

Philadelphia Orchestra's Arabian Nights

By Priscilla McLean - August 03, 2012

A truly great orchestra showed its colors on Saturday evening. As a prelude to the concert, SPAC featured a Mideast bazaar, with exotic food, Turkish rugs, special clothes and jewelry for sale along with belly dancers and a storyteller, on the lawn in front of the amphitheater. The night cooperated with sultry, suffocating heat, all in preparation for the Philadelphia Orchestra's performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sheherazade*, Op. 35.

Although this was a lot of fun, the orchestra didn't need any of it. From the first note of Rossini's "Overture to *William Tell*" to the last sound of *Sheherazade*, the orchestra was in top form, making these well-known, perhaps overplayed pieces fresh and exciting.

The key was Gianandrea Noseda, guest conductor, who brought out the finely hewn phrases and almost perfect tempi, drawing the music in the air with his myriad conducting gestures and passionate involvement.

The performers were truly inspirational. In Dvorak's *Cello Concerto in B minor*, Op. 104, solo cellist Johannes Moser played with great sensitivity and massive sound, seeming to enjoy every moment of the music. His phrasing and variety of cello sound were inspirational. Every note was like a liquid gem, especially in the highest register.

During the *Sheherazade*, with its continual shifting of focus from large ensemble sound to short instrumental solos, the musicians outdid themselves. Gorgeous solo performances were given by concertmaster David Kim (violin), Richard Woodhams, principal oboe, Ricardo Morales, principal clarinet, Jennifer Montone, principal horn, Hai-Ye Ni, principal cellist, and Elizabeth Hainen, principal harpist. The arrow sharp crispness of the trumpet section and the huge clear sound of the trombones should also be mentioned.

The fourth movement, perhaps because of the theme of it — festival at Baghdad, shipwreck at sea, etc. — raced like a torrent, the brass players barely hanging on for dear life. The orchestra survived and played flawlessly, making for a tremendously exciting finale.

Sheherazade, full of rapidly changing sections and short themes tied together with the solo violin's undulating delicate melody, often seems unconnected and, with the wrong conductor, can become drawn out, diffuse and deadly. It is a rare occurrence when a master can pull this together into such a cohesive, powerful and evocative work. With Gianandrea Noseda at the helm, this happened and it was splendid.