



Cheyenne  
Symphony  
Orchestra

**Masterpiece 1 – Arabian Nights**

**October 22, 2022**

***Seven O’Clock Shout* — Valerie Coleman**

Coleman is one of America’s young composers whose appealing works have garnered high praise for their imagination, accessibility, and innate musical integrity. A native of Kentucky, she is a graduate of Louisville Male High School, Boston University, and the Mannes College of Music. She is an accomplished flautist as well as a composer, and early on in her career in composition focused on woodwind chamber music. Branching out into other genres, she has written works for major orchestras, including the Philadelphia Orchestra. Her work quickly earned her widespread recognition and awards, and is characterized by the incorporation of a diverse array of musical elements, including Afro-Cuban, jazz, and what might be recognized as “mid-century American” styles. All of that, plus a healthy mastery of the nuanced color of traditional French orchestral textures. Personally, she has a warm, genial demeanor, and that and her sense of humanity is palpable in her work.

*Seven O’Clock Shout* was commissioned by the Philadelphia Orchestra, for whom she had previously written the well-received *Umoja: Anthem of Unity*. She was given the commission for *Seven O’Clock Shout* in Summer of 2020 only two weeks before the premiere, and obviously worked quickly (one recalls Mozart and Rossini in this regard).

In essence, *Seven O’Clock Shout* is a sincere reflection about and a cheerful salute to the legions of those in the helping professions who personally sacrificed themselves and labored so diligently to save the rest of us during the worst of the Covid-19. One will remember that for a while during the darkest of that time it became a kind of New York City daily ritual at seven o’clock for folks to shout out the window and beat on pots and pans to recognize their civic heroes.

This short work falls into several discernable sections, opening with what the composer calls a trumpet fanfare. If so, it is a melancholy, or at least, meditative, one that invokes the isolation of the individual in the viral challenge. A second trumpet soon answers, symbolic of the need to contact with others, and soon leads to a “lushly dense landscape of nature” invoking the army of caregivers. The opening idea is heard in the English horn, with the rest of the orchestra gradually joining in. Clarinet and flute solos invoke the “humanity and grace” essential in meeting humanity’s challenge. A soft, insistent marimba kicks off a spirited, rhythmic response of optimism that includes a vivacious piccolo solo. Soon, the low strings lay out an ostinato figure that leads to the exuberant “seven o’clock” moment in which the orchestra whoops, cheers, and in general creates a joyful din of affirmation and gratitude. Trumpets and percussion drive the spirited ostinato forward, leading to an orchestral version of the traditional African “call and response.” In this case, the solo trombone issues the “call,” and the orchestra enthusiastically replies with “shouts” of response. A happy time, indeed. The peroration

is a warm anthem of affirmation of humankind's triumph over monumental existential challenge, and its resilience in "surviving yet another day."

### ***Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini in A Minor, op.43* — Sergei Rachmaninoff**

Those who create art, whether in the performing arts or in the visual arts, inevitably find their personal "niche" in matters of style. And it is of little consequence whether or not their artistic orientation is a conscious personal choice, or one seemingly imposed by their audiences and by professional critics. Simply put, there are artists whose voice naturally is to work within tradition and commonly-understood artistic language; they strive to develop that tradition to new levels of meaning through their own talent and personal vision. Others make a total commitment to artistic truth arrived at through new voices, new styles, new languages. Every museum and gallery of art, and every concert hall is testimony to this essential dichotomy. And it must be admitted, that there is a universal prejudice among intellectuals—especially those who subconsciously view the arts as they do technology—that the new is necessary the good. The latest styles are more sophisticated, hence more relevant, and old styles should be left with the dead artists that created them. This popular view was dominant among the cognoscenti during most of the twentieth century, but is beginning to moderate, as a more liberal acceptance of diverse artistic styles now is more common than previously—in all the arts.

Like J.S. Bach, who upon his death was looked upon as a more or less old fuddy-duddy (now we know better, of course), Rachmaninoff has borne his share of criticism for having composed in a hopelessly old-fashioned style, long after its relevance. His compositions are the last major representatives of vivid Russian Romanticism—long after that style was presumed dead and buried. Yet, like Bach, his musical genius, his talent, and his strong belief in the validity of his art all led him to create a legacy that took "old-fashioned-style" to a natural and valid high point of achievement. While a child of the nineteenth century, he died almost at the midpoint of the twentieth, secure in his success, and secure in the world's enduring appreciation of his "dated" style.

The composer was a virtuoso pianist and his writing for the solo piano emanates from a mastery of the almost limitless figurations possible for the instrument. He began his attempts at composing relatively early, even sketching out plans for a piano concerto when he was sixteen (it never materialized). But, he made rapid progress, and at the age of eighteen, he completed his first piano concerto in the summer after his graduation from the Moscow Conservatory. That autumn saw the completion of his ubiquitous *Prelude in C# Minor* (a piece whose popularity came to haunt him). Of his many compositions for piano, there are four piano concertos and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, which, of course, is nominally a piano concerto.

The *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* was composed during the summer of 1934, while the composer and his wife were in residence at their villa on Lake Lucerne, in Switzerland. He had built the residence somewhat to remind him of, and to replace, his family estate in Russia, confiscated and destroyed by the Revolution. They lived there until their emigration to California in 1939. Rachmaninoff had composed variations for piano before. The *Variations on a Theme of Chopin* dates from 1902-3, and more notably, the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* from 1931. It is the latter that served

obviously as a kind of preparation for the Paganini variations. Some observers have pointed out the rhythmic vitality and incisiveness of the Corelli variations as a forerunner of the composer's late style—a turn from the lush and expansive natures of much of his earlier works. The Paganini variations received their première in Fall 1934 with the Philadelphia Orchestra with the composer as soloist.

The *Rhapsody* is based upon Caprice No. 24 in A Minor, op. 1 for solo violin by the most celebrated violinist of the nineteenth century, Niccolò Paganini. This famous little tune has served as the basis for more variations than you can imagine over the years. Among the crowd of those who appropriated the theme were Schumann, Liszt, and Brahms—good company! Rachmaninoff crafted his composition in the form of twenty-four variations. After a short introduction, we hear the first variation before the theme, itself, is played. Thereafter follows the theme and twenty-three more variations. Most analysts purport to see the work divided roughly into three main sections, each of which can be thought of as corresponding to the usual three movements of a traditional concerto. There is something to be said for this, but you won't hear a pause that clearly demarks this conception. If you're counting, everything up to variation 11, *Moderato*, can be construed as the first main section. Along the way you can hear a couple of quotations of the famous medieval plainchant for the dead, the *Dies irae*. Rachmaninoff had a deep interest in Russian Orthodox liturgy, and this is a typical expression of that.

The middle section begins, and after a series of variations we arrive at the famous Variation 18. It's one of Rachmaninoff's most famous melodies, and its lush, rich texture is one of the icons of Russian romanticism. While it seems like a new inspiration out of nowhere, in actuality this inspired moment stems simply from the inversion of Paganini's theme. The composer simply took the tripping little bit of ephemera, slowed it down, turned it upside down, cloaked it with glorious harmonies, and something for the ages resulted. It also doesn't hurt that its key is D-flat major, a key pretty far from the basic key of the piece—and that makes it seem all the more exotic and even refreshing. It's true musical genius.

The remaining six variations take off in faster tempos, driving us to the end, borne by ever more impressive virtuoso figurations in the piano, reminding us of just what a towering pianist the composer was. There are a few moments that sound like a cadenza, and then the chase resumes. At the climax the brass loudly intones the *Dies irae* one more time as the pianist pours out cascades of scales and arpeggios and then ends it all with two soft chords.

Rachmaninoff lived nine more years, dying of cancer at his home in Beverly Hills in 1943. In the interim he composed his Third Symphony and the *Symphonic Dances*, and little else, owing most likely to his failing health. But, he did concertize until one month before his death, playing his last performance in Knoxville, Tennessee. Perhaps the conductor, Leon Botstein, summed up the artist and his work best: “Rachmaninoff retained the notion that music serves as a reminder of sheer joy, beauty and happiness in dark times...”.

## ***Scheherazade*, op. 35 — Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov**

Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov's career stood in the very center of Russian musical life of the second half of the nineteenth century. His first career was in the Russian navy, but he soon garnered success in music. Known primarily for his fifteen operas, he was instrumental in the rising importance of that genre in Russia. In addition to his fame and influence as a composer, he was also head of the conservatory in St. Petersburg--his statue dominates the little park directly across the street from the conservatory and the famed Mariinsky Theatre. In the West, of course, we know him primarily for his symphonic overtures and the tone poem, *Scheherazade*. His ability as an orchestrator and teacher of orchestration is one of his many legacies--Igor Stravinsky was one of his students. In fact, much of the marvelous musical atmosphere that audiences adore in Stravinsky's early ballets, the *Rite of Spring*, *Firebird*, and *Petrouchka*, lead directly back to Rimsky-Korsakov and the orchestral style of his operas. And it is of no small interest that there are sections in Debussy's *La Mer* and Ravel's *Daphnis et Cloé* that seem lifted right out of *Scheherazade*. A fascination with exotic, non-Western subject matter was a prime characteristic of Romanticism, and Russian music of the late nineteenth century is exemplary of this predilection.

*Scheherazade*, completed in 1888, is a musical depiction of the well-known story, *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. The eponymous heroine must entertain her bridegroom, the murderous sultan, with continuous intriguing tales in order to forestall the arrival of the executioner who had beheaded a thousand previous wives the morning after their successive marriages. While Rimsky-Korsakov more or less disclaimed his well-known reputation for his evocative musical orientalism, his abilities therein certainly created a triumph of exotic atmosphere in *Scheherazade*. The four movements--following their titles, which Rimsky-Korsakov later withdrew--depict specific stories of Scheherazade, the Sultana. We can follow loosely the narrative, opening with the dark dynamic leitmotiv in the bass that represents the cruel Sultan. The narrator, Scheherezade, is represented by the elaborate, highly figured violin solo that constantly weaves in and out of the texture as the stories unfold. The composer makes ample use of other solo instruments throughout the suite, combined with a rich, colorful orchestral texture that carries it all. The last movement ties all the tales and stories together by juxtaposing the principal themes from the preceding movements in a smashing climax.

--Wm. E. Runyan  
©2022 William E. Runyan