

**MUSIC**

**Adams unleashes a powerhouse with ‘Scheherazade.2’**

Joshua Kosman | on February 23, 2017

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Photo: Chris Lee

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Violinist Leila Josefowicz

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John Adams wasn't kidding around when he labeled "Scheherazade.2" a "dramatic symphony." This thrillingly inventive new work for violin and orchestra, which had its local premiere in Davies Symphony Hall on Wednesday, Feb. 22, grabs the listener right from the opening measures, and doesn't let up for 45 minutes.

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Naturally, a “dramatic” symphony doesn’t use that word in the sense of a “dramatic” mountaintop rescue, or even a “dramatic” political showdown. The term, which Adams lifted from Berlioz’s “Romeo and Juliet,” is more straightforwardly Aristotelian, and simply suggests that the music covers a certain stretch of narrative ground rather than dealing in pure abstraction.

But try telling that to anyone who sat transfixed through Wednesday’s powerhouse performance by violinist Leila Josefowicz and the San Francisco Symphony under Music Director Michael Tilson Thomas. “Scheherazade.2” is edge-of-the-seat stuff — evocative, propulsive, fascinatingly unpredictable.

As the oddly software-tinged title suggests, the piece offers a modern retelling of the story that serves as a premise for “The Arabian Nights.” Traditionally — for example in the lush tone poem by Rimsky-Korsakov that serves as a key reference point for Adams — Scheherazade is cast as a wily seductress, using her inventive storytelling gift to keep herself alive day by day.

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Adams isn’t having any of that. His Scheherazade — magnificently embodied by Josefowicz in a performance of wild resourcefulness and gritty urgency — is a fierce warrior, always ready to take a stand against the forces of male oppression with some slashing passagework or sinewy, insistent melody.

In the first of the work’s four movements, she finds herself opposed by a cadre of “true believers,” in a ferocious battle that interrupts what had been an entrancing swirl of exotic color. During the first minutes of the piece, Adams lures you into thinking that lush sensuality is going to be the order of the day, only to pull a canny

switcheroo.

More episodes follow in quick succession — a radiant love scene, a briskly angular confrontation between Scheherazade and a corps of religious zealots, and finally an explosive chase scene forged in scurrying melodic lines and culminating in the protagonist's fearless escape.

Because Scheherazade's antagonist is represented throughout by the orchestra — and because Adams' writing for the violin is so extravagantly virtuosic — there's a strong flavor of the traditional concerto model at work here. Yet "Scheherazade.2" is also unmistakably a symphony, working from one point to the next with ironclad musical logic.

It also demonstrates, yet again, the depth and facility of Adams' mastery of the orchestra. Like Rimsky-Korsakov before him, he conjures up a palette of instrumental colors and shading that almost seem to have no precedent; as in "The Gospel According to the Other Mary," which the Symphony played last week, he uses the cimbalom (a hammer dulcimer, played with unnerving dexterity by Chester Englander) to impart an otherworldly sheen to the orchestral textures.

The piece was written for Josefowicz, and it was obvious from her performance, delivered from memory, just how much her playing had inspired the composer. From breathless pyrotechnic explosions to the episodes of expressive (but still steely) lyricism, she brought every corner of the work to light like a majestic tragedian.

The orchestra, under Thomas' taut and alert guidance, rose equally well to the occasion. Adams never makes things easy for the orchestra, but the Symphony players dispatched his off-kilter rhythms and sumptuously blended textures with aplomb.

Sumptuous textures were also on offer during the second half of the program, in a reprise of music from Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet," although rhythmic precision and ensemble cohesion were in somewhat shorter supply. No matter — the Adams

work, which crowned the orchestra's two-week celebration of his 70th birthday, packed enough glory for all.

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**San Francisco Symphony:** 8 p.m. Friday, Feb. 24, and Saturday, Feb. 25. \$45-\$165. Davies Symphony Hall, 201 Van Ness Ave., S.F. (415) 864-6000.  
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