

## **NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV — Scheherazade**

Though it doesn't always tell a definite story, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* depicts a series of scenes from the famous collection of medieval Arabic folk tales known as the *One Thousand and One Nights*. As told in the Arabic epic, Scheherazade is the crafty storyteller who continues to spin cliffhanging tales night after night in an attempt to forestall her own death at the hands of a wicked sultan. The piece opens with an evocation of these two characters: the Sultan portrayed by the unison and fortissimo proclamation and Scheherazade by the soft fairy-tale chords in the woodwinds and the entry of the mournful and seductive solo violin. What follows, unfolding through four movements, is what the composer described as "a kaleidoscope of fairy-tale images and designs," evoking many of the stories contained in the *One Thousand and One Nights*, but not necessarily programmatic in a clear or direct way. In his memoirs, Rimsky-Korsakov explained, "In composing *Scheherazade*, I meant the hints [conveyed by the titles] to direct the listener's fancy but slightly on the path which my own fancy had traveled. All I had desired was that the listener, if he liked my piece as symphonic music, should carry away the impression that it is beyond doubt an Oriental narrative of some numerous and varied fairy-tale wonders and not merely four pieces played one after another and composed on the basis of themes common to all four movements."

The first movement is titled "The Sea and Sinbad's Ship" in reference to the famous Middle Eastern folk hero of the same name, but Rimsky-Korsakov intentionally leaves references to the story fairly vague, inviting us to supply specific details about which of Sinbad's many voyages is being dramatized. The second movement, "The Kalandar Prince," tells the story of a wandering Sufi mystic who finds himself shipwrecked on a deserted island filled with strange and terrible creatures. In both cases, the throbbing of the ocean is always close at hand and provides the narrative motion for the story. The third movement, "The Young Prince and the Young Princess," tells the simplest and most innocent story of young love in a playful dialogue between the woodwinds and strings. The final movement is the most erratic and the most colorful, evoking no less than three additional stories as well as incorporating reminiscences of previous movements. Despite a lack of clear narrative in the piece as a whole, it is difficult not to hear the final movement as the master storyteller Scheherazade weaving all of the narrative threads together and finally winning over the heart of the Sultan. The peaceful coda at the end of the final movement lets us know that, in the end, love triumphs over evil and the kingdom is once again at peace.

## **JOHN ADAMS — Harmonium**

In his own description of the piece, John Adams has claimed that *Harmonium* represents a musical inflection point in his personal development, even calling it the "first mature statements in a language that was born out of my initial exposure to Minimalism." As a school of musical

thought, minimalism was born out of a backlash to the over-determined and highly mathematical compositional styles that emanated from the Darmstadt School following the Second World War. Following in the footsteps of Viennese composers Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern, composers at Darmstadt found ways to govern their use of musical materials with increasing mathematical precision and expansive algorithmic variety. This highly complex and densely structured music coming from European capitals was inevitably challenged by a much more austere and repetitive style known as minimalism that flourished on America's West Coast. Like their colleagues in the visual arts, musical minimalists used self-consciously simple musical textures and slowly unfolding patterns as a way of drawing listeners in and encouraging closer attention to very subtle changes over time.

Although John Adams is often included among the composers associated with the very core of minimalist music, he is more than a decade younger than the other composers most frequently cited: Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass. Perhaps accordingly, his approach to minimalism has been more promiscuous than these other figures, with Adams frequently combining insights from minimalism with inspirations from other times and places. In *Harmonium*, Adams's approach to his minimalist materials is given force and direction by the presence of voices and his choices of text. At first glance, the texts are a slightly unusual pairing. The first movement sets a text by seventeenth-century metaphysical poet John Donne, which ultimately serves as a kind of poetic exegesis for Plato's famous *Symposium* on the topic of love. The other two texts are both from nineteenth-century American recluse Emily Dickinson: the first, a careful and wry meditation on death; and the second, a rapturous and erotic account of longing. In addition to the texts by Donne and Dickinson, the piece is haunted by the presence of a third poet, the enigmatic modernist Wallace Stevens, from whom Adams took the piece's title. Apparently, Adams originally intended to set poems from Stevens's first collection of poems, *Harmonium*, but later decided that the language simply didn't match what he was hoping to say. But in some ways, Stevens's poetry provides the clearest tonal analog to Adams's composition because of the ways that it accomplishes its narrative and symbolic work through juxtaposition and oblique angle rather than direct emotional appeal. Both Stevens and Adams are masters of architecture through time, weaving a collection of otherwise mundane moments into a complex and satisfying web of interrelations. Taken together, the texts and music all gesture towards a kind of transcendental vision in which distinctions between self and other, carnal and divine, or even death and life are slowly and blissfully dissolved.