





F 3.5
ISO 100

● REC

Scheherazade Is Ready for Her

Close-up

05:15:35

30 FPS

BY
David Patrick Stearns

“I am holding the whole of Scheherazade in the palm of my hand!”

And Curtis Institute of Music video director and editor Matt Hagestuen didn't even have his hands full with the multicolored video memory cards, looking like flattened M&Ms candies—none of them vaguely resembling composer Rimsky-Korsakov or the legendary Scheherazade, whose masterful story-telling staved off her execution for 1001 nights. Ancient meets ultramodern here: Immersive Scheherazade, a multimedia installation with the famous Rimsky-Korsakov piece played, heard and seen in a setting writ larger than perhaps ever before, is one of the most ambitious undertakings in recent Curtis history. Production began last July and it culminated in a premiere run from April 29 through May 15. But all the expansive majesty of the piece could fit into the Persian queen's jewelry box.

Translating this quintessential Russian orchestral work from the Curtis Symphony Orchestra's usual rehearsal space in Gould Rehearsal Hall into a visual environment that splashes images of the musicians all over the floor, walls, and ceiling—with sound to match—required a 60-hour setup for three long recording days in December, 14 technical personnel, 48 microphones, 26 cameras (4K) under 20 lights, and 3,000 feet of wiring to power it all. And, of course, the 80-member CSO led by conductor Osmo Vänskä. While the music pulsed in the rehearsal space, the images were refracted and scrutinized in the adjacent room over three large screen monitors and eight small ones.

“More back light on the harp player,” barked one technician. “That's perfect! Lock it down.”

Though the production was made by some of the most experienced professionals in the business, even Vince Ford, Curtis's senior vice president of digital strategy and innovation who has produced televised New York Philharmonic concerts, admits to being on new ground. If there was a template for the project, it wasn't the Live From Lincoln Center shows on PBS but the two competing Vincent van Gogh installations that ran in New York and are touring the world that engulf ticket buyers in crowds, wheat fields, and starry nights. Matisse's *Thousand and One Nights* is the only classic painting seen in Immersive Scheherazade. But unlike the Van Gogh exhibits, “there won't be a gift shop at the end,” quipped Mr. Ford in an interview after a recording session.



Brilliant sound quality—right down to the violin's bow-to-string friction—must match the heat of the video element. The word used by Drew Schlegel, director of audio engineering, is “presence”—not an uncommon term in the audio production world, though here, it's essential. Unlike pop music videos in which the visual element has a life of its own, the students are the stars of this project, says Mr. Ford.

One might wonder if true music making is possible under such a technological magnifying glass. But one never underestimates Vänskä, who is best known as the music director of the Minnesota Orchestra and has led the Curtis Symphony Orchestra on multiple concert tours. Even a casual observer would have to be struck, for example, by the mixture of urgency, fun, and lightness in the “Festival at Baghdad” movement of *Scheherazade*, which was recorded in long takes that enhance overall concentration.

“His relationship with the students is so down to earth and nurturing in so many different ways that the students adore being around him and make music like crazy for him,” said Curtis president and CEO Roberto Díaz.

Efficient, hyper-focused excitement was the atmosphere of the day, with a sense of easy familiarity among the technicians, partly because they were all hired from the Philadelphia area. The proper equipment, however, came from a further-afield search. “No one company had everything we needed,” said Mr. Ford. “This in itself was a logistical challenge—getting all the equipment within budget when we needed it, and during a



pandemic with supply-chain challenges. It took seven weeks to find everything.”

And the recording sessions were only the starting point: “We will spend another 300 hours editing and putting the installation together,” said Mr. Ford.

The enterprising spirit of the project has not been unusual during the pandemic, during which many groups refused to be silenced by forced shutdown—some releasing to the public their library of performance videos that had already been seen (such as the Metropolitan Opera’s simulcasts) or releasing little-known archival ones (such as the Philadelphia Orchestra’s Verdi Requiem under Yannick Nézet-Séguin).

Others assembled new videos under heroically makeshift circumstances. Curtis’s own contribution to lockdown culture was *MERCY*, a film adaptation of Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito* made with singers in their separate quarters, probing this opera about betrayal and forgiveness.

Luckily, Immersive Scheherazade emerged during the less restrictive, pre-Omicron window of time in the pandemic when musicians could be in the same room—albeit with frequent testing—though not so open that the usual round of concerts and tours was possible. “The feeling was that if we can’t have public performances, we can do something that would create a different experience that’s as meaningful as possible,” recalled Mr. Díaz, “and can live beyond the performance.

“If you look at what is happening at the Metropolitan Opera, singers have to be as comfortable in front of a camera as they are on stage,” he continued. “Why not create something ‘in-house’ that will give them a new experience, something that will immerse them in repertoire, and with an end result that’s a different type of performance experience? We considered a range of repertoire. At one point, we considered putting a piece together section by section: We didn’t know if we could have everyone together in the room.”

Then, pandemic-related restrictions temporarily eased. And as Mr. Díaz put it, “*Scheherazade* rose to the top.”

The 45-minute piece, written in 1888 at the height of Russian romanticism, showcases the Curtis student players but does so with music whose descriptive qualities are more open-ended than, say, Richard Strauss tone poems. Visual interpretation can take many forms. Though one of the movements is titled “The Calendar Prince,” one need not know that such a “prince” is actually an ascetic mystic to be pulled into the theme-and-variations format of the music. However, the mythology and its implications, both ancient and modern, have been taken up in other classroom studies at Curtis. Mr. Díaz went so far as to describe the school as “rallying around” *Scheherazade*.

A full-length piece like this requires a full-length budget of \$120,000—rather more than most makeshift videos made under lockdown but a lot less than what a major, non-student orchestra would require. “One benefit of developing a project like this within a university/conservatory is that we can attempt something new without predefined rules,” said Mr. Ford. “In fact, a part of the goal

of this project is to determine how to bring something new and ambitious to life that doesn’t fit within an existing template.”

Outside the academic world, such projects face work rules that strictly govern concert lengths, recording fees, and media distribution channels. Overhead costs can make multimedia projects prohibitive. Such mercantile questions are not essential in this setting by any means. But with a substantial financial and technological investment, they still loom.

Almost like a Hollywood film preview, Immersive Scheherazade began with a limited run in the Black Box theater at Curtis. And then? In a project that’s still in progress and with no clear-cut finish line, Immersive Scheherazade has a wide-open future in terms of how it can be accessed by the public. Such installations thrive in expansive spaces. Such as the lobby of the Kimmel Center? Or as a “value-added” factor in any number of concert halls when the orchestra is on tour?

Mr. Díaz believes the finished project could be “shopped” most anywhere—without commercial monetizing goals but with the intention of reaching visual-age musicians of the future. “The opportunity to engage and inspire young people far beyond our buildings has such incredible value,” he said. “One of the things we’ve always talked about at Curtis is that no one inspires young people like young people.

“How do you put value on that?”

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(Top) Photo of the installation.
(Bottom) A filming session in December.

