

“Tangazo”

Astor Piazzolla (1921-92)

The Argentinian tango represents only one of numerous musical styles that resulted from the blending of musical cultures of European immigrants and African slaves with those of indigenous peoples already living on the North and South American continents. With its origins in eighteenth-century Buenos Aires bars and brothels, the tango eventually gained popularity throughout the world. Two centuries later, Argentinian composer Astor Piazzolla continued the stylistic integration by introducing elements of jazz, innovative harmonies and melodies, and such instruments as the saxophone and electric guitar. The resulting synthesis of styles, referred to as *nuevo tango*, has become quite popular. “Tangazo” reflects this revolutionized approach to the social dance so characteristic of Argentinian culture.

This one movement work begins in the low strings, gradually moving from the basses and cellos into the higher strings for a rather agitated accumulation of intensely powerful harmonies. As the woodwinds and percussion become more rhythmic, the tango melody itself appears, first in the oboe. A slower and more lyrical section features the solo horn, leading eventually to a return of the rhythmic tango in the oboe. Though the music gradually becomes softer, the deep passion of the tango never quite fades.

Piano Concerto No. 5 “The Egyptian”

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

French composer Camille Saint-Saëns enjoyed vacations in Algiers and Egypt, especially during the winter months. Composing his Piano Concerto No. 5 on one such journey may be a reason for its nickname “The Egyptian,” though Saint-Saëns himself referred to it as a “sea voyage.” More likely the name resulted from some of the musical characteristics of the second movement.

During the nineteenth century the concerto was treated as a genre for exhibiting the virtuosity of the soloist, and this work is quite typical of such an aspiration. The quiet opening of the first movement gives way to sweeping scales and arpeggios that seem to sparkle in both piano and orchestra. Saint-Saëns’ elegant musical lyricism and pleasing harmonies are also demonstrated in this charming movement.

As noted above, the designation “The Egyptian” may well have related to the rhapsodic second movement with its quick runs and flourishes built from scales and modes that have a very middle eastern sound. There are also passages that imitate the Javanese gamelan music that Saint-Saëns may have heard at the Paris Exposition of 1889. Twice Saint-Saëns presents a rather unusual harmonic effect in the piano that had reminded him of “chirping Nile crickets.” And according to Saint-Saëns himself, one of the melodies in this movement was inspired by a Nubian love song sung by boatmen on the Nile River.

The exuberant finale, with its dramatic interaction between orchestra and soloist, leaves behind the eastern exoticism and returns to the bustling energy of Paris. The virtuoso Saint-Saëns, who as a child prodigy was compared favorably with another famous child prodigy—Mozart—premiered the Concerto

No. 5 himself, for his Jubilee Concert in 1896 in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of his professional début.

Scheherazade

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)

Rimsky-Korsakov was perhaps the most gifted of a group of young nineteenth-century Russian composers who strived to create a national music for their country. This group, referred to collectively as *The Five*, consciously rebelled against the musical dominance of German-speaking countries, and to a lesser extent Italy and France, by incorporating folk-like melodies and rhythms and Russian folklore and literature into their compositions. Encouraged by Mili Balakirev, the self-appointed leader of the group, Rimsky-Korsakov began to pursue composition more seriously, eventually accepting a post at the prestigious St. Petersburg Conservatory. Because of his natural gift for combining groups of instruments to create brilliant effects, he is counted among the most prodigious orchestrators in music history. His book, *The Principles of Orchestration*, is still in use.

Scheherazade transports the listener to an exotic, oriental fairy-tale world of magic carpets, magicians, genies, and magic lamps. The composition is loosely based on *One Thousand and One Nights*, a compilation of folklore, literature, and legends from the Middle East collected over several centuries. Brought to Europe in 1704, the collection, known in English as *Arabian Nights*, recounts the sagas of such heroes as Sinbad the Sailor, Ali Babba and the Forty Thieves, and Aladdin. Stories from the *Arabian Nights* also inspired the 1992 movie *Aladdin* as well as the 1953 musical *Kismet*.

The story of the clever Sultana Scheherazade serves as a narrative frame for the various adventures recounted in *Arabian Nights*. Her tale is summarized in the preface of the musical score. Sultan Shahryar of Persia, upon discovering the unfaithfulness of his wife, had her executed and then declared all women to be unfaithful. Consequently, for several years he adhered to his vow to marry a new virgin every night and execute her the next morning after spending only one night with her. The Sultana Scheherazade saved her own life by captivating her husband each night with an adventurous story with no end—a sort of cliffhanger. Curious to hear the conclusion of the story, the Sultan postponed her execution. The next night she would conclude one story but begin another. After continuing for one thousand and one nights, Sultan Shahryar finally repudiated his vow and allowed Scheherazade to live.

Scheherazade is a symphonic suite, consisting of four individual movements unified by a common theme—the story of Sultan Shahryar and his storytelling wife Scheherazade. The somewhat vague title for each movement evokes adventure, fantasy, and exoticism without suggesting any particular narrative or tale. References to the sea in the first and last movements were quite likely inspired by Rimsky-Korsakov's experience as a naval officer. The spectacular orchestration, generally characteristic of Russian nationalism, reveals the composer's extraordinary talent for combining instruments with astonishing results.

The first movement, "The Sea and Sinbad's Ship," introduces two principal melodic themes that permeate all four movements. The first of these is a bold, solemn statement presented predominantly in the low brass. The second is a gently winding, sensuous melody in the solo violin accompanied by

arpeggios in the harp. Though suggestive of the stern Sultan Schahryar and the storyteller Scheherezade, these two melodies appear in other movements, varied and transformed depending on the action, mood, or images depicted, and sometimes with no reference to either Shahryar or Scherherezade. In this movement, an additional melody suggests the steady rocking of the ocean's waves.

"The Story of the Kalendar Prince" involves a royal prince who disguised himself among a group of Kalendar, dervishes who could enter a trance-like state through repetitive physical motions. After the initial presentation of the sensuous violin melody suggestive of "Scheherezade," a new theme is introduced in the bassoon and then presented alternately by soloists and the full orchestra. An appearance of the solemn "Sultan" melody plucked in the low strings leads to a dissonant fanfare shared throughout the orchestra. The new theme initiated by the bassoon eventually returns, varied and embellished in turn by many of the solo instruments. Rimsky-Korsakov's colorful instrumental combinations are particularly evident in this kaleidoscopic movement.

"The Young Prince and The Young Princess" opens with the violin presenting a lyrically flowing and expansive melody punctuated with fluttering embellished runs in the woodwinds. The varied repetitions are interrupted by a lighter, more dance-like tune accompanied by plucked strings. Eventually the sensuous "Scheherezade" melody in the violin and harp interrupts. The remainder of the movement combines these melodies, sweeping to a climax and closing with rapid embellishing passages.

The finale opens with a quick reference to the "Sultan's" theme and "Scheherezade's" wandering solo violin accompanied by harp before giving way to a quick, spirited dance punctuated by cymbal and tambourine—the "Festival at Bagdad." Various melodies from previous movements appear, embellished by solo instruments. Even the Kalendar fanfare is presented in the winds. The music builds toward an exciting climax while making reference to the "Sultan's" theme in low brass and the Kalendar fanfare. The culminating fervor that seems to evoke the swirling sea comes to a sudden halt with a crash in the percussion—a "Shipwreck on a Rock." The ensuing mood is calm and expansive, with the melodies evoking the Sultan and Scheherezade predominating. The two themes finally appear together, quietly, calmly, bring the work to a tender close.

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