

ASYO Overture Program Notes
By Noel Morris ©2025

Rossini *William Tell* Overture

William Tell is akin to Uncle Sam for the Swiss people. He symbolizes liberty and the struggle for independence.

According to legend, Tell lived in a remote Alpine village and was a skilled archer and helmsman. Things came to a head when the sadistic Austrian governor forced him to make an impossible choice: be executed with his son or shoot an apple off the boy's head. Tell knocked the apple clear, but the plot thickened, and he fired a second arrow into the governor, himself. That act of defiance united the Swiss people and led to the birth of a nation. The only catch is this: the story might not be true. If it is true, it happened 700 years ago in a remote region where people couldn't read, write, or keep historical records.

No matter. The Swiss established the Old Swiss Confederacy in 1291, and William Tell remains a figure of Swiss folklore.

More than 500 years later, a red-hot Italian composer finished his 38th opera at age 36. As usual, audiences and critics raved. In Vienna, local composers complained they couldn't get a fair shake in the climate of "Rossini Fever." No one could have predicted that Gioachino Rossini, the giant of the opera house, was about to quit.

All his life, he'd composed at superhuman speed. At 21, he produced an incredible four operas for one season. By 1828, he had only one more in him, and he decided to base it on the 1804 Friedrich Schiller drama *William Tell*.

Rossini hit the bullseye with *Guillaume Tell*. It is a masterpiece and an epic that not only serves as the summation of a glorious career but also a beacon for the next generation of opera composers. Like a symphony, its overture has four parts, starting with cellos depicting the stillness of a mountain village at dawn. The following section uses the winds as raindrops ahead of a ferocious storm. A solo English horn takes over in a pastoral scene with a cowherd playing his pipe. Finally, most famously, the galloping finale summons the Swiss army.

Gioachino Rossini retired a wealthy man in Paris at 37 and lived another 40 years. He became a renowned foodie, hosted musical gatherings in his home, and wrote some small pieces along the way, but never again touched opera.

Lili Boulanger: *Of a Spring Morning*

Once upon a time, proper people thought it *improper* for women to publish music. It followed that conservatories questioned girls' ability to handle the intellectual rigors of composition and barred them from harmony and counterpoint classes. Lili Boulanger offers a case study in what happens when access meets breathtaking talent.

Born in 1893, she was the daughter of a prestigious composition professor at the Paris Conservatoire. When she was two, Lili contracted bronchial pneumonia and nearly died—an episode that had a lasting impact on her health. Nevertheless, she showed an uncanny gift for music, learning to sing, play piano, harp, violin, cello, and organ.

Initially, thanks to Papa's influence, Lili's older sister, Nadia, entered the Conservatoire. Just ten years old, Nadia kept baby sister in tow. In 1908, Nadia won second prize in the prestigious Prix de Rome competition, which must have been a bittersweet achievement (her composition won the most votes, but the panel declined to award a first prize).

Even as medical issues dogged Lili's life, she entered and won the Prix de Rome in 1913. She was the youngest contestant by six years.

Now brandishing one of music's highest honors, the two sisters traveled to Rome to claim Lili's prize, a residency at the Villa Medici. Sadly, World War I interrupted their stay. By 1917, Lili's life approached its end. Twenty-three and bedridden, she worked on an opera and wrote two pieces: *Of a Sad Evening* and *Of a Spring Morning*. Too weak to write her last piece, *Pie Jesu*, she dictated the music to her sister.

Lili Boulanger died of Crohn's Disease at twenty-four on March 15, 1918. After her death, Nadia went on to become a legendary composition teacher. Nadia's students included Aaron Copland, Astor Piazzolla, Philip Glass, and Quincy Jones.

Rimsky-Korsakov *Scheherazade*

Throughout the 19th century, people in Europe and Russia gobbled up everything "Oriental," fueling a market for goods from distant lands. People decorated their homes with Persian rugs and clamored for novels about swarthy men with scimitars—usually written by people who'd never set foot in those places. As an artistic movement, authenticity took a back seat to the imagination.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic poem *Scheherazade* takes its narrative from the story collection "One Thousand and One Arabian Nights." The collection frames each story with a retelling of King Shahryar, who executes his wives after their wedding night to keep them from cheating. Marrying and murdering, he repeats the cycle over and over again until one girl inspires a change of heart.

On her wedding night, the maid Scheherazade entertains him with a tale, keeping him spellbound until dawn—without finishing the story. Eager to hear the conclusion, he spares her life for a day. The next night, she finishes the story but starts another. Again, she ends with a cliffhanger and lives another day. For nearly three years, clever Scheherazade mollifies Shahryar with her stories. After 1,001 Arabian nights, he lifts the death sentence.

About the composer

Rimsky-Korsakov had a brother who was 22 years his senior, a navy man who kept a lively correspondence from distant ports of call. His letters captivated little landlocked “Nika,” who built model ships and proudly recited nautical terms. At age 12, Nikolai entered the Naval College in St. Petersburg.

When Russia’s first conservatory opened in 1862, it seemed young “Rimsky” would be a navy man. He embarked upon a 32-month voyage that took him to ports in the Americas. Upon his return to St. Petersburg, he picked up some music textbooks and reconnected with his composer-friends, who encouraged him to stick with music. That he did—and soon joined the faculty at the conservatory. At the same time, he remained loyal to the friends who helped him along. When Alexander Borodin died in 1887, Rimsky vowed to complete Borodin’s unfinished opera *Prince Igor*.

Borodin had infused the opera with Arabian melodies borrowed from a book. With that sound still in his ears, Rimsky vacationed at a country house during the summer of 1888 and wrote his own Arabian essay, the stunning showpiece *Scheherazade*. He finished the work in less than a month.

Inside the score

Traditionally, Scheherazade’s quiet act of defiance frames the telling of each *Arabian Nights* tale. Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov follows this formula, starting each section with her hypnotic voice, assigned to the solo violin. Notice how Scheherazade’s music is perfumed, curvy, and seductive, like the girl it represents.