

RIMSKY-KORSAKOV'S SHEHERAZADE: SOLO VIOLIN PART

Marking the centenary of the composer's death, **GLENN DICTEROW** reveals the freedom and agility needed to seduce the listener in this most sensuous of all orchestral violin solos



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I adore *Sheherazade* because it possesses some of the most beautiful violin solos ever written for the concertmaster – the melodies are simply gorgeous. At least 80 per cent of the solos are meant to be played freely, which is a rare luxury in the orchestral repertoire. This freedom allows you to shape and phrase the melody with very little or no direction from the conductor.

Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic suite is musical storytelling at its best. It is based on the *One Thousand and One Nights* tale of a princess, Sheherazade, who has to amuse her husband, the Sultan, by relating a collection of tales and

adventures to avoid having her head chopped off – as was the fate of her predecessors. Sheherazade is given an ultimatum: 'Unless you tell me fantastic stories, your life is going to end quickly.' And that is the burden the concertmaster also bears. As Sheherazade's voice, your violin must beguile and enchant, and the power of this musical seduction depends on the quality of sound, colour and phrasing. Many of the passages are constructed around scales, so the challenge is to reach beyond the notes and rhythms, and to touch something altogether more ethereal.

I have made two recordings of *Sheherazade* with the New York Philharmonic, the first under the musical direction of Yuri Temirkanov (RCA) and the second recorded just a few years later with Kurt Masur (Teldec). I tend to favour my performance in the first recording as it is a little more free.

[1] First movement, bars 14–17, with annotations by Glenn Dicterow

Lento ♩ = ♩
Recit.

14 solo *espressivo*

16 *ten.* *Cadenza*

FIRST MOVEMENT

The opening statement of Sheherazade's theme is preceded by a dark, minor-key introduction and then luminous ascending chords in the winds. The set-up is magical and the fantasy has begun – but you have to sustain this special energy. Poor technique and intonation or angular phrasing can ruin everything.

example 1 >

I find some of the original printed bowings a trifle awkward, as the changes happen in unnatural places. For example, in the opening solo (**example 1**), a down bow is indicated on the third group of semiquaver triplets in bar 15 and for me this interrupts the natural flow of the notes. I continue on a down bow through one more triplet and then change my bow on the A natural. This makes it sound as seamless as possible. When practising, one must aim to minimise the bow changes. Two pointers here: sustain the dynamic at

[2] Second movement, bars 1–4, with annotations by Glenn Dicterow

Lento
Recit.

[3] Second movement, bar 162, with annotations by Glenn Dicterow

Moderato assai ♩ = ♩ = 72
Recit.

example 2 >

SECOND MOVEMENT: OPENING

The more Sheherazade's solos progress, the more she gains in confidence. The second appearance of her tune (bars 1–4, **example 2**) is musically more complex and builds up to an incredible explosion of double-stops in the fourth bar, which is technically challenging. Once again I object to the original bowing, which would make it virtually impossible to get across that fiery *espressivo*. Instead, I use more bow strokes to enable maximum sound and virtuosity. It's a common misconception that open strings in solo violin playing are bad news in the context of scale-like passagework, and bars 1 and 2 are a good example of where open Es contribute to a more focused and cleaner sound.

The double-stop cadenza is a clumsily written passage, and the original staccato marking for the notes towards the end is ludicrous. I don't think anyone in their right mind would play it that way – rather, it's a smooth and on-the-string bowing that you need here, in the upper half of the bow. The ability to articulate the double-stops and make them sound virtuosic takes a lot of practice: play them slowly at first and always be mindful of intonation.

For solid intonation, practise slowly with open-string drones, resting on each note until you hear the overtones. Intonation is a particular concern in all of Sheherazade's solos, and it is worth spending a lot of time perfecting because playing in tune also makes your instrument resonate better. There are a few too many violin soloists who tend not to take pure intonation seriously.

Once the technical aspects are under control, you have to make sure that you keep the phrasing free and improvisatory. Help the audience visualise the fantasy by transporting them into the story.

example 3 >

SECOND MOVEMENT: FROM BAR 162

The pizzicato section starting at bar 162 (**example 3**) has to be precise and together, both in an accompanying role and also as a bridge between the clarinet flourishes. The responsibility for this is >

[4] Second movement, bars 181–184

[5] Second movement, bars 373–383

[6] Third movement, bars 142–157, with annotations by Glenn Dicterow

usually given to the concertmaster, who adopts the role of a conductor, while the clarinet is free to play however they like. This can be incredibly distracting, so you really have to shut off completely and feel the beat internally. From experience, it takes all the power I have to sit there, like a machine, nodding the scroll every four beats. It's one of the scariest moments of the piece, as just going one step out of sync could lead to total anarchy.

example 4 >

There are several passages that follow that are also difficult to synchronise as a section – for example, the bright harmonic octave figure at bar 181 (**example 4**), which is just as exposed as the melody that is being passed from one wind instrument to the next. This figure should be played crisply, in the middle of the bow, and to make it easier to get to the right part of the bow, omit the second E in bar 181. The first harmonic will cover up for it in any case.

Make a strong accent on the first beat of every bar and when you reach the pianissimo semiquavers (bar 201), play them in the upper half of the bow. Then when the first figure returns (bar 209), use the

[7] Fourth movement, bars 8–9, with annotations by Glenn Dicterow

[8] Fourth movement, bars 659–665, with annotations by Glenn Dicterow

example 5 >

quaver (♩) beat to return to the middle of the bow, as before. The key to being on top of this fast passage is total economy of movement.

At bar 373 (**example 5**), where the chords are non-divisi, don't be afraid to use an open E string. The piano marking is less to do with the dynamic and more about the quality of sound. Don't die out – the whole passage should sustain a big sound. The subsequent ben tenuto down bows (bar 383) should be played with a long, agile right arm. Recover the full length of the bow for each chord quickly by getting from the point to the frog in a split second. This passage may be a free-for-all but everyone needs to be together. At bar 392 play detached as opposed to spiccato as indicated in the score.

Agility and keeping the sound going is the important consideration here. Every bar should be practised slowly, as legato as possible, and with no gaps between the notes – especially in the retakes after the chords. Fight the tendency to slow down by pushing ahead until you reach the fermata (bar 392). The passage that comes next could be dangerous if you're not careful. Playing it in the lower half of the bow helps. The violin section has to breathe like a chamber ensemble, with an intuitive understanding of tempos and phrasing.

example 6 >

THIRD MOVEMENT

Sheherazade sings her melody in A minor (bar 142, **example 6**), to the distant strumming of the harp, which she herself picks up and uses to accompany the woodwind melodies. Her entrance should be imperceptible, so start it with an up bow. At first, the concertmaster solo is once again granted the freedom of phrasing, but it must soon follow the orchestral line, embellishing the thematic material as it takes on a guitar-like accompanying role. Despite the rigidity of this ricochet figure from bar 146 there can still be a lot of freedom of phrasing. As long as the first beat of each bar is reached on time, there is no reason why you cannot apply lots of rubato in between. That is to say, hold the long notes a bit longer, and then quicken the ricochet to compensate. This is not an exact science, so it would be silly of me to dictate when and where you alter the rhythm, but the important thing to remember is flexibility at all times. Here, you are embellishing the melody and you must accomplish that with total freedom – but within the parameters of the beat. This freedom and spontaneity is what is so wonderful about the piece.

example 7 >

FOURTH MOVEMENT

The passage at the Lento recitative (bar 8, **example 7**) is very awkward, and it is difficult to keep the bottom notes running solidly all the way through. You can cheat by simply touching the lower notes, as you might in a Bach unaccompanied sonata – the resonance will pull the note through. But at all times sustain the top thematic notes.

example 8 >

I like to take my time on the final solo (bars 659–665, **example 8**). It's the most confident of all of Sheherazade's themes. She has won the challenge where dozens failed, and is deservedly basking in her glory. Play this with the feeling that you have won the battle. I play each of the crochet (♩) triplets in bars 661 and 662 separately. This is as sensuous and decadent as the theme gets, and male players would do well to tap into their feminine sides. ■

Interview by Aline Nassif