

Notes on the Program
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Overture to Russlan and Ludmilla

Mikhail Glinka
(1804-1857)

Mikhail Glinka was the first Russian composer to attain recognition in his own country and is considered the father of Russian classical music. His works had a distinctive Russian style that influenced later countrymen, most notably Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Stravinsky. Although born into a wealthy family, his childhood was difficult. However, he became well-educated and after his formal schooling was a civil service employee at the behest of his father. The light workload allowed him to pursue his composition career. After some time in Berlin, he returned to his home city of St. Petersburg, where he began work on his second opera, Russlan and Ludmilla, based on the fairy-tale poem by Pushkin. Ludmilla, the beautiful daughter of a duke in Kiev, is pursued by Russlan. During betrothal festivities, evil spirits whisk her away to the realm of a dwarf-wizard. Russlan ultimately awakens her from the magic sleep and is joyfully united with her. In 1842, the opera opened to a cool reception and dreadful reviews by critics. The most well-known portion now is the brilliantly energetic overture, which opens with two vigorous themes, both from the final scene of happiness. Both have brilliant chords followed by dashing scales. The contrasting lyrical theme is a melody from a battlefield scene, where Russlan's thoughts turn to Ludmilla. In the coda, the wicked dwarf's theme is heard in its descending whole-tone scale.

Sleeping Beauty Suite, Opus 66a

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
(1840-1893)

Russian to his very core, Tchaikovsky was a sentimental, theatrical, melodious composer whose greatest genius was in creating melody. He is unquestionably the most loved and most popular Russian composer, who lived a tragic and relatively short life. Known mostly for his symphonies, violin concerto, and piano concertos, his

orchestral works also include suites drawn from the ballet, two others of which are *Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*. The suite from *Sleeping Beauty* was written in 1889 and first performed in 1890.

A ballet suite is a collection of excerpts from a ballet, arranged so the music can be performed even when a ballet company is not available to dance. Although Tchaikovsky did not make the selection of the excerpts himself, the work is traditionally divided into three sections. In the *Introduction of the Lilac Fairy*, the bombastic opening soars and then gives way to the brass before the quieter second section, *Adagio—Pas d'action*. This section is also called the *Rose Adagio* because at Princess Aurora's sixteenth birthday party, each suitor hands her a rose. The harp's cascading arpeggios flow into the most well-known melody of the suite. This is picked up by the strings and woodwinds; the brass join in to underlie the glorious melodies in the strings. The rhythmic ending is taken over with the brass assuming the melody. In the *Character Dance*, at her wedding to Prince Desire, Puss in Boots and a female cat dance for the royal couple. The *Panorama* depicts the boat voyage to the enchanted land where Aurora sleeps. The final section, *Waltz*, is almost obligatory for a ballet suite. This is at Aurora's birthday party before she pricks her finger on the spinning wheel. The strings first have the lilting familiar melody. Its quick bouncing rhythm is occasionally interrupted by the brass, who then disappear as the strings and woodwinds take over. Finally, the waltz carries to a conclusion with the full orchestra proclaiming the awakening of the sleeping beauty.

Scheherazade, Opus 35

**Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov
(1844-1908)**

Rimsky-Korsakov was the most prolific of the Russian composers of his era and although he tried all sorts of musical forms, his true success came in the field of opera and symphonic poems.

Due to his brilliance at orchestration, Rimsky-Korsakov had an uncanny ability to give his music a nationalistic or geographical authenticity. *Scheherazade*, composed in 1888, has all the colors and fragrances of the East, brilliantly reflecting the exotic life of

the Old World as told in the stories of *The Arabian Nights*. Nobody knows the exact origin of these tales, but they have been retold in countless ways since the early days of Persia and India. Rimsky-Korsakoff used a language more beautiful than others to retell these tales. However, because he was adverse to listeners hearing this as “program” music, he deliberately avoided dividing the suite into definite story episodes. His goal was to inspire listeners to use their imaginations as they heard the melodies.

The story on which *Scheherazade* is based is familiar. The Sultan, believing that all women are unfaithful, vows to kill all of his wives after the first nuptial night. However, Scheherazade saves her life by entertaining her husband with fascinating tales, which she tells him for one thousand and one nights. His curiosity overwhelms his urge for his bloody vow—each day the Sultan postpones his wife’s execution. Finally, he abandons the plan altogether. Sultana Scheherazade recounts many wondrous tales, using poetry, folk melodies, and stories of the enchanting East.

I. The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship. The Sultan grimly opens the suite to ensure his wives’ fidelity. The tremulous violins answer as Scheherazade begins to weave her narrative. The restless sea laps at the vessel as Sinbad the Sailor looks over the rail and thrills to the ceaseless motion of the ocean. A fierce storm rages and the stern voice of the Sultan (repeat of the opening theme) clamors. Scheherazade continues and in the closing calm, we realize she has postponed her fate for one day.

II. The Tale of the Prince Kalender. Now Scheherazade is a bit more confident. The bassoon picks up the main theme describing the Kalender, a member of a cult of wanderers (fakirs), as he fascinated his listeners. An exotic Asian dance leads into a scene of wild barbaric splendor with brass fanfares, whirling woodwinds, and flying strings. In the final portion, the vitality continues.

III. The Young Prince and Princess. The Prince speaks of his love first, in a tender violin melody. The Princess answers in the clarinet, depicting an idyllic love. She is accompanied by snare drum, tambourine, cymbals, and the triangle, as at the conclusion the shy Scheherazade appears.

IV. Festival at Baghdad. The nervous main theme alternates with Scheherazade’s voice as the finale opens. One again the Sultan’s stern voice is heard but Scheherazade distracts him with her description of the colorful and lively festival at Baghdad. The

brilliant life of Asia glows. As the excitement grows, other instruments join the solo flute. The dancing becomes more frenzied, yet has an undercurrent of fear. Scheherazade bravely continues, achieving more pictures of beauty. Suddenly the scene shifts to the broad decks of Sinbad's ship. The sea surges, the ship founders and is gone, with only the wind howling to mourn her. Scheherazade rehearses the woodwind phrase that began her stories. The Sultan speaks, quietly, lovingly, as the violin rises to a triumph against magnificent harmonies as the story reaches its dreamlike end.