

by D. S. Crafts

for the Journal

Last season's Santa Fe Opera production of *The Golden Cockerel* was disappointing for many reasons, but certainly not for the music itself. The composer, Rimsky-Korsakov, literally wrote the book on orchestration and the exotic, alluring character of his music easily conjures up a sense of otherworldly fairy-tale. It was perfectly suited to this year's New Mexico Philharmonic ballet, *Aladdin*, which employed selections from the orchestral suite from the opera *The Golden Cockerel* and from *Scheherazade*.

The ballet was once again the product of Natalie Harris[cq] and the New Mexico Ballet Company. And once again Harris' choreography featured clean lines, clear storytelling and clever staging, refreshingly devoid of pretentious "avant-garde" (read: avant-rien) devices. I trust this production will have a life beyond the two performances here in Albuquerque.

As the story unfolds in three short acts, Aladdin, a ne'er-do-well of the streets, encounters the Princess Jasmine and falls in love with her. The accompanying music is taken from *Scheherazade*. As Aladdin is thrown in prison, the *Golden Cockerel* music begins as the Aladdin writhes in agonized movement. The Old Cell Mate (Sean Dahlberg[cq]) then hobbles in on a crutch to tempt him with a magic key and tell him of the Cave of Wonders. There Aladdin finds the magic lamp and is granted three wishes by the genie. Now rich, he ultimately wins the hand of the beautiful princess, but not before a dastardly intrigue by the devious and scheming Jafar (also danced by Sean Dahlberg), the royal vizier who wishes to become a genie.

The principals were well-chosen. Robbie Rodriguez[cq] in the title role danced a strong masculine character full of virtuosic movement, a bad boy who seems to grow in maturity before our eyes. Amanda Rohr[cq] as Princess Jasmine appeared regal yet sensuous (something akin to the Victoria character currently appearing on Masterpiece Theater). The third act love scene between the two was exquisite as the music returns to *Scheherazade* with some excellent solo violin playing from concertmaster Krzysztof Zimowski[cq].

As the genie of the lamp Natalia Harrison[cq] came across as spritely with even a touch of mischievousness. The treasure itself in the Cave of Wonders was cleverly personified by dancers dressed in gold.

The computer-generated animated backdrops effectively compliment the array of the colorful costumes worn by dozens of dancers of various ages.

David Felberg[cq] led the Philharmonic, generally playing well. However, the first violins were out of tune much of the performance. This is an on-going problem and the only weak spot in this otherwise excellent orchestra. The ensemble occupied the pit and had more of a sonic "presence" than when on stage from which they usually play in the highly-resonant Popejoy Auditorium.

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