

74. Notturmo dlya chetyreh valton (Notturmo for Four Horns)

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov
(1844-1908)
transcribed by William Melton

Rimsky-Korsakov, Nicolai Andreyevich

(born 18 March 1844 in Tikhvin/Novgorod; died 21 June 1908 in Liubensk, near St. Petersburg)

Though the young Rimsky-Korsakov showed talent on the piano and at composition, his aristocratic parents enrolled him in the naval academy in St. Petersburg. The youth continued to make music alongside his studies, and a watershed moment occurred in 1861 when he made the acquaintance of Mily Balakirev, and through him the further nationalist composers Cui, Borodin and Mussorgsky (who together with Rimsky and Balakirev would be known as 'the Five' or 'the Mighty Handful'). Rimsky's study with Balakirev was interrupted by a world cruise on his graduation from the academy, and it would be the better part of three years later before he returned to Russia. His compositional production quickly extended to a Symphony in E flat, the orchestral works *Sadko* and *Antar*, and quite a few songs, and he was offered a professorship in composition and instrumentation at the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1871. Rimsky resigned his navy post but remained inspector of navy bands for another decade. He championed Russian works as the conductor of patron-publisher Mitrofan Belaiev's Russian Symphonic Concerts, was engaged at the Imperial Court Chapel, and appearances on the conducting podium in Paris (1889) and Brussels (1890) added to his international stature. Exposure to Wagner's *Ring* in 1889 prompted a concentration on opera in the latter part of Rimsky's career, and his devotion to Mussorgsky and Borodin expressed itself in the orchestration and publication of many of their works after their deaths. He courageously sided with the advocates of intellectual freedom against the oppressive Czarist regime after the February Revolution in 1905, and three years later his many students mourned his loss to a heart ailment at the age of sixty-four.

Rimsky wrote in his autobiography that his first close exposure to the horn came in the school year of 1858-59, when at the direction of his piano teacher Ulich he played the Beethoven Sonata for Piano and Horn with a local hornist. 'Instrumentation', the composer wrote, 'though I didn't even know the word at the time, seemed to me to be something mysterious and alluring. I can still remember the impression the sound of the horns made on me at the beginning of Alice's E major Romanze [in Meyerbeer's *Robert Le Diable*]. Rimsky's appointment to a professorship at St. Petersburg Conservatory made it imperative that he remedy the deficiencies in his musical education. He had become familiar with brass instruments with exposure to naval bands, but needed more up to date knowledge (his early opera *May Night* was written for natural horns and trumpets). In the late 1880s Rimsky's former pupil and current friend Alexander Glazunov took up horn lessons with Fyodor Julievich Franke, the principal horn of the opera orchestra of the Maryinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. Rimsky noted, 'In order to get to know the wind instruments better, I also began practicing'. Rimsky's horn practice may well have extended to playing horn duets with Glazunov: the MS of Rimsky-Korsakov's Two Duets for two horns is housed, significantly, in the Russian National Library's Glazunov Archive. The *Capriccio Espagnol*, with its exposed horn quartet passage, dates from 1887. 1889 brought something special: an excellent traveling German orchestra under conductor Karl Muck arrived in St. Petersburg to play Wagner's *Ring* cycle complete. It was a revelatory experience for many Russian composers (the young Igor Stravinsky included) to hear the German hornists/Wagner tubists play such virtuosic parts with panache and security. Rimsky wrote, 'Glazunov and I were extraordinarily impressed with Wagner's orchestrations, and from then on slowly took his method of instrumentation for our own'. This approach would soon result in the inclusion of six horns in the opera-ballet *Mlada* of 1890 (and later students of Rimsky's who reflected his interest in horn sound included Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Respighi and Nikolai Tcherepnin). *The Principles of Orchestration* revealed some of Rimsky's thoughts on the instrument.

Horn (in F): The tone of this instrument is soft, poetical, and full of beauty.

In spite of valves the horn has but little mobility and would seem to produce its tone in a languid and lazy manner.

It is evident that the quartet of horns presents every facility for four-part harmony, perfectly balanced in tone [...].

This emphasis on sound over technique is aptly demonstrated in the *Notturmo dlya chetyreh valton* (*Notturmo* for four horns). This piece has become such a staple of the horn quartet literature that it is hard to imagine that it remained unknown for a half-century after the composer's death. The reason was that it existed in two versions that needed to be united before the piece could be played. One of these was a pencil score, looking all the world like an album leaf for piano, that was in the possession of the composer Mikhail Fabianovich Gnesin (1883-1957), a gifted pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov in the first decade of the century. Meanwhile, sitting unnoticed in the Saltikov-Schedrin State Library in Leningrad was an untitled fragment of a short score in ink of the beginning sixteen bars of the same piece notated a perfect fifth higher and labeled 'Corni I, II, III, IV in F'. Towards the end of his life Gnesin discovered the archive fragment and used it as a Rosetta stone to turn his souvenir from the master into a brief but effective work for four horns. The two MSS now united, the reconstructed *Notturmo* for four horns was first published in 1955 in Vol. 27 (*Kamernye ansambli/Chamber Ensembles*) of the ongoing collected works of Rimsky-Korsakov (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe muzykal'noe izdatel'stvo, 1946-1970), and subsequently in 1958 in its first western edition.

The Gnesins were a very talented musical family (Mikhail's three sisters established a noteworthy conservatory in Moscow, with Reinhold Glière and Aram Khachaturian among their many students). However, their compilation of the *Notturmo* introduced many slurs and dynamics that do not appear in either of Rimsky's MSS now held by the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg.* There is also one pitch (the last note of bar eleven in Horn 1), that the Gnesin edition notates as a c'', presumably because the sprawling note in Rimsky's pencil sketch could be interpreted as either c'' or d''. However, as Rimsky was a stickler for ink scores (he was famous for rejecting student fair copies in pencil), we can surmise that he began the ink fragment for horns after completing the pencil sketch. In the ink fragment the pitch in question is definitely written as d'' (reprising the use of the same pitch in a similar figure at the end of bar two), and that pitch is used in this edition. The version published here is a step closer to an Urtext edition. No extraneous markings intrude on Rimsky's own, with

a sole exception. Because slurs that are notated at the beginning of the MS disappear as it gets progressively less detailed, when specific melodic figures are reprised they have been given the same articulation markings as in their first appearance.

The *Notturmo* has cautiously been dated at 1888. This is based on the inclusion of a quote from *Scheherazade*, also composed in that year. Beginning just before bar twenty-five, the first horn in the *Notturmo* cites the melody that appears in *Scheherazade* in solo flute (upbeats to the ninth bar after B, *Tranquillo*).

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*Rimsky-Korsakov Archive, No. 121e. Thanks are due to Vera A. Pryanishnikova, departmental director at the National Library of Russia, for providing high quality copies of the two MSS.