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‘Rimsky-Korsakov and His World’ Review: Celebrating a Russian Master

This year’s Bard Music Festival explores the disconnect between the impressive weight of Rimsky-Korsakov’s oeuvre and the comparative lack of representation it receives in the U.S.



‘Portrait of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’ (1898), by Valentin Serov PHOTO: VALENTIN SEROV/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

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Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) is arguably one of the most popular names in Russian music. His magnificent symphonic poem “Scheherazade,” his “Russian Easter Festival Overture” and “Capriccio espagnol” are concert standards. The brief “Flight of the Bumblebee” has been a fixture of pops concerts, especially in virtuoso arrangements for nearly every solo instrument. The so-called “Song of India”—recorded during the years before and after World War I by such “golden age” sopranos as Alma Gluck and Amelita Galli-Curci—even crossed over from pops classic to pop music, fox-trotted by bandleader Paul Whiteman in the 1920s and swung by Tommy Dorsey in the 1930s. In fact, the “Bumblebee” and the “Song of India” originated in two of Rimsky-Korsakov’s 15 operas, the former originally an entr’acte in “The Tale of Tsar Saltan,” the latter a tenor aria, the “Song of the Indian Merchant,” in his opera “Sadko.” And therein lies the irony: For over a century, Rimsky-Korsakov’s popularity has essentially ridden on this mere handful of works. But what about the rest?: What of his dazzling C-Sharp Minor Piano Concerto, his opulent C-Minor Piano Trio? And what of his splendid operas “The Tsar’s Bride” and “Mozart and Salieri”?

These are just a few rarities awaiting audiences at this year’s Bard Music Festival, “Rimsky-Korsakov and His World” (Aug. 10-12 and Aug. 17-19). In fact, one point it will explore is the disconnect between the impressive weight of Rimsky-Korsakov’s oeuvre and the comparative lack of representation it receives in the West.

As a composer, Rimsky-Korsakov was a primary force in crafting a distinctive Russian school of composition. Together with composers Mily Balakirev (1837-1910), Alexander Borodin (1833-1887), César Cui (1835-1918) and Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881), he was a member of the “Mighty Five,” all essentially self-trained musicians with day jobs in other fields. They saw themselves as architects of a genuinely national musical style with roots in traditional Russian folk and church music, independent of the prevailing influence of Italian and French opera and German symphony, which they identified with conservatory training.

Rimsky-Korsakov, who had received private piano lessons, was composing pieces by age 10. Influenced by his much older brother, a naval officer, he entered the Naval College at St. Petersburg in 1856, during which time opera attendance fed his growing musical interest. Meeting Balakirev, Cui and Mussorgsky around 1861 nourished it further. However, no sooner did Balakirev, now Rimsky-Korsakov's volunteer music teacher, assign his pupil to learn the rudiments of large-scale composition by writing a symphony than the Imperial navy ordered midshipman Rimsky-Korsakov on a three-year world tour. The symphony was finished and performed after his return home in 1865, but the ocean became a recurring musical theme, in the familiar Sinbad and Sea episodes of "Scheherazade," and also in his operas "Sadko" and "Tsar Saltan."

Meanwhile, Rimsky-Korsakov, commanded by Balakirev to compose intuitively, was increasingly drawn to the academic compositional techniques Balakirev despised. This was especially true once Rimsky-Korsakov joined the faculty of the St. Petersburg Conservatory (established by Anton Rubinstein, Franz Liszt's Russian keyboard rival, a prolific composer and a towering musical figure throughout Europe). As a professor there, Rimsky-Korsakov—for whom the conservatory is now named—essentially taught by keeping one step ahead of his students. Assiduously learning on the job, he eventually wrote one of the supreme textbooks on orchestration. He remained a singularly important teacher, most famously of Stravinsky and, briefly, Prokofiev—but also of the future composer of the "Pines of Rome," Ottorino Respighi, who studied orchestration with him while serving as principal violist of the Russian Imperial Theater.

The more Rimsky-Korsakov learned, the more he revised his own works, many of which exist in multiple versions. He also completed many scores his colleagues left unfinished, among them, Borodin's opera "Prince Igor," which Rimsky-Korsakov and his gifted protégé Alexander Glazunov fashioned from the shambling manuscript that Borodin left at his sudden death. More controversial (from the modern viewpoint), Rimsky-Korsakov made a revised edition of Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov" that helped immeasurably to introduce it to Western audiences, and which remained the standard version performed outside Russia until it was supplanted by Mussorgsky's original later in the 20th century.

Rimsky-Korsakov was perhaps the finest orchestral colorist between Berlioz and Richard Strauss. But while his works are celebrated for their vivid instrumentation, their appeal is also melodic, for, like Tchaikovsky and Rubinstein, he was a splendid melodist, his outpouring often inspired by folk tunes and Orthodox liturgical chant, and frequently imbued with the Oriental coloring most familiar in the recurring “Scheherazade” violin solo. This scintillating, seductive tonal language became a Russian musical hallmark, not just in works by the Mighty Five, but by a wide swath of composers into the 20th century, including Tchaikovsky, Glazunov, Rachmaninoff and Scriabin. Their music, together with that of less familiar figures like Anton Arensky and Anatoly Lyadov, will also feature on the Bard’s stimulating programs, contextualizing Rimsky-Korsakov’s oeuvre while providing a richly polychrome picture of Imperial Russia’s extraordinary musical culture.

—*Mr. Scherer writes about music and the fine arts for the Journal.*