

MUSIC

Review: John Adams Unveils ‘Scheherazade.2,’ an Answer to Male Brutality

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI MARCH 27, 2015

Two years ago, the composer John Adams took in an exhibition at the Arab World Institute in Paris about the history of the “Arabian Nights” collection of folk stories. He already knew, or so he thought, the tale of Scheherazade, the young woman forced into marriage with a Persian king who takes a succession of virgins as wives and has each one executed the morning after lest she have a chance to dishonor him. Scheherazade delays her own death by telling the king a riveting tale night after night.

But as Mr. Adams said in a brief discussion with the conductor Alan Gilbert at Avery Fisher Hall on Thursday night, he was “shocked and appalled” by the “casual brutality” toward women that is a given in the “Arabian Nights.” That exhibition was the impetus for Mr. Adams’s new work, “Scheherazade.2,” a dramatic symphony for violin and orchestra that was presented by the New York Philharmonic in a world premiere. (The title, of course, nods to the beloved Rimsky-Korsakov symphonic poem “Scheherazade.”)

The Paris show got Mr. Adams thinking about the continuing physical and mental brutality against women not just in enclaves of the Middle East but also in America — for example, he said, on the airwaves that carry Rush Limbaugh. What would a Scheherazade for our own time be like? This work offers his answer in the portrait of a beautiful, empowered and fearless woman confronting oppression.

He described the brilliant violinist Leila Josefowicz, for whom he wrote this work in a commission from the Philharmonic, as the embodiment of his heroine as a fearless and empowered artist. Long an Adams champion, Ms. Josefowicz gave a dazzling and inspired performance, backed by the glittering, rhapsodic and supremely confident playing of the orchestra under Mr. Gilbert.

For this four-movement score, Mr. Adams provides some sketchy images that

hint at a story. The first, titled “Tale of the Wise Young Woman — Pursuit by the True Believers,” begins mysteriously, amid subdued tension. The orchestra sweeps up and crests into a wave of thick, hazy chords and hovering fragments. A prominent part for cimbalom, the hammered dulcimer, lends the entire score an exotic flavor. (Chester Englander was the vivid performer.)

The violin, the voice of this modern-day Scheherazade, enters playing elegiac lines that keep breaking into skittish flights. Eventually the violin is set upon by gnashing bursts of jagged chords and a gaggle of crisscrossing orchestral voices, evoking the indignant true believers.

In his comments, Mr. Adams suggested that in the second movement, “A Long Desire (Love Scene),” his heroine’s romantic interest could possibly be another woman. “Who knows?” he said. The music is aflame with staggered, pulsing chords and desire, then settles into a long episode of dreamy, sensual allure.

“Scheherazade and the Men with Beards,” the frenzied third movement, suggests that the heroine is charged by accusers who bicker among themselves over doctrine. Musically, the arguing is evoked through a babble of jumpy lines. The violin, in a cagey move, takes hold of bits of babble, as if to say, “Let me try to untangle these musical accusations for you.”

In the final movement, “Escape, Flight, Sanctuary,” having been condemned, the heroine breaks free: Her escape comes across as an exploit of searing intensity, with the violin playing frenetic eruptions. The piece ends in resignation, although the seemingly calm chords are spiked with pungency. Her safe haven may be only temporary. Ms. Josefowicz, playing this formidable violin part from memory, gave a stunning performance, by turns commanding and vulnerable, slashing and sensual. The ovation was tremendous.

Mr. Gilbert began the program with a short, sumptuous 1909 tone poem, “The Enchanted Lake,” by a Rimsky-Korsakov student, Anatoly Lyadov. He then led an organic, insightful account of Stravinsky’s “Petrouchka,” a performance full of ideas. He had the piece sounding almost as radical as Stravinsky’s “The Rite of Spring.” The New York Philharmonic repeats this program on Saturday at Avery Fisher Hall; 212-875-5656, nyphil.org.

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