



SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA
PIERRE MONTEUX, CONDUCTOR

RIMSKY-KORSAKOFF

Antar Symphony

No. 2, Op. 9



Form 2S504

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Rimsky-Korsakoff ANTAR SYMPHONY

In contrast to the succinct and at times enigmatic comments that most composers make about their works, Rimsky-Korsakoff has left us a detailed description of the creation of his Symphonic Suite *Antar* and also of the meaning of the work. Writing in his fascinating autobiography, *My Musical Life*, Rimsky-Korsakoff says: "Having indefinitely postponed writing the Symphony in B minor, I turned to Syenkovski's (Baron Brambeus) beautiful tale *Antar*, at Balakireff's and Moussorgsky's suggestion: on this subject I had planned to compose a symphony or symphonic poem in four movements. The desert; the disillusioned Antar; the episode with the gazelle and the bird; the ruins of Palmyra; the vision of the Peri; the three joys of life—revenge, power and love,—and finally Antar's death,—all of this was tempting to a composer. I set to work in midwinter.

"Save for the principal theme of *Antar* himself, which I had composed under the indubitable influence of certain phrases of *William Ratcliff* (i.e., a well-known opera by César Cui) and the Peri Gül Nazar's theme with its florid Oriental embellishments,—all the other themes purely cantabile, I had borrowed from a French collection of Arab melodies of Algiers, which Borodin happened to possess. As for the principal subject of the Fourth Movement, it had been given to me, with his own harmonization, by Dargomijsky, who, in turn had taken it from Khristianovich's collection of Arab melodies. For the beginning of the Adagio of this Movement I retained Dargomijsky's original harmonization (English horn and two bassoons).

"During the summer of 1868 I composed the Second Movement in C-sharp of *Antar* (in place of the former failure in B minor) and the Third Movement (*Joy of Power*). Thus the work on *Antar* had been almost completed in score by the end of summer. I named this work, (rather unfortunately, too), my Second Symphony; many years later I renamed it a *Symphonic Suite*. The term Suite was then unfamiliar to our circle in general, nor was it in vogue in the music literature of Western Europe. Still, I was wrong in calling *Antar* a symphony. My *Antar* was a poem, suite, fairy-tale, story or anything you like, but not a symphony. Its structure in four separate movements was all that made it approach a symphony. The First Movement of *Antar* is a free musical delineation of the consecutive episodes of the story, save that they are musically unified by the ever-recurring theme of *Antar* himself. It has no thematic development whatever; only variations and paraphrases. In general the music of the introduction (the desert, *Antar* and the episode of the gazelle), enfolding, as it were, the scherzo like E-sharp major part in 6/8; again, forming as it does the conclusion of the First Movement, gives the latter a rounded structure, with suggestions of an incomplete tripartite form. The Second Movement (*Joy of Revenge*), in structure, brings more to mind the sonata form; yet it is built

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upon a single fundamental theme of *Antar* himself and upon the introductory phrase of threatening character. The first subject is in reality a development of these motives; *Antar*'s theme and the introductory phrase. There is no subsidiary subject,—its place is taken by the same theme of *Antar* in its original complete form (Trombones in A minor). Then follows the development of the same material omitting only the moment of the return to the first subject. This leads directly to *Antar*'s complete theme (Trombones in C-sharp minor), which serves as subsidiary subject. Then follows a coda on the introductory phrase and a soothing conclusion, again on *Antar*'s principal theme. The Third Movement (*Joy of Power*) is a species of triumphal march (B minor—D major) with a subsidiary oriental cantabile melody and a conclusion on *Antar*'s theme.

"The Fourth Movement (*Joy of Love*), after a brief introduction borrowed from the First Movement (*Antar* reappears amid the ruins of Palmyra), is an Adagio. It is built in the main on the cantabile Arab subject (which Dargomijsky had given me) and its development, together with the phrase of the Peri Gül Nazar and *Antar*'s principal theme. In form it is a variety of simple rondo with one subject and subsidiary phrases (which are episodic and enter, now here, now there, into a passagelike 'working out'), with a long coda on *Antar*'s and Gül Nazar's themes. Accordingly, in spite of its rounded forms and the constant use of symphonic development,—*Antar* is, after all, no symphony; something different is associated in my mind with the conception of symphonic form. Then, also, the tonalities of the four movements of *Antar* present an unusual succession: F-sharp minor—F-sharp major; C-sharp minor—B minor—D major; and lastly D-flat major (as a dominant of F-sharp)."

This colorful work was first performed in Petrograd on March 22, 1869. Its subject matter deals with the adventures of *Antar*—a famous Arabic warrior and poet who lived in the sixth century. On a fly-leaf of the score is printed the following condensation of Syenkovski's story:

I Largo—Allegro giocoso—Allegretto vivace

"Awful is the view of the desert of Shan; mighty in their desolation are the ruins of Palmyra, the city raised by the spirits of darkness. But *Antar*, the man of the desert, braves them, and dwells serenely in the midst of the scenes of destruction. *Antar* has forever forsaken the company of mankind. He has sworn eternal hatred on account of the evil they returned him for the good which he intended.

"Suddenly a charming, graceful gazelle appears. *Antar* starts to pursue it. But a great noise seems pulsing through the heavens, and the light of day is veiled by a dense shadow. It is a giant bird that is giving chase to the gazelle.

"*Antar* straightway changes his intent, and attacks the monster, which gives a piercing cry and flies away. The gazelle disappears at the same time, and *Antar*, left alone in the midst of the ruins, soon goes to sleep while meditating on the event that has happened.

"He sees himself transported to a splendid palace, where a multitude of slaves hasten to serve him and to charm his ear with their song. It is the abode of the Queen of Palmyra—the fairy Gül Nazar. The gazelle that he has saved from the talons of the spirit of darkness is none other than the fairy herself. In gratitude Gül Nazar promises *Antar* the three great joys of life, and when he assents to the proffered gift, the vision vanishes, and he awakes amid the surrounding ruins.

II Allegro

"The first joy granted by the Queen of Palmyra to *Antar* is the delight of vengeance.

III Allegro risoluto alla marcia

"The second joy—the delight of power.

IV Allegretto vivace—andante amoroso

"*Antar* has returned to the fallen remains of Palmyra. The third and last gift granted by the fairy to *Antar* is the joy of true love. *Antar* begs the fairy to take away his life as soon as she perceives the least estrangement on his side and she promises to do his desire.

After a long time of mutual bliss, the fairy perceives one day that *Antar* is absent in spirit, and is gazing into the distance. Straightway divining the reason, she passionately embraces him. The force of her love inflames *Antar*, and his heart is consumed away.

"Their lips meet in a last kiss, and *Antar* dies in the arms of the fairy."

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