

Rimsky-Korsakov's
Classical Music Tale

Scheherazade

The story of

The Thousand and One
Arabian Nights

Discovery Guide

Watch the Video on YouTube!
youtube.com/watch?v=U-9pP3u410o

Play the free Interactive Game at GoClassical For Kids!
goclassical.org/kids/scheherazade

Main Characters

The Great King

The royal ruler of the land, who handed down his land and wealth to his sons Sharayar and Shahzaman

Scheherazade

The brave, clever storyteller and daughter of the king's chief minister

King Sharayar

The unhappy ruler who listens to Scheherazade's stories each night.

The Deceitful Queen

King Sharayar's wife who betrayed him.



The Music of Scheherazade

A History of the Music

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov composed Scheherazade during the summer of 1888 at a beautiful lakeside country house. He loved folk tales and spent his youth traveling the world as a Russian naval officer, giving him a lifelong love for the ocean. He combined his sea memories with magical stories to create an orchestral masterpiece that premiered in St. Petersburg, Russia, on October 28, 1888. Rimsky-Korsakov wanted the instruments to act like a colorful picture book for the ears, inspiring listeners to use their own imaginations to paint the scenes.



Rimsky-Korsakov's
Childhood Home
& Museum



Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov Signed Cabinet Card



The Story Behind the Music

The music brings the famous 1001 Arabian Nights stories to life. It begins with a loud, grumbling brass theme representing the stern Sultan. To help the ruler become a kinder leader, the brave Scheherazade shares enchanting tales of Sinbad sailing stormy seas, royal romances, and festive marketplaces. She always pauses her stories at an exciting cliffhanger so the Sultan will let her return the next night. After 1,001 nights, her beautiful musical adventures, carried by a sweet solo violin, soften his heart completely.

The Main Thematic Instruments

Rimsky-Korsakov uses a clever technique called **MUSICAL THEMES** to bring characters to life without words. Just like a modern movie soundtrack, specific instruments are assigned to different characters so the audience instantly recognizes who is "speaking." By contrasting a single delicate violin with a powerful booming brass section, the composer creates a musical conversation between the story's two main figures.



The Voice of Scheherazade: The Solo Violin and Harp

The brave storyteller is represented by a beautiful solo violin playing a sweet, winding melody. Whenever this theme appears, the rest of the orchestra grows quiet so the single violin can shine, mimicking a room falling silent when listening to a fascinating tale. To make it sound even more magical, a gentle **HARP** accompanies the violin. This combination of instruments evokes ancient traveling storytellers plucking a stringed instrument while reciting a tale, perfectly matching Scheherazade's grace and intelligence.

The Presence of the Sultan King: Heavy Brass and Low Strings

In sharp contrast, the powerful Sultan King Sharayar is introduced by **HEAVY BRASS** and **LOW STRINGS** (trombones, tubas, and double basses). Played incredibly loud and altogether in unison, meaning the instruments all play the exact same notes at the exact same time, these instruments deliver a giant wall of sound announcing a royal entrance. The music is heavy, rigid, and stomping to represent his strict rules and dark, stern personality. The instruments play a descending scale that presses down on the audience, setting up a perfect musical battle of wits between the loud king and the clever storyteller.

The Art of Scheherazade

A PERSIAN MINIATURE is a small, brightly colored illustration that tells a beautiful story. Back in the 14th century, reading poetry and literature became very popular in Persia, the homeland of Scheherazade. Special painting schools opened across the region, where master painters used rich pigments from crushed minerals and real gold to make the pages shimmer.



These tiny artworks were painted inside books to illustrate popular poems and folk stories, making the pages exciting and easy for children to understand. Look closely to discover a magical world packed into a tiny space.



The magnificently detailed drawings show brave characters, grand royal palaces with swirling patterns, lush green gardens, magical singing birds, and blooming flowers.



Long before books existed, people shared news, history, and culture through the ancient art of storytelling.

Traveling storytellers, like the Bards of the Middle Ages, journeyed from village to village to pass down traditions. For children, these tales were especially important because they taught valuable lessons about wisdom, good behavior, and virtue. Eventually, collectors like the Brothers Grimm began writing these spoken words down into modern fairy tale books.

Storytelling

One of the most famous story collections in the world is the *1001 Arabian Nights*.

These Middle Eastern tales were originally performed aloud by traveling storytellers long before they were ever printed. This incredible tradition of oral storytelling inspired Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov to turn these classic bedtime adventures into a beautiful piece of classical music.



The collection's most famous tale centers on the brave and clever Scheherazade.

Her king had ordered a terrible law to end the lives of the young girls in the kingdom, and Scheherazade was next in line. To save herself, she begged the king to listen to a story. She told a thrilling tale but stopped right at the most exciting part, promising to finish it the next night. The king eagerly spared her life for one more day just to hear the ending. By repeating this clever trick for 1,001 nights, Scheherazade saved herself and all the young girls in the kingdom.

Geography

Ancient Persia

The character Scheherazade lived in ANCIENT PERSIA, a vibrant region located in the modern-day Middle East, primarily centering around the country of Iran. Long before it became a unified nation, diverse cultures occupied these lands. The Persian people formally established themselves around 1500 B.C., settling south of Lake Urmia and around the historic city of Shiraz.

Persian Empire

By 550 B.C., the Persians were led by King Cyrus the Great, a famous ruler who rapidly expanded the kingdom into a massive empire. Under his leadership, Persian territories stretched as far west as parts of modern EGYPT, LIBYA, and GREECE, and all the way east to the Indus River in modern PAKISTAN and INDIA, and covered modern-day AFGHANISTAN, IRAN, IRAQ, SYRIA, LEBANON, ISRAEL, TURKEY and ARMENIA. This vast geography connected different cultures, which helped spread the magical fairy tales we enjoy today.

Scheherazade's dangerous world of Kings and empires was inspired by the real history of ancient Persia.



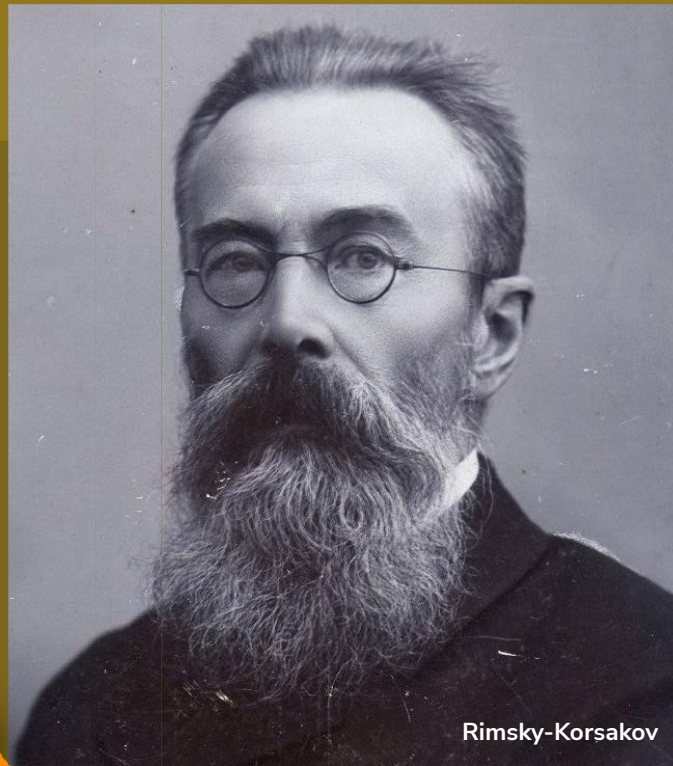
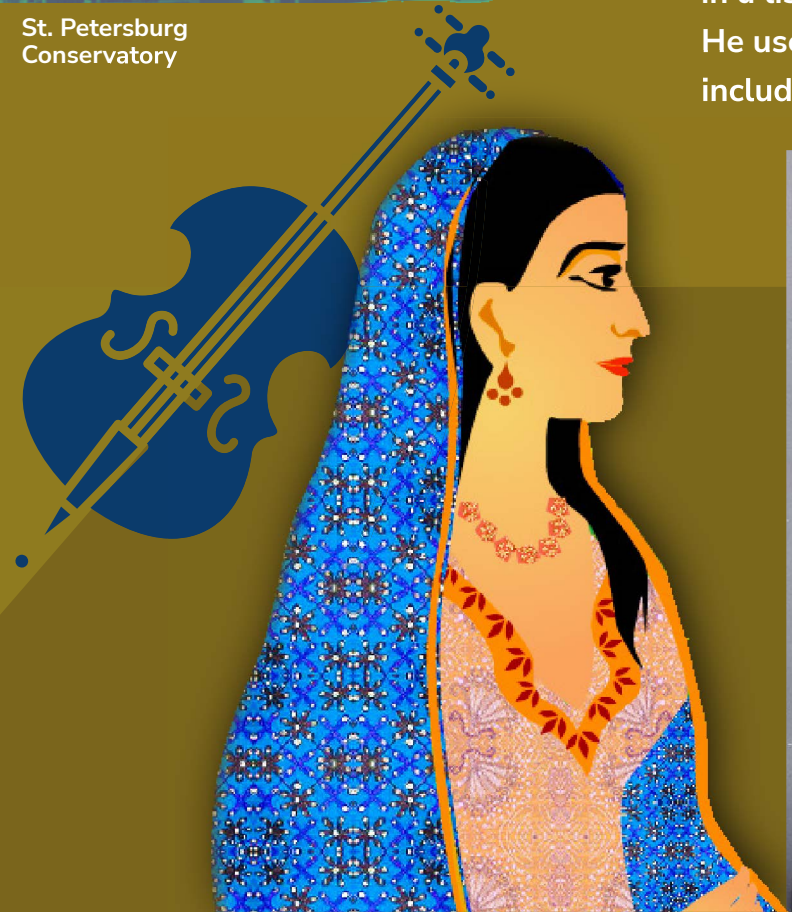
About the Composer Rimsky-Korsakov

NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV (1840–1908) grew up in a wealthy family loving music. Though he learned piano and cello, his family steered him toward a career in the Russian Navy. His path changed at age 17 when he met a famous composer named Balakirev, who recognized the teenager's immense talent. Rimsky-Korsakov soon joined a group of young musicians called "The Five," working together to create a brand new style of classical music inspired by traditional Russian stories.



St. Petersburg
Conservatory

Later in life, he became a celebrated professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, teaching legendary students like Igor Stravinsky. Today, Rimsky-Korsakov is remembered as the master of "orchestration." This is the special art of painting pictures in a listener's mind by blending the unique "sound colors" of different instruments. He used this musical magic to write a vast collection of operas and orchestral pieces, including his famous and beautifully descriptive musical retelling of Scheherazade.



Rimsky-Korsakov

Rimsky-Korsakov family Coat Of Arms



Credits

Executive Producer and Writer:

Dr. Jama Laurent for the Creative Kids Education Foundation

Design and Development:

John Marchena, Ann Zumwinkle, William Jimenez for Zumwinkle.com

Audio and Video Production:

Douglas Bland for Zumwinkle.com

Recording of "Scheherazade, Op. 35", composed by Nicolai Rimski-Korsakov, conducted by Riccardo Muti and performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, courtesy EMI Records.

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Resources

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