

San Juan Symphony - 2009-2010 Season
February 20-21, 2010 - A Thousand and One Bedtime Stories
Program Notes by Michael Allsen

This concert is framed by a pair of fairy tale works by Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. The ever-familiar *Swan Lake* deals in enchantment, love, betrayal, and death—all told in in Tchaikovsky's lush ballet score. *Scheherazade* tells a series of tales from *The Thousand and One Nights*—the exotic “Arabian Nights” that were among the Romantics' favorite literature. Rimsky-Korsakov's masterful use of the orchestra makes this one of the most powerful works of musical storytelling of the late 19th century. Between these works, pianist Spencer Meyer joins the San Juan Symphony for Chopin's virtuoso *Concerto No.2*. This work by a teenaged Chopin has no particular story in mind...but this shouldn't stop you from conjuring up your own.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
Scene and Waltz from *Swan Lake*

Tchaikovsky composed Swan Lake in 1875-76. The first performance was at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, on March 4, 1877. Duration 11:00.

Tchaikovsky's three fairy-tale ballets remain staples of the repertoire of both ballet companies and symphony orchestras: *Swan Lake* (1876), *The Sleeping Beauty* (1889), and *The Nutcracker* (1892). Though the story of *Swan Lake* seems to have originated in a German collection of folk tales, the Russians have also claimed the story for their own. Just who transformed the story into a ballet scenario is unclear, but at some point in 1875, Tchaikovsky was commissioned by the Bolshoi's balletmaster Julius Reisinger to write the score. *Swan Lake* was Tchaikovsky's first attempt at writing a full ballet, and though his music was wonderful, the production was a dismal failure at its 1877 premiere. Among the factors that contributed this flop was the fact that the ballerina in the lead role of Odette was pulled from the production at the last minute due to scandal—she had apparently accepted several pieces of jewelry from a wealthy suitor, only to pawn them for cash and marry another dancer! But the production as a whole was doomed by its lackluster choreography. One of Tchaikovsky's friends wrote: “Costume, stage scenery, and machinery did nothing to conceal the complete emptiness of the dancing. For the balletomane there was barely more than five minutes pleasure in the dancing...but the music-lover had better luck.” There were several more unsuccessful productions over the next few years, and Tchaikovsky always intended revise the score, but died before he could return to the project. *Swan Lake* was finally revived at a memorial program for Tchaikovsky in 1895, in a version revised by choreographers Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov which remains more or less standard today. This revised version, which retained Tchaikovsky's music intact, was a complete success, and *Swan Lake* has never fallen from the repertoire—there have been thousands of productions since them. (Including a tongue-in-cheek all-male version by Les Ballets Trocadero de Monte Carlo—check it out on YouTube!)

Swan Lake tells the story of Prince Siegfried who, as heir to the kingdom, must name his bride at a ball held on his birthday. Unwilling to marry except for love, he takes off in pursuit of a flock of swans. Just as he is about to shoot one of the birds, he realizes that she is in fact a woman

who has been transformed into the form of a white swan—the princess Odette, who was enchanted by the evil magician von Rothbart. Siegfried falls hopelessly in love, and threatens to kill the magician, only to be stopped by Odette, who knows that if von Rothbart dies before the spell is broken, she will remain a swan forever. Dejected, Siegfried returns to the ball, only to find the magician’s daughter Odile, disguised as Odette, though as a black swan. He dances with Odile, and declares to the court that he will marry her, just a moment before the real Odette arrives and Siegfried realizes he has been duped. He returns to the lake to find Odette, and declares his love. In the end the lovers must drown themselves to break the spell—united only in death.

The *Scene (Dance of the Swans)* accompanies Odette and her retinue of swans—all of them, of course enchanted princesses—as they glide across the surface of Swan Lake. What begins as quiet oboe solo quickly grows into a passionate romantic passage for the full orchestra. The *Waltz* come from Act III, and was originally intended for a large ensemble of peasants who danced in honor of the prince at his ball. Tchaikovsky introduces a series of lyrical lilting themes, including a fine trumpet solo, before this dance ends in an energetic coda.

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)

Concerto No.2 for Piano and Orchestra in F minor, Op.21

The Concerto No.2 was composed between 1828 and 1830. Chopin was the soloist at the first performance, a private concert in Warsaw on March 3, 1830, which was conducted by Karol Kurpinski. The same performers gave a public performance of the concerto at the National Theater in Warsaw two weeks later. Duration 31:00.

As a very young man, Chopin was the darling of Parisian musical society: a phenomenally talented performer, whose Polish background gave him just a hint of exoticism. It was expected on many sides that he would move from performance and compositions for solo piano towards more “important” genres. Chopin resisted—when he was 24, Chopin wrote to a friend:

“Mozart encompasses the entire domain of musical creation, but I’ve only got the keyboard in my poor head. I know my limitations, and I know I’d make a fool of myself if I tried to climb too high without having the ability to do it. They plague me to death urging me to write symphonies and operas, and they want me to be everything in one—a Polish Rossini and a Mozart and a Beethoven. But I just laugh under my breath and think to myself that one must start from small things. I’m only a pianist...”

“Only a pianist” indeed! Chopin’s solo piano works are certainly the most sublime and powerful works in this medium to come from the Romantic period. Why, then, do we have two youthful piano concertos by Chopin? (The *Concerto No.2* was completed when he was 19, and the E Minor concerto—known as *No.1* because it was published first—was written about a year later.) At the time, the concerto was the vehicle to stardom for young virtuosos, and the public fully expected that instrumentalists would follow the path established by Mozart, Beethoven, and others, and perform their own original concertos. Chopin’s concertos had the desired effect. When he performed the *Concerto No.2* in Warsaw, it gained him public exposure and audience adoration that no number of private salon performances could. In his description of the concert,

he wrote that: “The first *Allegro* of my concerto, unintelligible to most, received the award of a single ‘Bravo,’ but I believe that this was given because people wanted to show that they understand and appreciate serious music... The [slow movement] and Rondo produced a very great effect; after these, the applause and ‘Bravos’ really came from the heart.” After these two concertos, however, Chopin concentrated almost exclusively on solo piano works—it is almost as if, having gained success and security as a composer, he could put this genre away and follow his heart.

We know from descriptions of his playing that Chopin had an exceedingly delicate touch as a young man, and drew amazing amounts of expression from within a relatively small dynamic range. His *Concerto No.2* suits this kind of playing beautifully—this is not a piece in which there is a profound dialogue between soloist and orchestra as in Beethoven’s works, nor is there any of the crashing bombast of the later concertos by Liszt. Here the orchestra provides a light accompaniment, and it is the solo line that dominates throughout. (In fact, Chopin often performed the concerto as a solo, without orchestral accompaniment.)

The opening movement (*Allegro*) begins in the manner of Mozart concerto, with orchestral introduction of contrasting themes—one forceful and the other more lyrical. When the piano enters, it dominates the texture entirely, with only the barest of accompaniment beneath florid piano lines. One of the few moments of dialogue in the concerto comes in the development section, where the soloist briefly plays above a countermelody from the bassoon. The slow movement (*Larghetto*) begins mysteriously in the orchestra, but the piano soon enters with a phrase of undiluted Romanticism. (According to Chopin, this melody was directly inspired by an affair of the heart!) There is a more impassioned middle section before the opening mood returns. The main theme of the final Rondo (*Allegro vivace*) is clearly a younger cousin to Chopin’s *mazurkas* for solo piano—a rollicking dance that alternates with more lyrical interludes. At the end, a horn call introduces a coda of startling virtuosity.

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) ***Scheherazade* Symphonic Suite, Op.35**

Rimsky-Korsakov completed Scheherazade in 1888, during his summer break from his duties at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He conducted its premiere in St. Petersburg, on November 9, 1888. Duration 40:00.

The Thousand and One Nights is a collection of Arabic and Egyptian stories dating from as early as the 10th century. The framing story is that the Sultan Shahryar, convinced of the infidelity of all women, puts a series of wives to death until the Princess Scheherazade distracts him by telling him one fantastic tale after another, one each night for 1001 nights, and he eventually lays aside his murderous plan. There are many versions of the *The Thousand and One Nights*, but most of the stories, including the voyages of Sinbad and the story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, were collected together by the 15th century. Some, including, the story of Aladdin, were added even later. 19th-century readers were fascinated by exotic settings and fairy-tales, and the “Arabian Nights” fills this bill nicely—stories of love, humor, bravery, and magic. To be sure, most European, American, and Russian readers know the collection only through carefully-edited translations that avoided the more sexually explicit bits, and accentuated the fairy-tale aspects.

(An exception was the unexpurgated English translation published by Francis Burton in 1885—a highly controversial book in its time.) The tales served as the basis for innumerable works of art, literature, dance and music. The most powerful musical treatment is certainly Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestral suite *Scheherazade*, which was composed in 1888.

The suite is laid out in four movements, each of which was given a descriptive title by the composer in the earliest version: *I. The Sea and Sinbad's Ship*, *II. The Tale of the Kalendar Prince*, *III. The Young Prince and the Young Princess*, and *IV. Festival at Bagdad. The Sea. The Ship Goes to Pieces on a Rock Surmounted by the Bronze Statue of a Warrior. Conclusion*. Rimsky-Korsakov was uncomfortable with a strictly programmatic interpretation, however, and before publishing the work, considered replacing the titles of the four movements with less picturesque designations: *Prelude*, *Adagio*, *Ballade*, and *Finale*. He did away with movement-titles altogether in the published version of the suite, but by this time the original descriptive titles were well known. Rimsky-Korsakov had it both ways, however, as he later wrote in his autobiography:

“In composing *Scheherazade*, I meant these hints to direct but slightly the hearer's fancy on the path which my own fancy had traveled, and to leave more minute and particular conceptions as to the will and mood of each movement. All that I desired was that, if the listener liked my piece as *symphonic music*, he should carry away the impression that it is beyond doubt an oriental narrative of some varied fairy-tale wonders, and not merely four pieces played one after the other, and composed on the basis of themes common to all of the four movements. Why then, if this is the case, does my suite bear the specific title of *Scheherazade*? Because this name and the title *The Arabian Nights* connote in everybody's mind the East and fairy-tale marvels—besides, certain details of the musical exposition hint at the fact that all of these are various tales of some one person (which happens to be Scheherazade) entertaining therewith her stern husband.”

Rimsky-Korsakov was an acknowledged master of scoring music for orchestra (his *Principles of Orchestration* is still one of the standard works on the subject)—for him, “...orchestration is part of the very soul of the work.” *Scheherazade* may well be his masterwork in this regard—are few other works that make such effective use of orchestral color. *The Sea and Sinbad's Ship* begins with a pair of themes that recur in all four movements, an angry theme from the trombones (the voice of the Sultan?) and a seductive violin solo, which despite all of Rimsky-Korsakov's circumlocutions, must represent Scheherazade herself. The body of the movement is distinctly aquatic, with a broad 6/4 theme that suggests the rolling of the waves.

There are several princes in the collection who disguise themselves as kalendar—roving holy men. After the violin announces a new story, Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Tale of the Kalendar Prince* begins with a series of quiet, oriental-sounding woodwind solos, expanding into a dance for the full string section. A bold pronouncement from the solo trombone suddenly changes the mood, and the movement ends in what sounds like an extended battle scene, alternating Scheherazade's theme with more warlike music. The next music is a gentle contrast: *The Young Prince and the Young Princess* is a nostalgic interlude, with a rich dance melody (derived from Scheherazade's theme) above a shimmering background, and a hint of oriental percussion. Scheherazade herself appears briefly, before the movement ends with a lush coda.

The finale begins with boisterous and sometimes frantic festival music that alternates with Scheherazade's sinuous theme. The broad Sinbad music of the first movement returns in the trombones, but now the woodwinds provide the howling of hurricane winds, until a moment of crashing disaster. The movement ends with a quiet epilogue for solo violin, as Scheherazade concludes the tale.

Program notes:

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