

An operatic premonition in Rimsky's Korsakov's Musical Tableau *Sadko*, Op. 5

Introduction

Rimsky-Korsakov may well have felt some trepidation as he embarked on the composition of his op. 5, *Sadko*, variously referred to as a Symphonic Poem, Musical Picture, Symphonic Picture, or Musical Tableau. This ambiguity in the translation of Rimsky Korsakov's Russian stems partly from the innovation of Rimsky-Korsakov's endeavor – Robinson and von Vechten both tout the work as the first Russian symphonic poem.¹ In 1867, the date of the first version, Rimsky-Korsakov was a shadow of the composer he was to become. Still in the navy and yet to fully commit to composition² Rimsky-Korsakov's place in the pecking order of Russian composers is reflected in the work's genesis, as he was only third in line to the scenario for the work. Stasov, the respected critic and head ideologue behind the "Mighty Handful" had produced a program and suggested writing music to the story to Balakirev as early as 1861. Balakirev had in turn given the project to Mussorgsky, who, finding himself too busy with other work finally gave the idea to Rimsky-Korsakov in 1867, and therefore any personal investment in the subject of the project is at best doubtful. As a naval officer Rimsky-Korsakov may have been attracted generally to the nautical theme, but he was undoubtedly committed to the idea/ideology behind the project and the innovation it seemed to demand. The stakes were high as the *Sadko* story was one of the great historic Russian *byliny* (epic narrative folk poems) as significant as Beowulf for the English,³ but it also placed Rimsky-Korsakov, who was very much in his apprenticeship at this stage, at the

¹ Robinson 2008:1, Rimsky-Korsakov 1942: 72, ft. 2

² In fact it was partly the success of *Sadko* which encouraged him to compose full-time.

³ Figes 2002: 399

forefront of the “Mighty Handful”’s aesthetic agenda. As Rimsky-Korsakov was writing *Sadko* Balakirev was working on *Tamara* and Mussorgsky was writing *St. John’s Night on Bare Mountain*. *Sadko* was closely followed by *Antar* in 1868 and in the following years Balakirev corresponded actively with Tchaikovsky about the symphonic poem *Fatum*, whose form he took issue with, and then the *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture*, which Balakirev encouraged Tchaikovsky to revise multiple times. Taken as a whole the creative agenda being forwarded by both Stasov and Balakirev throughout the 1860s and 70s was clear: to create a thoroughly Russian program music and *Sadko* gave Rimsky-Korsakov’s the chance to add his voice in this emerging genre.

Program and Form

The story of *Sadko* was centuries old, based on a historical figure from the twelfth century, a merchant from Novgorod of the same name principally remembered for founding a church in his home town. We do not know the precise scenario that Stasov originally conceived or how well it mirrored the *bylina* and similarly we do not know if any programmatic description accompanied the premiere and subsequent performances, bar the title *Episodes from the Legend of Sadko*. One assumes the audience was familiar with the folk tale and the term “episodes” conveys they should not expect to hear a musical depiction of the entire story but only certain select passages.⁴ As with all of his early works Rimsky-Korsakov went back and revised the score, firstly in 1869, then again in 1892. The first edition was published without any additional programmatic explanation but the second and third editions both feature short programmatic descriptions immediately prefacing the score. These are of unknown authorship, perhaps written by an editor at some point, but potentially penned by Rimsky-

⁴ For a summary of the original story please see Appendix 1.

Korsakov himself. He wrote many of his own libretti, including for *Sadko*, (the opera of 1896) so was evidently not averse to writing. The third edition, as Rimsky's Korsakov's final and presumably most complete rendition, will be the subject of exploration below and my own translation of the preface to the third edition reads as follows:

The ship of Sadko, notable inhabitant of Novgorod, was stopped out at sea. Named by fate, Sadko is himself thrown into the waves, as a tribute to the King of the sea....the ship continues on its way.

Left alone amid the waves, Sadko, with his *Gusli*, is driven by the Sea King to his underwater kingdom. It is in the middle of a great feast. The Sea King married his daughter to the Ocean. The Sea King, having made Sadko play his *Gusli*, began to dance and the whole kingdom imitated him. The ocean was agitated as well; it broke and engulfed the vessels....then Sadko broke the strings of his *Gusli*, dancing ceased and the sea became calm.⁵

Rimsky-Korsakov also mentions both the music and program at length in his memoirs, in particular documenting his various sources of inspiration. If his first symphony had been essentially “Beethovenian” it was obviously Liszt who was holding sway over the young Rimsky-Korsakov at this moment as he mentions both the *Mephisto Waltz* and the opening of *Ce qu'on entend sur la montagne*.⁶ A variety of Russian sources including Balakirev's *Tamara* (still in its generative stages) Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila* and a folk tune from Balakirev's

⁵ The preface to the second edition carries a similar story but with some general references to the music, more like a brief program note than a program as such – thanks to Kirill Zikanov for his help with this. My translation is taken from the French version printed alongside the Russian in the Jurgenson edition.

⁶ Frolova-Walker 2007: 187-190 documents the nature of these Lisztian influences.

collection are also mentioned.⁷ There is a common theme running through all of these connections as they concern harmony, melody and orchestration – matters of vertical sonority, which is curious, given that the particular demands of such a work appear to be of formal and horizontal organization.

The close relationship and mutual implication of program and form was not lost on Rimsky-Korsakov who describes the form as “resulting” from the “originality of the task”⁸ implying both a strong connection between the form and program or narrative, but also that the form itself is truly original. Elsewhere he is even more explicit: “the form my fantasy assumed was due to the subject I had chosen” and in his discussion there is no mention of any formal models or precedents.⁹ Despite the relentless modesty and criticism that accompanies description of the early works in his memoirs one detects that overall, Rimsky-Korsakov was happy with a job well done, no doubt aided by the uniformly positive reception that the work received. However Rimsky-Korsakov honest about his own failings, repeatedly mentioning his “lack of technique” with reference to form, and later on writing that at this early stage in his career “my ideas of musical forms were vague, especially rondo forms.”¹⁰ However, despite these perceived deficiencies, the form of the work remains identical in all three version of the work even though the composer in 1892 must, in his own opinion at least, have been significantly more assured in his manipulation of musical form. In fact, despite various re-orchestrations, instrumental additions, vertical adjustments and metrical

⁷ Rimsky-Korsakov 1942: 70-72, Yastrebtsev 1985: 26-28

⁸ Rimsky-Korsakov 1942: 73

⁹ *ibid.*: 72

¹⁰ Rimsky Korsakov 1942: 100

renotations, the three editions correspond exactly, bar for bar.¹¹ Apparently the “original” form that he had struck upon as a 23 three-year-old could not be improved. The form of the “fantasy” proved hard to pin down Rimsky-Korsakov struggled to categorize his original formal decisions. Although the work totals only 10 or 11 minutes in performance in his memoirs he describes the work, somewhat curiously, as being in four movements.

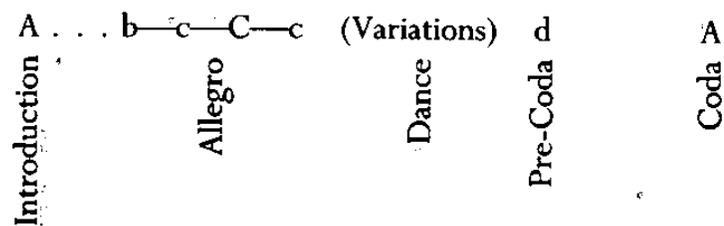
“Introduction” (1st Mvt): “picture of the calmly surging sea”

“D Major Movement” (2nd Mvt.): “The feast in the Sea Kings’ Realm

“3rd Movement”: “dance theme”

“closing Movement” (4th Mvt.): (The Sea)¹²

The music disallows such simplifications and Rimsky-Korsakov fails to account for the opening of the Allegro, which is not included in either the 1st or 2nd movements, despite appearing to start a formal section. The form (and its innovation?) was obviously a matter of some debate as Yastrebtsev recalls a conversation from 1893 in which Rimsky-Korsakov not only disclosed his prasing of the form, but also a schematic representation that carries a rudimentary analysis which functions as useful starting point.¹³

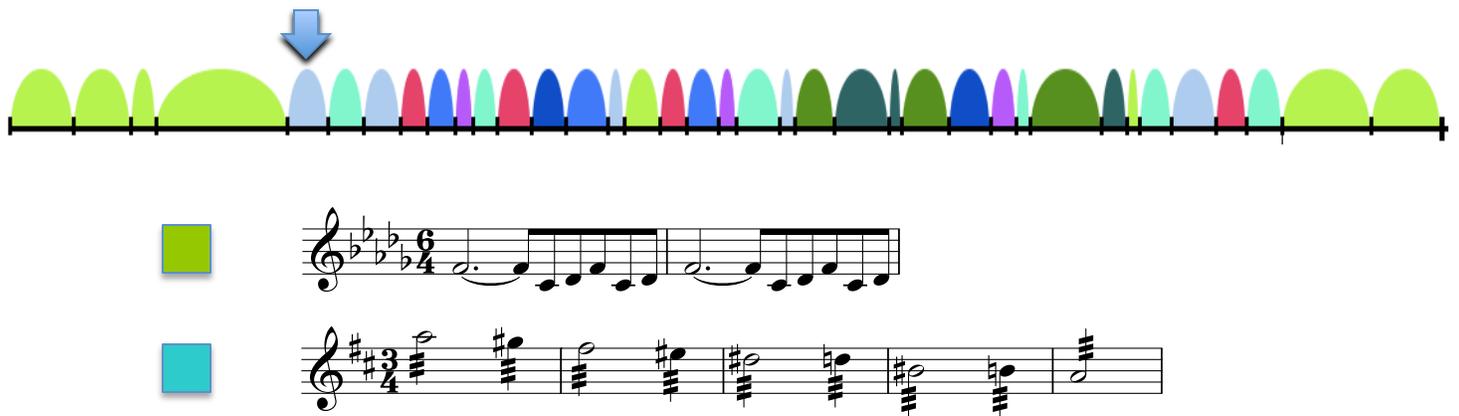


¹¹ Due to a rebarring the second and third versions total 631 measures, whereas the first is only 630.

¹² All formal terminology and description in quotation marks comes from the memoirs, the bracketed interpolations are my own, filling in what is implied in the composer’s text.

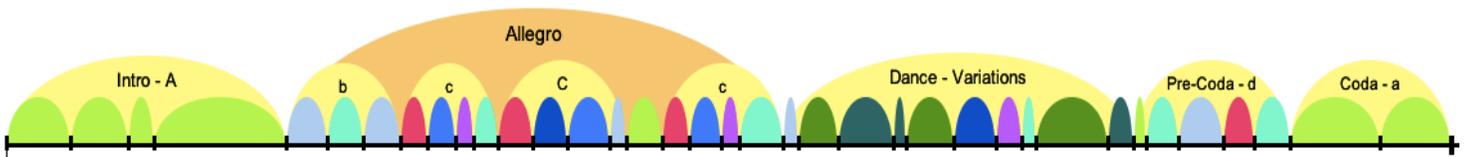
¹³ Yastrebtsev 1985: 28

This scheme shows an introduction/coda frame enclosing a tripartite central section, the middle part of which is internally developmental (Variations) but independently thematized and curiously denied a letter designation. He also splits the Allegro into groups, b and c, the latter of which is developed in its own right. A closer examination of the score in part excuses Rimsky-Korsakov's efforts and highlights the unique difficulties the piece presents in terms of formal designations. We are faced with a large number of themes, often very short, mostly quadratic, which repeat, sometimes predictably but also erratically, with little or no sense of development or large-scale repetition. These themes are unique and highly characterized in terms of register, instrumentation and key, and generally recur in exact, or almost exact repetition. In addition the main span of the movement contained within the intro-coda frame does not attain a single PAC and negotiates two main key areas, D major and D flat major – a scheme that was chosen to please Balakirev.¹⁴ Using Variations Audio Timeliner we can divide the musical surface, using a variety of colors to show the interaction of the various themes with a melodic key below. The lightest blue (marked with an arrow) does not represent material that is interrelated, but the few sections that are all unrelated and occur only once each.



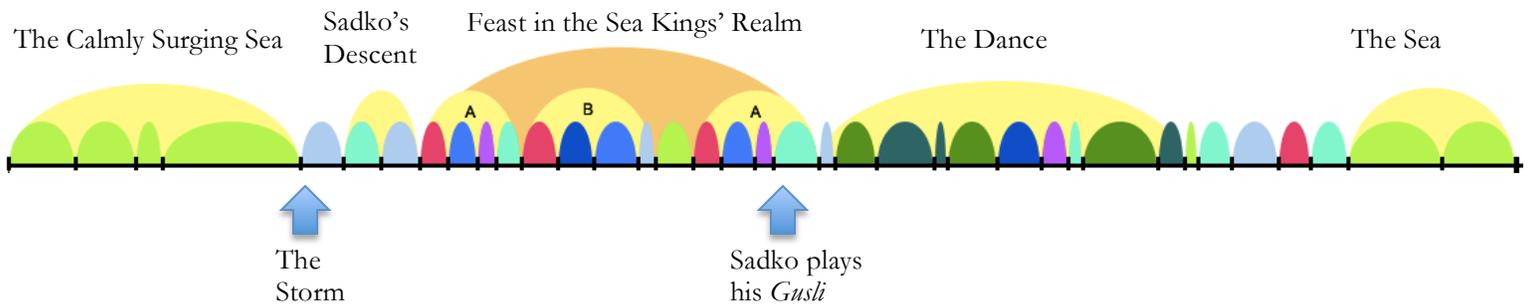
¹⁴ Rimsky-Korsakov 1942: 72

95% of the musical material is taken from numerous repetitions of eight themes shown above, usually of either 8 or 16 bars each and we can lay Rimsky-Korsakov's formal scheme on top of this with relatively ease.



As a purely musical account this is relatively satisfactory. The pre-coda might start in various places but the return of introductory material at m. 490 seems the most appropriate moment. Although both A sections obviously share a consistent theme, the letter designations cannot just denote thematic zones but instead merely show abstract differentiated formal areas – which makes the decision not to give the variations a letter even

stranger.¹⁵ Whilst the musical account might seem relatively accurate, apart from the “Dance” the program is almost entirely absent from this formal scheme, but these same divisions can support a narrative reading compiled from the program in the memoirs, the preface to the third edition and some musical intuition.



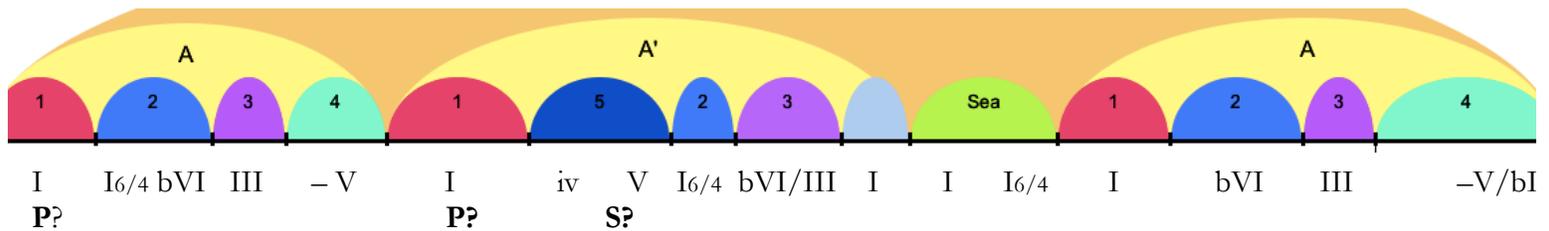
On the surface the plan is relatively convincing and every section can be accounted for programmatically, with the exception of the dubiously designated “pre-coda”. The storm can be placed with confidence partly due to the “stormy” characteristics of the musical surface, the swiftly crescendoing and decrescendoing triplets in the vla. and vc. and the unmistakable amplification of the gentle hairpins of the introduction. There is also metrical disruption of the surface at mm. 54-7 with the piece’s first 3 bar sub-phrase and the tension between Db/C# and D is immediately dramatized. Sadko’s descent has a clear musical characterization with a three octave scalar descent in the violins between m. 63 to m. 99 and Rimsky-Korsakov is similarly explicit in his depiction of the *gusli*, at mm. 273-277, as the *sf* chords on the harp announce the beginning of the dance, immediately allowing us to associate the instrument with the character of Sadko. Rimsky-Korsakov may have failed to produce a comprehensive account of his work but his plan does draw focus onto the

¹⁵ Rimsky-Korsakov may have been unhappy with a scheme that read A B C D E A as this would confirm the suspicion that the central section is just be a procession of unrelated formal blocks.

problematic issues that must be explored, namely the pre-coda, the formal organization of the Feast - the only section which seems to have strong internal organization and operation of variation form in the “Dance”.

A Matter of Detail

Rimsky-Korsakov makes no mention of any recognized forms with reference to *Sadko* that could serve as referential or dialogic companions and the very idea of a primary theme and the telos that a theme of this type implies is consistently problematized. From a sonata theory perspective a tonally stable Introduction is only mildly deformational, if at all and the consequent transition section depicting the storm and Sadko’s descent might also be explained away as an attempt to reach an active dominant to precipitate a launching of P space. Although a dominant pedal lasting 28 measures is reached at m. 57 the launch of the new theme is still strongly undermined.

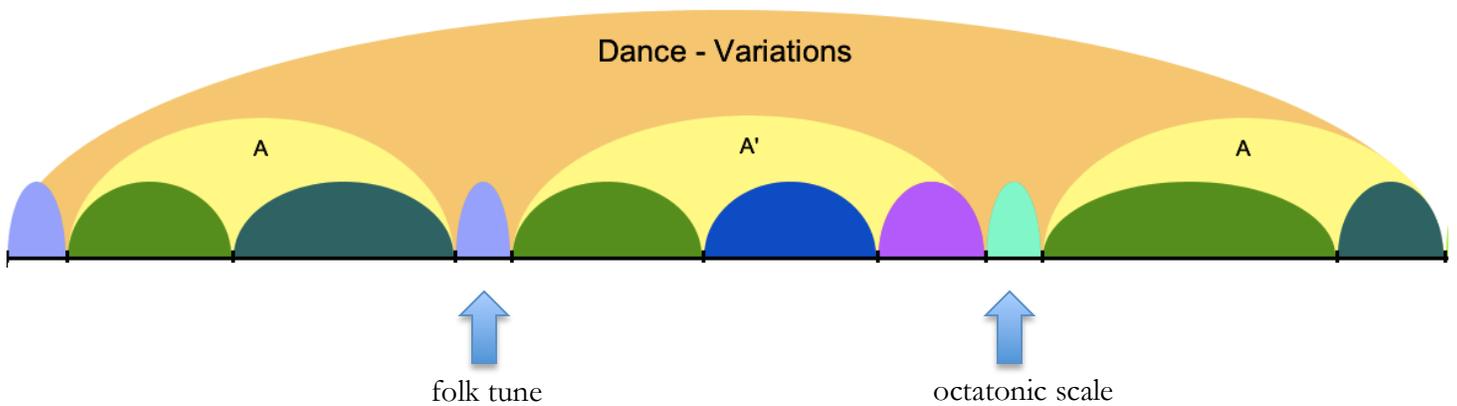


The new tonic, D is reached in the bass at m. 95 but harmonized with 6/4 sonorities and both major and minor subdominants. When the cellos enter on D we sense the arrival of a new theme - and a new theme in the new key - but this arrival comes halfway through a four bar hypermetrical unit, and the D4 the cellos enter on is a dissonance against dominant harmony, resolving down to C#. This four bar antecedent is answered by a four bar consequent which resolves onto I via iv. The antecedent restarts, as if attempting to reaffirm its status as P but the antecedent is interrupted by a new motif at m. 111, before the

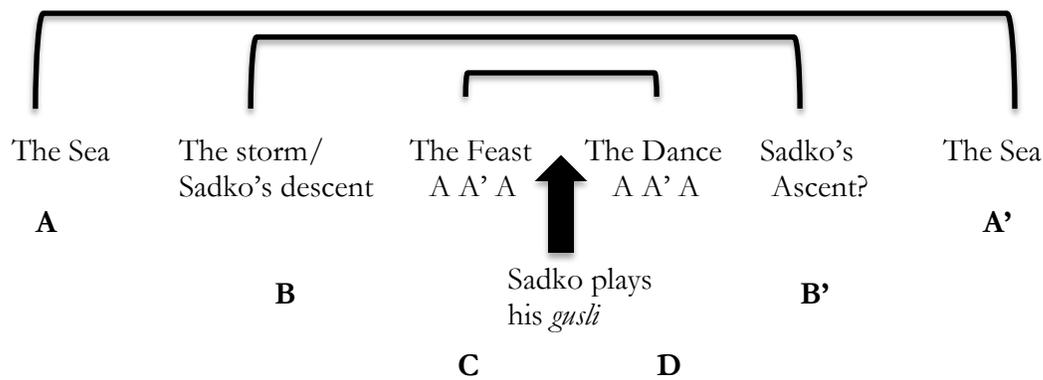
consequent and resolution to **I**. Over and above all of these factors this theme, with its lilting $\frac{3}{4}$ meter played by *piano dolce* cellos and quiet tremolo violas just does not *sound* like a P theme. After this theme peters out the new motifs at m. 111 and m. 127 only add more harmonic instability as the music descends by major third firstly to Bb major at m. 121 and then F# major at m. 129.¹⁶ An octatonic descent attains another dominant lock at m. 140 giving the “P” theme another chance to assert itself, this time with both antecedents being answered by consequents and resolutions to **I** in D major. The launch of a harmonically stable theme in the relative minor at m. 163 supports the claims of D major as its relative minor whilst simultaneously dramatizing its absence and instability. The music at mm. 199-206 functions as a transition to the Sea theme, with the introduction of the characteristic hairpins as we cycle through successive LP transformation and an equal subdivision of the octave by major third, D – Bb – F# – D. This is the only time that the sea music is heard in the works’ parallel key D major, rather than its “native” key Db. The transposition is crucial, as the “sea” when heard in Db major characterizes the surface of the sea when viewed from above, whereas after we have been transported to the Sea-King’s kingdom, we can still view the sea, but only from below. Musically speaking this moment functions as an introductory reminiscence, now in the right key for the “P” theme, and therefore as a last chance saloon. When the “P” theme returns for a second time at m. 223 we have heard two themes in D major and B minor, little tonal stability in D, additional tonally unstable thematic passages, a reminiscence of the introduction and not even a shadow of a cadence. Taken as a whole any sense that we are dealing with a sonata-type procedure must surely have disappeared. Rather than finally finding its voice, the referential layout of the A section is repeated exactly in the

¹⁶ The transformation by descending third is a feature that Rimsky-Korsakov took from Liszt’s *Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne*.

reprise with the fourth section transposed down a semitone resolving not onto A as the dominant of D, but G# as the dominant of Db.



The form of the Dance echoes that of the Feast with the first theme recurring three times and performing an initiating function. The representation above includes two transitional sections, the first of which is coda-like and taken from Balakirev's folk song collection, and the second a repeat of the descending octatonic scale. The variation technique that which Rimsky-Korsakov mentioned is clear as for the first time a thematic section is clearly expanded in the first half of the reprise of A. Including the transition, this central section presents three thematic recollections, the first of which seems the most significant. It is the same theme as appears in the A' section of the Feast, arising as an analogous position as the first point of departure and further encouraging the idea that this central span really contains two formal elements of substance, not three, with Sadko's strumming of the *gusli* dividing the work almost exactly in half. Taking this logic a little further in fact it seems that we may be dealing with a mirror or arch form, with the storm and Sadko's descent equivalent to the "pre-coda".



In strictly palindromic form ABCDCBA these kinds of constructions, usually sectional and repetitious, are more usually associated with twentieth-century works by Bartok or Berio. Rimsky-Korsakov's form is not strict and instead of a central movement around which the form is mirrored there is a central moment. Although the two inner parts do not share a common theme they are analogous in terms of scale and formal process and the outer parts do have clear thematic parallels. If **B** represents Sadko's descent then the duality invites the labeling **B'** as Sadko's ascent up to the surface. With this in mind the arch form seems perfectly appropriate for a narrative which is by nature elliptical. The central action space is in a fantastical world displaced from reality, which frames the story. One question that is raised is the nature of the musical connection of the descent and ascent. Both are unusual for their inclusion of "bespoke" music that does not recur anywhere else, presumably reflecting their privileged narrative status as moments of transformation and flux. There is also demonstrate more precisely palindromic elements as the final few bars at m. 610 with the rising semitones, stabbed *fff* chord and ensuing silence, mirror the opening of the **Allegro molto** almost exactly, but in reverse. The common thematic characteristic is the use of the octatonic scale, (or the "semitone-whole tone" scale as Rimsky-Korsakov called it) and this serves as a point of departure for exploring the characterization of the 8 themes present in the musical surface.

Personification of theme and leitmotif

We need not wade into the polemic surrounding all questions octatonic but the appearance of the scale in Liszt's *Ce qu'on entend sur la montagne*, mentioned by Rimsky-Korsakov as a source for *Sadko*, helps confirm the teutonic origins of this "Russian" scale. This work announced the octatonic scale to the Russian musical world and for Rimsky-Korsakov the associations were clear – the inherent chromaticism perfectly suited for depicting the work of fantastical sorcery just like the whole tone scale in Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, supporting Taruskin's more general characterization of the scale as an evocative of magic and bewitchment.¹⁷ As such, we can either treat it as the sound of transformation from the real world to a fantastical one or attach it directly to the Sea King himself as the perpetrator of this magic. As the scale returns within the central space, which is firmly rooted in the underwater realm, as well as in these two moments of transformation we might prefer the latter interpretation. The scale is adjusted to suite the scenarios, so between mm. 63-95 the scale is successively normalized as we adjust to the new key and soundscape moving from descending octatonic, to chromatic and finally diatonic scales. All of these scales still descend, and it is only at mm. 501-505 and mm. 513-17 that the trombones present the only ascending versions of the scale in the entire work, bursting out of the texture *crescendo molto*, and lending weight to the hypothesis that this indeed depicts Sadko's ascent.

Thus far only the octatonic scale and the dance theme have been easily identifiable with a particular character even though the musical surface with its consistent repetition of a limited, but relatively numerous short themes invites explicit personification. When Stasov first suggested the story to Balakirev for musical treatment he must have seen its operatic

¹⁷ Taruskin 1985: 93

potential, but it was not until 1894, almost 30 years after the original tone poem (but only two since the most recent revisions) that Nikolay Findeyzen sent the composer an opera scenario based on the story.¹⁸ The opera sets the entire *bylina* as outlined in Appendix 1, furnished with additional detail, and is extensive enough that the section set in the tone poem forms only one of the opera's seven scenes. Undoubtedly the plan was that the music from the tone poem, by now an incredibly popular staple in the concert repertory, would play a significant part in the new opera to help guarantee its success. However, Taruskin plays down (or fails to notice?) the similarities, only mentioning the evocation of the sea, which Rimsky-Korsakov used in the overture, as a leitmotif throughout scenes 5 and 6, and finally to crown the glittering finale. Rimsky-Korsakov was not averse to using leitmotifs to systematically thematize certain characters but in *Sadko* this was not his tool of choice and he preferred to use historic folk melodies and recitative to lend an authentic flavor to the *byliny*. The octatonic scale is consistently dramatized throughout and Taruskin pinpoints this opera as the highpoint of the trend for delineating the real and fantastical through the opposition of diatonic folksong and fantastically chromatic, and often octatonic harmonies.¹⁹ In this respect Rimsky-Korsakov pays homage to his tone poem and his very first foray into octatonicism, but Taruskin seems to entirely miss a much more significant correlation which has huge implications for our reading of the tone poem.

Almost all the musical material used in scene 6, whose narrative corresponds almost exactly to that of op. 5, is derived from the earlier work. Every single theme identified above is utilized and this usage is not random, but rather the melodies function as leitmotifs, not in

¹⁸ Taruskin 2012

¹⁹ Taruskin 2008: 173

the opera as a whole, but within the confines of this single scene. Most are assigned to specific characters and those which are not have specific depictional roles.

The Sea

A musical staff in 6/8 time with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The melody consists of a series of eighth notes: G4, A4, B-flat4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B-flat5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6, A6, B-flat6, C7, D7, E7, F7, G7, A7, B-flat7, C8.

The Sea King/
The Underwater
Realm

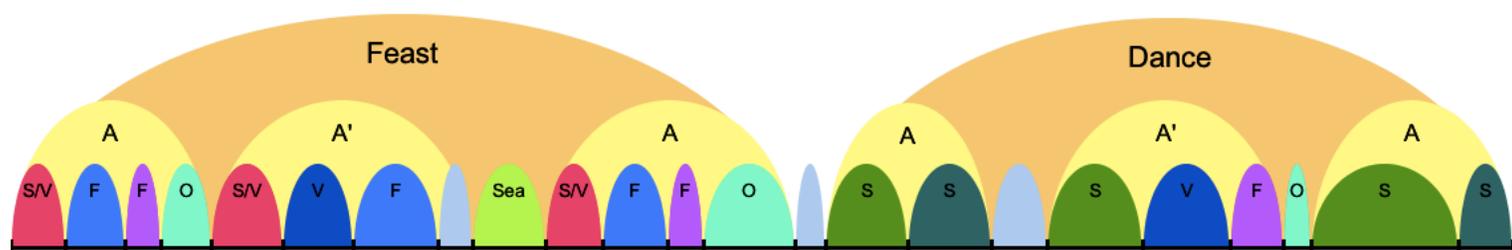
A musical staff in 3/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (F#, C#). The notation features a series of chords: G#4, A#4, B5, C#5, D#5, E6, F#6, G#6, A7, B7, C#7, D#7, E8, F#8, G#8, A9, B9, C#10, D#10, E11, F#11, G#11, A12, B12, C#13, D#13, E14, F#14, G#14, A15, B15, C#16, D#16, E17, F#17, G#17, A18, B18, C#19, D#19, E20, F#20, G#20, A21, B21, C#22, D#22, E23, F#23, G#23, A24, B24, C#25, D#25, E26, F#26, G#26, A27, B27, C#28, D#28, E29, F#29, G#29, A30, B30, C#31, D#31, E32, F#32, G#32, A33, B33, C#34, D#34, E35, F#35, G#35, A36, B36, C#37, D#37, E38, F#38, G#38, A39, B39, C#40, D#40, E41, F#41, G#41, A42, B42, C#43, D#43, E44, F#44, G#44, A45, B45, C#46, D#46, E47, F#47, G#47, A48, B48, C#49, D#49, E50, F#50, G#50, A51, B51, C#52, D#52, E53, F#53, G#53, A54, B54, C#55, D#55, E56, F#56, G#56, A57, B57, C#58, D#58, E59, F#59, G#59, A60, B60, C#61, D#61, E62, F#62, G#62, A63, B63, C#64, D#64, E65, F#65, G#65, A66, B66, C#67, D#67, E68, F#68, G#68, A69, B69, C#70, D#70, E71, F#71, G#71, A72, B72, C#73, D#73, E74, F#74, G#74, A75, B75, C#76, D#76, E77, F#77, G#77, A78, B78, C#79, D#79, E80, F#80, G#80, A81, B81, C#82, D#82, E83, F#83, G#83, A84, B84, C#85, D#85, E86, F#86, G#86, A87, B87, C#88, D#88, E89, F#89, G#89, A90, B90, C#91, D#91, E92, F#92, G#92, A93, B93, C#94, D#94, E95, F#95, G#95, A96, B96, C#97, D#97, E98, F#98, G#98, A99, B99, C#100, D#100, E101, F#101, G#101, A102, B102, C#103, D#103, E104, F#104, G#104, A105, B105, C#106, D#106, E107, F#107, G#107, A108, B108, C#109, D#109, E110, F#110, G#110, A111, B111, C#112, D#112, E113, F#113, G#113, A114, B114, C#115, D#115, E116, F#116, G#116, A117, B117, C#118, D#118, E119, F#119, G#119, A120, B120, C#121, D#121, E122, F#122, G#122, A123, B123, C#124, D#124, E125, F#125, G#125, A126, B126, C#127, D#127, E128, F#128, G#128, A129, B129, C#130, D#130, E131, F#131, G#131, A132, B132, C#133, D#133, E134, F#134, G#134, A135, B135, C#136, D#136, E137, F#137, G#137, A138, B138, C#139, D#139, E140, F#140, G#140, A141, B141, C#142, D#142, E143, F#143, G#143, A144, B144, C#145, D#145, E146, 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C#928, D#928, E929, F#929, G#929, A930, B930, C#931, D#931, E932, F#932, G#932, A933, B933, C#934, D#934, E935, F#935, G#935, A936, B936, C#937, D#937, E938, F#938, G#938, A939, B939, C#940, D#940, E941, F#941, G#941, A942, B942, C#943, D#943, E944, F#944, G#944, A945, B945, C#946, D#946, E947, F#947, G#94

This theme is obviously derived from Sadko's dance theme, but when played by *marcato* horns is easily assimilated into the program as the Sea King joining in with the dance in its later stages, causing the sea to erupt in the *feroce* section at m. 521 as the Sea King reaches an even higher state of delirium, his theme now *ff* in the trombones. Various other details, including the buildup of the dance and the snapping of the *gusli's* strings survive absolutely intact in the opera and required nothing but copying and transposing.

The opera allows us to regard certain themes, particularly the two that depict the fish, to be non-narrative and purely scenic, just like the sea. The "golden fish" which the Sea King rewards Sadko do not obviously play a role in the tone poems' narrative and therefore merely represent the underwater realm. Uncertainty over the precise status of the octatonic scale is preserved in the opera as although Sea King is the only character to sing the theme, as we might expect, it is often played by the orchestra for purely atmospheric effect. We can now say with certainty that the two principal themes represent our star-crossed lovers, and this draws the focus explicitly onto their use and also their combination. *Sadko* is essentially a love story, but this factor is underplayed in the synopsis prefacing the score and hardly mentioned in the memoirs. The only mention of Volkhova is that she is "wedded to the sea", implying an almost virginal purity. If the lovers are introduced almost immediately, with the juxtaposition of their two themes in the A' section of the feast, it would appear that their relationship is doomed to failure – and quite rightly both because the feast itself celebrates Volkhova's marriage to the sea, but also because the Sea King, in his traditional role as patriarchal has full control of his daughter's romantic destiny and has yet to be impressed by Sadko's talents. It is only his famously enchanting playing of the *gusli* that can bring a change of heart.

Rimsky-Korsakov mentioned that the key-scheme was designed to please Balakirev – but provided no details for interpreting the dichotomy of D and Db major. As mentioned previously Sadko's theme sits unhappily in this tonal context, (perhaps unable to hide his earthly allegiances) while Volkhova, whose music is firmly in B minor belongs in this tonal setting as relative minor, whilst simultaneously expressing discontent – no doubt as a result of her marriage to the sea. If Sadko's aim is to woo Volkhova, spirit her away from her submarine enslavement and take her back to the surface through his playing of the *gusli*, then of course his dance and song must be in Db major and the telos of the work also becomes clear – a reconciliation of Sadko and Volkhova's themes in Db major, representing their coming together in the “real” world.

Unfortunately the reality is actually a little more complex. The opera reveals that the idea of an opening “Sadko theme” is actually a simplification, as the consequent of his phrase, (mm. 103-107 etc.) orchestrated with a contrasting instrumental voice, is actually sung by Volkhova and her text “your song is charming. Oh, my dearest one” initiates her falling for the lowly musician, whereas the text for her extended theme in B minor when it is first heard sees her pleading with her father to let Sadko stay with them: “Show him mercy, my father.....let him stay with us.” In his aria praising the Sea King the consequent phrase is adjusted so that this musical fragment is Volkhova's exclusively and not sung by Sadko at any point, despite the strength of its association with his music. The dance sees a strong intensification of the couple's discourse as where in the feast only a small percentage of the music has connotations for either character, in the dance Sadko takes over entirely, with a singular response from Volkhova, as he desperately tries to claim her.



S = Sadko, V = Volkhova, F = Gold and Silver Fish,
 O = Octatonic, S/V = Sadko and Volkhova

Volkhova therefore has two themes, the first of which is intertwined with Sadko's and represents her falling in love, the second of which is more extended but might be interpreted as a petitioning to her father. Presented in this fashion, it seems that a thematic apotheosis should see the triumph of the first, rather than the second, as an affirmation of love – and it is this option that Rimsky-Korsakov chooses. Firstly Sadko's four bars, which have always started with a 4-3 appoggiatura on the dominant, reassert their allegiance to earthly reality and Db major when they are transposed up a fourth so that the 4-3 now resolves onto a I6/4 at m. 571. This is then answered by Volkhova at mm. 577-584 and for the first time the two lovers speak with a common instrumental voice as trombone passes to trumpet and cello to viola. With this combined utterance Sadko's task is almost complete and they can make their ascent into reality, the falling octatonic scale now combined with the rising chromatic scale as Sadko finally snaps his *gusli's* strings, without external intervention, and the sea is calmed. The final seascape is essentially a repetition of the opening, but where he was absent before, Sadko is now present (with his *gusli*), finally at peace on the surface with his bride.

Conclusion

Sadko was both a mariner and musician just like Rimsky-Korsakov himself but there is no strong evidence that the tone-poem was autobiographical. Few details are known about the beginning of Rimsky-Korsakov's relationship with his future wife Nadezhda Purgold but he met her the year after composing *Sadko* and any claims that the composer's own romantic interests are written into the work must remain highly speculative. More interestingly one could treat the two worlds which the work straddles as an allegory for the composer's double life – naval officer first and musician second. The sea, static and placid as the unglamorous drudgery and security of a life in the navy, whilst an alternative life, at this point nothing but a hope and aspiration, is full of dazzling sights and magical sounds. It is only in this world that the musician is free to play and sing (or compose) as he wishes, and only through this music-making that he can be truly fulfilled, in life and in love, through the romance with Volkhova. A lot was at stake for Rimsky-Korsakov as *Sadko* was the first work in which he was allowed to find his own voice. It was only his second orchestral work since his first symphony Op. 1 and unlike the *Serbian Fantasy* seems to have been composed without excessive intervention or guidance from Balakirev and no doubt the composer hoped that it would announce him to the musical world, allowing him to leave his old life behind.

Although the analogy is attractive and thought-provoking, at least to the free-thinking musicologist, we must face the facts as we know them. Rimsky-Korsakov did not choose the scenario but was given it, and despite discussing the work extensively there is no evidence that he had any particular personal investment in the story, and most likely he viewed it as new compositional exercise with which he hoped to impress Balakirev and the other members of the “Mighty Handful”. But what an exercise, by all accounts a remarkably

innovative addition to the world of program music. Even if he was incapable of identifying his own innovations it is clear that the Arch Form was quite new and perfectly suited for its programmatic purpose, and without any obvious formal prototypes the combination of themes and the Db/D key scheme suggests its own programmatic telos. But it is the parallel with the opera which provides the truly remarkable turn. The trueness of the recomposition and the way in which all the musical material is so effortlessly assimilated into an opera scene make a strong case for the profundity of the interrelationship of music, narrative, drama and character in Rimsky-Korsakov's conception of program music. Program music is not merely symphonic music accompanied by a complementary narrative but is constructed, right from the outset, as a symphonically enacted and unvoiced operatic drama. It forces us to conclude that Rimsky-Korsakov had all the characters and leitmotifs in mind when he wrote the tone poem and that he either thought they were quite obvious, or he was happy to leave his audience in the dark about the love story buried in his work. Or perhaps, just as the tone poem functions as a musical premonition of and prototype for the opera-scene to come, so in the opera the composer finally wrote the tone poem's true program.

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Appendix 1

As we would expect of a folk poem that was orally transmitted over hundreds of years, there is no author, no definitive version, and many different details and glossings for the basic narrative. Bradford Robinson provides a synopsis of *Sadko, bogatyy gos* (“Sadko”, the Rich Trader), with all the most important and common details, in his preface to the München Study Score.

Sadko....”was a poor young man capable of charming rich and poor alike with his playing of the *gusli*, a folk instrument roughly comparable to the zither. Through the power of his music and a certain native guile he advances to become the richest merchant in Novgorod and soon pursues his business interests with his own fleet of sailing ships. On one such journey it is discovered that he has offended the Sea King and must throw himself overboard, with his *gusli*, to save his fleet and crew. Beneath the waves his playing of the *gusli* throws the Sea King into a frenzied dance that churns the oceans. Sadko has to be silenced by St. Nicholas, the patron saint of sailors, lest the seas overflow their shores. The chastened Sea King gives Sadko his daughter Volkhova as a prize, after which Sadko awakens to find himself in his native Novgorod, his riches restored, and Volkhova transformed into the River Volkhov, thereby magically giving the great trading city of Novgorod its historical outlet to the sea.”