

# Program Notes

By April L. Racana

Friday, October 9 The 97th Tokyo Opera City Subscription Concert

Opera City  
10/9

Orchard Hall  
10/18

Suntory Hall  
10/30

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)

## Opera "Kashchey the Deathless" (concert-style opera with Japanese supertitles)

"In every new work of mine I am trying to do something that is new for me. On the one hand, I am pushed on by the thought that in this way [my music] will retain freshness and interest, but at the same time I am prompted by my pride to think that many facets, devices, moods and styles, if not all, should be within my reach. I would not like to shut myself within the limits set by... [others]."  
[Grove] This was written by Rimsky-Korsakov in 1902, the same time-frame he was completing work on this opera, *Kashchey the Deathless*, so it is not surprising that one can find examples of many of these explorations within this work.

Rimsky-Korsakov began work on this opera in 1901, having already composed 11 other works in the genre. By this time, the composer had been working as a professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory for three decades, and was already well known for many of his brilliant orchestrations, including *Capriccio Espagnol* and *Scheherazade*, the latter of which represents one of his preferred subjects, that of basing his works on fairy tales and folk stories. In fact, composing a total of 15 operas, scholars have come to put these works into stylistic categories including: Historical dramas; Gogol operas; Epic dramas; Stylistic experiments; and Fairy tales which includes the work being performed for this concert series, the opera *Kashchey the Deathless*.

Based on the original libretto by Yevgeny Petrovsky, the story line came from the folklore that so interested Rimsky-Korsakov. (Incidentally a similar Russian folk tale was used by Stravinsky when he composed *The Firebird*.) In contrast to the epic operas where the composer intended to draw the audience into the action on the stage, in this case, he does the opposite and tries to create a distance between the audience and the actors on the stage 'by creating a closed magical world.' [Grove] The mystical scene is created by utilizing unusual (for the time) harmonies that are based around the diminished seventh chord. In addition, the composer incorporates motives for each of the characters, that recur throughout the work.

In this version of the story, Rimsky-Korsakov presents the story in a one-act opera, divided into three scenes. The first scene is set in a faraway magical kingdom where Kashchey, the evil wizard is holding captive the Princess Tsarevna. Many days have gone by and the Princess is losing hope of ever seeing her Prince Ivan again and returning home. She sings of her dying hopes and desires, using melodies that are believed to be based on Russian folk melodies. Kashchey sings in response in much darker tones, including the sinister tri-tone leaps in his melodies, accompanied by the orchestra also using much darker timbres.

Kashchey shows the Princess a vision

of her Prince through a magical mirror, but she also sees another woman in the vision. That woman turns out to be Kashchey's daughter, Kashcheyevna. This concerns Kashchey, as his daughter holds the key to his immortality in her tears. He sings an arioso explaining that as long as she never sheds a tear he will forever be immortal. This turn of events prompts the evil wizard to free the Storm Knight from imprisonment in his castle, so that he can intervene and keep his daughter from Prince Ivan. The Orchestra unleashes the whirling, stormy effects in the woodwinds and strings to present the motive for the Storm Knight as he swirls his way to Kashcheyevna's kingdom. Kashchey sends the Princess back to her tower and whips up a snowstorm, while the chorus sings "the wicked one will never pass away, Kashchey will never die."

The second scene opens with Kashcheyevna singing an arioso, telling of her anticipation of yet another Prince whom she will seduce and then kill by her sword. She is preparing a potion for the occasion and is heard repeatedly chanting: "Flowers, flowers, give me your power!" Prince Ivan arrives and is mesmerized by the beauty of this magical kingdom. He drinks the potion she offers him, which makes him forget his Princess, but before he falls asleep from the effects of the potion, the two sing a quiet duet together. She prepares the sword to take his life, but realizes she is falling in love with him in spite of her hard heart.

All of a sudden the Storm Knight arrives on a gust of swirling winds and blows the sword out of her hands. The wind also awakens the Prince, which features the orchestral brass section in a noble

chorale. The Prince's memory is restored as he hears the Storm Knight singing of the Princess' plea for help. The Prince returns with the Storm Knight, again with the orchestra playing the whirlwind motives, while Kashcheyevna cries out for the Prince to stay with her.

The third scene returns back to Kashchey's magical kingdom where we hear the Princess singing a lullaby. She is sounding even more desperate and losing hope at ever being rescued. But the Storm Knight and Prince arrive at the tower, and the two lovers, reunited, sing a duet together, which closes on the Prince's noble motive. Kashcheyevna however arrives, and interrupts their reunion and impending escape. She offers to let the Princess go if the Prince will stay with her, but he replies in sombre tones rejecting her offer.

Kashchey awakens amidst all the turbulence, singing a final dark arioso expressing his anger of all that has taken place. Kashcheyevna's heart has been broken so she begins crying, which means the end to both her and her father. She is transformed into a willow tree as the chorus announces in jubilant tones the freedom for the Prince and Princess, together with the Storm Knight. The full orchestra closes on a variation of Prince Ivan's motive while the two sing a song of hope and love as spring arrives.

**Instrumentation:** 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd doubling on English horn), 2 clarinets (2nd doubling on bass clarinet), 2 bassoons (2nd doubling on contrabassoon), 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, harp, celesta, strings

April L. Racana / Music Specialist at Nishimachi International School where she has taught since 1992. She completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana (BS/Piano Pedagogy) and her graduate studies at San Francisco State University (MA/Music).