

## ***Sarod & Scheherazade***

### **ONE-MINUTE NOTES**

#### **Amjad Ali Khan: *Samaagam*: A Concerto for Sarod, Concertante Group and String Orchestra**

Amjad Ali Khan's concerto fuses Northern Indian traditional instruments with a Western orchestra. *Samaagam* is Sanskrit for "flowing together," an apt metaphor for Khan's compelling concerto. He draws heavily on nearly a dozen ragas, the melodic building blocks of India's classical music. Listen for drones and improvisatory passages that are cousins to jazz solos. Sarod, tabla and the NJSO's principal string players all have their opportunity for exercising spontaneous musical creativity.

#### **Rimsky-Korsakov: *Scheherazade***

*Scheherazade* features an obbligato role for our excellent concertmaster, Eric Wyrick. His recurring solo violin line represents the spellbinding voice of the Sultana as she relates the 1001 tales of the Arabian Nights, thereby staving off death by entertaining her husband. *Scheherazade*'s music is sinuous and seductive. The sultan's theme, in the brasses, is barbaric, forceful and masculine. The writing is enchanting—a perfect blend of exoticism and impeccable orchestration.

### **AMJAD ALI KHAN: *Samagaam*: A Concerto for Sarod, Concertante Group and String Orchestra**

#### **AMJAD ALI KHAN**

**Born:** October 9, 1945, in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India

**Composed:** 2008

**World Premiere:** June 20, 2008, in Kirkwall, Orkney Islands, Scotland

**NJSO Premiere:** These are the NJSO-premiere performances.

**Duration:** 45 minutes

Amjad Ali Khan is arguably the most celebrated Indian classical musician since Ravi Shankar. His instrument, the sarod, is a cousin of the sitar. Both are members of the lute family: plucked string instruments with a hollow body. Unlike the lute (or the guitar), the sarod does not have frets on its fingerboard. Sarods are slightly smaller than sitars and tend to have a darker-tinged sound. In appearance, they consist of three principal parts: a round resonator belly (called *pyala*, and usually enclosed with parched goat skin), a central fingerboard and a peg box. Sarods have 17 to 19 strings, including drone and sympathetic strings that vibrate with the melodic strings. Most players use a plectrum. The instrument is central to the Northern Indian Hindustani musical tradition, where it is usually accompanied by *tabla*—a pair of North Indian drums, one conical, the other kettle-shaped.

Khan comes from a distinguished family of Indian classical musicians and sarod players; one of his ancestors may actually have invented the sarod. He studied the instrument with his father and was performing in public by his early teens. His international career took off when he was 18, and he eventually branched into teaching both sarod and the traditions of Indian classical music. In this country, he has taught at University of New Mexico and at Stanford.

The request for a sarod concerto came from the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. Khan is an enthusiastic lover of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and other Western composers, and he has previously collaborated with many Western musicians. He is also keen on American jazz, whose reliance on improvisation has a direct parallel in Indian classical music.

His concerto fuses Western and Eastern elements, beginning with its title. *Samaagam* is a Sanskrit word that means a confluence, or a flowing together. The work's multiple sections do flow logically from one segment to the next, often with an improvisation for sarod, *tabla* or the concertante string players providing the transition. Khan has adapted into *Samaagam* more than 10 ragas, the melodic building blocks of Indian classical music. The concerto's individual sections and subsections take their

names from traditional Hindustani ragas. Khan has written:

The concerto aims to preserve the essence of both Indian and Western traditions so that they can flow into each other without artistic compromise. The aim is, through this process, to joyfully explore the common musical DNA of both traditions. I often say that every raga has a soul and every musical note is the sound of God. In *Samaagam*, several different ragas are presented. Some make only a fleeting appearance, while others are explored longer.

The entire concerto comprises beautiful compositions in various Ragas, I feel that it is like a Bouquet of Ragas. I have given utmost importance and attention to the importance of composition in the concerto. I believe that by playing the essence of a raga for a shorter period, you are not diluting it. I believe in being traditional and not conventional.

Kahn's combination of Eastern and Western instruments lends his music a unique sonority. The harmonies are often slow-moving, with drones providing a soothing background to the intricate, rhapsodic solo passages. In faster sections, rhythms are deceptively simple and endlessly varied. This is music will engage the brain while soothing the soul.

### **IN THE COMPOSER'S WORDS**

Amjad Ali Khan has graciously provided the following introduction to *Samaagam* and his music:

It is indeed a matter of great honor for me, Amaan and Ayaan to perform with Xian Zhang and New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. We present my Sarod Concerto *Samaagam*. *Samaagam* comes from a Sanskrit word meaning confluence or flowing together. The concerto has been aimed to preserve the essence of both Indian and Western traditions so that they can flow into each other without artistic compromise. The aim is through this process to joyfully explore the common musical DNA of both traditions. As I often say that every raga has a soul and every musical note is the sound of God. In *Samaagam* several different ragas are presented. Some will making only a fleeting appearance; while others [are] explored for longer. It is a great

pleasure and honour to work with the Chinese American conductor Xian Zhang, who makes the concerto flow like a river.

I have always valued the western world for their discipline, tradition, conduct and sensitivity. Like cosmic divinity, music knows few barriers or boundaries. I have always admired and enjoyed listening to European classical musicians like Beethoven, Bach, Brahms, Russia's Tchaikovsky. In fact the idea to turn my ancestral house in Gwalior came after I went to Bonn (Germany) to visit the house of Beethoven. Our renditions are often compared with jazz, which is not misplaced. There is scope for improvisations in both the disciplines, but in a different manner. The message of Indian classical music is freedom within the discipline.

Indian classical music has indeed had a very spiritual and scientific development and growth. This was a phenomenon that existed from Vedic times. The tradition of classical music dates back to the Sam Veda period. The earliest version of classical music was the Vedic chants. Interestingly, the effect of all the 12 notes on our body, mind and soul are very scientific. If we sing out all the 12 notes with concentration, the human body receives all its positive vibrations. In fact, the positive effect transcends even on plants and animals. Various permutations and combinations give the scales a shape of a raga. However, a raga is much more and beyond. It's not just a mere scale. A raga has to be invoked, understood and cared for, like a living entity.

A wonderful and strange mystery of Indian classical music is the fact that one can spend a lifetime trying to obtain knowledge and perfection and still feel that one has only touched a mere drop of an ocean. The learning never stops along the Journey of searching and discovering. Its understanding changes with every year a musician lives. This is true Sadhana (Practice). Some of the greatest sadhaks (practitioners) in Indian classical music were Swami Haridas, Swami Tyagaraja, Swami Muttuswamy Dikshitar, Swami Shyama Shastri, PurandaraDasa, Swati Tirunal, Baiju Bawra and Miyan Tansen (from where my family gets its musical lineage). They are responsible for the solid foundation of the art in both north and south India. As the name suggests, classical music represents the concentrated essence of

Indian music in its richest forms. India has two classical traditions. The North Indian and South Indian system also called Carnatic music.

Right from my childhood, I understood the vastness and the oceanic depths of music. I feel that the 12 musical notes are so very powerful and vibrant like the sun and all the harmony around it are like its rays. Just like light and shade! I always had a great desire to create a sarod concerto for the longest time. I have always admired the richness of European classical music. Be it Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Tchaikovsky; the works!

The entire concerto comprises of beautiful compositions in various ragas, I feel that it is like a bouquet of ragas. I have given utmost importance and attention to the importance of compositions in the concerto. I believe that by playing the essence of a raga for a shorter period, you are not diluting it. I believe in being traditional and not conventional.

– Amjad Ali Khan

*Instrumentation: flute, bassoon, strings, three solo sarods and solo tabla. The first chair strings have concertante parts.*

## **RIMSKY-KORSAKOV: *Scheherazade*, Symphonic Suite, Op. 35**

### **NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV**

**Born:** March 18, 1844, in Tikhvin, near Novgorod, Russia

**Died:** June 21, 1908, in Liubensk, near St. Petersburg, Russia

**Composed:** 1888

**World Premiere:** October 28, 1888, in St. Petersburg. The composer conducted.

**NJSO Premiere:** 1936–37 season. Rene Pollain conducted.

**Duration:** 42 minutes

The concept of Orientalism carried great sway in late 19th-century Russia. The land itself spanned

thousands of miles from west to east, subsuming vastly different cultures within its boundaries. When he began work on *Scheherazade*, Rimsky-Korsakov had recently completed his friend Alexander Borodin's unfinished opera, *Prince Igor*, whose music is heavily tinged with eastern flavor. The exotic harmonies of eastern culture exerted a strong influence on Rimsky's own symphonic suite.

In his memoirs, *My Musical Life*, Rimsky-Korsakov wrote of *Scheherazade*: "I had in view the creation of an orchestral suite in four movements, closely knit by the community of its themes and motives, yet presenting, as it were, a kaleidoscope of fairy-tale images and designs of Oriental character. ... All I 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."

He placed a note at the head of his score recapitulating the story. Sultan Shakriar, convinced that all women are faithless, determines to put each of his wives to death after the first night. Clever Sultana Scheherazade saves herself one night after another by captivating her husband with different fairy tales and adventures. Driven by curiosity, the sultan repeatedly postpones her execution, eventually abandoning his bloodthirsty plan.

Curiously, in later life Rimsky-Korsakov spoke of aversion to an overly specific program for the suite. While he acknowledged that the solo violin represented the silken voice of the gifted Sultana as she related her stories, he held that his technique was a musical unifier, rather than a programmatic device. The composer wanted the story to act as a catalyst for each individual listener's imagination, rather than having us interpret the music as a literal illustration of the literary program.

*Scheherazade* was sketched in Petersburg in early 1888 and completed during the summer while Rimsky-Korsakov was on holiday in the country. It was approximately contemporary with his *Russian Easter Overture*, and the two works were premiered on the same concert that December. Along with his *Capriccio espagnol*, Rimsky-Korsakov felt that *Scheherazade* and the overture "close[d] a period in my work, at the end of which my orchestration had attained a considerable degree of virtuosity and warm sonority without Wagnerian influence, limiting myself to the normally constituted orchestra

used by Glinka.”

Rimsky-Korsakov rightly regarded *Scheherazade* as the peak of his orchestration achievement, though not necessarily his finest musical achievement. Perhaps the greatest achievement of this suite is that the composer succeeded so completely in evoking the lush, exotic orientalism of his subject without the use of unconventional instruments. It is a veritable festival for the orchestra. Colorful solos for nearly every instrument ingeniously weave together the different melodic lines that connect the music and evoke the magical spirit of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

*Instrumentation: three flutes (two doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones (third doubling bass trombone), tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tambourine, harp and strings.*

#### **SCHEHERAZADE: IN THE CONCERTMASTER’S WORDS**

*Program annotator Laurie Shulman asked NJSO Concertmaster Eric Wyrick to weigh in on the challenges and rewards of playing Rimsky-Korsakov’s orchestral masterpiece.*

**Laurie Shulman:** *Scheherazade* is not a concerto, yet the violin plays a central role. How does it fit into the violin solo literature?

**Eric Wyrick:** *Scheherazade* is extremely important to the concertmaster’s solo repertoire. It is the first piece on any audition list. Rimsky’s violin part is also the standard for showcasing one’s individual sound (think “violinist DNA”), as well as his lyricism, creativity, fantasy and artistry.

**LS:** How do you juggle the dual role of being a soloist as well as a section leader?

**EW:** The structure of *Scheherazade* allows for many moments of solo playing. Any interpretation is a complex dance that is led by the conductor, but the score determines who are the partners in that dance.

**LS:** So, who's "driving the bus"? The concertmaster or the conductor?

**EW:** In the parts where it's written for violin with no orchestra other than harp, the concertmaster should be free to interpret at will. All else is mostly generated by the conductor, with personal interjections from other solo instruments, cameos that Rimsky included throughout the score.

**LS:** Do you have a favorite spot in the Rimsky?

**EW:** I love the last note of the piece! Finally, all the preceding tension and drama are resolved with a satisfying E-major chord. I am sitting on the highest E in the texture, hopefully soaring above. This is also the most difficult spot, literally a high-wire act.