Capriccio espagnol, op. 34

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, strings

Duration: 15 minutes in five movements.

THE COMPOSER – NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV (1844-1908) – Rimsky-Korsakov was part of a group called the “Belyayev Circle” from the mid 1880s through the turn of the century. Named for timber merchant and amateur musician Mitrofan Belyayev, the collective included Glazunov, Lyadov, Tcherepnin and other important St. Petersburg musical luminaries. In many ways, the Circle continued the nationalist movement previously associated with “The Five” but they were even more conservative in their thinking, Rimsky-Korsakov most of all.

THE HISTORY – The French obsession with the sights and sounds of exotic Spain is a well-documented subject of music history, one mirrored and even pre-dated by a similar Russian fascination. What began with Glinka was taken up with considerable interest by Rimsky-Korsakov in his 1887 orchestral showpiece Capriccio espagnol. An instant international hit, this suite highlighted the composer’s famed mastery of instrumental color. Rimsky-Korsakov clearly knew just how “vividly brilliant” his ingredients were when he stated, “The Spanish themes of dance character furnished me with rich material for putting to use multiform orchestral effects.” Important among these effects was the choice to focus on individual virtuosity as many passages highlighted specific players in the ensemble. Rimsky-Korsakov also asked for certain “extended” techniques from his string section when, in the 4th movement, he instructed them to strum as if they were gypsy guitarists. Another magnificent effect, to be sure. Unlike some of the other, purely fictive musical travelogues of the day, Rimsky-Korsakov sourced his folk material from the real-life traditions of Spain. The personal copy of the song collection he drew from still exists and confirms the authenticity of his melodies but no book exists that can take credit for the orchestration, which is tirelessly inventive but apparently not the point, according to the man himself. As far as he was concerned, the Capriccio was not a “magnificently orchestrated piece” but instead a “brilliant composition for the orchestra.” Conservative and humble!

THE WORLD – Puerto Rico was granted autonomy from Spain in 1897. Also that year, the Greco-Turkish War of 1897 was fought, the Klondike Stampedede (Gold Rush) began in San Francisco and English author Bram Stoker published Dracula.

THE CONNECTION – Capriccio espagnol was last performed by the CCSO in the 1997-1998 season.