

YOUNG CLASSICAL WRITERS PRIZE 2021



One Thousand and One Nights

by **Christopher Churcher** (age 17) – specially commended

on Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade

'She would take him to faraway lands to observe foreign ways, so he could get closer to the strangeness within himself' - Fatema Mernissi

I am the eldest daughter of a vizier to King Shahriyár of Persia. Forced to marry this vicious, bitter king, to whom I have become a captive, I now tell my silver-tongued stories to my husband, the murderer, who vowed to kill his wives on their wedding night. In a fervid endeavour to save my life, I lay down my tapestry of tales before him like a labyrinth of intricate puzzles, in an effort that will last for one thousand and one nights. My name is Scheherazade.

He sits writing at his desk just outside Saint Petersburg. It is 1888 and a 43-year-old composer is captivated by visions of a culture more intoxicating and dangerous than his own. A rich tapestry of melody and orchestration, awoken by his reveries of a vaguely defined 'East', is unearthing a strangeness and wildness in himself. He will describe this fledgling symphonic suite as 'a kaleidoscope of fairy-tale images and designs of oriental character.' This piece is to be called Scheherazade. His name is Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.

It was the 18th of January 2016. An eleven-year-old boy, still short enough that the cavernous concert hall in Birmingham seemed miles wide to him, was captivated by the brash trombone lines and swirling strings of Scheherazade. Sat wide-eyed behind the orchestra, exhilarated by crashing cymbals and entranced by the whirling arms of the conductor, this piece inspired in him a love for classical music as deep as the sea that Sinbad traverses with his ship in the Arabian Nights. This piece was to become his childhood passion and he writes about it today in 2021.

Rimsky-Korsakov sits at his writing desk just outside Saint Petersburg, subsumed by vibrant reveries of faraway lands. Intoxicated by images of the immortal stories of the Arabian Nights, he captures the domineering King Shahriyár with a forbidding, unison bellow of sound from the orchestra and releases the silver-tongued voice of Scheherazade with a tender, wistful violin solo. As a panoply of mythical tales and characters swirl onto the page, he conjures one of the wandering kalandar princes with a twisting, mellow bassoon solo, spot-lit over muted cellos – a great shipwreck erupts from his pen with a colossal wall of sound from the orchestra, decorated with eddying harps, spiralling flutes and bombastic trombones – finally, Scheherazade finds her peace as the tormented violin interludes of the earlier movements resolve with her final serenity.

I, Scheherazade, sit back, exhausted on the final eve of my millennium of nights. With the now complete tapestry of stories behind me, I can look back on the one thousand and one nights of story-telling, brimming with adventures to foreign climes. Looking forward centuries after I am released from a captive imagination through a tapestry of history and folklore, I will see my tales captured in the poetry of Alfred Tennyson, the music of Ravel, the writing of Voltaire and, in the music of Rimsky-Korsakov, I will find reincarnation in the yearning, sensuous melodies of a solo violin. I will see that my legacy of the power of narration remains. As Fatema Mernissi writes, I took the king to faraway lands to observe foreign ways, so he could get closer to the strangeness within himself. By liberating him from being his own captive, I found my freedom.

Christopher Churcher