Typical of young naval officers, eighteen-year-old Nikolai planned an around-the-world voyage in 1862. Before his departure, Rimsky-Korsakov shared with Balakirev the beginnings of his Symphony in E-flat, and Balakirev encouraged Nikolai to work on the piece during his voyage. While at sea, Nikolai completed the composition, and upon his return, revised it with Balakirev’s help. Balakirev conducted the premiere of the piece to an audience astonished to learn that the composer was a 21-year-old navy officer!

In 1871, now 27 years old, Rimsky-Korsakov became a professor at the renowned St. Petersburg Conservatory, simultaneously retaining his position as an active naval officer. But keenly aware of his minimal music theory knowledge and lack of a formal music education, Nikolai became a student of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky to learn harmony and counterpoint, transforming himself into one of the world’s foremost music theorists. Influenced by Tchaikovsky, Nikolai’s music took on a “western European” sound, which, when mixed with the “Russian nationalism” sound of the Five, made Rimsky-Korsakov’s compositions unique, separating him from other Russian composers of the day.

The compositions and techniques of Rimsky-Korsakov and the Five gained momentum; together, they formed a network of audiences, played through the masterpieces, and would “pore over scores and argue about music.” Rimsky-Korsakov’s orchestration skills were greatly respected, and at varying points in time, each of the Five separately asked...
him to score or orchestrate their own pieces – in many cases, his editions of their works enjoyed the most widespread use, even today.\textsuperscript{xv}

The first year of the Russian Revolution, 1905, was sparked with uprisings and demonstrations, as workers expressed profound discontent with the government’s inability to improve their quality of life. January 22, 1905 was dubbed “Bloody Sunday” after police forces fired on a peaceful demonstration, leaving hundreds dead.\textsuperscript{xvi} When students from the St. Petersburg Conservatory participated in the demonstrations, Rimsky-Korsakov became more than a composer. He became a political activist.

Rimsky-Korsakov, then 61 years old, stepped forward in support of his students.\textsuperscript{xvii} A lifelong political liberal, he personally published an open letter to the director of the Conservatory, boldly supporting the student strikers and attacking the Russian Musical Society, who controlled the institution.\textsuperscript{xviii} He and 29 other prominent musicians publicly endorsed a letter demanding political reforms, but his vocal stance on civil liberties cost him his job: on April 5, 1905, despite his fame and reputation as a leading Russian composer, he was fired from the conservatory.\textsuperscript{xix} In protest, Nikolai’s students and colleagues staged a student performance of his opera, Kashchey the Deathless, which was followed not by the planned student concert, but by a huge political demonstration.\textsuperscript{xx} Widespread coverage of these events led to the prohibition of his music, a ban that lasted for 2 years.\textsuperscript{xx} Several faculty members resigned in protest, and more than 300 students walked out of the Conservatory, as a sign of solidarity with Rimsky-Korsakov.

When the St. Petersburg Conservatory reopened in December of 1905, Rimsky-Korsakov was reinstated as professor under a new director, Alexander Glazunov, but the reinstatement was short-lived. In 1906, Nikolai retired and left the Conservatory.\textsuperscript{xxii} He was suffering from heart problems and high levels of censorship from the Russian government made it nearly impossible to publish his opera, The Golden Cockerel, which implied criticisms of the monarchy.\textsuperscript{xxiii} In fact, the opera was not performed until 1909, after his death in 1908.\textsuperscript{xxiv}

As one of Russia’s most influential composers, Rimsky-Korsakov’s late start did not determine his musical achievements. As a political activist, Rimsky-Korsakov proudly shares the spotlight with other important musicians such as actor/singer Paul Robeson and musician Pete Seeger, whose vocal opposition to the McCarthy hearings of the 1950’s caused both artists to be blacklisted. All three used their celebrity, even at risk to their own careers, as a platform for important political statements. Rimsky-Korsakov’s larger-than-life achievements are inspirational proof of what is possible: irrespective of age, our best and most profound accomplishments may be ahead of us.

As we open the season on October 7 – 9, 2016, come hear the HSO perform two pieces by this renowned composer: Scheherazade (a wonderful composition based on the Tales of the Arabian Nights) and Capriccio Espagnol.
Masterworks #1:
Do you know which composer began his career as a naval officer and ended as a political activist?

Wondering How the Music Will Sound?
Try HSO’S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you’ll hear on our concert stage!

Looking for a way to involve young children in the music? Here’s a link to a video with the music of Scheherazade and some of the stories from Tales of the Arabian Nights:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7O1SKrCe0u

Want to enhance your own enjoyment? Learn to recognize the voice of Scheherazade and identify the music of the seal! Try this listening guide for adolescents and older audiences: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjXm2MlrQU0

And a link to the full performance by the Rotterdam Philharmonic: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0R439gPhEE

A link to Capriccio Espagnol with Zubin Mehta and the Berlin Philharmonic: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lh6mDL-VwYw

For the Concerto for guitar and orchestra by Rodrigo, please enjoy this performance by guitarist Pepe Romero: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ye-FvKCZp3s

Masterworks, October 7-9, 2016

Two masterpieces by Rimsky-Korsakov, his Scheherazade and Capriccio Espagnol, can happily be found together on a really wonderful recording with Sir Charles Mackerras and the London Symphony Orchestra, captured in brilliant digital sound on TELARC. Another favorite recording of Scheherazade alone is the classic recording with Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in sound that defies its age (RCA).

Rodrigo’s charming Concierto de Aranjuez is memorably performed by the American guitarist Sharon Isbin accompanied by Jose Serebrier and the New York Philharmonic, recorded in lovely sound on the WARNER label.

3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. Ibid
7. Ibid
8. Ibid
15. Ibid
17. Ibid
18. Ibid
20. Ibid
24. Ibid
25. Ibid
27. Ibid
28. Ibid
29. Ibid
30. Ibid