

COLORADO COLLEGE



Summer
Music
festival

Program Notes
by
Michael Grace

FESTIVAL ORCHESTRA CONCERT

June 26, 2026

7:00 PM

Celeste Theatre

Continental Express (Colorado Premiere)

Sam Wu

Origin City-Great Plains-Rocky Mountains-Mojave Desert-Terminus

(b. 1995)

A brief biography of Sam Wu appears in the program booklet. He wrote the following statement on the inspiration for *Continental Express*:

“Continental Express imagines a high-speed rail journey across the United States. Stops along the way include: the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the Mojave Desert. Each landscape parades by swiftly; the train glides over tracks of steel, anxious to connect the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Continental Express also pays homage to some of my musical inspirations: Aaron Copland (Great Plains), Jean Sibelius (Rocky Mountains), Tan Dun (Mojave Desert), and John Adams (Origin & Terminus Cities).”

Violin Concerto in A minor, Op. 82

Alexander Glazunov

Moderato

(1865-1936)

Andante sostenuto

Allegro

Alexander Glazunov was a prolific Russian composer and teacher who was better known in his own time than now. He composed numerous symphonies, concertos and other major orchestral works, and, during the early years of the 20th century, served as Director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Having studied with older Russian composers, especially Rimsky Korsakov, he was often considered somewhat old-fashioned in his own works. Of course, as is often the case, that made his music more appealing to a wide audience in his time, which often preferred more traditional sounds than those of his “modernist” contemporaries. Although perhaps a bit old-fashioned, his music is generally heard as sharp-witted and composed with pleasing musicality. He was known for his sharp musical mind, which allowed him to memorize pieces after one hearing. He could absorb the best of his many role models.

His Violin Concerto in A minor remains one of his most popular compositions. It was composed in 1904 and was dedicated to perhaps one of the most celebrated violinists of all time, Leopold Auer. It was originally composed as a one-movement work, but during the years since has traditionally been divided into three sections, each with its own tempo marking. But note that it is to be played as one continuous work, and it is often difficult to hear when he transitions from one “movement” to the next.

The first movement, *Moderato*, is fairly traditional and quickly reveals Glazunov’s mastery of orchestration with its subtle transitions from color to color. The beauty of these timbral metamorphoses is simply stunning. The second movement is, simply put, a gem. First, the soloist has to play many treacherously difficult double stops (two notes at a time), while accompanied by a rich texture of harp scales and arpeggios (broken chords) along with an occasional French horn countermelody. While it serves as the traditional cadenza that gives the players a chance to show off, it is easy to call this marvelous movement a “gem!”

Again, without pause, but with an announcement by the trumpets with a martial fanfare, we are swept into the last movement, *Allegro*. Notice how the solo violin answers and repeats the trumpets in what might seem like an unlikely pairing. From here on, this race to the end is most vivacious! Replete with dazzling orchestral colors, very difficult licks for each group of instruments, and a true rush to climax, musically, this is an ending to end all endings!

Scheherazade, Op. 35

Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov
(1844-1908)

The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship

Largo e maestoso. Allegro non troppo

The Legend of the Kalendar Prince

Lento. Andantino. Allegro molto. Con moto

The Young Prince and the Young Princess

Andantino quasi allegretto. Pochissimo più mosso. Come prima.

Pochissimo più animato

Festival at Baghdad. The Sea. Ship Breaks upon a Cliff Surmounted by a Bronze Horseman

Allegro molto. Vivo. Allegro non troppo maestoso

Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov was a Russian composer, the youngest of the group of Russian nationalists known as “The Mighty Five,” and also one of the most international and successful. He was attracted to Russian and other exotic subjects for his music but also interested in the craft of composition in Western Europe, and he found a rather remarkable balance between the exotic and the traditional that was appreciated by huge international audiences. He was particularly famous for his skill in orchestration, a skill he learned in part from the earlier French Romantic composer, Hector Berlioz, but which he took to new heights. In fact, like Berlioz, he wrote a book on orchestration that is still in use today.

Scheherazade, composed in the summer of 1887, is a “symphonic suite,” a collection of four movements that might be considered like a traditional symphony but which has a program, or a story, on which the music is based. In the original edition, Rimsky-Korsakov provided a short paragraph introducing this story which came from the ever-popular *Arabian Nights* also known as *One Thousand and One Nights*.

“The Sultan Schariar, convinced that all women are false and faithless, vowed to put to death each of his wives after the first nuptial night. But the Sultana Scheherazade saved her life by entertaining her lord with fascinating tales, told seriatim, for a thousand and one nights. The Sultan, consumed with curiosity, postponed from day to day the execution of his wife, and finally repudiated his bloody vow entirely.”

Originally, each of the four movements had a title suggesting that it might relate to one specific tale, or a group of tales. In his autobiography, however, Rimsky-Korsakov explained what he really had in mind.

“In composing *Sheherazade* I meant these hints [the movement titles] to direct only slightly the listener’s fancy on the path that my own fancy had traveled, and to leave more minute and particular conceptions to the will and mood of each. . . All I wanted was that the hearer, if he liked the piece as *symphonic music*, should carry away the impression that it is undoubtedly an oriental narrative of numerous and varied fairy-tale marvels, and not merely four pieces played one after the other and based on themes common to all four.”

So, we find that the movement titles do not refer to specific tales in *The Arabian Nights* but to general scenes or images. In fact, we should note that in the second edition of the score, the composer removed the titles completely.

The first movement was titled *The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship*. It opens with a commanding, stern theme that is nearly always considered the voice of Sultan Schariar demanding entertainment from his new wife. Immediately following this theme, we hear a delicate and sinuous melody played by a solo violin accompanied by harp which Rimsky-Korsakov indicated was the new wife, Scheherazade, beginning her first story. The movement alternates between these two themes and variations on them. Often the music sounds like ocean waves to reflect the title and to make the listener think of Sinbad on the sea, a theme that runs through numerous tales in *The Arabian Nights*. Some historians like to note that Rimsky-Korsakov began his professional career in the Russian Navy before turning to music. He was familiar with the sea.

The second movement, *The Legend of the Kalender Prince*, captures the feeling of Kalenders, a group of roving *fakirs* (monks), one of whom is a prince in disguise. The movement opens with a repeat of Scheherazade’s melody from the first movement, as if she is starting a new tale, and then continues with its own new melody. This memorable tune is heard first in the solo bassoon, then the oboe, and finally the violins. There is a second section with a more heroic melody passed around among the brass instruments.

The third movement, *The Young Prince and the Young Princess*, is the lyrical slow movement simply expressing voluptuous, young romantic love. There are two lyrical melodies, the second of which is enervated by a colorful percussion battery of triangle, tambourine, drum, and cymbal. There is a surprising return of Scheherazade’s theme from the first movement, now heard as if to remind us that in the context of this young prince and princess’ love is our wonderful storyteller who will eventually capture the heart of even the most obdurate sultan.

The fourth movement, with a long title—*The Festival at Baghdad. The Sea. Ship Breaks upon a Cliff Surmounted by a Bronze Horseman*—brings together several tales. After an opening with the Sultan’s and Scheherazade’s melodies heard again in yet other transformations, the Baghdad festival is depicted colorfully with exotic melodies and catchy cross-rhythms. These build to an exulted climax before we are carried away, as if by magic carpet, and by the original Sultan and Scheherazade themes, back to Sinbad’s ship on the ocean waves. Musical tension builds, through the terrific crash on the rocks, after which the Sultan’s theme comes back, now in the brass, surrounded by magnificent decorative auras from the other instruments and with a new kind of triumphant resolve. Finally, Scheherazade’s theme comes back in a heavenly aura, with the Sultan underneath—she, and her poetic narrative magic, have conquered the “sultanic” beast!

As a footnote, while listening we should always focus some attention on Rimsky-Korsakov’s brilliant orchestration—the constant changing of color and sound—and his use of many instruments as solos. This musical kaleidoscope is often considered one of the most brilliant works in the orchestral repertoire.

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