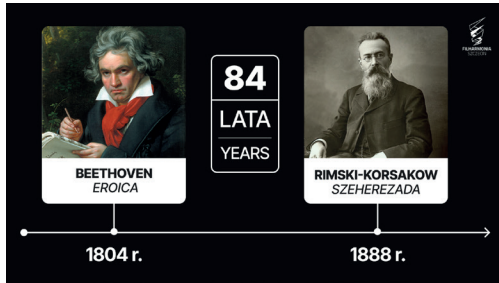


SYMPHONIC MONUMENTS

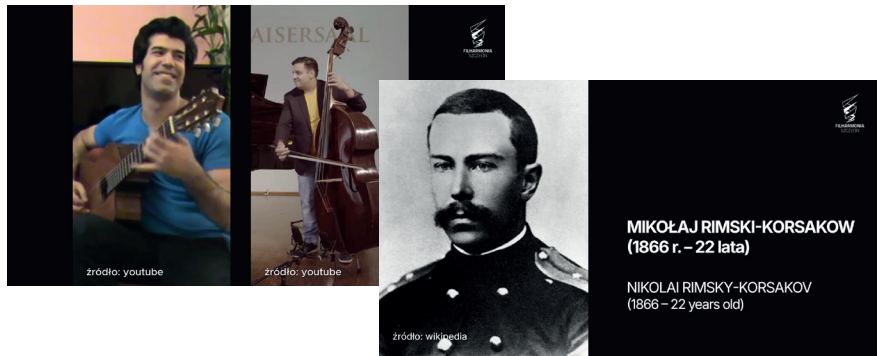
NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV
SCHEHERAZADE op. 35

TRANSCRIPT OF THE CONDUCTOR'S LECTURE
(FOR FOREIGN GUESTS)

RIMSKY-KORSAKOV



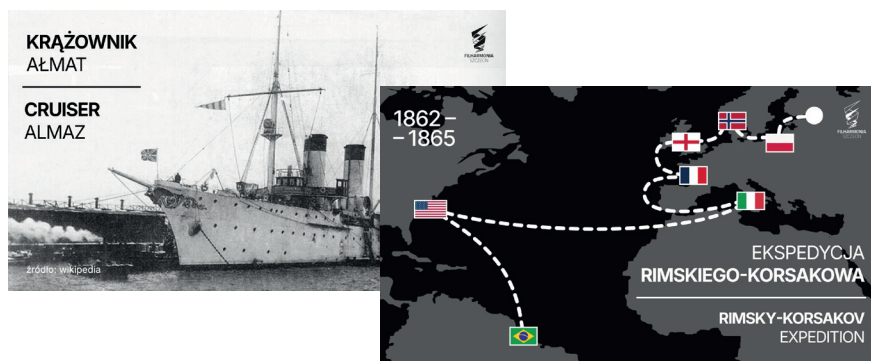
Three months have passed since our last encounter with the Symphonic monuments, but on the music history timeline, we will move forward by as much as 84 years. Much has been said about Beethoven as a person, and many films have been made – just to mention *Immortal Beloved* with Gary Oldman or *Copying Beethoven*, directed by Agnieszka Holland. The case is different from that of the protagonist of tonight's event, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, who is mainly associated with perhaps the shortest hit in so-called classical music, *Flight of the Bumblebee*. In fact, there is an unofficial online competition for the fastest performance of this excerpt from the opera *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*.



However, Rimsky-Korsakov is far from being a one-hit composer. Today, I will tell you a bit about a man who never received formal musical education – yet still became a professor and later the rector of the Saint Petersburg Conservatory, which now even bears his name.

And, of course, about *Scheherazade*, a four-movement orchestral suite that most fully represents his symphonic style.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov was born into a family with a strong tradition of naval service. At the age of six, he began learning to play the piano, and by eleven, he was already attempting his first compositions. Initially, these activities were just one part of his general education. At twelve, he enrolled in the Naval Cadet Corps, thus continuing his family's tradition. He embarked on an international expedition aboard the clipper *Almaz* six years later.



He spent nearly three years at sea. Perhaps his life would have taken a completely different course if, even before that journey, music had not resounded so strongly in his soul and if he had not met Mily Balakirev, the leader of a group of amateur composers known as *The Mighty Handful*. After returning from the expedition, he remained in the military for several more years, but composing completely captivated him.

And since we're on the topic of the sea, let's move on to *Scheherazade*. In 1871, at just 27 years old, Rimsky-Korsakov became a **professor** of composition and orchestration at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. It's hard to imagine such a thing in today's world of academic degrees and structured career advancements for teachers. However, Nikolai was not arrogant – he was well aware of his gaps in formal musical education, and they troubled him. He once admitted, "*I had to make constant efforts just to stay one step ahead of my students.*"

SCHEHERAZADE

By the mid-1870s, he focused on improving his compositional technique, writing dozens of fugues and small chamber pieces purely as exercises. This dedicated work bore fruit, and *Scheherazade* is perhaps the finest of them all.



The first programmatic symphony in history is considered to be *Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony*, which Rimsky-Korsakov especially admired in his youth. Some composers believed program music was of lesser value, seeing it as a shortcut – merely depicting an existing reality or a literary concept through sound. Supporters of program music, however, had a completely different view. They argued that illustrative music was an alternative to and even a rejection of the egocentric, grandiose expression of the self. Program composers drew inspiration from nature, fairy tales, fantasy, and exoticism – all of which are present in *Scheherazade*.

From his first programmatic work, *Sadko*, Rimsky-Korsakov was regarded as a storyteller within musical circles. His fascination with Oriental culture was already evident in his *Second Symphony*, composed in 1868 and later revised by the composer into what became known as the *Antar Suite*. It's no surprise, then, that he eventually turned to *One Thousand and One Nights* as inspiration.

One Thousand and One Nights is a masterpiece of world literature – though today, it is often associated more with a collection of a few selected stories adapted into films for children.

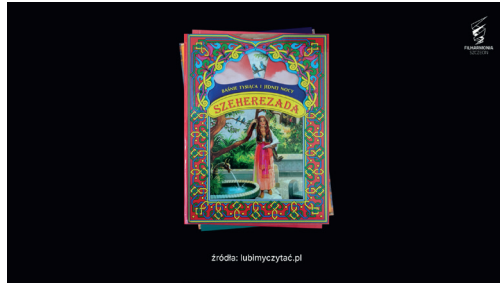
This book dates back to the late 9th and early 10th centuries, but the collection of around 300 fairy tales, legends, and folk stories only reached Europe at the beginning of the 18th century.

Before that, the work had evolved over several centuries in the East. Originally an Indo-Persian compilation, it was embraced by Arab culture in the early Islamic era. While we don't know the exact size of the collection at that time or which stories were included, one thing is certain – the framework of the entire book was already based on the tale of Scheherazade.

The earliest Arabic version of the book was created in Iraq, most likely in Baghdad, which was then the intellectual and political capital of the Arab world. This version was formed through Arabic translations – or rather adaptations – of older Indo-Persian tales, enriched with native Middle Eastern folklore, many of which had been part of the region's literary tradition for centuries.

The evolution of One Thousand and One Nights was a continuous process; older stories were expanded and supplemented with more recent tales, including accounts of travels and romantic adventures, where historical facts were mixed with literary fiction. The collection is anonymous and has never been definitively completed. It was also meant primarily for storytelling rather than reading.

As a result, both the composition of the collection and the content of individual tales have changed and continue to change, depending on the literary skills and aspirations of those who retell them, as well as the preferences of their audiences, whom the storyteller sought to captivate as much as possible.



Rimsky-Korsakov was known as a storyteller – even before composing *Scheherazade* – so it seems only natural that he eventually turned to a collection of Eastern legends (or rather, one of its many translations) and decided to retell these stories in his own language: the language of music. *The Scheherazade* symphonic suite consists of four movements like a typical symphony. But that's where the similarities end.

Rimsky-Korsakov gave each movement a title:

- *The Sea and Sinbad's Ship*
- *The Story of the Kalendar Prince*
- *The Young Prince and the Young Princess*
- *Festival in Baghdad. The Sea. The Ship Breaks
Against the Rock Surmounted by the Bronze Horseman*

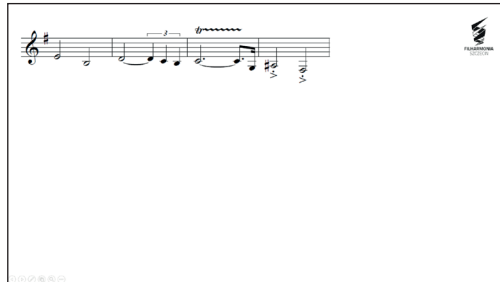
Over time, the composer regretted his decision, realising that these titles – by strongly directing the listener's imagination – limited the music's whole experience. He wanted to evoke the atmosphere of the Orient more through a wealth of colourful suggestions rather than a set of concrete images.

Rimsky-Korsakov even considered renaming the movements using a more neutral musical language: *Prelude, Ballad, Adagio, and Finale*. However, this idea never gained traction – the original concept behind *Scheherazade* had already become too well-known and beloved. This inconsistency in Rimsky-Korsakov's statements intrigues me. I wonder how much of it was a genuine change of heart and how much was an attempt to elevate *Scheherazade* to a higher, more ambitious artistic level.

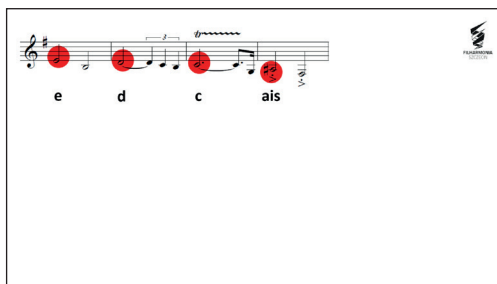
PART I

SCHEHERAZADE

The form of this piece is structurally quite simple and is based on three musical ideas presented at the very beginning of the first movement.



The first motif is that of the evil Sultan. It is a motif played in unison (all instruments play the same notes together) by the low-wind instruments and strings.



This motif sounds menacing and unsettling not only because of the specific instrumentation but also due to the use of the whole-tone scale, which introduces an oriental character from the beginning of the piece.

The first musical idea consists of a melody in G major (one sharp) and four chords: E-dur, H-dur, a-moll, and E-dur. The notes e, d, c, and ais are marked above the melody. The chords are labeled below the staff.

The second musical idea is a series of chords played by the woodwind instruments – this is an apparent reference to the overture *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by 17-year-old Felix Mendelssohn, written more than half a century earlier. It is particularly interesting because the first public performance of this overture took place in February 1827 in Szczecin.

The second musical idea consists of a melody in G major and five chords: E-dur, H-dur, a-moll, Fis-dur, and a-moll. The notes e, d, c, and ais are marked above the melody. The chords are labeled below the staff.

While Mendelssohn's harmony of these chords is entirely classical, and the relationships between them follow the standards of the time, Korsakov employs a wholly different approach. The successive vertical chords seem to be harmonically unrelated.

In reality, Korsakov uses the previously mentioned whole-tone scale, hiding it within these chords and creating a musical variation of the Sultan's first theme. These chords are meant to transport the listeners into an unreal, fairy-tale world, preparing for the third musical idea – the theme of Scheherazade telling the Sultan her stories. It is one of the most famous violin solos in the symphonic repertoire.

The image shows a musical score for Scheherazade, Part II. It features a violin melody and a harp accompaniment. The violin part has notes e, d, c, and ais marked with red circles. The harp part shows chords for e-moll, D-dur, C-dur, Fis-dur, and a-moll. The score includes markings for 'cresc. poco' and 'soprano'.

The harp accompanying the violin introduces a narrative character, and in our imagination, we can see the intrigued Sultan starting to listen attentively to his wife's tales.

The further part of the first section of *Scheherazade* involves transforming these motifs in various ways:

- Sultan's Theme - Allegro non troppo, 4 bars before K (orchestral excerpt)
- Scheherazade's Theme - C → tree in D (orchestral excerpt)
- Chords - 11 bars from the end (orchestral excerpt)

All of this is set against a backdrop of spread-out chords symbolizing the rolling sea, where all these adventures are taking place (after all, Korsakov originally named the parts of the piece, with the first part called *The Sea and the Ship of Sindbad*).

PART II

SCHEHERAZADE

Scheherazade finished her stories in the early morning, always leaving King Shahryar in a state of unsatisfied curiosity at the most interesting moment. Nights turned into days, which then merged into more nights. *The One Thousand and One Nights* book is like a matryoshka doll, where one must open the dolls individually to get to the last one finally. Korsakov used a similar technique: he created a sense of endless anticipation in the transition between the first and second parts.

The first part ends with a calm E major chord – it might seem like the end, but then unexpectedly, the key changes from major to minor, and the music smoothly, almost imperceptibly, transitions to the second section, where the main character, Scheherazade – the violinist – begins her story once again.

Rimsky-Korsakov leaves no doubt that we are in the Middle East. The new musical idea, the theme of the PRINCE OF THE CALENDAR (I am unable to find and understand what rank this refers to – since I know it is a rank, not a name, and how it is declined), first presented by the bassoon, has a sad, mournful, but clearly oriental character. Interestingly, in the collection of Arab tales, there are three princes of the Calendar; it's hard to say which one Korsakov had in mind, which could be an argument confirming his universal approach to the composition we're discussing today.

BASSOON THEME (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

Later, the composer develops this theme variationally, with it being played sequentially by the oboe and finally by the string quintet. The entire piece clearly picks up momentum and swelling – this effect is achieved through successive tempo acceleration and increased dynamics.

By the way, the Szczecin Philharmonic presented this fragment of Scheherazade – as a song, with lyrics written by the conductor – during the first family concert *Young Music Lovers' Academy*. I wonder if anyone here had the opportunity to attend this event with their children?

THE OBOE SOLO | THEME TAKEN OVER BY THE QUINTET (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

An important rule in composing engaging music is to use contrasts that hold the listeners' attention and evoke strong emotions. Korsakov knew this well, as evidenced by the introduction of a new version of the Sultan's theme, this time as a particularly ominous-sounding fanfare played by the trombone (and repeated in shorter rhythmic values by the trumpet, which can also be interpreted as the appearance of another character in the story). This situation occurs against a tremolo played by the quintet (very rapid and short bow strokes) on a tritone, a dissonant interval that in ancient times was considered devilish.

TROMBONE AND TRUMPET FANFARE (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

Korsakov was a composer full of unbridled creativity. One of the most interesting solutions (and probably the first time in music history) is to present the prince's theme – this time by the clarinet – in a version independent of pulse, time, or tempo – one might say *ad libitum*, improvised according to one's liking. However, there is one catch – the pulse is actually there. It is played clearly, *pizzicato* by the string instruments. These two planes are independent of each other. In cinema, such an effect is achieved by dividing the screen and showing two alternative versions of events or actions from the perspective of two different characters.



CLARINET SOLO AND STRING QUINTET PIZZICATO (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

The prince's theme goes through several other voices of the orchestra, and its final presentation, taken over by the cello, turns into a rapidly accelerating march, which ends the second part of the suite. Please pay attention to these nuances when listening to *Scheherazade* in its entirety!

PART III

SCHEHERAZADE

The programmatic *Scheherazade* suite, in the general atmospheric sense of the word, now seems sprawling, with **constant repetition of motifs** and a certain primitiveness in formal transitions. However, it is difficult to resist the suggestiveness of its oriental themes and its sometimes magical orchestral colour." This rather harsh judgment of *Scheherazade* was made by the Polish composer and music publicist Stefan Kisielewski.

I wouldn't necessarily view this constant repetition of motifs in such a negative light. We tend to like the songs we already know. Secondly, isn't the entire concept of film music built precisely on recurring motifs, often representing specific characters?

And speaking of film music, the third movement of the symphonic suite we are discussing today, meant to evoke the tale of a young prince and a young princess, is a full-fledged Hollywood love theme. Russian composers are renowned for their exceptional talent in writing sincerely moving melodies – let's recall, for example, the love theme from Pyotr Tchaikovsky's famous *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture*, which has been used in many films.

LOVE THEME FROM ROMEO AND JULIET (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

Returning to Rimsky-Korsakov – the opening melody might seem beautiful, yet simple, perhaps even... naive?

THEME WITHOUT HARMONIC BACKGROUND – VIOLINS ONLY (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

All the tension, the emotions that don't just float on the surface but churn deep inside, somewhere around the abdomen – these are brought to life by the harmony, or more precisely, the harmonic progression, where the elements shift chromatically (meaning by half-steps) within one of the voices.

It's like this: imagine standing in front of a large, built-in wardrobe with multiple doors, each forming a straight, parallel, and perpendicular grid. But one of the doors has sagged, and its hinge is misaligned. Suddenly, amidst the orderly structure of vertical and horizontal lines, there's an irritating disturbance – a misaligned angle that disrupts the natural look of the wardrobe. Chromatic movement in harmony, often resulting in dissonant chords, evokes a similar feeling.

Andantino, quasi allegretto $\text{♩} = 120$

p Str.

The combination of these two elements – melody and harmony – is something you will hear shortly in the full performance of the piece.

A contrasting counterpart to this romantic theme is a light, carefree march. It begins with an instrument often associated with the military – the snare drum. This passage is frequently required from musicians during orchestra auditions.

SNARE DRUM SOLO FROM LETTER D (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

Soon, additional percussion instruments join the snare.

FULL PERCUSSION FROM LETTER G TO LETTER H (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

An interesting detail: when Scheherazade takes the spotlight in this section, her plaintive song transforms into short, bouncing notes, played with a bow that lightly skips across the strings. This technique is called *ricochet*. Don't you think the violin sounds somewhat percussive here, almost echoing the timbre of the snare drum heard earlier?

VIOLIN SOLO WITH RICOCHETS (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

The love theme from the beginning of the movement remains ever-present—Scheherazade tells her tale of the prince and princess. Still, perhaps, in reality, she is weaving a story about her love for the Sultan, a tale that seems to be heading toward a happy ending?

CLIMAX (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

The entire movement closes with a charming musical goodnight kiss.

PART IV

SCHEHERAZADE

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov had a fondness for long titles. The famous *Flight of the Bumblebee*, for example, comes from an opera commonly known as *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* (as I mentioned at the beginning of today's session). Still, its full title is *The Tale of Tsar Saltan, of His Son, the Glorious and Mighty Knight Prince Gvidon Saltanovich, and of the Beautiful Swan Princess*. Quite ambitious, don't you think? The title of the final movement of *Scheherazade* could undoubtedly compete for the longest title in history. Here it is:

The Festival at Baghdad. The Sea. The Ship Breaks Against a Rock Surmounted by the Bronze Horseman.

Here, the somewhat sugary romance gives way to thrilling action packed with drama and excitement. From the very first measures, it's clear that the Sultan is not in a good mood today.

FIRST 4 BARS (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

The opening juxtaposition of the Sultan's and Scheherazade's themes suggests tension—perhaps an intense argument? The emotional charge is certainly more substantial than in previous renditions. Soon, however, the tale resumes, transporting listeners to the bustling streets of Baghdad, alive with festivity and commotion. It is how Rimsky-Korsakov envisioned it.

VIVO, FRAGMENT UP TO LETTER C (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

The festival in Baghdad is suddenly interrupted by the return of the sea theme from the first movement. This time, however, the sea is no longer calm but turbulent and dangerous.

ALLEGRO NON TROPPO 6/4 UP TO LETTER X (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

The effect of whistling and howling wind is achieved through rapid chromatic runs played by the high-pitched flutes and clarinets.

FLUTES + CLARINETS PART 4–6 BARS FROM LETTER X (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

The ship is heading toward a towering cliff—toward disaster.

FROM LETTER Y TO POCO PIÙ TRANQUILLO (ORCHESTRAL EXCERPT).

The final bars of the piece bring everything full circle. Rimsky-Korsakov repeats elements from the beginning of the composition, closing his tale. The Sultan's theme now sounds calm and dreamy, as if the once vengeful ruler has finally found peace.



FILHARMONIA
SZCZECIN