

SUSPENSION:

A SERIES OF MUSICAL REFLECTIONS

No:9

Despite the weather having turned, and the grey skies having appeared, we're continuing the Easter celebrations with Rimsky-Korsakov's spectacular *Russian Easter Festival Overture*. This one's a little longer than we're used to so far, but I'm sure you'll find it to be worth your while.

Composed between 1887 and 1888, this work is Rimsky-Korsakov's own retelling of Russian Easter celebrations, specifically (in his own words) "not in a domestic chapel, but in a cathedral thronged with people from every walk of life, and with several priests conducting the cathedral service." The musical material is derived from the Russian *Obikhod*, a collection of Orthodox polyphonic chants. In particular, he uses the melodies, 'Let God arise!', 'An angel wailed', and 'Christ has risen from the dead'. In this sense, this piece joins a vast catalogue of pieces which use either biblical texts or sacred music to re-tell the miracle of the Easter Story; over the last week, radio channels and online live streams have treated us to Bach's *St. Matthew* and *St. John Passions*, Handel's *Messiah* and many, many more.

The message and story of Christ's resurrection are clearly central amongst the composer's concerns when writing this piece; the score is wedged between two bible passages (Psalm 68:1-2 and Mark 16:1-6). However, what Rimsky-Korsakov captures so well are the *realisations* of the Easter story and its meaning for Christians. He musicalises the dazzling celebrations and the overflowing joy of an Easter scene, in all its glory, with an almost over-the-top symphonic language, a far-cry from the simplicity with which the original chants would be received, when sung in their original chant format. Rimsky-Korsakov himself wrote that he wanted to emulate "- the legendary and heathen aspect of the holiday, and the transition from the solemnity and mystery of the evening of Passion Saturday to the unbridled pagan-religious celebrations of Easter Sunday morning". So, however you're celebrating this Easter Monday, I hope the joy and vitality of this composer's interpretation of Eastertide will put a little spring in your step.

Something to listen out for in this piece: this piece is sort of a who's-who of the symphony orchestra. Rimsky-Korsakov's imaginative instrumentation is really clear in the way in which he weaves the melodies throughout the sections, featuring a violin solo here-, a brass fanfare there-. I might be biased but my favourite is the solo 'cello.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FHFJ0IU9Us>

Enjoy.

Sarah