

Rimsky-Korsakoff SCHEHERAZADE, Op. 35 (Symphonic Suite)

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1. The Sea and the Vessel of Sinbad.

As the music begins, we perceive the menacing figure of the stern Sulan, grimly determined upon his sanguinary method of insuring "fidelity" in his wives. The bold phrase, given in unison by trombone, tube, horns, and the woodwind and strings in their lower range at the very beginning of the Suite represent the severe monarchical. There is a little interlude, rather tentative in character, and then the violin, trembling and diffident, yet shining clear against rich chords from the harp, utters the lovely little song that typifies Scheherazade, the narrator.

Now we feel the long swell of the sea; we hear the strange, mysterious sounds of water lapping at the smooth sides of the vessel; we see the bending mast, the white-capped blue of deep water, and the brazen sun hanging in a brazen sky.

The music has the long rolling motion of a deep-sea comb. Strings manifest the thread of the story of Sinbad . . . underneath, always, moves the sea-rhythm. Presently we hear the string motif transferred to the dreamy voice of the horn, and decorated with polished tones of the flute as glittering as a dash of seaweed in sunlight. There is a recurring phrase in woodwind that is almost articulate . . . almost says "Once upon a time . . ." and it is by no means difficult to feel toward the music precisely the attitude the composer wished to create. A fabulous story is being told . . . "A painted ship upon a painted ocean" . . . and not only the story, but the storyteller and the listener are suggested to us. Strange birds fly overhead . . . awful shapes move dimly in the green deep . . . a shadow runs swiftly across the sunlit decks though there is no shape between ship and sun . . . a short, fierce storm rages invisibly in the infinite blue depths of the tropic sky . . . the sea heaves up like a weary giant . . . Suddenly it is not a picture but a story . . . the stern voice of the Sulan is heard again (the same theme as at the opening of the movement) and the tremulous accents of Scheherazade go bravely on . . . and in the calm that closes the movement we have assurance that for one day, at least, she has postponed her terrible fate.

2. The Tale of the Prince Kalender.

The motif of Scheherazade opens the second movement of the Suite, a tremulous shining thread of tone, changing in expressiveness as the dainty Sultana's face must have altered to meet the smile or frown of her lord. Ending in a cadenza of extreme brilliance and difficulty, it leads us into the main theme of the movement, assigned to the bassoon. Here is a seldom opportunity for "the clown of the orchestra" (the bassoon). In turn pathetic, awk-

San Francisco
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Pierre Monteux

Conductor

ward, grave, jocose, this strange and amusing subject might well be taken as significant of the Prince Kalender himself . . . dignity in rags, pompousness in poverty, clowning in a courtier. We have no means of knowing what story the *fakir*-prince told in word and gesture, but we cannot escape the conclusion that it runs the gamut of human emotion.

After a space the fearful voice of the oboe takes up a little song derived from that of the bassoon . . . a brightness comes over the music . . . the violin joins in a livelier rhythm . . . and toward the close of the first section of the music we hear what might be the accompaniment to a wild exotic dance.

The placid opening of the second section is deceptive, for suddenly we are in the midst of a scene of wild barbaric splendor. Fanfares of the brass, flying phrases of string and woodwind are combined in a whirling, glowing flux of tone; incandescent masses of color are thrown out like bright jewels from the weird garments of some dancer of the Orient. Commanding phrases are uttered boldly by the trombones, and echoed in the mysterious distance by a muted trumpet; secretive sentences come from plucked and muted strings; that tragic-comedian, the bassoon, mutters strangely to itself.

3. The Young Prince and
the Young Princess.

What a delightful contrast in these naïve melodies! Here the significance of the music is not Oriental but simply human. It sings of love—love of the idyllic kind; not without passion but without the fierce selfish hunger of passion; not without ecstasy but with the ecstasy of love fulfilled and not satiated.

The Prince speaks first, and to him is assigned the tender melody of the violins at the very beginning of the movement. Presently the Young Princess herself speaks,

in the reedy sweetness of the clarinet—a tender little song, with rapturous flights of tone and arch phrases. Later we hear her accompanied in her song by flute, drum, tambourine, cymbal, and the tinkling triangle. The Young Prince sings again his amorous lay . . . and then, near the end, we remember that it is a picture, a story, as the shy and lissome figure of Scheherazade appears.

4. The Festival at Bagdad. The Sea.
The Vessel Is Wrecked. Conclusion.

Once again the stern-voiced Sulan is heard in his dreadful resolution . . . but Scheherazade hastens on with her stories, diverting him with a glowing description of a Bagdad festival. A brief but brilliant violin cadenza leads us to this lively and colorful scene. Wild dancers weave sinuously in strange arabesque figures, gayly colored draperies stiffen in the breeze, the hubbub of the market place runs like a powerful under-current beneath the more assertive sounds of the festival . . . snake charmers pipe magic tunes to their hooded and venomous charges . . . *fakirs* carry their wares and perform strange feats of thaumaturgy before a thousand curious eyes . . . ivory-skinned girls peer seductively from shadowy shelters of richest rags and rare fabrics . . . imperious camels carry some lordly satrap and his train through the scurrying, chattering crowds . . . rare perfumes, mingled with the penetrating odors of spices and the unforgettable scent of the streets and the crowds . . . it is the Orient, the Orient with all its brilliantly glowing life and sound and color.

Once again the ominous accents of the Sulan are heard while Scheherazade bravely continues with her tale, desperately achieving new climaxes. And suddenly we are once more on the sea . . . on the broad decks of Sinbad's ship.

But it is not the quiet ocean we have known. Rather its gigantic surges heave themselves up to terrifying heights . . . the vessel trembles to its very keel . . . the sails crack like giant pistons under the impact of sudden fierce gusts from the empty skies . . . masts lend and strain . . . the sailors turn ashen faces toward a great rock, surmounted by a warrior of bronze . . . and toward the rock the ship turns, too, drawn irresistibly by some ocean force.

A heaven-splitting crash . . . and the ship is gone, her proud hull splintering and grinding against the refractory rock . . . and only the wandering winds to mourn for her. Now Scheherazade releases the little, almost articulate phrase (woodwind) with which she prefaced her stories . . . and presently we hear her own lovely motif, as before, in the voice of the violin.

The Sultan finally speaks . . . but now gently, amorously, and the violin rises to an incredible triumphant height against the glowing harmonies that end the movement.



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