

**2017-2018 Season**  
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**Program Notes**

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**Concerto for Two Violins in A minor, Op. 3, No. 8 (R. 522) (published in 1711)**  
**Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)**

Vivaldi's fecundity is amazing. He composed forty operas, two oratorios, two dozen cantatas, 75 sonatas, many miscellaneous instrumental and vocal pieces, and a clutch of music for the church. Not to deny the considerable beauties of these works, it is, however, for his concertos that he is chiefly remembered. There are close to 500 of these, almost half being for solo violin, with other large collections for bassoon, cello, oboe, flute, recorder and mandolin. There is a sizable body of works for multiple soloists, and some with no featured performers at all, these latter drawing such soloists as are required from the orchestra itself.

Vivaldi was occupied with the composition of concertos for over forty years. He inherited many of the formal and stylistic traits of this music from the large number of Italian composer-violinists who had been spurred on by the achievements in string instrument making scored by such Cremonese craftsmen as Stradivarius, Guarneri and Amati. The Roman master Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713) laid the foundations for the concerto late in the 17th century with works that pitted a small group of soloists against the larger body of the orchestra in the *concerto grosso* ("great concerto"). His principles of construction were transferred from a group of soloists to a single featured performer by Giuseppe Torelli (1658-1709), based in Bologna, a significant incubator for early instrumental idioms. It was the Venetian Vivaldi, however, who gathered together many disparate ideas to create the style of the mature Baroque concerto that was to prove such a great influence on Bach, Handel and even Mozart. (The concerto, it must be remembered, reached its formal perfection at least a half-century before the symphony, and is the earliest species of music still part of the regular orchestral repertory.) Vivaldi's contributions to the genre may be summarized as follows: he established the three-movement, fast-slow-fast organization of the concerto that has served almost three centuries of composers; he introduced brilliance and virtuosity into the solo part (he was known in his day as much for his impassioned violin playing as for his compositions); he brought a quality of heightened expression into instrumental music; he created themes with distinct profiles that were easily remembered; he codified the ritornello form; he injected a quality of almost operatic pathos into many of his slow movements; and he promoted the use of wind instruments.

The form of the Baroque concerto is simple in principle, but capable of seemingly infinite variation, as the diversity of Vivaldi's own works demonstrates. The word "*concerto*" comes

from the Latin *concertare*, which originally meant “to contend, dispute,” but in its Italian derivative also took on the sense “to agree, get together.” Both implications of the word apply to the musical form. The soloist (or group of soloists) is held in opposition to the larger body of the orchestra (hence, the concert placement of the soloist at the front of the stage), but the two forces must collaborate in themes, tonalities and rhythm if anything other than chaos is to result — cooperation and contention simultaneously. The so-called “*ritornello*” form of the first and last movements of Vivaldi’s concertos exploits these two sounding elements by alternating them. First, the orchestra (called the *tutti* — Italian for “together”) introduces a collection of thematic fragments that establishes the key and mood. Then the soloist is trotted out as the orchestra is reduced to an accompanimental role. After the soloist has a turn, the full orchestra again appears with some of the fragments from the opening *tutti*. Further exchanges between soloist and orchestra fill out the movement, the solo portions being comparable to the stained-glass windows in a church wall buttressed by the returning *tuttis*. The form derives its name from the returning nature of these *tutti* sections, *ritornello* meaning simply “return.” The form is logical, easy to follow and amenable to an enormous variety of music.

The twelve Concertos published in 1711 as Op. 3 were the first such works of Vivaldi to appear in print, having been preceded by the Op. 1 Trios Sonatas (1705) and the Op. 2 Solo Sonatas (1709). The Op. 3 Concertos were brought out not in the composer’s hometown of Venice but in Amsterdam, and were soon after republished in London and Paris, testimony to his broad European reputation. (By 1711, many of Vivaldi’s works were already widely dispersed in manuscript copies.) Their publisher, Estienne Roger, titled the collection *L’Estro Armonico*, which has variously been translated as “*The Harmonic Whim*” or “*The Musical Fancy*.” The appearance of the Op. 3 Concertos marked Vivaldi as one of the leading composers of the day and were an important influence on the music of his contemporaries — of the dozen keyboard transcriptions Bach made from Vivaldi’s works, six come from this collection. These Concertos were composed between about 1700 and the time of their publication, and they exhibit a great variety of stylistic features and performing forces, ranging from the old-fashioned church *concerto grosso* in several movements for a trio of soloists perfected by Corelli to the fully mature, tightly structured, three-movement Baroque solo concerto.

The Concerto in A minor, Op. 3, No. 8, which J.S. Bach arranged for keyboard, is in the three movements customary for the genre: fast–slow–fast. The opening *Allegro*, with its many quick alternations between solo and orchestra, is music full of stern sobriety and dark energy. An almost operatic pathos flows from the bittersweet second movement, built above a repeated rhythmic ostinato in the orchestra. The rich sentiments and dynamic thrust of the first movement return in the finale.

## **Violin Concerto, Op. 14 (1939)** **Samuel Barber (1910-1981)**

Samuel Barber's success as one of America's greatest composers was both early and lasting. Born and raised in a small town on the outskirts of Philadelphia, he received a sound appreciation of music as a boy from his mother, a talented pianist, and from his aunt, the noted Metropolitan Opera contralto Louise Homer. In 1924, at the tender age of fourteen, he entered the first class enrolled at the Curtis Institute and received instruction in piano, voice and composition, winning the Beurns Prize in composition in 1928. Three years later he composed the sparkling *Overture to "The School for Scandal"*, which was premiered by Alexander Smallens and the Philadelphia Orchestra in August 1933, and secured for the young composer an immediate reputation. In 1935, Barber won both the Pulitzer Scholarship and the American Prix de Rome, enabling him to study in Europe. While abroad, he conducted, gave recitals (he had an excellent and well-trained baritone voice) and met some of the most important musicians of the day, including Toscanini, who became a champion of his works. The great Italian conductor premiered both the *Essay for Orchestra* and the *Adagio for Strings* during the 1938 season of the NBC Symphony, making Barber the first American composer whose works Toscanini conducted with that ensemble.

In his 1954 study of the composer, Nathan Broder wrote as follows of the genesis of the Violin Concerto: "In the summer of 1939, after a visit to England and Scotland, Barber settled down in the village of Sils-Maria in Switzerland to work on a violin concerto, which had been commissioned by a wealthy Philadelphia merchant. This progressed slowly and he set off for Paris, planning to complete the work there during the fall. But he had hardly arrived in Paris when all Americans were warned to leave. He sailed for home, and word reached the ship before they arrived in New York that German troops had invaded Poland." The work was completed after Barber returned home and premiered on February 7, 1941 by Albert Spalding with the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy. It has become one of the most frequently performed of all 20th-century concertos.

The change from the warm lyricism of the Violin Concerto's first two movements to the aggressive rhythms and strong dissonances of the finale is actually a microcosm of the stylistic evolution Barber's music underwent at the outbreak of World War II. The style of the works of the early years — the *Overture to "The School for Scandal"* (1932), the *Essay for Orchestra* (1937), the *Adagio for Strings* (1938), those pieces which established his international reputation as a 20th-century romanticist — was soon to be augmented by the more modern but expressively richer musical language of the *Second Symphony* (1944), the *Capricorn Concerto* (1944) and the ballet for Martha Graham, *The Serpent Heart* (1946), from which the orchestral suite *Medea* was derived.

The Concerto's opening movement, almost Brahmsian in its nostalgic songfulness, is built on two lyrical themes. The first one, presented immediately by the soloist, is an extended, arching melody; the other, initiated by the clarinet, is rhythmically animated by the use of the "Scottish snap," a short-long figure also familiar from jazz idioms. The two themes alternate throughout the remainder of the movement, which follows a broadly drawn, traditional concerto form. The expressive *cantabile* of the first movement carries into the lovely *Adagio*. The oboe intones a plangent melody as the main theme, from which the soloist spins a rhapsodic elaboration to serve as the movement's central section. The return of the main theme is entrusted to the soloist. *Moto perpetuo* — "*perpetual motion*" — Barber marked the finale of this Concerto, and the music more than lives up to its title. After an opening timpani flourish, the soloist introduces a fiery motive above a jabbing rhythmic accompaniment that returns, rondo-like, throughout the movement. A whirling coda of vertiginous speed and virtuosic brilliance brings this splendid Concerto to a dazzling close.

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***Scheherazade*, Op. 35 (1888)**  
**Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)**

"In the middle of the winter [of 1888], engrossed as I was in my work on *Prince Igor* and other things, I conceived the idea of writing an orchestral composition on the subject of certain episodes from *Scheherazade*." Thus did Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov give the curt explanation of the genesis of his most famous work in his autobiography, *My Musical Life*. His friend Alexander Borodin had died the year before, leaving his *magnum opus*, the opera *Prince Igor*, in a state of unfinished disarray. Rimsky-Korsakov had taken it upon himself to complete the piece, and may well have been inspired by its exotic setting among the Tartar tribes in 12th-

century central Asia to undertake his own embodiment of musical Orientalism. The stories on which he based his work were taken from the *Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of millennium-old fantasy tales from Egypt, Persia and India which had been gathered together, translated into French, and published in many installments by Antoine Galland beginning in 1704. They were in large part responsible for exciting a fierce passion for *turquerie* and *chinoiserie* among the fashionable classes of Europe later in the century, a movement that left its mark on music in the form of numerous tinkling “Turkish marches” by Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn and a horde of lesser now-faded lights, and in Mozart’s rollicking opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. The taste for exoticism was never completely abandoned by musicians (witness Bizet’s *The Pearl Fishers* or Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* or *Turandot* or even *The Girl of the Golden West*; Ravel prided himself on his collection of Oriental artifacts), and proved the perfect subject for Rimsky-Korsakov’s talent as an orchestral colorist. Preliminary sketches were made for the piece in St. Petersburg during the early months of 1888, the score was largely written in June at the composer’s country place on Lake Cheryemenyetskoye, near Luga, and the orchestration completed by early August. *Scheherazade* was a success at its premiere in St. Petersburg in December, and it has remained one of the most popular of all symphonic works.

To refresh the listener’s memory of the ancient legends, Rimsky-Korsakov prefaced the score with these words: “The sultan Shakriar, convinced of the falsehood and inconstancy of all women, had sworn an oath to put to death each of his wives after the first night. However, the sultana Scheherazade saved her life by arousing his interest in the tales she told him during 1,001 nights. Driven by curiosity, the sultan postponed her execution from day to day, and at last abandoned his sanguinary design. Scheherazade told many miraculous stories to the sultan. For her tales she borrowed verses from the poets and words from folk-songs combining fairy-tales with adventures.” To each of the four movements of his “symphonic suite” Rimsky gave a title: *The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship*, *The Story of the Kalandar Prince*, *The Young Prince and the Young Princess* and *Festival at Baghdad — The Sea — Shipwreck*. At first glance, these titles seem definite enough to lead the listener to specific nightly chapters of Scheherazade’s soap opera. On closer examination, however, they prove too vague to be of much help. The *Kalandar Prince*, for instance, could be any one of three noblemen who dress as members of the Kalandars, a sect of wandering dervishes, and tell three different tales. “I meant these hints,” advised the composer, “to direct but slightly the hearer’s fancy on the path which my own fancy had traveled, and leave more minute and particular conceptions to the will and mood of each listener. 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.”

Of the musical construction of *Scheherazade*, Rimsky-Korsakov noted, "A characteristic theme, the theme of Scheherazade herself, appears in all four movements. This theme is a florid melody in triplets, and it generally ends in a free *cadenza*. It is played, for the most part, by the solo violin." There is another recurring theme, given in ponderous tones in the work's opening measures, which seems at first to depict the sultan. However, the composer explained, "In vain do people seek in my suite leading motives linked always with the same poetic ideas and conceptions. On the contrary, in the majority of cases, all these seeming leitmotives are nothing but purely musical material, or the given motives for symphonic development. These given motives thread and spread over all the movements of the suite, alternating and intertwining each with the other. Appearing as they do each time under different moods, the self-same motives and themes correspond each time to different images, actions and pictures." Well, then, if there is here no programmatic plot and if the movements tumble forth in some sort of free musical fantasy, how is the attentive listener to find his way through Rimsky-Korsakov's story of *Scheherazade*? Perhaps the advice of Donald N. Ferguson about this veritable orgy of blazing orchestral color and atmospheric sensuality is profitably heard: "Ecstasies of imaginatively fulfilled desire: visions of celestial luxury engendered in the hashish-fevered mind of some squalid dreamer in the market place of Baghdad or Teheran — such are the tales of Scheherazade and the Arabian nights."