

2026 SASL Paint to Music Contest - Overview of Scheherazade and the Music Selections

Scheherazade Op. 35, is a symphonic poem composed by Nikolai Rimsky Korsakov in 1888. It is based on the story One Thousand and One Nights, sometimes known as The Arabian Nights. This orchestral work is typical of Russian music and is Rimsky-Korsakov's most popular work.

Rimsky-Korsakov preceded the composition of the score of this work by writing the story of how the Sultan Schahryar, convinced women are untrustworthy, swore to put each one of his wives to death after the first night of marriage. The Sultana Scheherazade, a skilled storyteller, volunteers to marry the Sultan to save other women from his decree of executing each bride. She accomplishes this by telling the Sultan captivating stories pausing each night at a cliffhanger, forcing the Sultan to spare her life to hear the rest of the tale. After 1,001 nights, the Sultan falls deeply in love with Scheherazade. He spares her life and they live happily ever after with their three children.

Grades K-5 Selections

"The Story of Sinbad the Sailor"

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's "The Story of Sinbad the Sailor" is the first movement of his symphonic suite, *Scheherazade*. The movement uses a swirling melody of the solo violin, representing Scheherazade, to introduce the mythical sea voyage of Sinbad the Sailor. The music depicts the vast ocean with a gently rocking accompaniment in the cellos and a shimmering, melody in E major evoking the grandeur and the mystery of the journey as the orchestra builds to a fortissimo climax that conveys the power and immensity of the ocean and Sinbad's journey.

The symphonic suite is framed by the recurring theme of Scheherazade, the resourceful storyteller who saves her life by enchanting the wicked Sultan with nightly tales. The movement begins with a powerful and "growling" depiction of the Sultan, followed by the delicate, evocative violin melody of Scheherazade, which weaves through the entire piece and represents her voice as she tells a story.

"The Story of the Kalendar Prince"

"The Story of the Kalendar Prince" is the second movement of *Scheherazade*. It is inspired by the collection of tales, and portrays a wandering kalendar (a one-eyed prince) who has been robbed of his wealth and identity and has become a beggar. The music depicts his wandering journey, his eventual return and his encounter with the prince and princess. The prince tells the king a story of his past life and adventures. This movement features a powerful melody from the solo violin.

"The Festival at Baghdad"

"The Festival at Baghdad" is the final movement of *Scheherazade*. This musical movement depicts scenes of a bustling festival in Baghdad, followed by a dramatic ship at sea and a shipwreck against a bronze warrior. The movement begins with the motif of the sea, just like the 1st movement. The scene then quickly changes to the whirl and swirl of the festival and the carnival atmosphere.

Grades 6-12 Selections

“The Sultan and Scheherazade”

This is from the first movement which opens with two distinct themes. Sultan Shahryar is represented by a harsh, domineering bass motif played by the low brass. Scheherazade is represented by a soft, sensuous, winding melody played by a solo violin and often accompanied by the harp. This melody symbolizes her storytelling and influence over the Sultan.

“The Story of the Young Prince and the Princess”

The third movement is a love story featuring the “Young Prince and the Young Princess”. The music is tender and sensual depicting their love and is one of the stories that Scheherazade tells the Sultan to save her life. The music is lyrical, beautiful, and romantic. It tells the simple story of young love in a playful dialogue between the woodwinds and the strings

“Sinbad’s Ship Breaking on the Rock Cliffs”

This music is in the later part of the 4th movement which musically depicts a spectacular shipwreck. The music evokes the violent turbulence of the sea followed by a frantic storm. The piece ends in a sudden, crashing finale as the ship is destroyed against the cliffs. The movement ends with the triumphant return of Scheherazade’s violin theme, signaling her victory over the Sultan and the promise of a peaceful future.

About Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Rimsky-Korsakov was born March 18, 1844, in Tikhvin, Russia. He died at 64 years of age on June 21, 1908, in Liubensk, Russia. He started taking piano lessons at age 6. He entered the Imperial Naval School at age 12. He composed his first symphony while on a navy ship. After he left the Russian navy, he taught at the St. Petersburg Conservatory which is now named for him. His music often reflects a love for the sea. He was one of a group of 5 famous Russian composers known as “The Mighty Handful” (as in five fingers). To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Russian author Alexander Pushkin, Rimsky-Korsakov wrote the now famous “Flight of the Bumblebee”. He was known for his brilliant use of sound and color and borrowing melodies from Russian folk melodies.