

SCHEHERAZADE!

Saturday, October 18, 2014 – 8pm at The VETS, Providence
Amica Rush Hour Concert – Friday, October 17, 6:30pm

Daniel Hege, *guest conductor*

Jon Nakamatsu, *piano*

SHOSTAKOVICH	<i>Festive Overture</i> , op.96
BEETHOVEN	Piano Concerto No.2, B-flat major , op.19
RIMSKY-KORSAKOV	<i>Scheherazade</i> , op.35

***Festive Overture*, op.96**

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

In 1954 Shostakovich proclaimed “The artist in Russia has more ‘freedom’ than the artist in the West.” Those words came following the death of Stalin and the end of a period of subjugation and suppression for this composer.

That was his verbal declaration. His musical statement that year, which had a similar joyous message, was the *Festive Overture*. Here is a work that followed on the heels of the Tenth Symphony’s “optimistic tragedy” but is very different from it. Rarely had Shostakovich written in such an effervescent and “unbuttoned” style. Biographers Dmitri and Ludmilla Sollertinsky call the work “full of joy, sunlight, and limitless energy . . . which seems to pour out in one breath.”

The brassy fanfare of the introduction fairly explodes at the opening of the main *Presto* section. Here, we are treated to a quick series of themes in the woodwinds and strings with brass commentaries. A comic theme in the low brass introduces a lovely, sustained theme in the horns. The strings immediately develop this, leading to a general development section. The drive and exuberance of the development spills into a sizeable ending section that combines introductory material with main themes. (An extra brass section may be used here for reinforcement.) The final *Presto* hammers out a brilliant ending to the *Festive Overture*.

Piano Concerto No.2 in B-flat major, op.19

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

The Piano Concerto No. 2 by Beethoven was the second published but the first completed. Although he had made two adolescent attempts at piano concertos, the B-flat Concerto, begun two years after his 1792 arrival in Vienna, was his first fully orchestrated piano concerto. He finished the work the following year, barely in time for its premiere on his debut concert of March 29, 1795. The concerto contained innovative contrasts in dynamics and mood, but was also deeply indebted to Mozart’s piano concertos, especially in its structure. Thus, an adventurous work from Beethoven’s period of discipleship emerged, but a work with which he was dissatisfied for several years. The composer continued to play the concerto, but only while

making drastic revisions on it until 1801, when he finally consigned it to a publisher. By that time, he had composed and published his C major Concerto as No. 1 (Op. 15), so the B-flat Concerto became No. 2 by default.

When Czech piano virtuoso Václav Tomášek heard Beethoven play the revised B-flat Concerto in Prague in 1798, he could not touch the piano for days. That may have resulted from the power of Beethoven's performance. The work, however, was also impressive. In the first movement, there is a plethora of interesting material, sometimes handled in unexpected ways. For example, Beethoven sets up the audience to expect the orchestra's second theme to sound in a certain key. Instead, he sidesteps into the "wrong" key. About the halfway point, orchestra and piano engage in a dialogue of fragments from various themes. Then the music builds again to a climax with the piano's solo cadenza.

In the *Adagio*, the orchestra paints winsome, flowing melodies, which the piano then elaborates and decorates. Here, we get a taste of what Beethoven's *ex tempore* ornamentation must have sounded like. Toward the end, when we expect a full, virtuosic solo cadenza, Beethoven writes out what analyst Roger Fisk calls an "anti-cadenza," a single line in the right hand only, marked *con gran espressione*. The result may not be as *gran* as Beethoven had envisioned, but it is an interesting experiment.

The finale is full of fun, beginning with the "Scotch-Snap" rhythm of the main theme. Episodic digressions from the theme are equally imaginative, particularly the section that carries a slightly Gypsy flavor. Beethoven concludes his concerto with all the rugged good humor of a country dance.

Scheherazade

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)

During the 1880s, Rimsky-Korsakov labored at putting in order the works of the late Modest Mussorgsky as well as completing and orchestrating *Prince Igor* by the late Alexander Borodin. At this time, he also crystallized certain ideas about the true nature of his own compositional style, coming to realize that his orchestration, in his own words, "had attained a considerable degree of virtuosity and warm sonority. . . ." Given this conclusion, coupled with his ever-present interest in folklore and national musical identity (not necessarily just Russian), there is a natural sequence to Rimsky-Korsakov's last three major orchestral works: *Spanish Capriccio* (1887), *Scheherazade* (1888) and the *Russian Easter Overture* (1888).

Scheherazade was inspired by the tales of *The Arabian Nights* in which the Sultan vows to take a new wife each night and have her executed the next morning. His bride, Scheherazade, however, succeeded in saving herself by engaging the Sultan's interest in a series of interconnected tales. These took 1,001 nights to recount.

Originally, Rimsky-Korsakov's portrayal of *The Arabian Nights* was general and atmospheric. As he stated in his autobiography, "I had even intended to label Movement I of *Scheherazade* — Prelude; II — Ballade; III — Adagio; and IV — Finale; but on the advice of Liadov and others I had not done so." Thus, each movement of the suite bears the name of one of the tales.

Throughout *Scheherazade*, several musical themes recur. However, Rimsky-Korsakov was adamant about the generality of this “musical data.” He wrote,

All I had desired was that the hearer, if he liked my piece as symphonic music, should carry away the impression that it is beyond doubt an oriental narrative of some numerous and varied fairy-tale wonders and not merely four pieces played one after the other and composed on the basis of themes common to all the four movements.

Nonetheless, the two ideas presented at the opening of the work do bear some later significance. These are the themes of the stern Sultan (trombones, low woodwinds, and strings in unison) and of Scheherazade (solo violin and harp). The composer used the latter as a unifying device throughout the suite, presenting it as introductions to the first, second and fourth movements and as an interlude in the third. At the end of the work, the theme of Scheherazade and the theme of the Sultan are joined in a final moment of quiet sensuousness.

Program Notes by Dr. Michael Fink