

## **Xian Conducts *Scheherazade***

### **ONE-MINUTE NOTES**

**Gabriela Ortiz:** *Kauyumari*

Mexico City native Gabriela Ortiz grew up immersed in Mexican folk music, then gained international perspective studying in Paris and London. Her compositions are a melting pot that draws on elements of Latin, Afro-Cuban and contemporary styles, as well as folk and popular music. She wrote *Kauyumari* as the world began to emerge from the isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic. The title means ‘blue deer’ in the language of Mexico’s Huichol people. She has written: “The blue deer represents a spiritual guide . . . transformed through an extended pilgrimage into a hallucinogenic cactus called peyote. It allows the Huichol to communicate with their ancestors...and take on their role as guardians of the planet...Music has the power to grant us access to the intangible; healing our wounds and binding us to what can only be expressed through sound. Although life is filled with interruptions, *Kauyumari* is a comprehension and celebration of the fact that each of these rifts is also a new beginning.”

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart:** Piano Concerto No. 17 in G Major, K. 453

Mozart’s mature piano concertos are a splendid group of compositions that attest not only to his genius and prodigious pianistic gifts, but also to his astonishing productivity in the 1780s. The Concerto No. 17 in G major, K. 453, is one of six piano concertos that he composed in 1784. In this case he was writing not for himself but for a gifted student, Babette (Barbara) Ployer. The first movement is quasi-military, but softened by the elegance and lilt of its themes. Mozart’s central Andante opens with serenade-like music for strings and winds. The piano enters serenely, but the movement soon wanders into unexpected key centers, including operatic passages in minor mode, with wide melodic leaps. The finale is a splendid set of variations on a theme that foreshadows the carefree music of Papageno in *The Magic Flute*. This was Mozart’s first concerto to use variations for the finale rather than sonata or rondo form.

**Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov: *Scheherazade*, Op. 35**

*Scheherazade* features an obligato role for our excellent concertmaster, Eric Wyrick. His recurring solo violin line represents the spellbinding voice of the Sultana as she relates the 1001 tales of the Arabian Nights, thereby staving off death by entertaining her husband. *Scheherazade's* music is sinuous and seductive. The sultan's theme, in the brasses, is barbaric, forceful and masculine. Rimsky's writing is enchanting: a perfect blend of musical storytelling and impeccable orchestration.

**Gabriela Ortiz: *Kauyumari***

**Gabriela Ortiz**

**Born:** December 20, 1964, in Mexico City, Mexico

**Composed:** 2021

**World Premiere:** January 14, 2022, in Los Angeles; Gustavo Dudamel conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

**Duration:** 7 minutes

**Instrumentation:** piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, two trombones, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, bongos, claves, glockenspiel, jawbone, log drum, metal guïro, seed pod rattle, shakers, sistrum, snare drum, suspended cymbal, tam tam, tambourine, xylophone), harp and strings

*"I fell in love with music once I understood that sounds have souls, and it is through them that one may speak of oneself."*

Thus reads the home page of Mexico City native Gabriela Ortiz's website. An internationally educated musician, she studied at the Paris École Normale de Musique, London's Guildhall School of Music and University of London. She serves on the faculty of the National School of Music at the National Autonomous University in Mexico City and has also taught at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music. She has earned a bevy of composition awards in Mexico, including the Bellas Artes Gold Medal in 2022, the highest distinction granted by Mexico's National Institute of Fine Arts. In this country she was both a Guggenheim Fellow and a Fulbright Fellow, and she has been nominated twice for Latin GRAMMYS.

Ortiz grew up immersed in Mexican folk music—both her parents were folk musicians—and her compositions are a melting pot that draws on elements of Latin, Afro-Cuban and contemporary styles as well as folk and popular music, including rock and jazz. She composed *Kauyumari* for the Los Angeles Philharmonic as the world began to emerge from the isolation of the pandemic. Her composer's note explains her title and its relevance to the circumstances of the commission.

Among the Huichol people of Mexico, *Kauyumari* means "blue deer." The blue deer represents a spiritual guide, one that is transformed through an extended pilgrimage into a hallucinogenic cactus called peyote. It allows the Huichol to communicate with their ancestors, do their bidding, and take on

their role as guardians of the planet. Each year, these Native Mexicans embark on a symbolic journey to "hunt" the blue deer, making offerings in gratitude for having been granted access to the invisible world, through which they also are able to heal the wounds of the soul.

When I received the commission from the Los Angeles Philharmonic to compose a piece that would reflect on our return to the stage following the pandemic, I immediately thought of the blue deer and its power to enter the world of the intangible as akin to a celebration of the reopening of live music. Specifically, I thought of a Huichol melody sung by the De La Cruz family—dedicated to recording ancestral folklore—that I used for the final movement of my piece, *Altar de Muertos* (Altar of the Dead), commissioned by the Kronos String Quartet in 1997. I used this material within the orchestral context and elaborated on the construction and progressive development of the melody and its accompaniment in such a way that it would symbolize the blue deer. This in turn was transformed into an orchestral texture which gradually evolves into a complex rhythm pattern, to such a degree that the melody itself becomes unrecognizable (the imaginary effect of peyote and our awareness of the invisible realm), giving rise to a choral wind section while maintaining an incisive rhythmic accompaniment as a form of reassurance that the world will naturally follow its course.

While composing this piece, I noted once again how music has the power to grant us access to the intangible; healing our wounds and binding us to what can only be expressed through sound. Although life is filled with interruptions, *Kauyumari* is a comprehension and celebration of the fact that each of these rifts is also a new beginning.

*Kauyumari* pulsates with positive energy, making liberal use of an extensive percussion battery augmented by several folk instruments. The message is one of renaissance in the sense of rebirth: an apt embrace of the world we all rejoiced in rediscovering as the pandemic eased.

## **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 17 in G Major, K. 453**

### **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

**Born:** January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

**Died:** December 5, 1791, in Vienna, Austria

**Composed:** March–April 1784

**World Premiere:** Probably 29 April 1784 in Vienna at the Kärntnerthor Theater

**Duration:** 30 minutes

**Instrumentation:** flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, solo piano and strings

In a letter to his father Leopold dated June 9, 1784, Mozart wrote:

Tomorrow Herr Ployer, the agent, is giving a concert in the country at Döbling, where Fräulein Babette is playing her new concerto in G, and I am performing the quintet; we are then playing together the grand sonata for two claviers. I am fetching Paisiello in my carriage, as I want him

to hear both my pupil and my compositions.

What a wonderful time this was for Mozart! His music was the height of fashion; he was sought after by the nobility and wealthy upper middle classes, and he enjoyed the respect of the finest musicians of the day, among whom the composer Giovanni Paisiello must certainly be counted. One would almost like to freeze this moment in Mozart's frantic life, when he was happy and thriving on a growing career.

Babette (Barbara) Ployer was the daughter of Gottfried Ignaz von Ployer, Archbishop Colloredo's agent in Salzburg. She was obviously quite gifted, for Mozart had also written for her the splendid and unusual Concerto No. 14 in E-flat Major (we know it as K. 449). If he played his brilliant two-piano sonata (in D Major, K. 448) with her at the concert, he clearly respected her musicianship and technique. She was one of the few students he taught of whom he thought highly enough to permit her to play his works in public with his blessing.

Babette benefited from Mozart's exceptional gifts during a year when virtually everything he produced was an immortal masterpiece. Both concertos written for her date from 1784; the autograph of K. 453 is dated March 22. Its companion pieces that year were five additional piano concertos, two sonatas, one string quartet and the fine E-flat quintet for piano and winds (K. 452) to which Mozart alludes in the letter quoted above; he considered that work to be the finest he had written to date.

The G-major concerto is primarily important because it is the first mature concerto to use variations rather than sonata/rondo for its finale; that technique would reach its culmination in the C-minor concerto, K. 491 two years later. But K. 453 has other, ineffable charms. Charles Rosen calls its opening movement "perhaps the most graceful and colorful of all Mozart's military allegros." Arthur Hutchings describes the concerto as "one of those few in the series wherein each of the three movements reaches a supreme level of excellence." He was right; there is no weak link among the three movements. Writing for Babette Ployer seems to have brought out the best in Mozart.

The concerto opens with a characteristic dotted rhythm melody in 4/4 time, a favorite pattern of Mozart's in his first movements. This one, however, is unsupported by trumpets or timpani. The march tune is belied by delicate commentary from flute, oboes and bassoons that establishes a mood more lyrical and intimate than martial. There is little here to connect it with the "military" concerti beyond its rhythm. Mozart's selection of G major as the home tonality reinforces a sense of innocence and joy. Grace and lyric beauty prevail in this lovely movement, where another perfectly delectable melody seems to be lurking around every corner. The second theme, a harmonically unstable melodic query that Mozart develops with magnificent chromatic skill, bears special attention, for it resurfaces in the slow movement, metamorphosed into the principal melody.

The first movement development section takes its cue from the second theme, stressing harmonic tension and adventurous wandering rather than technical bravura. This concerto's drama is of a more subtle nature than the others composed the same year.

The *Andante* opens with strings alone, then the winds enter in a lovely serenade-like passage. The solo piano entrance, in the tonic of C major, cedes almost immediately to a G minor outburst. Distinctly operatic, this passage foreshadows the wide melodic leaps so emotionally effective in the F-sharp minor slow movement of the A major concerto, K. 488. In the ensuing music, so far afield does Mozart travel that when he returns to the opening statement in C major, it sounds as if he is traveling to a foreign land. A brief episode in the distant key of E-flat does little to mitigate the sense of harmonic disorientation. Surely this is the type of movement that caused the 19th-century Romantics to claim Mozart as one of their own!

Mozart's finale is a splendid set of variations on a theme that brings a smile to one's face and presages the carefree music that Papageno sings in *The Magic Flute*. Mozart is said to have adapted a theme his pet starling sang, but for modern listeners the entire movement is imbued with the spirit of *opera buffa*. Its essential structure is theme and five variations, plus a finale marked *Presto* that provides an imposing conclusion. Reducing it to such analysis does it an injustice, for every segment of this delicious movement is touched with genius, and humor, and the kind of chromatic transitions that cause us to shake our heads in disbelief that so much imagination and magic could touch a single work.

## Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov *Scheherazade*, Op. 35

### Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

**Born:** 1844 in Tikhvin, near Novgorod, Russia

**Died:** 1908 in Liubensk, near St. Petersburg, Russia

**Composed:** 1888

**World Premiere:** October 28, 1888, in St. Petersburg. The composer conducted

**Duration:** 42 minutes

**Instrumentation:** three flutes (two doubling piccolo); two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones (third doubling bass trombone), tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tambourine), harp and strings

The concept of Orientalism carried great sway in late 19th-century Russia. The land itself spanned thousands of miles from west to east, subsuming vastly different cultures within its boundaries. When he began work on *Scheherazade*, Rimsky-Korsakov had recently completed his friend Alexander Borodin's unfinished opera, *Prince Igor*, whose music is heavily tinged with Eastern flavor. These same colorful and unusual harmonies associated with the Eastern world at the time exerted a strong influence on Rimsky-Korsakov's own symphonic suite.

In his memoirs, *My Musical Life*, Rimsky-Korsakov wrote of *Scheherazade*:

I had in view the creation of an orchestral suite in four movements, closely knit by the community of its themes and motives, yet presenting, as it were, a kaleidoscope of fairy-tale images and designs of Oriental character... All I desired was that the hearer, if he liked my piece as *symphonic music*, should carry away the impression that it is beyond doubt an Oriental narrative of some numerous and varied fairy-tale wonders.

He placed a note at the head of his score recapitulating the story. Sultan Shakriar, convinced that all women are faithless, determines to put each of his wives to death after the first night. Clever Sultana Scheherazade saves herself one night after another by captivating her husband with different fairy tales and adventures. Driven by curiosity, the sultan repeatedly postpones her execution, eventually abandoning his bloodthirsty plan.

Curiously, in later life Rimsky-Korsakov spoke of aversion to an overly specific program for the suite. While he acknowledged that the solo violin represented the silken voice of the gifted Sultana as she related her stories, he held that his technique was a musical unifier, rather than a programmatic device. The composer wanted the story to act as a catalyst for each individual listener's imagination, rather than having us interpret the music as a literal illustration of the literary program.

*Scheherazade* was sketched in Petersburg in early 1888 and completed during the summer while Rimsky-Korsakov was on holiday in the country. It was approximately contemporary with his *Russian Easter Overture*, and the two works were premiered on the same concert that December. Along with his *Capriccio Espagnol*, Rimsky-Korsakov felt that *Scheherazade* and the overture:

...close[d] a period in my work, at the end of which my orchestration had attained a considerable degree of virtuosity and warm sonority without Wagnerian influence, limiting myself to the normally constituted orchestra used by Glinka.

Rimsky-Korsakov rightly regarded *Scheherazade* as the peak of his orchestration achievement, though not necessarily his finest musical achievement. Perhaps the greatest achievement of this suite is that the composer succeeded so completely in evoking the specific and unfamiliar of his subject without the use of unconventional instruments. It is a veritable festival for the orchestra. Colorful solos for nearly every instrument ingeniously weave together the different melodic lines that connect the music and evoke the magical spirit of the 1001 Arabian nights.

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