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Evocations of the Other: Treatments of the exotic and the feminine in nineteenth-century music – The Redemption of *Sheherazade*



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Abstract

The concert hall, as much as the operatic stage, is a theatre – a place for viewing, and the observation of narratives. Music can be and often is read as the latter, whether overtly programmatic or not, and though abstracted through the intermediation of instruments, the orchestral and operatic literatures of Western art music enact and present narratives and struggles of power. Classical music has been dominated since its inception by men, working in a historically white European context, with the result of an almost total exclusion of the first-person perspectives of women and non-white ethnic and cultural identities. This fact, coupled with an intense historical fixation with the Orient within Western classical music, transforms the concert hall and operatic stages into extra-artistic theatres where the material presented can be read as representative of Western societal trends, attitudes and prejudices.

This research draws connections between colonialist and patriarchal thought and musical representations of the ethnic and/or female ‘Other’ in the Western canon, and traces the use of certain musical *topoi* in conjunction with female and ethnic tropes. I examine these with reference to works ranging from Rameau, Saint-Saëns, and Strauss, among others, with a particular emphasis on the operatic and orchestral works of Rimsky-Korsakov, inquiring into the possibility of subverting Orientalist and misogynist elements within such musical works from a socially critical perspective.

I will argue that classical music, rather than existing as a purely sonic artefact, becomes representational, on the stages of the concert hall or operatic theatre, of power struggles and of imbalances of power between men and women, and between white and non-white ethnic and cultural identities. I will do so in an attempt at communicating a vital understanding of classical music as a cultural object that ties into lived socio-political realities.

The treatment of women and the treatment of non-white ethnicities have long been equatable. Though the struggles of one never has and never will outweigh the struggles of the other, the two have for centuries suffered oppression in many similar ways within Western society, and the traces of this litter the world of European art. This applies specifically to those arts in which life can be credibly breathed into the subject matter: theatre, music, and therefore, notably, opera. Exoticist tendencies within these, whether subconsciously or not, often had sinister roots in colonial aspirations, much in the same way that depictions of women in music, and particularly in opera, had clear links to the societal subjugation of women. The treatment of both on the operatic stage came to reduce each to a version of themselves in which the edges were smoothed, any unwieldy truths to their identities filed down to fit the standard mould. Specifically in treatments of the East, the dramaturgical and musical treatment of the exotic and the feminine fell increasingly under the power of the imagination of the Western male throughout the eighteenth, and especially the nineteenth centuries (Al-Tae, 2010). The male monopoly on the creation of high art throughout this period, and indeed to this day to an extent, is undeniable, and therefore the intrinsic treatment of the Other within the circulation of the arts in Western society begs scrutiny – particularly given its intrinsic and dangerous links between ethnicity, sexuality and violence, and any combination thereof. Given the significance of geography in its creation and its notable intersection of all of the above, an especially enlightening object for the study of these can be found in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sheherazade*.

The crux of this essay is not to delve into the labyrinth of male European colonial thought and all of its manifold expressions in art. To do so would require a great many more words than is permissible here. However, it can be argued with a certain assuredness that musical treatments of the ethnic in nineteenth-century music evolved in tandem with colonial aspirations and the branching out of Western imperialism towards the East, and to a smaller extent also to the Americas (Mason, 1991). Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes*, for instance, is a prime example of the latter. This work takes one on a globetrotting theatrical adventure that passes sequentially through Turkey, Peru, Persia and Illinois. In the final tableau, tellingly titled *Les Sauvages*, Rameau scores a duet for soprano and baritone with chorus in which the community of Native Americans celebrates the return of peace in a 'traditional' pipe ceremony. Based on an earlier harpsichord piece also titled *Les Sauvages*, Rameau makes extensive use of a "LOUD, soft, soft, soft" pattern which while a feature of many Native American musics, is largely a stereotypical representation of the manifold traditions as a collective (Locke, 2009, p. 50).

Interestingly, the questions of cultural interaction and ethnic representation are singularly relevant to this piece, which was coincidentally taken by the French missionary Amiot to Peking later in the century and presented to the Chinese, who received the music with apparent disdain (Amiot, 1788/2005) leading to Amiot subsequently devising a number of highly questionable theories about racial comparison and superiority. The French, in their colonial excursions, were no strangers to indigenous peoples, and in fact often paid much more heed to their

cultures than did the Spaniards or the English (Savage, 1983). The French had even experienced performances of music and dance by Tupi Indians in Paris, which may very well have been witnessed by a number of eminent French musicians (Pisani, 2005). Whatever the quality of French interactions with indigenous peoples, the aforementioned example, though singular and only fractionally representative, nevertheless forms part of a widespread trend in cultural (and therefore geographical) representation that runs from the early history of European music right through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and beyond. These musical trends constitute a certain cultural imperialism in which the subtleties of the ethnic culture in question are time and time again effaced and musically represented by a generic mould more in tune with contemporary European perceptions of the Exotic – be it American, Middle-Eastern, or from elsewhere.

In the nineteenth century specifically, in tandem with a growing cultural preoccupation with the East, composers began musically exploring the possibilities of creating more immediate representations, or at least, largely superficial evocations of its peoples and landscapes. As in the eighteenth century, this was often done by taking one musical element – one generic cultural signifier – and spreading it across the board, so to speak. Such musical elements were then taken, largely without question, to represent entire geographical swathes, as is often done to this day with the major pentatonic scale often being used to suggest or occasionally even wholly represent the Far East. In a similar way, the use of octatonic scales, or chromatic inflections that would evoke these, were increasingly used to suggest the Eastern Other. Félicien David, for instance, made extensive use of octatonic scales in the remarkable Symphonic Ode *Le Désert* in 1844, which, while making use of several actual Middle-Eastern elements, including a stylised call to prayer, is nonetheless still a work marked by a distinct geographical indistinctness. Nevertheless, the use of octatonic scales does in fact bear some verisimilitude to existing musical traditions in the Middle East, including those of Turkey, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and by extension North Africa as well.¹ The problem arises, however, when one feature such as this is used to wholly represent a people, a culture, or even an entire geographical region simply by merit of being *an* element from within the vast range of ‘Oriental’ musical traditions.

The use of octatonic scales, and in particular, the use of the interval of an augmented second that appears within them, has a long and astonishingly repetitive history within Western art music that continues to this day – witnessed even by something as simple as a modern-day interpretation of the harmonic minor scale as being “Arabian” (Taylor, 2007, p. 55). The harmonic ambiguity of the octatonic scale is something that has piqued the Eurocentric imagination hugely over the past three centuries. With its simultaneous major/minor duality allowing for a pronounced tonic major chord whilst still retaining elements of that disconcerting flattened supertonic of such modes as the Locrian, the octatonic scale has a huge dramatic potential that has lost none of its potency even in the twenty-first century. This harmonic, and therefore dramatic, duality has long been exploited to evoke a sense of mystery and awe, perhaps even fear – all of which were prime features in the Western perception

¹ Octatonic scales can for instance be linked to the *maqam saba* – a mode in the *maqam* tradition of Arabic music, though the Arabic modes often make use of microtonal inflections that are discarded when transplanted to Western art music.

of the East. As such, the scale and its characteristic augmented second intervals easily became the chief signifier of that mysterious allure of the exotic. Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Eastern Romance' (Op.2, no.2), written over 1865-66, exudes just that. The accompaniment is characterised throughout by heavy low fifths in the bass, over which the piano spins a heady octatonic melody full of melismatic flourishes. Sumptuous chromatic turns give the music an added sensuality and colour, into which the soprano sings a text full of fantastical imagery of a rose serenaded by a nightingale in the night. The song and its rather telling title reveal just how much musicians were still held in sway by musical evocations of what they perceived the East to sound like.

2

The line in question reads: "My despondency is neither tormented, not alarmed by anything, and the heart again burns and loves – because it is unable not to love".

Another art song by Rimsky-Korsakov, 'On the Hills of Georgia' (Op.3, no. 4), also written in 1866, shares a number of the exoticist features of his 'Eastern romance'. The unsettled harmony and winding chromaticism are immediately similar to the latter, however, half-way through the song, Rimsky-Korsakov introduces another musical element to signify an impression of ethnicity: the use of drones, or pedal points – the nearest pianistic equivalent. It is interesting to note that this song, immediately by having its geographical setting named, already anchors the material for better or for worse in a verifiable source. Strikingly, however, the use of drones are in fact an important feature of Georgian folk music, and the vocal line here takes on a much more sustained character, with a more contained, single flourish not dissimilar to those found in traditional Georgian vocal music. The song is nevertheless still firmly rooted in the soil of exoticist thought, but it is interesting to note the presence of some ethnic authenticity coming through. Even if this is only to a slight degree, it is nonetheless important to note that the most Georgian-sounding passages occur on lines in the text devoid of any geographical or ethno-cultural markers.² In this early work of Rimsky-Korsakov's, therefore, there can already be seen some traces of a certain cultural sensitivity often eclipsed by an often-erroneous label of exoticism with regards to some of his more significant works.

Vladimir Stasov, a critic and a huge figure in Russian cultural life, in a discussion on the prevalence of 'Oriental' material in the art music of the Russians, wrote that, in contrast to the unsuccessful eighteenth-century faux-Orientalism of Mozart and the like, in their musical evocations of Turkishness, the New Russian School was gifted with a much more immediate impression of the East rooted to a much larger extent in reality and much less in purely imaginative thinking (Stasov, 1882, as cited in Taruskin & Weiss, 1984). He points out that a number of Russian musicians had actually visited so-called exotic locales and that, while many others had not done so themselves, many artistic elements of what is Eastern had entered the mainstream of Russian cultural life. This use of Oriental material is often cited as a key element in Russian nationalist music, but perhaps it could be posited that centuries of experiencing a sense of Otherness in interactions, whether artistic or otherwise, with Europe, had left the Russians with a unique sensitivity, comparatively speaking, to treatments of the East.

3

Compare, for instance, the bassoon solo of *Sheherazade's* second movement (<https://youtu.be/JpgRKXzB6tI?t=30>) to an example of traditional Georgian vocal music (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDAQTM1hMA>).

Perhaps it was because of this sensitivity to the closeness of what by most of Europe was viewed as the vague, distant and indistinct East, that Rimsky-Korsakov's musical treatment of the 'Other' in the famous symphonic poem *Sheherazade* was done with such striking sensitivity. The work is often presented as one of the definitively exotic works of the nineteenth century and certainly does take part in a certain sensationalisation of the East. The fourth movement, for instance, puts on display a barbarian festive fervour that is reminiscent of the notorious (though thrilling) orchestral boisterousness of the bacchanal from *Samson et Dalila* and looks forward to the comparable display of pagan hedonism of Strauss' fin-de-siècle 'Dance of the seven veils'. Yet, upon closer inspection, *Sheherazade* holds a startling wealth of material likely inspired by or written in the vein of actual musical traditions. As such, beneath the veneer of ethnic sensationalisation, Rimsky-Korsakov's music displays a degree of cultural sensitivity that hopefully challenges established notions of the work's, for lack of a better word, agenda.

The second movement that Rimsky-Korsakov conjures up from the textual source material of *1001 Arabian Nights*, titled 'The Tale of the Kalendar Prince', can on the surface seem like just another cog in the exoticist machine that supposedly is *Sheherazade* – beautiful, yes, evocative, yes, but culturally significant beyond that? Probably not. However, upon closer inspection, this movement is perhaps the most telling in the whole work with reference to Rimsky-Korsakov's treatment of the ethnic Other. The movement opens with a restatement of the famous solo violin theme first introduced towards the beginning of the first movement. As this solo ascends to a vigorous climax, it cadences onto a passage remarkably similar to traditional Georgian music. Much of the music from Georgia makes extensive use of short melodic cells with repetitive rhythmic patterns, and there is overall an overwhelmingly common use of drones – particularly in the vocal traditions. Drones *are* a common feature of many non-European, and also European folk traditions, and so cannot be taken as representative of accurate representation of Georgian music here. However, the way in which Rimsky-Korsakov plants a melodically and rhythmically repetitive solo for bassoon – itself timbrally very similar to the duduk so prevalent in the Caucasus – over drones in fifths that shift diatonically, as is highly characteristic of much Georgian folk music,³ is all highly indicative of some degree of familiarity with and understanding of the vernacular music of that region. Indeed Balakirev himself transcribed a number of folk songs and dances while travelling through Georgia in the 1860s – bringing them back to the wonder and rapt admiration of those in his circle, including Rimsky-Korsakov, who personally stated: "These new sounds were a sort of revelation for us then, we were all literally reborn" (Volkov, 2010, p. 102).

Rimsky-Korsakov's enthusiasm for the music of the Caucasus therefore is clear. More than being just a clear imitation of its musical traditions however, the Georgianness of the bassoon solo importantly matches the subject matter as well. The movement vaguely deals with the Turkic subject matter of a Prince disguising himself as a travelling Muslim ascetic, and therefore the music explicitly supports the narrative frame provided – however vague the outline given by the composer. Georgia is now

and was then, like Russia, a Christian nation, but did have a prominent Muslim population. In fact, the Muslim populations of the Caucasus were something of a thorn in the side of the Russians. The northern Caucasus was as highly a contested territory then as it is now. Tolstoy himself fought there and based some of his writings on his experiences. Pushkin also often dealt with Georgia and the broader Caucasus in his writings. In *A Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1822), specifically, he treats the Circassians – a people of the Northern Caucasus and adherents to Sunni Islam – relatively favourably throughout the poem, but then subverts this totally in the epilogue when he rejoices in the suppression of the Caucasus that bent its “snow head in self-abasement” in response to a Russian military commander who was on the march to violently subdue the Caucasian barbarians, and the poem closes like a smug fable about the folly of resisting the Russian advance (Pushkin, 1822/2001, p. 131-48). Bearing in mind the fact that the devastating Russo-Circassian war and the subsequent ethnic cleansing of the region reached its height in the 1860s and was notably revisited artistically by Tolstoy in 1872, and bearing in mind Rimsky-Korsakov’s own affinity for the peoples and cultures of the Caucasus, it is perhaps not improbable to see a correlation between his treatment of the Caucasus in the second movement of *Sheherazade* in the bassoon solo, and the sharp aggression of the military fanfares that disrupt the tableau’s initial peacefulness. The structure of the movement certainly seems to tap into the Romantic symphonic model of the heroic struggle – perhaps Rimsky-Korsakov’s emphatic and vocal appreciation of the culture could have translated to an appreciation of its people and found its way into his treatment of the Caucasian and Islamic other in this movement. Interestingly, it can be argued that the ethnic Other is not the only one treated in this work.

The aforementioned violin solo that opens the movement and re-appears several times throughout the work as a whole could perhaps too be more significant than is initially apparent. The work as a whole opens with a stark, fortissimo theme played in unison by the low woodwinds and the strings in their low registers, but is dominated by the trombones – an instrument having historical associations with death. This theme is powerful, yes, imposing even, but within two bars that grandiosity already seems curiously undermined by the pompous regality of a trill. The passage following for a dulcet, pianissimo woodwind choir certainly dispels any air of command the opening theme initially evoked, and certainly the entrance of the solo violin immediately after puts the intimidation of the opening theme to the back of one’s mind, and instead places its own lyrical insistence at the forefront. Many have interpreted the stern opening theme as being representative of the Sultan in the tale of Sheherazade: a misogynistic tyrant who, after witnessing his wife committing adultery with a slave – notably a black one – vows to sleep with a young virgin each night, and murder her the following morning to avoid the pain of future betrayal. The violin solo must surely then represent the character of Sheherazade herself. Rimsky-Korsakov once disavowed any such explicitly leitmotivic interpretations of his themes, stating rather indistinctly:

In vain do people seek in my suite leading motives linked unbrokenly
with ever the same poetic ideas and conceptions. On the contrary, in the

majority of cases, all these seeming *Leitmotive* are nothing but purely musical material or the given motives for symphonic development. (Rimsky-Korsakov, 1909/1923, p. 58)

Rimsky-Korsakov here seems quite adamant, however the inexact language used brings a total application of his words into question. His treatment of the so-called Sultan theme, and of the violin solo that appears significantly in each of the four movements of this work titled after the character it most likely represents, certainly seems to imply a dramatic function in addition to the musical touched on above. Indeed the score itself somewhat explicitly points to a dramatic narrative aspect in the violin solo. At almost every one of its appearances throughout the entire work, the solo appears accompanied by the marking “Recit.,” which, given Rimsky-Korsakov’s own extensive vocal work, is surely telling. The notion that the marking was included purely as a tempo and/or mood indication is dispensable as well, as there exist a number of non-dramatic alternatives that could have been used. Bearing this in mind, the violin solo takes on a whole new significance. Musically the Sultan motif remains virtually unchanged, but, unable to find resolution, pushes the harmony constantly – this theme is repeatedly moved around the orchestra – which does support Rimsky-Korsakov’s words on how the themes are not characters, but treated for the most part just as that – musical themes. However, *Sheherazade*’s voice again and again rears its head above the oceanic surges of the thematic material and its undulating accompaniment – cutting through the stark lines accompanying what one assumes is a musical representation of one of the tales of Sinbad’s marine voyages as per the title. Her ornate and melismatic motif is disseminated throughout the orchestral textures – here her voice rings out in an echo of her violin motif in the clarinets, there in the flutes – as if adapting her own personal voice to the nuances of the tale being told to best appease the Sultan.

Across the work as a whole, Rimsky-Korsakov endows her voice with a trajectorial development that seems to support a development of her character – and indeed this is done with a remarkable sensitivity. Each subsequent statement of her theme is given an added intensity. At the opening of the second movement, her theme is augmented by a double-stopped homophonic writing for the solo instrument that makes vivid use of the open G-string, the violinistic equivalent of the female chest voice – a vocal phenomenon long considered hugely exciting and long explicitly linked with sexuality. (Wood, 2006). Towards the middle of the third movement her voice reappears, restating her theme before launching into a number of iridescent virtuosic figurations over the orchestra. The addition of this increased virtuosic and harmonic complexity to the bare frame of her first utterances implies a growing conviction and urgency to her storytelling. After all, her tales are very literally a matter of life and death. When the solo violin breaks away from this pattern, it takes on a theme briefly stated towards the beginning of the movement and vigorously pours it out over the orchestra, who surge forward in an impassioned display echoing her voice. It is here that the voice of the feminine Other in *Sheherazade* first truly comes into its own, when it ceases to exist in a melodic vacuum and melds with the full orchestra – no longer the Other, but now a part of the collective whole.

The opening of the suite's final movement is a condensed and modified restatement of the first bars of the work as a whole, and as such, revisits the power struggle between the male oppressor and the would-be female oppressee. The Sultan's theme is here rendered more compact, but through the addition of triple-quaver subdivisions of the originally grandiose theme, and its fortissimo delivery on the biting lower strings of the string section, the theme is given an added sharpness – a sort of belligerent petulance when compared to the subsequent restatement of *Sheherazade's* theme. The latter is again imbued with a renewed strength of purpose: fortified now by polyphonic double-stopped writing, emphatic triple-stopped chords, and emotionally anchored by a low B-drone in the basses – further supporting the idea of the feminine assuming an increased strength in response to the cruelty of the Sultan.

During this movement, several themes heard throughout the work return with an added edge and immediacy, implying an intensification of *Sheherazade's* story-telling and thus an intensification of her struggle to subdue the male oppressor. At the height of the movement, the Sultan's motif returns, resplendent, full-glory in the brass while the remainder of the orchestra scatters before it. As the music builds, however, the theme is suddenly joined by the military fanfare first heard in the second movement. The two jointly rear up towards a violent paroxysm, but are sharply cut off by a crash of the tam-tam and the rest of the orchestra, and a jarring modulation to B-minor – perhaps related to the unusual presence of the B-drone underscoring *Sheherazade's* theme earlier in the movement. Just as the feminine voice took its strength from the orchestra in the third movement, the masculine is here robbed of it by similar means and is subsequently mollified – its unwieldy whole-tone-based harmony smoothed out and pulled towards A-minor. Significantly, the musical vicar of the female voice in *Sheherazade*, the violin solo, is rooted in A-Dorian, to which the music returns when the title character's theme again appears a few bars later. As the restatement of this theme spirals upwards, the solo violin lands on a top-E and is tellingly joined by just a single other violin soloist while the male voice of the Sultan sounds out in the low strings, subdued and pacified by the voice of Sheherazade and what can only be interpreted as her sister, who soar above it in a display of easy, unforced, but ultimately hard-won musical dominance.

In his ground-breaking study of Orientalism (1978), Edward Said wrote that “to talk about Orientalism is to talk about power” (cited in Mason, 1991, p. 167). In a similar vein, to talk about the feminine in the history of Western society broadly, but more specifically within the frame of nineteenth-century music, is to talk about the suppression of that femininity. Rimsky-Korsakov's treatment of both the ethnic and the feminine in *Sheherazade* displays a sensitivity that unfortunately did not find its way into most depictions of women, and specifically ethnic women, in the musical literature of the nineteenth century. Just as ethnic musical traditions were often simplified and limited to a few choice elements signifying a much wider range of ethnicities, so too were the human elements of the ethnic subject matter depicted in the nineteenth century often simplified into two simple categories – the violent and the sensual: men were often violent, as depicted in the trope of the Ethnic Tyrant, while ethnic women were often crudely sexualised, and this often resulting in

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It must be said, however, that despite the frippery of Verdi's depiction of the Harem in *Il Corsaro*, the work is largely driven forward by a tenacious, strong-willed female character, Gulnara, who, having being essentially sexually assaulted by the Pasha, stabs him to death à-la-Tosca, and does so without the typically fatal repercussions. In fact, she is the only leading role to remain standing at the opera's close – surviving even the male lead, who leaps to his death into the sea.

recourse to the female trope of the Ethnic Temptress. Roger Parker, in his writings on the subjugative treatment of women in nineteenth-century opera, wrote that within the operatic tradition there existed two types of women: “the docile ones who usually suffer and die; and the scary ones who almost always suffer and die” (Parker, 1997, p. 158-9) Sexual women were at particular risk, and ethnic women especially so; a combination of these two features therefore would prove unequivocally lethal.

Dalila (Delilah) and Salome are two particularly notable figures whose sexuality is indivisibly tied to their ethnicity, and both stand in stark contrast to the Judeo-Christian values of their male opposition. In Richard Strauss' *Salome*, the titular character is a woman whose eroticism is made so pronounced as to verge on the psychotic – her desire for Jochanaan and her rejection by him drive her to wild extremes, scandalously baring her body to Herod – another ethnic tyrant – and famously begging for and ultimately receiving the severed head of Jochanaan. Both dramaturgically and musically, the relative delicacy of Salome's character as a young girl is highlighted, but as she descends into furor her voice is horrifically warped into a series howls and shrieks as she is consumed by her desire for Jochanaan – the stoic, blameless male representative of the Western ideal. Dalila's (the female antagonist of Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*) feminine sexuality is likewise distorted and vilified for the precise reason that it is used against a man, and specifically a man of God and an enemy of her 'barbaric' people, the Philistines. It is worth noting that, musically, her most important utterances – i.e., her arias – are not exoticised, and that she instead is gifted some of the most cathartic and lyrical music in the literature available to the mezzo soprano. That being said, it is salient that the axis on which her role spins, the ravishing aria 'Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix', though surely one of the most exquisite moments in all opera, is subtly but quite tellingly subverted by the entry halfway-through of Samson, the tenor. The figure of Samson hovers at the musical periphery throughout the aria, and instead of the Ethnic Temptress Dalila, it is to Samson that Saint-Saëns chooses to gift the closing bars of the number, awarding him a lush and powerful top B-flat as he exclaims his ardour – which by virtue of being male, by default trumps that of his ethnic and female lover.

The figure of Cleopatra is often sensationalised and occasionally also vilified for her ethnic sexuality – again used against a man of the West, though in this case Western in ethnicity, whereas characters such as Samson or Jochanaan are Western more through their religious adherence to a Judeo-Christian God. In Rimsky-Korsakov's own *Mlada* the figure of Cleopatra – notably a sexual character, and one who also notably transgressed boundaries of gender during the power struggles between her and her brother – appears to the work's central protagonist, Yaromir. She is accompanied by throngs of young and importantly exotic women who go about their task attempting to seduce the magically-frozen Yaromir. Immediately this recalls the countless harems of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century opera, from *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, to Verdi's *Il Corsaro*,⁴ and interestingly the scene bears strong similarities to the courtesan-like female entourage of the goddess Naina in Glinka's seminal *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (Naroditskaya, 2012). The entrance of the here almost totemic figure of Cleopatra is heralded by a quiet but insistent orchestral

undulation of a metrically blurred triplet figure accompanied by a sustained drones. The shimmering orchestral fabric Rimsky-Korsakov conjures repeatedly pulls from D-flat major to D-flat minor in the same way that the dancer representing Cleopatra's gestures suddenly shifts from strong "impulsive movement", to gestures that are "lazy and lingering". (Ibid. p. 223)

As with Salome, and to a lesser extent Dalila, the use of dance as a tool of seduction in Cleopatra's apparition scene is vitally important, and ties into a pair of historical terpsichorean polarities that mimics the all-too-often simplification of female sexuality into a mere two camps: a chaste and pious virginity, and an earthly, carnal licentiousness. In the nineteenth century and earlier, the use of dance was similarly divided. At one end of the rather simplified continuum was the use of classical ballet to express an emphasis on order, balance and control. At the other end of the spectrum was the use of dance to express a sense of the transgressive, the barbaric and the orgiastic. Carmen and her arias of seduction and rebellion, all deliberately modelled on dances, is one testament to this, and Salome is another (Hutcheon & Hutcheon, 2000). Strauss taps into the suspect, transgressive potential for dance in not just one but two of the towering works in his oeuvre, *Salome*, but notably also *Elektra*. Both of these works prominently feature a feminine descent into sexualised madness through the medium of dance (Kramer, 2004). The former dances in the name of seduction and bloodshed, and the latter dances a dance of bloodshed into which is tied that curious late-nineteenth-century preoccupation with Eros and Thanatos – sexual ardour and the longing for death, and the combination thereof (Hutcheon & Hutcheon, 1999). The link between femininity and death as is plentifully witnessed in both of these works is something also deeply embedded in the fabric of Rimsky-Korsakov's aforementioned ballet-opera, *Mlada*.

In *Mlada*, the title character is a silent role represented by a dancer, and is the ghost of a girl murdered at the start of the work. Murdered incidentally by another woman – one driven wild with desire for a Western prince, Yaromir. In order to seduce the object of her desire, the murderess Voyslava ominously enlists the aid of Morena, the goddess of the Underworld, appearing in the guise of an old woman. The evil goddess Morena's vocal lines are very rarely bound to a single tonal centre, being marked by a plentiful use chromaticism and large leaps downwards into her chest register – the use of which has strong links to female sexuality. Its use here by the goddess of the Underworld while plotting the murder of an innocent creates a grotesque effect. With the voice being the most primal and immediately physical instrument, its use is intrinsically linked to the body of its owner; and as Morena plays the divine role of the goddess of the Underworld, a realm of deep and deathly grottoes, the use of her cavernous and powerful operatic female chest voice makes explicit the nineteenth-century male interpretation of the sexual female as something dark and suspicious. Specifically, it points to a deep-seated suspicion in Western art of the dark, cavernous unholiness of female anatomy (Gilbert, 2006). The links between female sexuality and unholiness is made more explicit in the aforementioned appearance of Cleopatra in Act III. It is interesting to note that, despite being a spectre of the ancient Egyptian queen, the figure of Cleopatra is not represented by some ethereal, ghostlike figure,

but by a vigorous, full-blooded female dancer – in fact the same dancer who takes on the title role of *Mlada*. The unpredictability and again overtly sexual nature of her seductive dance is reflected in the unexpected modulations of the music and in its ‘exotic’ chromatic solo string lines. The wild, piercing clarinet solo that appears in this scene also encapsulates a sense of musical barbarism in that the harmony is constantly subverted by a sharp, strident chromaticism that is magnified tenfold by the equally strident and extremely timbrally bright and forceful top register of the clarinet.

This appearance of Cleopatra on the witches’ mountain Sabbath is dramatically also highly evocative of Venus’ appearance and seduction of the title character in Wagner’s 1845 *Tannhäuser* – a work filled to the brim with stereotypical male treatments of female sexuality. The goddess Venus, for instance, bears testament again to that familiar nineteenth-century negativity regarding active female sexuality; her domain – as a veritable den of dissolution is even explicitly titled the Venusberg, the *mons veneris*. On the other hand, her terrestrial counterpart is Elisabeth, who represents the opposing mode of female sexuality – a pious chastity, and unwavering dedication to her male counterpart. This is in turn not unlike the black-and-white comparison of Carmen and Mercedes, and the treatment of femininity in Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Mlada* is for the most part similarly dictated by an adherence to this crude polarity.

There is plentiful evidence of a deeply entrenched misogyny in Western culture that can be seen in the treatment of women in its art – specifically such performative art forms as dance and opera, where the female subject is a living breathing representation of her sex as a whole. Despite this, and despite his own dehumanisation and dualistic simplification of women in *Mlada*, Rimsky-Korsakov’s treatment of the feminine in *Sheherazade* remains notable for its sensitivity, supported by the supreme craftsmanship of the music. It must be said however, that in *Sheherazade*, we have perhaps both one of the most striking figures in historical literature, and, more specifically, one of the most striking female characters to be treated in the music of the nineteenth century. She is a foreigner, a woman, and yet also a famous protagonist. She uses her body of her own volition as a tool to gain some degree of power and influence over a domineering male figure, and uses her intellect to spin a myriad of fantastical and highly detailed tales with which to beguile the senses of her oppressor – tales also treated by Rimsky-Korsakov with a particularly sharp vibrancy that underscores the manifold ingenuity of their creator within the narrative of *1001 Arabian Nights*.

It might strike some as anachronistic to attempt a feminist reading of a work written in 1888 and a cornerstone of the orchestral repertoire. It seems unnecessary to go into much more detail regarding the musical merits of the work than has already been done here. The work achieved as widespread popularity and enduring success as it did because it is music of an intensely pleasurable sonic beauty. The cathartic cumulative effect of its yearning lyricism, dazzling orchestral colours, and emotive theatricality is undeniable. Rather than existing in a vacuum separate from society, however, music – it must be borne in mind – is tightly bound to the fabric of a society’s culture, and

as such can and should be read as a reflection thereof. Culture is not extra-musical, and therefore, neither is music extra-cultural. Music's engagement with our own society, and here specifically with issues of gender and ethnicity, must be investigated as an inquiry into the workings of our communities, and, more broadly, as a study of Western culture (McClary, 1994). The role of women in Western music-making in particular, while having seen a huge surge in inquestive thought in recent decades, still remains an issue too alive and too vital to let go of. Schoenberg's own writings on masculine attraction and female repulsion and his quest for an "asexual music", labellings of the feminine and the masculine in sonata form (Higgins, 1993, p.179), and also the vigorous contemporary male resistance against female conductors, are all issues with immediate relevance to our musical culture today. These gender issues must continue to be challenged actively, given the function of music as a deeply reflective model of our society as a whole.

One mode of redemption for the historical societal and artistic treatment of the Other in music, be they the Feminine or the Exotic, can be achieved through a precise and determined manual shift in the contemporary interpretation of characters and tales about these. *Carmen*, for instance – once a lesson against female sexuality that went against supposed societal mores – has in contemporary society become something of the opposite, and the character is often described in contemporary discourse as a strong and empowered woman who takes her sexuality and life into her own hands, and as a result subsequently suffers unjust and violent retribution from a domineering patriarchal society.

To conclude, it might be of particular relevance to make mention of a contemporary work that, like the original symphonic suite by Rimsky-Korsakov, offers a glimpse into the redemptive possibilities of music with regards to the treatment of the ethnic and feminine Other. John Adams' *Sheherazade.2* clearly follows in the vein of Rimsky-Korsakov's treatment of the title character; most notably, the work is subtitled 'A dramatic symphony for violin and orchestra', which immediately, in addition to the subject matter, places the Adams within the heritage of the piece by Rimsky-Korsakov. Armed with a sharp historical and social awareness, however, the conceptual material centres not on the tales told by Sheherazade, but centres more explicitly on the woman herself – her intellect, her sexuality as her own prerogative, and the unjust persecution of womanhood. Despite Adams' description of the work as being exotic, (Adams, 2015) the music does not seek to portray the allure of a far-away land, populated by tropes and peppered with sensationalist imagery like the stereotypical exoticist work. The work does feature a prominent part for solo cimbalom, but the function it serves is no different to the solo violin or the orchestra: to convey the message of the music to the audience, and not merely as some generic cultural signifier à-la-Rameau.

As a whole, the work is musically characterised by a volatile and aggressively visceral musical idiom that expresses the historical burden of women, and the plight of women in our own times too; this is a *Sheherazade* more openly charged by anger, outrage and passion. Adams describes *Sheherazade.2* as a reaction against the

“casual brutality” (2016) towards women in *1001 Arabian Nights* and certainly the stark idiom he employs matches this startlingly well. In performance especially, through the visual conduit of Leila Josefowicz’s vigorous virtuosity, the piece makes a strong, unflinching statement about the strength of women. Written for Josefowicz herself, Adams’ writing for the solo violin physicalises the narrative’s emotions through the medium of Josefowicz’s body and the overt, violent physicality required to realise the music.

The treatment of an ethnic woman in a contemporary work as unflinchingly dramatic as this forces the soloist – currently Josefowicz – to stand as a physical representative of the historical-literary figure of Sheherazade – a woman and a Muslim. To do so is a bold move in the context of the modern Western concert hall. It goes without question that it *is* more than unfortunate that what Adams has done in *Scheherazade.2* should be outstanding as a social statement. Ideally it *should not* be outstanding that an ethnic woman is treated with such respect and empathy, but given the blunt reality of the contemporary political and social sphere it nevertheless *is* outstanding, hugely commendable, and also hugely necessary. It *is* still outstanding within the contemporary music scene that *Scheherazade.2* treats a woman as an autonomous figure, not sexualised, but sexual, and that he musically treats the feminine with an intense and palpable strength representative of the actual, real-life strength of women from around the world. Furthermore, it must be noted that the cultural heritage of the character is here treated with a dignity far removed from the rampant sensationalism of the nineteenth century – Adams achieves this largely by musically treating the character of Sheherazade not specifically as a Muslim woman, in contrast to an *American* woman, but purely as a woman who is likely Muslim. It is through works as raw and resolute, and yet as empathetic and sensitive in both music and subject matter, as *Scheherazade.2* that many social issues latent in Western society can be teased out and we as a global community can face ourselves and perhaps begin to break down the barriers between the us and the Other

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Course information

Taught by Dr Inge van Rij, MUSC337: Music in the 19th Century (2015) at Victoria University of Wellington consists of an advanced study of selected music of the nineteenth century from a range of historical, analytical and critical perspectives with a particular emphasis the cultural and historical rationales behind various canonical nineteenth-century works.