

From: [Grove Music Online](#): Nikolay Andreyevich Rimsky-Korsakov

6. **Orchestral and other works.**

Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestral works are largely programmatic, the more so if we take him seriously when he says, 'To me even a folk theme has a programme of sorts'. The two chief influences upon his orchestral music were Balakirev, unsurprisingly (especially his First Symphony, the Overture on Three Russian Themes, the Czech Overture and *Tamara*), and Liszt (the symphonic poems). All Rimsky-Korsakov's works based on folk themes, Russian or otherwise, owe much to Balakirev's gestures and formal procedures. His oriental style evolved from *Tamara*; even some of his most characteristic oriental passages, such as the recurring solo violin sections of *Sheherezade*, are drawn from that source. Liszt's influence, on the other hand, was responsible for the development of his fantastic style, a fact of which he made no secret. When asked by his biographer, Yastrebtsev, how to account for the enormous differences between his First Symphony (1865) and his orchestral fantasia *Sadko* (1867) the composer replied with disarming frankness: 'When I wrote the symphony, we [the composers of Balakirev's circle] knew only Beethoven, Schumann and some Glinka; by the time I began working on *Sadko* and *Antar*, I was profoundly inspired by the beauty of Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz*'. Liszt's harmonic experimentation inspired both Rimsky-Korsakov's use of the octatonic scale and 3rd-related triads, both features of *Sadko*, *Antar*, *Skazka* ('Legend') and many of the operas.

The difference between these earlier pieces and the most popular works of the 1880s (the *Spanish Capriccio*, *Sheherezade* and the *Easter Festival* overture) lies not so much in the material, or even in its development, as in orchestration that replaced the sparser textures of Glinka and Balakirev with a new luxuriance. The principle of highlighting 'primary hues', individual timbres, remained in place (suffice it to recall the prominence of the bassoon in the second movement of *Sheherezade*, or the trombone solo in the *Easter Festival* overture), but behind the seemingly effortless transparency of sound there was now a sophisticated armoury of orchestral effects, some discovered in the scores of other composers, but many freshly invented by Rimsky-Korsakov himself. He confessed that the striking use of *pianissimo* trombones to support the *forte* strings in the first movement of *Sheherezade* was drawn from Wagner, but the orchestral imitation of bells (for example, in the *Easter Festival* overture) was his own invention; we find just such bell effects in Musorgsky and Borodin too, but in each case we know that the passages concerned were scored by Rimsky-Korsakov, who saw no reason to restrict the appearance of his most felicitous ideas to his own scores. The influence of Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestral style, in its turn, seeped into the lingua franca of European music after Debussy and Ravel mined *Sheherezade* for new orchestral idioms (one passage from its second movement appears, hardly disguised, in both *La Mer* and *Daphnis et Chloé*).

The discipline of non-programmatic symphonic writing did not inspire Rimsky-Korsakov to the same degree; his First Symphony is too slender and derivative, and in the Third Symphony and the Sinfonietta, a series of variations on trivial material leads to tedium. The music for piano or chamber ensemble likewise adds little to our estimation of the composer. His songs are another matter: while they do not boast the overt lyricism of Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninoff, a number of them, such as *Redeyet oblakov letuchaya gryada* ('The Clouds begin to Scatter') from op.42 or *Na nivı zholtıye* ('Silence Descends on the Golden Cornfields') from op.39, certainly possess a delicate beauty, and these have deservedly entered the standard repertory of Russian singers.