

F.A.M.E. October 2004
Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov
1844-1908

Biography:

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov was born in a small Russian town, Tikhvin, located near St. Petersburg. At 3-4 years of age, he kept perfect time on a toy drum when his father played the piano. He had a perfect pitch, and began formal piano training when he was about 6 years old. When Nicolai was twelve years old, his parents sent him to the Naval School in St. Petersburg, following in his brother's footsteps. (His brother, a naval officer, was 22 years older than Nicolai). He studied music while at the school and began to compose a symphony. During this time period, Nicolai became associated with other young Russian composers, who together with Nicolai, became known as the "Russian Five".

Nicolai began his naval career when he embarked on an almost three-year long sea journey on the clipper ship *Almaz*. While at sea, he found little time for music. Soon his passion for music died down, being replaced with a passion for the sea and nature.

When he returned from his journey, he came back in contact with the composers he met from his days at the naval school. They encouraged him to complete the symphony he had started and in December 1865, his first symphony was performed. In 1872, Nicolai, who had little education on music theory and structure, was asked to be a professor of composition and orchestration at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Despite his limited knowledge, he accepted the position and would study at night in secret in order to be able to teach (and stay ahead of) his students. Eventually Rimsky-Korsakov became known as one of the finest Russian composition teachers. (taught Stravinsky)

He met his wife, Nadezhda Purgod, a talented pianist, at one of the gatherings of the "Russian Five"; and they married in 1882. They had three children.

During his career, he wrote 15 operas and 11 symphonies in addition to many other musical pieces. He had a passion for folk songs, producing two collections of Russian folksongs. His pieces were influenced by the experiences of his naval career, in particular, the seas.

One of Rimsky-Korsakov's most famous pieces is from an opera he wrote in 1899 called the Tale of Tsar Saltan. (play song on tape). Does anyone recognize this piece? It is "Flight of the Bumblebee".

In 1905, Rimsky-Korsakov was showing sympathy for the revolutionary students and was fired from his professorship at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. The government imposed a ban on his works, which lasted about two months. His removal sparked a series of resignations by fellow faculty members and Rimsky-Korsakov was reinstated after about eight months. He also wrote an opera (Le Coq d'Or) which was an attack on Imperial Russia, which the government banned after its premiere.

Nicolai had heart problems and died several years later of a heart ailment in June 1908.

The Music

(Have students close their eyes). Today, we are going to take an imaginary trip. (Turn on tape of sea sounds). Listen to the sound. (Spray bottle of salt water). Can you lick your lips and taste anything? Where were you in your mind? (hopefully they answer ocean, sea). Now listen to this music. Does it sound as though someone is at sea?

This piece is called “Sinbad at Sea” and it is the first movement of Scheherazade, written by Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov in 1888. It is one of the stories from the Arabian Nights. The tales of the Arabian Nights were passed down through the centuries by word of mouth, the oldest dating back to the 10th century.

The Sultan’s first wife had betrayed him, and in anger and grief he decided to have her killed and vowed to marry a woman each night and kill her the next morning before she too could betray him. Scheherazade, whose father was the vizier on the Sultan’s court, was a very clever woman and had a plan. She convinced her father to make her the Sultan’s next wife. After the wedding, Scheherazade’s sister begged her to tell her a story. With the Sultan listening, she began an exciting tale of fantasy and adventure, but stopped before the story ended. This caused the Sultan to put off killing her until she could finish the story the next evening. Scheherazade never finished her tale, but kept her husband the Sultan enthralled with story after story for 1,001 nights. By that time the Sultan and Scheherazade had three sons, and the Sultan, convinced of Scheherazade’s fidelity and wisdom, reversed the death sentence.

“The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship”, was one of the stories told by Scheherazade to the Sultan. (Story is on the next page)

Rimsky-Korsakov, like Wagner (from F.A.M.E. V) utilized leitmotifs in this piece. Certain instruments or melodies represent different characters in the story. The stern and solemn tune which is dominated by brass (and bass strings) represents the Sultan (and the Sultan in the role of Sinbad), and the violin melody (and harp arpeggios) represents Scheherazade as she weaves her tale.

However, when Nicolai was first writing this piece, he first entitled the movements Prelude, Ballade, Adagio and Finale. He renamed the four movements, The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship; The Kalender Prince; The Young Prince and Princess; Festival at Baghdad. Nicolai indicated that the piece was not meant to be an exact depiction of Scheherazade’s stories, and the titles of the movements are meant to “direct but slightly the hearer’s fancy on the path my own fancy traveled.”

The Story of Sinbad and his Ship

Once upon a time, there was a young man named Sinbad. Sinbad's father had died leaving him a lot of money. Sinbad had a good time with his money. He bought fancy clothes, expensive food and fast horses. He did not spend it wisely. This went on for a long time until finally Sinbad realized he would be quite poor and would have to get a job.

So, he decided to sell what was left of his land and possessions and buy a ship and goods. He was going to go from island to island and sell his merchandise. He had many exciting adventures. One day, he and his crew landed on the most beautiful island that they had ever seen. Having been at sea a long time, they decided to dock their ship. They went ashore and lit fires, washed their clothes and had a good time.

But, soon the island shook and quaked. Do you know what they had done? They had docked on a whale!!! The whale had been floating; sand had settled on the whale's back and trees had grown. The sailors ran for their lives and left everything behind. Sinbad floated at sea for days and days in a wash tub. He was blown by the winds, tossed by the waves and bitten by fish. On he drifted until at last he was washed up on another island.

This island had people on it so he knew it wasn't another whale. It also had fresh fruit and water. Sinbad became a friend to everyone, including the king, on the island. He, being a storyteller himself, told many tales of the wondrous sights he had seen on his sea travels.

After a long stay, Sinbad became homesick and began longing for news of his home, Baghdad. One day while checking the ships at the waterfront he found the captain of his old ship! It turned out the captain had escaped from the whale and saved Sinbad's ship and merchandise. Sinbad gave some of his goods as gifts to his friend, the king, and sold the rest of the goods and returned to Baghdad a rich man.

Sinbad was so happy being home; he was rich with his profits and was able to buy a fine house and farmlands. His old friends rejoined him and life was very pleasant. After awhile, Sinbad began to forget about his hardships and plan for his second voyage.

And that is the story of Sinbad the Sailor and his First Voyage!