



2023-2024 Musical Interludes | Pedagogues & Protégés

Celebrating the musical legacies of three illustrious educators, their students, and their contemporaries

Program Notes | Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

By Brian Lauritzen

In the tapestry of Russian classical music, the influence of **Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov** (1844-1908) stands as a common thread, weaving through the works of composers who studied with him. As our series of Pedagogues and Protégés continues here at the Pasadena Conservatory of Music, today's concert offers a glimpse into the musical lineage of Rimsky-Korsakov's students, featuring music that reflect the diverse paths they forged under his guidance.

We begin with a selection of art songs by Rimsky-Korsakov himself. Known primarily for his orchestral masterpieces (such as *Scheherazade*, *Capriccio Español*, and many others), Rimsky-Korsakov was also a prolific songwriter. These art songs reveal his keen sensitivity to poetry and the human voice. Through delicate melodies and colorful harmonies, the composer captures the essence of each poem, showcasing his ability to evoke vivid imagery and emotion through music.

Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936), one of Rimsky-Korsakov's most gifted students, demonstrates his mentor's penchant for vibrant orchestration and exotic themes in his enchanting piece, *Rêverie orientale*. Like Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* does on a grand orchestral scale, Glazunov's *Rêverie* transports us to a world of Eastern mystique on a chamber music scale. It's a showcase of Glazunov's ability to infuse Russian music with diverse cultural influences while maintaining a strong connection to Rimsky-Korsakov's innate sense of how to use certain instruments (here, the clarinet) in unique and beguiling ways.

Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov (1859-1935) was a student who revered Rimsky-Korsakov, perhaps above all others. Ippolitov-Ivanov's *Romances, Op. 63*, embody the lyrical charm and melodic richness characteristic of his mentor's style. The selected romances showcase Ippolitov-Ivanov's ability to evoke deep emotions through simple yet poignant melodies, a trait he undoubtedly inherited from Rimsky-Korsakov.

It is tempting to think that **Alexander Borodin** (1833-1887) is more famous today for what was a side hustle to his full-time day job, but that may not actually be the case. Borodin was a chemist by profession who wrote music in his spare time. He was so successful as a scientist, there is a specific chemical reaction which bears Borodin's name: the Hunsdiecker-Borodin reaction. In this reaction, silver salts of carboxylic acids react with a halogen to produce an organic halide and Borodin was the first to successfully demonstrate this reaction (1861). In between long hours in the lab, Borodin also found time to study composition with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and the relationship was one of student-teacher, but also close friends. Twenty years after his scientific breakthrough came a chamber music breakthrough, Borodin's String Quartet No. 2, now an icon of the genre. The third movement *Notturmo* (or Nocturne) is a bona fide hit and has been arranged for all manner of different instrumentations. Lush harmonies and soaring melodies in this movement give way to a rollicking fourth movement finale.

Straying from the lush orchestral soundscapes, **Igor Stravinsky's** (1882-1971) *Three Pieces for Solo Clarinet* provides a stark contrast. Stravinsky started his journey as a composer under Rimsky-Korsakov's guidance. His first great success, the

ballet *The Firebird*, shares a common musical language with Rimsky-Korsakov and might even represent the singular point at which Stravinsky sheds the feathers of his teacher and finds his own compositional wings. We, of course, know how his trajectory eventually went: Stravinsky diverged dramatically from his mentor's style, embracing a more dissonant and rhythmically complex language. The three pieces for solo clarinet highlight Stravinsky's departure from the romanticism of his teacher, foreshadowing the groundbreaking works that would come to define his career. That said, these aren't thorny or difficult works. Instead, they are thoughtful, introspective, and at times even dance-like. Don't forget, Stravinsky also wrote jazz and ragtime.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) was another bold and innovative student of Rimsky-Korsakov who also forged his own path in the musical landscape. He started forging his own path as a student at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory when, for a concerto competition, he played his own Piano Concerto No. 1 rather than any of the standard classical concertos that were on the prescribed repertoire list. Despite "breaking the rules," Prokofiev ended up winning the competition. The prize: a grand piano. Prokofiev's Seventh Piano Sonata, composed during the tumultuous period of World War II, reflects Prokofiev's ability to blend his distinctive style with the intense emotions of the time. This powerful and dynamic work serves as a fitting testament to the diverse legacy of Rimsky-Korsakov's students, each leaving an indelible mark on the world of classical music.

From the lush romanticism of Borodin's Second String Quartet to the dramatic intensity of Prokofiev's Sonata today's program truly is a reflection of the intricate web of musical relationships that connect each of these composers to their mentor, Rimsky-Korsakov. Through this rich tapestry, we witness the evolution of Russian classical music, shaped by the enduring influence of a single individual and the creative spirit of those who followed in his footsteps.