From the Blue Ridge
Jeff Midkiff
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Mandolin Concerto "From The Blue Ridge" (2011) for Mandolin and Orchestra by Jeff Midkiff

My love for playing the mandolin, and a lifetime of doing so, began to take on new meaning and motivation just a few years ago. After decades of performing as a professional clarinetist in numerous orchestral concerts, I felt a deep-seated desire to bring my favorite instrument in line with those experiences. I truly enjoy the amazing color, language and structure of the symphony, and my years as a clarinetist made me familiar with it from the inside of the orchestra. I have worked to develop a highly improvisational approach to the mandolin, and I knew in my heart that I could say something with it on a symphonic scale. My excitement and motivation for this piece started with the idea that I could bring my most natural companion to the symphonic stage--two seemingly different worlds together. I hope you enjoy the fusion of these complementary musical worlds.

The Roanoke Symphony Orchestra and their Music Director & Conductor David Stewart Wiley commissioned the piece in November of 2010 and it was then that the falling leaves, blowing in the wind, drew the opening musical scene. The first of three movements (Allegro) begins with the mandolin on swirling sixteenth notes, setting the stage for excitement and anticipation, as does the entire movement. Indeed, our Blue Ridge's beauty and importance to me would form the piece. The middle of the first movement moves from D-Minor to the relative key of B-Flat Major with woodwinds in a waltz-like dance, before we return to the first (fast) theme. Although the movement ends quickly, there is a final unexpected fade with a long held single note in the clarinets.

The lyrical and slow second movement draws on more typical and familiar bluegrass melodies. Having grown up in Roanoke, moved away, and returned, I wanted the concerto to echo the emotions associated with home, and with coming home to Roanoke. To get there, I looked no further than the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Roanoke Valley. "Wildwood Flower" by the Carter Family, and Bill Monroe's "Roanoke" are my thematic inspirations. A haunting fiddle tune from the mandolin (accompanied by the oboe) paints a picture of longing before the journey is complete. The end of the movement is "resolved" with major thirds returning from the "Roanoke" theme, and an improvisational-sounding piccolo solo, flowing without significant break to the final movement, after a brief mandolin utterance over a halo of strings.

The third movement, "The Crooked Road," is an upbeat, improvisational and dynamic affair. It draws strongly from jazz and bluegrass themes in a series of ideas in a "controlled jam session" with one idea leading to another. Every section of the orchestra has a virtuosic role to play, with percussion in particular setting up the different rhythmic grooves. A break in the action occurs with an extended cadenza for mandolin and concertmaster before a mixed-meter blues riff for full orchestra. Another somewhat brief cadenza for solo mandolin inserts and asserts itself just before a bright, upbeat and up-tempo conclusion ends the new work with a flourish upward. Thus ends our musical journey "From The Blue Ridge"!
It is easy to presume that classical music and popular music split into separate spheres in the twentieth century. However the beginnings of the split can be found much earlier, as a gradual division of the operatic repertoire into “grand” opera and lighter operettas became more pronounced. In England this led to the likes of John Gay’s 1728 *Beggar’s Opera* and eventually to the wild popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan. In the United States the split became manifest in the rise of Broadway. By the same token nineteenth century France, which had strict legal regulations for operatic performance, actually supported two opera houses, the Opéra national de Paris and the Théâtre National de l’Opéra Comique, the latter of which allowed for greater freedom of expression and a wider popular appeal with the concert going public. Hérold, who was influenced by Méhul and Boieldieu, wrote his *Zampa* for the Opéra Comique.

With 56 performances in its first 15 months, *Zampa* was a great success. Hérold’s final opera, *Le Pré aux clercs*, was even more popular: it was performed for the 1482nd time in the centennial celebration of Hérold’s birth in 1891. *Zampa* caused quite a stir in Paris at its premiere. The critics felt that it more rightly belonged at l’Opéra because its plot revolved around the weighty subject of a revenge-inclined statue brought to life (a clear dramatic debt to *Don Juan*), though the music itself and the inclusion of spoken dialogue made the Opéra Comique the proper venue. *Zampa*’s overture does not really reference these events directly as might be expected, rather it provides an introduction to the opera’s most memorable melodies. Overtures such as *Zampa*’s are often called “pastiche overtures,” and might be thought of more as a medley of tunes than a dramatic statement. Carl Maria von Weber’s overtures work in exactly this manner, as do those by Arthur Sullivan.

The overture to *Zampa* was arranged for brass band in the nineteenth century, which, together with its lively beat and melodiuous writing, made the work a favorite among nineteenth-century American audiences. Today *Zampa* is more or less forgotten as an opera and revived relatively infrequently, but the overture has remained a staple of the concert repertoire. As a pastiche overture, knowledge of the plot is not needed – one can simply enjoy the tunes as they flow from one to the next.

*Scheherazade*, op. 35
Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)
Premiered: 1889 in Leipzig
The second half of the nineteenth century saw Russia establish herself as a musical force. Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, together with Modest Musorgsky (1839-81) and three other Russian composers came to be known as the “mighty handful,” a phrase synonymous with the “Russian School” but with more dramatic flair. The mighty handful’s style of composition is marked by a focus on the religious and folk lives of the Russian people united with ideas from Realism and Romanticism. Mikhail Glinka (1804-57) was the movement’s forefather and a composer who exerted a marked influence on Rimsky-Korsakov. While Rimsky-Korsakov cared little for counterpoint or “textbook” harmony and form, he was a brilliant orchestrator who could play virtually every instrument in the orchestra. His 1913 book on orchestration is second only to Berlioz’s treatise in influence and is, in fact, still used as a textbook at some universities almost a century later.

The composer called Scheherazade a “symphonic suite,” but this was done in an effort to be contrarian to Germanic forms. The work is closer to being a traditional four-movement symphony than he would have us believe. The programmatic content of the work is, however, closer to being a large-scale concert overture (like Mendelssohn’s Midsummer Night’s Dream), or a tone poem (like Richard Strauss’s Don Juan). Scheherazade is based on a Persian legend “1001 Nights” wherein a resentful sultan, Schahriar, daily marries a woman only to have her executed each night. The title character, his newest queen, halts the trend by telling him enchanting tales each night for 1001 successive nights. Scheherazade thereby gains the king’s trust and cunningly saves her life.

Rimsky-Korsakov’s symphonic suite relates the tales in episodic fashion over the course of the work, and each tale might be thought of as mini-movements within the larger work. The opening depicts the vengeful sultan, immediately followed by a soothing diversion in the woodwinds that is basically stolen from Mendelssohn. A solo violinist then enters with the “Scheherazade motive.” This theme, scattered throughout the work, frames the smaller tales and reminds us of her role as a narrator. The sonata-form first movement, “The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship,” relates the seven voyages of Captain Sinbad as he sails the ocean. The captain encounters storms and monsters and, inevitably, each voyage is marred by a shipwreck on a dangerous island followed by a fantastic journey home. The ternary-form second movement, “The Story of the Prince-Kalandar,” opens with the trumpeting fanfares associated with nobility. In this tale of disguise a prince dresses himself as a monk and goes on an adventure. It is easy to imagine the tender closing, a series of solos involving the winds and strings, as the disguised prince falling in love — but the sultan’s theme rudely interrupts the story, showing that he does not yet love Scheherazade in the way that the prince does in the story. Scheherazade works to change this attitude more overtly in the lyric third movement, “The young prince and princess.” In the composer’s interpretation of this love story, it is easy to hear the swooning princess in the clarinet’s runs and the seduced prince in the muted string’s melody. Rimsky-Korsakov’s subheadings for the sonata-rondo fourth movement relate its programmatic outline: “Festival in Baghdad. The Sea. The Ship Breaks Up Against a Cliff Surmounted by a Bronze Horseman. Conclusion.” The finale brings the cycle to an end by recalling each of the ideas from the opening movement (one could even argue that the entire work is a large-scale sonata form with the finale acting as a huge recapitulation to the first three movements). Scheherazade’s theme also reappears in the violin solo that closes the work, marking the end of 1001 consecutive nights of tale telling.