

Iconicity in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*: A Musical Semiotic and Experimental Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the semiotic mechanisms through which Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* communicates narrative meaning in instrumental music. Combining a detailed musical semiotic analysis with an experimental listener survey involving 38 participants, this study explores how the piece utilizes both primary iconicity (direct musical imitation) and secondary iconicity (symbolic emotional expression) to convey the stories and emotions inspired by *One Thousand and One Nights*. Participants listened to musical excerpts and evaluated their correspondence to narrative summaries, allowing for analysis of how listeners interpret musical cues. The survey results show that listeners are able to identify and interpret key musical icons regardless of formal musical training or paratextual cues such as movement titles. Ultimately, this research affirms *Scheherazade* as a powerful example of storytelling through sound and offers a broader model for understanding how music communicates across cultural boundaries.

Keywords: Musical iconicity; *Scheherazade*; Musical semiotics; *One Thousand and One Nights*; Programmatic music; Music psychology

INTRODUCTION

Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic suite *Scheherazade* (Op. 35) premiered in the late 19th century, at a pivotal transition when the creative storytelling of programmatic music gave way to the emerging ideals of musical abstraction—music valued for its form rather than its story. Inspired by the Middle Eastern collection of folktales, *One Thousand and One*

Nights, *Scheherazade* creates a soundscape that evokes images of crashing ocean waves, magical genies, and other symbols of the stories. The title refers not only to the piece itself but also to the narrator of the stories: Scheherazade, the clever storyteller who tells the Sultan a new tale each night, ending on a cliffhanger to postpone her execution. Her musical theme becomes the structural and thematic anchor of the music, linking the suite's movements through recurring musical ideas that reflect her evolving narrative voice as it adapts to each story and its characters. The original names of these movements also contributed to this imagery, as each one referred to a specific tale that shaped the musical themes to follow. However, in later editions of the score, Rimsky-Korsakov replaced the narrative titles with tempo markings, concerned that the original names would limit the audience's imagination when listening to

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the piece. Today, orchestras retain the evocative titles to highlight the suite's narrative origins (1).

The Shift from Program to Abstraction

Programmatic music, though present in the 16th and 17th centuries, gained significant prominence during the 18th century Romantic era, when composers more deliberately drew inspiration from literature, visual art, and the natural world to incorporate narrative storytelling and imagery into their works (2). This stylistic approach became a distinct characteristic of the period, shaping much of its orchestral and operatic repertoire. Among the notable contributions of Rimsky-Korsakov to this genre, his operas *Sadko* (1867) and *The Snow Maiden* (1880) exemplify the integration of folklore and narrative structure into musical form (3). However, the late 19th century saw the emergence of a contrasting musical perspective: "musical abstraction" or "absolute music," terms referring to the focus on the music itself, independent of any representational or literary content. This movement was articulated most famously by critic Eduard Hanslick, who argued in his book, *The Beautiful in Music* (1854), that the value of music resides in its "tonally moving forms," rather than in its capacity to express emotions or depict stories (4). As musicologist Berthold Hoeckner observes in *Programming the Absolute* (2002), this period marked a growing tension between narrative influences and abstraction in music. Hoeckner also notes that even composers firmly rooted in programmatic traditions, such as Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss, began to refrain from including explicit programmatic explanations in their published scores, concerned that such specificity could limit the listener's interpretive agency (5).

Narrative Roots of Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade

Rimsky-Korsakov sought to evoke the imagery and atmosphere of *One Thousand and One Nights* in *Scheherazade*, providing descriptive titles to reinforce these connections. In the English translation of his autobiography, *My Musical Life*, Rimsky-Korsakov wrote:

The program I had been guided by for composing *Shekherazada* consisted of separate, unconnected episodes and pictures from *The Arabian Nights*. 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 (6).

The original titles of the four movements he provided were, in order: "The Sea and Sinbad's Ship," "The Legend of the Kalender Prince," "The Young Prince and the Young Princess," and "Festival at Baghdad; The Sea; The Ship Breaks upon a Cliff Surmounted by a Bronze Horseman." These names were included in the first editions of the score but gradually disappeared from later. Rimsky-Korsakov himself removed them, expressing concern that such labels might constrain the listener's imaginative engagement with the music. As he notes:

My aversion for the seeking of a too definite program in my composition led me subsequently (in the new edition) to do away with even those hints of it which had lain in the headings of each movement, like: The Sea; Sinbad's Ship; the Kalender's Narrative, etc... In composing *Shekherazada* I meant these hints to direct but slightly the hearer's fancy on the path which my own fancy had travelled, and to leave more minute and particular conceptions to the will and mood of each. All I had 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 and not merely four pieces played one after the other and composed on the basis of themes common to all the four movements (6).

Even in the absence of these explicit programmatic labels, however, *Scheherazade* retains strong cues to the narrative of *One Thousand and One Nights*. As Hoeckner notes, works like *Scheherazade* "program the absolute" by embedding narrative traces within abstract form (5). The music's repetitive motifs and orchestration continue to evoke a sense of story, an aspect that invites deeper analysis through the lens of musical semiotics, the study of how music conveys meaning.

Primary vs. Secondary Iconicity

As Finnish musicologist and semiotician Eero Tarasti explains in *Signs of Music*, music functions semiotically when it operates as a "sign-system," capable of conveying emotion, character, or narrative meaning (7). This signification process allows listeners to interpret music not merely as an abstract arrangement of sounds, but as a medium capable of representing ideas, gestures, and dramatic trajectories. A foundational concept in musical semiotics is iconicity, a term that describes how musical signs resemble or reference non-musical concepts. In her article, "Referential Iconicity in Music and Speech"

(2019), linguist Verónica Giraldo identifies two forms of iconicity: primary and secondary.

Primary iconicity refers to the direct relationship between a sign and its meaning; in music, sound mimics real-world phenomena through musical gestures. This might include rising scales to depict physical ascent, tremolos to mimic trembling, or instrumental textures, such as a flowing arpeggiated harp, that evoke imagery like running water. In such cases, the music imitates natural or physical experiences in a manner immediately perceptible to the listener.

Secondary iconicity, by contrast, arises through cultural or narrative associations. Rather than imitating the external world directly, it relies on conventions or contextual cues from musical tradition. For example, the use of certain harmonic progressions, modal inflections, or orchestral colors might evoke emotional atmospheres—including mystery, celebration, or nostalgia—not through literal resemblance, but through shared cultural understanding and interpretive context.

Both types of iconicity fall under the broader category of iconic signs as described by Charles Sanders Peirce, who distinguishes icons from indexes and symbols based on the nature of their relationship to meaning. While indexes derive meaning from causal or spatial associations, and symbols function through established conventions, icons communicate through resemblance, whether tangible or conceptually inferred (9). This semiotic foundation helps clarify how musical gestures can function both through immediate perceptual likeness and through more abstract, culturally conditioned associations.

Research Aim and Significance

This paper demonstrates that Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* evokes the narrative world of *One Thousand and One Nights* through its use of musical semiotics—specifically primary and secondary iconicity—to reflect and suggest the tales' key symbols and emotional atmospheres. It is structured in two parts: the first offers a detailed musical analysis of each movement, illustrating how orchestration, gesture, harmony, and texture create iconic associations with specific story elements; the second presents findings from a listener-based experiment examining whether individuals without formal musical training can recognize these musical icons.

The significance of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, bridging music theory and semiotics to reveal how instrumental music conveys complex narrative meaning. By showing that listeners—even without specialized musical knowledge—can

intuitively perceive these musical icons, the study challenges the assumption that musical semiotic understanding is exclusive to trained audiences. This work contributes to broader discussions on how narrative meaning is constructed and perceived in instrumental music, as well as how elements like movement titles shape listener interpretation.

A SEMIOTIC UNDERSTANDING OF SCHEHERAZADE

To explore these questions in depth, the following section presents concise narrative summaries of each movement—also included in the experimental survey—followed by a musical semiotic analysis of *Scheherazade*. This analysis focuses on how Rimsky-Korsakov employs primary and secondary iconicity to evoke the key symbols and emotional atmospheres of the tales from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Understanding these musical signs lays the groundwork for interpreting the listener responses gathered in the experimental survey.

The Sea and Sinbad's Ship

Sinbad the Sailor braves seven perilous voyages full of magic and misfortune across the seas, only to return each time richer, wiser, and more resilient.

In this first movement, Rimsky-Korsakov uses musical gestures to vividly evoke the image and movement of the ocean (Figure 1). As depicted in the excerpt below, the rolling motion of the sea is conveyed through undulating figures in the basses and cellos, often built on stepwise oscillations between tonic and dominant or subdominant areas, creating a sense of perpetual motion. These primary



Figure 1. Musical depiction of the ocean in Movement I of *Scheherazade*. Undulating figures in the basses and cellos, often spanning multiple octaves and built on stepwise oscillations between harmonic centers, create a sense of rolling, perpetual motion. Pedal points anchor the harmony beneath a shifting surface texture, mimicking the vast, wave-like movement of the sea through primary iconicity (9).

iconic figures frequently span multiple octaves and are reinforced by pedal points that anchor the harmony while the surface texture shifts above, musically mimicking the vast, undulating surface of the sea.

Gradual crescendos and sudden dynamic drops enhance the sense of swelling and receding motion. They mimic the unpredictable rise and fall of ocean waves as an example of primary iconicity (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Swelling wave motion conveyed through dynamics in Movement I. Gradual crescendos and sudden dynamic drops musically imitate the swelling and receding motion of ocean waves, capturing their unpredictable rise and fall (9).

The timpani reinforces this effect with crashing accents that swell from piano to forte, evoking the impact and force of crashing waves (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Timpani accents in Movement I evoke the crashing of waves through dynamic swells from piano to forte, reinforcing the musical portrayal of a turbulent sea (9).

As an example of secondary iconicity, the trills symbolically evoke the restless agitation of stormy seas rather than directly imitating any specific sound. The expressive use of ornamentation here communicates

emotional intensity and turmoil, allowing listeners to perceive the music’s narrative meaning beyond literal depiction (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Expressive trills illustrating secondary iconicity in Scheherazade’s first movement. These rapid ornaments suggest the turbulent energy of a stormy sea, not through direct sonic imitation, but through symbolic emotional expression that communicates unrest and narrative tension (9).

Rimsky-Korsakov continues to employ secondary iconicity through extended pedal points and modal inflections, such as Phrygian and harmonic minor colors, that destabilize the tonal center and create a mysterious, mythical-sounding atmosphere. This modal ambiguity, along with diminished and augmented chords that interrupt otherwise stable progressions, contributes to an overarching sense of unpredictability, awe, and grandeur of the immense sea.

The Legend of the Kalendar Prince

The second movement opens with a calm and almost romantic atmosphere, established by gentle harp strummed chords and smooth, flowing lines in the winds and strings. These gestures create a sense of mysticism and wonder, reflecting the magical world the prince inhabits. Trills and tremolos in the woodwinds resemble swirling wind, enhancing the feeling of movement and unpredictability (Figure 5).

As illustrated in Figure 6, the solo lines, particularly in the violin and clarinet, feature delicate articulations, frequent staccatos, and light ornamentation that musically resemble tiptoeing or sneaking, aligning with the prince’s secretive journey through a magical chamber.

This sense of quiet exploration is suddenly disrupted by dramatic orchestral interjections, tremolo, and sharp dissonances, which contrast starkly with the otherwise lyrical texture, as demonstrated in Figure 7. These bursts of intensity represent sudden danger, such as the

appearance of the angry demon, and inject tension into the narrative.

The Young Prince and the Young Princess

A young prince and princess grapple with uncertainty, each unsure of the other's feelings, but eventually fall in love.

Although not directly based on a specific tale from One Thousand and One Nights, this movement captures the collection's overarching themes of romance and longing, and the story above is one I developed from my interpretation of the title and the music. The movement's orchestration focuses on rich, sustained harmonies in the violins, creating warmth and depth. In the excerpt below, slur markings indicate legato bowing, which enhances the smooth, flowing character of the melodies. The use of piano dynamics and the slower tempo further contributes to an intimate, delicate atmosphere (Figure 8).

As illustrated in Figure 9, light ascending and descending scale figures played by the winds subtly



Figure 5. Opening of Movement II featuring gentle harp chords and smooth wind and string lines, establishing a calm, romantic atmosphere. Woodwind trills and tremolos evoke swirling winds, enhancing the sense of movement and mysticism (9).



Figure 6. Solo violin and clarinet lines characterized by delicate articulations, frequent staccatos, and light ornamentation, musically evoking tiptoeing or sneaking that reflects the prince's secretive journey through a magical chamber (9).



Figure 7. Abrupt full orchestral tutti and dissonant chord in Movement II intensify the dramatic tension, representing the sudden appearance of the angry demon (9).



Figure 8. In Movement III, rich, sustained violin harmonies with legato bowing (indicated by slurs) create warmth and smoothness. Piano dynamics and a slower tempo contribute to the movement's intimate and delicate atmosphere (9).



Figure 9. Light ascending and descending wind scales weaving through the strings, employing secondary iconicity to impart gentle exhilaration and emotional lift while maintaining the Movement III's overall calmness (9).

weave through the strings, utilizing secondary iconicity by adding a gentle sense of exhilaration and emotional lift without disrupting the overall calmness.

Festival at Baghdad; The Sea; The Ship Goes to Pieces on a Rock Surmounted by a Bronze Warrior

A violent tempest disrupts a bustling festival in Baghdad, sending the city into chaos. The storm then travels out to sea, where it hurls a ship into a cliff.

Like “The Young Prince and the Young Princess,” the final movement isn’t based on a specific story from *One Thousand and One Nights*, but it vividly evokes a festive, celebratory atmosphere. It unfolds with a brisk tempo that immediately establishes a sense of urgency and excitement, capturing the vibrant energy of a grand festival. As depicted in Figure 10, the orchestration features lively interplay among woodwinds, brass, and strings, engaging in call-and-response passages that



Figure 10. Lively call-and-response interplay among woodwinds, brass, and strings evokes the bustling sounds of a marketplace or festival. Triangle strikes add sparkle, while the two-against-three hemiola rhythm between winds and horns creates rhythmic tension and forward momentum. Ascending and descending pizzicato swells in the strings further enhance the dynamic, festive energy (9).

mimic the bustling sounds of a crowded marketplace or celebratory gathering. The triangle’s bright, shimmering strikes punctuate the texture, adding sparkle and evoking the celebratory ambiance of the festival. The two-against-three rhythm between the winds and horns creates a rhythmic tension and propulsion, adding complexity and excitement to the music. This hemiola effect subtly disrupts the regular pulse, generating a sense of forward momentum and vibrant energy that enhances the dynamic, festive atmosphere. The strings perform ascending and descending pizzicato swells that add to the momentum.

The theme from the first movement, shown in Figure 11, returns to mark the ocean’s reappearance in the piece, but transformed. Demonstrated in Figure 12, it is now played fortissimo with added eighth-note flourishes and accented notes, the theme takes on heightened intensity and urgency, reflecting Scheherazade’s escalating efforts to prolong her life as she nears the end of her tales.



Figure 11. The ocean theme from Movement I.



Figure 12. Transformed ocean theme in Movement IV played fortissimo with added eighth-note flourishes and accented notes, conveying heightened intensity and urgency as Scheherazade’s tale reaches its climax (9).

METHODS AND MATERIALS

To determine whether these musical icons can be perceived by a broader audience of listeners, an experimental survey was conducted. The study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Informed

consent was obtained through an introductory survey statement, which confirmed that participation was voluntary and all responses would remain anonymous and deidentified.

Enrollment of Participants

A total of 38 participants, ranging in age from 14 to 80, took part in the study. No prior musical background was required, and participants were recruited informally through convenience sampling by sharing the survey link with a general audience. The survey asked participants to describe their musical training, and the data reflected a broad range of musical experience. To foreshadow the results, musical training did not appear to significantly impact how participants interpreted or matched the music to the stories. Both musically trained and untrained listeners showed similar abilities in identifying narrative elements and responding to the musical icons. Because no significant correlation was found between musical background and survey performance, it will not be a focus of further analysis.

Materials Used in the Study

The survey was designed and administered using the Qualtrics platform. Audio excerpts were taken from the 2022 Frankfurt Radio Symphony recording of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* conducted by Alain Altinoglu. Each 30–45 second clip was carefully selected to highlight the musical icons identified in the musical semiotic analysis. While not every icon discussed in the analysis appears in the excerpts, each clip features the most defining and illustrative elements. Below is a brief summary of the key icons represented in the selected excerpts:

Movement I (“The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship”): the vast, unpredictable sea through undulating bass lines, swelling dynamics, and wave-like orchestration.

Movement II (“The Legend of the Kalendar Prince”): the mystical, adventurous mood with delicate textures and harp glissandi, disrupted by sudden tutti and dissonant harmonies to signal danger.

Movement III (“The Young Prince and the Young Princess”): the long, legato, lyrical melodies and lush harmonies that evoke romance and emotional intimacy.

Movement IV (“Festival at Baghdad; The Sea; The Ship Goes to Pieces on a Rock Surmounted by a Bronze Warrior”): the chaos and color of celebration from fast tempos and the vivid orchestration, as well as the return of the ocean theme with heightened dynamics and intensified rhythms.

Study Procedure

The survey consisted of two sections. The first section determined whether listeners, without prior knowledge of the music, could accurately identify the narrative elements suggested by the musical icons in each movement. Participants were presented with brief summaries of my interpretations of the stories behind each movement (provided in the musical semiotic analysis section), shown again here in this randomized order:

a) The Legend of the Kalendar Prince: Driven by his desire for adventure, a prince discovers a magical chamber where a beautiful woman is imprisoned by a demon. The prince is punished by the demon, losing one eye and his throne.

b) Festival at Baghdad, The Sea, Ship Breaks upon a Cliff Surmounted by a Bronze Horseman: A violent tempest disrupts a bustling festival in Baghdad, sending the city into chaos. The storm travels out to sea, where it hurls a ship into a cliff.

c) The Young Prince and the Young Princess: A young prince and princess grapple with uncertainty, each unsure of the other’s feelings, but eventually fall in love.

d) The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship: Sinbad the Sailor braves seven perilous voyages full of magic and misfortune across the seas, only to return each time richer, wiser, and more resilient.

They then listened to four audio clips, each featuring a different musical excerpt. After listening, participants were asked to match each excerpt with the story they believed it corresponded to. Participants also had the opportunity to provide qualitative feedback to explain their responses. If the music lacked iconicity, listeners would likely be unable to identify the correct story and responses would be random. However, if iconic cues were present in the music, we would expect listeners to recognize and match the musical content to the appropriate narrative with some consistency.

The second section of the survey aimed to test whether listener interpretation and identification of the narratives were influenced by the presence of the movement titles. Participants were presented with a set of story-music pairings and asked to evaluate how well each story matched its assigned musical excerpt on a scale from one to ten. Participants were randomly and evenly assigned to one of two groups by the Qualtrics platform’s built-in randomizer, ensuring a balanced distribution with 19 participants in each group. One group received the correct pairings, in which each musical excerpt was matched with the story it was originally composed to represent. The other received intentionally incorrect pairings; the

answers they received were systematically shifted by one movement, so that each excerpt was paired with the story of the following movement in the suite (for example, Movement I was paired with the story from Movement II, Movement II with Movement III, and so on). This structured misalignment allowed the incorrect pairings to be deliberately controlled rather than randomly assigned. Participants were again given the chance to provide feedback in response to the answers.

If iconicity was not perceptible, both groups—those with and without the correct narrative context—would likely perform similarly, with no significant differences in their responses. However, if the music itself communicates iconic meaning, the group with the correct narrative cues should show higher confidence in identifying the intended story. This would suggest that the narrative context is not simply guiding listeners arbitrarily, but rather reinforcing meanings already embedded in the music. In other words, the music contains recognizable signs that align with the narrative, enabling listeners to make stronger, more supported interpretive connections.

RESULTS

In the first section of the survey, the results showed that the most frequently selected story for each excerpt was the correct one, indicating a strong intuitive connection between the music and its intended narrative.

Many participants also referenced specific musical elements that aligned with primary and secondary musical icons discussed in the analysis.

For example, in response to “The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship,” participants described the music as “up and down like the ocean” and noted that the “brass and percussion signify a perilous voyage.” Regarding “The Legend of the Kalendar Prince,” one participant observed that “it was soft and gentle at first; that reminded me of a beautiful woman, but then it had a stronger negative ending that reminded me of a demon,” while another remarked that “the loud chord at the end signifies punishment.” For “The Young Prince and the Young Princess,” listeners identified its expressive character, stating “the emotion conveyed was very romantic yet hesitant,” and “the flowing up and down could represent uncertainty.” In reference to “Festival at Baghdad, The Sea, Ship Breaks upon a Cliff Surmounted by a Bronze Horseman,” comments included “there were stronger notes that seemed like an intense storm,” and “it felt perilous but then triumphant at the end.”

In the second part of the survey, participants in Group A, who received the correct story-music pairings,

consistently gave higher average accuracy ratings across all four excerpts than those in Group B, who were given intentionally incorrect pairings (Table 1).

Table 1. Average story-matching ratings (out of 10) for each movement, comparing Group A (participants who received the correct story-music pairings) and Group B (participants who received the incorrect story-music pairings)

Movement	Group A (Correct Answers) Average Rating	Group B (Incorrect Answers) Average Rating
1	6.30	5.00
2	8.33	3.00
3	8.22	3.67
4	8.78	6.00

Higher scores indicate stronger perceived alignment between music and story.

Qualitative responses also supported this trend: Group A participants reported that they “were not surprised” by the pairings and that “the music paired with the story perfectly!” In contrast, participants in Group B expressed confusion, stating “most do not fit the mood of the story,” and “even after relistening to the excerpts again with these pairings, I still don’t think they match the storyline.” One participant, reflecting on Excerpt 3 (which was “The Young Prince and the Young Princess,” but incorrectly paired with the story for “Festival at Baghdad, The Sea, Ship Breaks upon a Cliff Surmounted by a Bronze Horseman”), commented, “I was especially surprised by Excerpt 3. I did not imagine it could be about the festival and the storm because the emotion I felt was too serene.”

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study support the central argument that Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade* evokes the narrative world of *One Thousand and One Nights* through musical semiotics—specifically, the use of primary and secondary iconicity. By analyzing how musical features reflect narrative symbols and emotions, and then testing listener perception through an experimental survey, this research also shows that the music’s storytelling capacity is accessible to listeners regardless of musical background. While musical experience amongst the participants was recorded, there was no clear relationship between formal training and the accuracy of responses.

In the first part of the survey, the majority of participants correctly matched each musical excerpt to its corresponding story. Importantly, many of their justifications reflected a natural recognition of both primary and secondary icons. Primary iconicity was reflected in listener comments such as “the sounds were up and down like the ocean,” referring to the wave-like bass motion in “The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship,” or “the brass and percussion signifies a perilous voyage,” identifying the imitative force of the orchestration. These observations suggest listeners perceived a sonic resemblance between musical gestures and sounds in the real world.

Secondary iconicity was also evident in listener responses. For example, in reference to “The Legend of the Kalendar Prince,” one participant described the piece as “gentle at first” but concluding with “a strong negative ending that reminded me of a demon,” aligning with the provided story summary. Similarly, a listener responding to “The Young Prince and the Young Princess” noted that the music felt “romantic yet hesitant,” reflecting the story’s naive and intimate theme. These reactions suggest that listeners were able to derive symbolic meaning from expressive musical qualities, even when those qualities were not directly imitative of literal real world sounds, thus demonstrating their sensitivity to secondary iconicity.

The results from the second part of the survey further underscore the effectiveness of musical semiotics in conveying narrative meaning. Listeners in Group B, who were presented with deliberately incorrect movement titles, largely remained unaffected or even resistant to these misleading cues. Rather than accepting the false titles at face value, many participants actively rejected them after relistening to the music, demonstrating a keen ability to discern the authentic narrative elements embedded within the musical material itself. This suggests that the music’s iconic and semiotic features hold significant interpretive power and can enable listeners to form meaningful impressions independent of external textual guidance. In other words, the listeners’ responses reflect an intuitive understanding of the music’s inherent storytelling qualities, which can override or contradict misleading context.

As seen in Figure 13, not all listeners selected the story that corresponded to the intended movement. However, these differing interpretations were not arbitrary; many listeners had clear and thoughtful reasons for their choices. For instance, one participant associated Excerpt 1, “The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship,” with “The Young Prince and the Young Princess” because the music’s undulating rhythm and flowing motion evoked the image of a “dance between

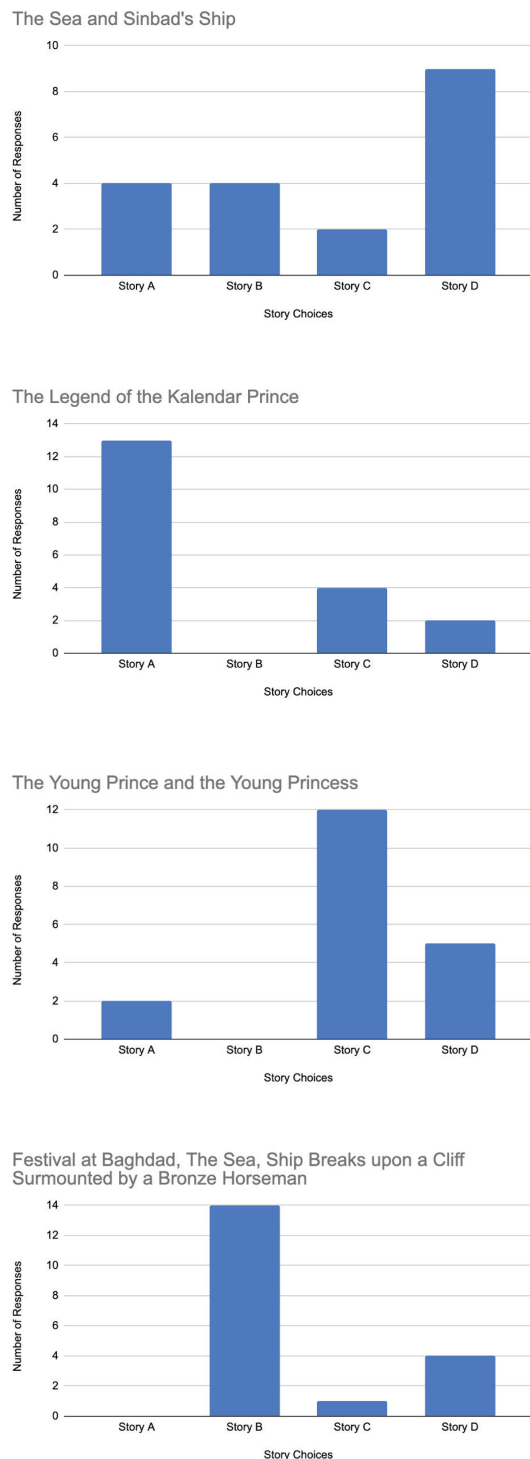


Figure 13. Most frequently selected story for each movement. Story key: A - The Legend of the Kalendar Prince; B - Festival at Baghdad, The Sea, Ship Breaks upon a Cliff Surmounted by a Bronze Horseman; C - The Young Prince and the Young Princess; D - The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship).

two people.” This suggests that listeners can draw on their own imaginative responses and personal associations when interpreting musical narratives, even if these do not precisely match the composer’s program. Such variations highlight the subjective nature of music and underscore how iconic musical elements—like rhythmic patterns or melodic contours—can suggest multiple narrative possibilities depending on the listener’s perspective. This insight highlights the expressive flexibility of instrumental storytelling, as music can evoke a range of interpretations and emotional responses.

The study presents several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the sample size of 38 participants was relatively small, which limits the statistical power of the findings and reduces their generalizability to broader populations. A larger sample would allow for more robust analysis and greater confidence in observed trends. Second, the use of convenience sampling, primarily from a shared academic or social environment, introduces potential bias. Participants may have had similar cultural backgrounds, educational experiences, or degrees of musical familiarity, which could influence both their interpretations and evaluative judgments in ways not representative of a more diverse population. Third, the study focused exclusively on Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade*. Although well suited for this kind of analysis due to its vivid programmatic content, relying on one piece limits the scope of conclusions. Listener responses may be shaped by the specific features of this composition rather than by generalizable aspects of musical narrative. Future research should address these limitations by including a larger and more diverse participant pool and exploring a broader range of musical works to better understand how listeners engage with narrative meaning in music.

An important question remains: how would listeners interpret these musical ideas in the absence of detailed narrative framing—particularly in light of Rimsky-Korsakov’s own decision to remove the original movement titles from the published score? Future research could first investigate the effects of minimal paratextual guidance by presenting participants with only the movement titles, without accompanying story summaries. This would help assess the extent to which titles alone shape interpretation and whether listeners construct their own narratives to fill in missing details. A follow-up study could then remove all contextual framing entirely, asking participants to listen to the music and describe any images, emotions, or narrative impressions that come to mind. This approach would clarify whether similar iconic associations emerge

independently or are primarily driven by framing cues.

Future research could also expand beyond *Scheherazade* to examine how listeners derive meaning from non-programmatic or abstract instrumental works. By comparing responses across these different musical contexts, researchers could investigate whether iconic interpretations, such as associating tremolos with tension or steady rhythmic pulses with movement, are specific to programmatic cues or reflect broader trends in musical perception. Cross-cultural studies would offer another valuable insight, exploring whether such associations are universally intuitive or shaped by culturally specific listening habits and symbolic conventions. In addition, developmental studies could help reveal how listeners’ narrative interpretations change over time, depending on factors such as age, musical training, and exposure to programmatic music. These approaches could show whether the ability to hear stories in music develops with experience or varies across different stages of life and musical backgrounds. Together, these directions could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how listeners construct narrative meaning from instrumental music across diverse contexts.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this paper shows that *Scheherazade* is more than an evocative orchestral suite; it is a testament to music’s ability to tell stories without words. This study demonstrates that Rimsky-Korsakov’s use of musical semiotics enables listeners—even those without formal training—to perceive narrative meaning in sound. The experimental data demonstrates that musical storytelling does not rely solely on titles or external cues; rather, meaning emerges through the listener’s engagement with iconic musical signs. In bridging close analysis with listener perception, this research affirms *Scheherazade* as a powerful example of narrative in instrumental music and offers a broader model for understanding how sound can communicate story across boundaries of language, culture, and musical expertise.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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