



Leo Smit, *Schemselnihar*

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *Scheherazade*

Tonight's concert invites us into the magical world of *One Thousand and One Nights*, where storytelling, adventure, romance, and imagination reign supreme. Although separated by more than half a century, composers Leo Smit and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov were both exceptional musical storytellers whose brilliant orchestral colors bring these timeless tales to life.

Leo Smit (1900–1943) was one of the Netherlands' most gifted twentieth-century composers and pianists, whose music blended the clarity of neo-classicism with vibrant lyricism, rhythmic energy, wit, and touches of jazz. After graduating cum laude from the Amsterdam Conservatory in 1923, he taught there before moving to Paris, where friendships with composers such as Darius Milhaud and exposure to the music of Stravinsky, Debussy, and Ravel helped shape his distinctive musical voice. Returning to Amsterdam in 1937, he produced some of his finest works, including the Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments, Symphony in C, Concertino for Harp and Orchestra, Trio for Clarinet, Viola, and Piano, and the poignant Sonata for Flute and Piano. A meticulous craftsman and master orchestrator, Smit had emerged as one of the leading Dutch composers of his generation before his career was cut tragically short. Because of his Jewish heritage, he and his wife were deported to the Sobibor extermination camp and murdered in 1943.

Tonight's concert opens with Smit's spellbinding ballet *Schemselnihar* (1929), inspired by one of the tales from *One Thousand and One Nights* (*Arabian Nights*). It tells a spectacular—and doomed—story of love at first sight. When the handsome Persian prince Ali Ebn Becar catches a glimpse of the breathtaking Schemselnihar, favorite concubine of the Caliph Haroun al-Rashid, the two fall instantly and hopelessly in love. Secret meetings in a palace of unimaginable luxury, love songs exchanged like coded messages, dramatic embraces, synchronized fainting spells, and moonlit escapes by boat follow as the lovers struggle to keep their forbidden romance alive. Yet no amount of devotion can overcome one heartbreaking reality: Schemselnihar belongs to the caliph. As the separated lovers waste away from longing, sustained only by passionate letters and dreams of reunion, heartbreak ultimately claims them both. Buried together at last, Ali and Schemselnihar achieve in death the union that life could never grant them.

I recommend experiencing this 27-minute ballet score as you would a great movie soundtrack to an epic romantic adventure. Smit's dazzling orchestral writing brings the story to life: shimmering textures evoke the caliph's opulent palace, soaring melodies capture the lovers' irresistible attraction, and increasingly restless, passionate music conveys the danger, longing, and heartbreak of their impossible

love. From wonder to romance, from ecstasy to despair, the music will lead you through the emotional arc of the ill-fated lovers.

Our next composer with an extraordinary gift for musical storytelling is **Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov** (1844–1908), Russia's unrivaled master of orchestration. Remarkably, he did not begin with formal training in composition but instead attended the Naval College in St. Petersburg and served as an officer in the Imperial Russian Navy, studying music and composing whenever his duties allowed. Encouraged by his mentor Mily Balakirev, he sought to create a distinctly Russian musical style inspired by his nation's history, folklore, and traditions rather than emulating the methods of Beethoven, Schumann, and other German masters. Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestral innovations helped shape the music of Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, along with generations of Hollywood film composers, and his music continues to enchant audiences with its craftsmanship, and wonder.

Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic suite *Scheherazade* (1888) returns us to the enchanting world of *One Thousand and One Nights*. When King Shahryar discovers his wife's infidelity, he concludes that every woman must be equally untrustworthy. Determined never to be betrayed again, he marries a new bride each evening—only to have her executed the following morning. The cycle of terror continues until the resourceful and courageous Scheherazade volunteers to become his next wife.

Knowing her life depends on keeping the king's attention, Scheherazade begins telling him a captivating story on their wedding night—but deliberately stops at the most suspenseful moment before dawn. Desperate to hear what happens next, the king postpones her execution. Night after night, for 1,001 evenings, Scheherazade spins tales of magic, romance, daring voyages, and clever heroes. Little by little, her stories soften the king's heart. By the time the final tale is told, Shahryar has fallen in love and abandons his cruelty.

Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* doesn't follow the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights* literally. Instead, it evokes their spirit, painting vivid musical scenes that invite your imagination to fill in the details.

I. “The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship” begins with a commanding statement from the full orchestra, announcing the Sultan Shahryar. Almost immediately, a solo violin, accompanied by shimmering harp, answers with delicate, winding phrases—the voice of Scheherazade herself. As the movement unfolds, broad, rolling melodies suggest the rise and fall of ocean swells, while surging brass and percussion conjure storms, danger, and the thrill of adventure on the high seas.

II. “The Story of the Kalendar Prince” opens once again with Scheherazade's solo violin before yielding to a richly expressive bassoon, introducing the wandering mystic of the title. Various instruments will each take a turn at telling us parts of the story. Sudden shifts between quiet mystery and exuberant excitement give the music the feel of a master storyteller interrupting himself with dramatic flourishes, sly humor, and unexpected twists.

III. “The Young Prince and the Young Princess” is the emotional heart of the suite. Here, Rimsky-Korsakov sets aside thrills in favor of warmth, grace, and tenderness. Long, flowing melodies unfold with elegance, and every phrase seems to breathe naturally. When the full orchestra blossoms into its richest sonorities, the listener is bathed in breathtaking warmth.

IV. “Festival at Baghdad – The Sea – Ship Breaks against a Cliff Surmounted by a Bronze Horseman” brings every thread of the suite together in a dazzling finale. Brilliant celebrations, bustling marketplaces, galloping rhythms, towering orchestral climaxes, and the return of the sea music from the opening movement tumble one into another as the excitement builds. The momentum races toward a spectacular shipwreck, the full orchestra crashing against the rocks. Then, almost unexpectedly, the solo violin reappears one last time: Scheherazade has finished her tale. Through the power of imagination and storytelling, she has transformed the Sultan—and, perhaps, us as well.

--David H. Johnson

Comments? Questions? Email me at david.johnson@gcsu.edu.