



# Pitch Organization Analysis of the Symphony “Antar”

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## Abstract

Rimsky-Korsakov composed his second symphony, "Antar," in 1868. This work is the first multi-movement programmatic symphony in Russian music. The article analyzes the original 1868 version of "Antar" within the context of Rimsky-Korsakov's career and the influences that shaped his style. It demonstrates that "Antar" is both a culmination of Rimsky-Korsakov's apprenticeship in Balakirev's circle and a precursor to his mature compositional theories. Rimsky-Korsakov, a key member of "The Mighty Handful," is renowned among the world's great composers for his vivid orchestration and imaginative oriental themes. His musical works emphasize a seamless integration with literature and visual arts, reflecting a strong sense of programmatic narrative and pictorial elements. He often combined Western forms with folk music material, using diverse compositional techniques to develop his works and express musical drama. He incorporated rich colors and sounds, as well as a variety of musical textures, to convey genuine emotion. His music exhibits a strong Russian national character and oriental flair, particularly evident in his symphonic works that frequently portray folk legends from everyday life.

## Keywords

“Antar”, Pitch Organization, Orchestration

## 1. About "Antar"

### 1.1 Creation Period and Versions

Rimsky-Korsakov's encounter with Mily Balakirev in 1861 left a profound impression on the 17-year-old naval officer and aspiring musician. At that time, Balakirev was already a well-known figure in the Saint Petersburg music scene and had begun attracting a group of disciples, including Mussorgsky and Borodin. Rimsky-Korsakov soon joined this circle. Although Rimsky-Korsakov lacked formal musical training and had limited musical works to his name, Balakirev encouraged him to compose a symphony, providing him with an Arabic tale, "Antar" by Seid Seynkovsky as inspiration. Using this as a theme, Rimsky-Korsakov set out to compose his "Second Symphony, 'Antar'", completing it in 1888. This work not only summarized the achievements of his apprenticeship with Balakirev's circle but also foreshadowed the maturity of his compositional theories. In 1875 and 1897, Rimsky-Korsakov revised "Antar" twice, renaming it as a symphonic suite. By that time, he had studied systematic music composition theory and had become a professor at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory (Yu Runyang, 2023).

### 1.2 Characteristics of the Genre

The 1887 performance of "Symphonie Fantastique" left a profound impact on Rimsky-Korsakov, influencing his decision to present the recently acquired "Antar" fairy tale material in the form of programmatic symphonic music. The work was completed in 1888, but the first movement lacked symphonic development, using only variations and

adaptations. It also did not follow the sonata structure, which typically forms the basis of a symphony. However, because the concept of a symphonic suite did not yet exist, and was influenced by Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique" and "Harold in Italy," he named the piece "Second Symphony". It was later renamed as a symphonic suite. The composer explained the renaming in detail: "The term 'suite' was almost unknown among my contemporaries at the time and was seldom used in Western musical works. Nevertheless, I named it a symphony, which was incorrect. This work can be called a symphonic suite, a fairy tale, or a story, but it is not a symphony."

### 1.3 Historical Significance

Looking back to the early 19th century, when Russian symphonic music was in its exploratory phase, there were works like Glinka's "Kamarinskaya" (1848) and "A Night in Madrid" (1848), as well as Rimsky Korsakov's "Symphony in E Minor" (1885) and "Sadko" (1887). These were single-movement orchestral pieces, not large-scale multi-movement symphonies. In contrast, Balakirev's "Symphony No. 1" (1884) and "In Bohemia" (1887), Mussorgsky's "Night on Bald Mountain" (1887), and Tchaikovsky's "Symphony No. 1 in G Minor" (1868) had the scale of symphonies but lacked a programmatic or narrative element. Even the operas "Ivan Susanin" (1838) and "Ruslan and Lyudmila" (1842) only contained symphonic sections.

### 1.4 Story Synopsis

The musical work "Antar" closely aligns with the content of the fairy tale by Seid Seynkovsky and is composed of four movements: "The Desert of Sam", "The Joy of Revenge", "The Joy of Power", and "The Joy of Love". The protagonist, Antar, is a young Arab. The story narrates how Antar sacrificed his blood for the people in the Desert of Sam, lost his wealth, and wasted his love and friendships, only to be betrayed by those he helped. With nowhere to turn, he found himself in the ruins of Palmyra, where he collapsed from hunger. Upon waking, he found himself in a grand and lavish palace, where he heard Queen Gulnara's voice. She thanked him for his sacrifices and promised to grant him three joys of life: revenge, power, and love.

The "Antar" fairy tale, both in content and title, reflects the influence of Western European Romantic literature, particularly Byronism. Byronism refers to the literary and cultural style associated with the British Romantic poet George Gordon Byron, characterized by individualism and rebellion, opposing social constraints and traditional norms. It often involves themes of heroism, love, tragedy, and concern for human fate. Byronist heroes are typically charismatic, rebellious individuals who face challenges and adversity in life, expressing resistance to fate and a longing for freedom. The "Antar" fairy tale combines elements of Byronism with a distinctly Russian flavor. In the musical representation of "Antar", the influence of Berlioz's Romantic music is also evident, as each movement is unified by a common thematic material associated with a central character, attempting to create rich soundscapes and music scenes in a Romantic style that immerses the listener. However, the strong Oriental music colors in "Antar" are characteristic of Russian music and set it apart from Western European Romantic music. This Russian music flavor is marked by the use of folk themes and the incorporation of exotic and Eastern elements, which gives the composition its unique character.

## 2. Theme Characteristics and Variation Techniques

The entire piece contains two main themes that represent the leading motives, focusing on two musical characters: the wounded and helpless Antar, and the beautiful and ethereal Gulnara. These two themes are the most significant in the piece, appearing in various forms throughout each of the four movements creating an organic link between them.

In the first movement, the second rehearsal mark introduces the Antar theme played by the violas. The melancholy F# minor key conveys the loneliness of Antar, supported by the harmonic accompaniment with a tonic harmony over three bars leading to a half-cadence. The appearance of E and F# in the melody lends the theme a Dorian mode characteristic, aligning with the listening preferences of Russian audiences.

Starting from the fourth rehearsal mark, the Gulnara theme is introduced by the solo flute in D minor, accompanied by a sustained A note in other voices. The Gulnara theme features prominent augmented second intervals and a quintuplet Arabesque ornamentation pattern, providing a clear oriental quality. Gulnara, being a magical and supernatural fairy-like character, is represented as elevated and distant, with her music possessing more exotic traits to emphasize the contrast with the Antar theme (Peng Cheng, 2021).

The ninth rehearsal mark brings together the Antar and Gulnara themes, depicting the first encounter between the two protagonists, and reinforcing their thematic images in the audience's mind.

At the fourteenth rehearsal mark, the Antar theme is combined with a newly introduced quick tempo motive. The composer uses the French horn in F# major to state the theme, while the clarinet portrays the desert scenery, creating contrast and illustrating the confrontation between Antar and the great bird. At the seventeenth rehearsal mark, the Antar theme again merges with the quick tempo motive, where the composer applies a variation treatment for the first time. The cello and bassoon in F# major deliver a gentle rendition of the Antar theme, reflecting Antar's change in mood after his struggle with the great bird.

The eighteenth rehearsal mark unites the Antar and Gulnara themes, expanding on the five-bar phrase from the ninth rehearsal mark, symbolizing the second encounter between the two protagonists. The first violin quietly plays the Antar theme in B minor, while the flute, after rendering the Gulnara theme, recalls the quick tempo motive, evoking a dreamlike memory.

In the first movement, the Antar theme appears a total of five times. Through theme variations and contrapuntal arrangements, a series of distinct scenes are created, each depicted within contrasting time signatures and tempos, illustrating Antar's journey through the desert while showcasing the masterful orchestration techniques of Rimsky-Korsakov.

In the remaining three movements, "Revenge", "Power", and "Love", the Antar theme doesn't appear in its original form but is varied and contrapuntally combined with other themes according to the narrative progression. Rimsky-Korsakov noted in his autobiography, "The task of depicting the joys of revenge, power, and love is entirely lyrical and merely expresses emotion and its changes, requiring no fixed musical form, allowing for complete freedom in musical structure."

The "Revenge" movement introduces a new theme, a dense sequence of notes representing the "blade of revenge" now in Antar's hands, with the underlying concept centered around conflict and tension. In the "Power" movement, the triumphant march theme expresses the sense of authority over others, while the Oriental singing melody depicts the sensual pleasure derived from political power, signifying the grandeur and glory of Antar's reign. The theme in the "Love" movement is a melody with a strong Oriental flavor, where the composer integrates the main themes with the movement's own theme. As the movement progresses, the Antar theme gradually fades away, transitioning from the high register of the first violin to the low register of the viola before eventually disappearing, leaving only the Gulnara theme, Gulnara extinguishes Antar's life, merging his soul with hers.

For an average listener unfamiliar with the title or storyline behind "Antar", they might intuitively sense an inspiration beyond the music, which could influence their interpretation, potentially diverging from the composer's intended expression. The repetition of themes and motives throughout the symphonic suite indicates a guiding plan akin to those in Berlioz, Liszt, or Tchaikovsky's symphonies. This thematic development naturally leads listeners to connect the music with its titles, prompting them to explore whether the musical work truly reflects the aesthetic features and functions suggested by the title and whether there exists a meaningful relationship between the title's significance and the structure of the music.

### 3. Carefully Organized Pitch Material

"Antar" is the composer's second symphony, and its tonal organization and harmonic techniques already exhibit his personal style, foreshadowing the maturity of his compositional theories. Many of the techniques used in this work are later systematically presented in the composer's own harmony textbook.

Rimsky-Korsakov's harmony textbook reveals a structured and systematic view of the tonal landscape. He sought to integrate every possible tonal relationship into a carefully considered system. In fact, the more remote the tonal relationships, the more they require a coherent tonal modulation plan. This desire for a logical approach to harmony and tonality reflects Rimsky-Korsakov's effort to bring order to the increasingly varied and colorful musical language of the late 19th century. Let's explore how he used carefully organized pitch material as the basis for creating unique harmonic techniques in his work.

The introduction section at the beginning of the piece contains three motives, all derived from the same six-note scale-based pitch material. The first motive consists of a sequence of three pairs of minor third chords played in tight harmony by three bassoons. The root notes between each pair of chords for major thirds, specifically Fb-D, D-B#, B#-Ft, outline an augmented chord. Because this cycle involves a three-way division of the octave, after two shifts, it always returns to the starting point. This harmonic progression, along with the orchestration, creates an eerie effect,

leading the listener into the exotic world of the "Antar" story.

In each pair of chords, the harmonic progression is identical: the second bassoon maintains the same pitch across the bar line, while the first and third bassoons move in contrary motion by a half step (the former ascending, the latter descending). This motive demonstrates the simplicity of harmonic progression, following what Arnold Schoenberg described as the "rule of the shortest way", as it uses common tones and half-step harmonic transitions.

The second motive, played by the strings, is accompanied by the quiet triplet rhythm of the timpani, featuring a sustained augmented triad (F, A, C#). The triplet briefly presents upper neighbor tones (D, Bb) with the underlying harmony. The third motive is an ascending D minor triad scale, initially played by the strings, then continued by the upper woodwinds, with the addition of Bb and C#. For this third motive, the music alternates between D minor and Bb minor, but D minor is emphasized in the melody, indicating it as the leading harmony.

The three introductory motives repeat in the same order at the first rehearsal mark, with the first motives shifted down by a minor sixth, and the second and third motives shifted up by a major third. The order of thirds for the bassoons in the first motive becomes C: -F#, F#-D, D-Bb; the second motive retains the augmented harmony but shifts to A, C, E; and the final motive concludes in F# minor. As mentioned earlier, all music up to the second rehearsal mark uses a consistent six-note scale, meaning every note in the first 24 bars is derived from two augmented triads, forming a six-note scale: A, C\*, E, and Bb, D, F#.

The introduction to the first movement uses this strict six-note scale to depict the desolation and vastness, and barrenness of the Syrian desert. This six-note scale is unfamiliar to listeners, creating an impression of alienation and an uninhabitable landscape compared to stable functional tonality. On one hand, the prevalence of augmented triads in related minor keys diminishes the perception of a tonal center, reducing the sense of movement from tonic to tonic. On the other hand, the symmetrical division of intervals supporting this section produces a sequence of harmonic progressions without a clear sense of resolution. Just as a Bedouin wandering the desert might see endless stretches of sand in every direction, listeners are presented with a series of related chords at the beginning of this symphony without a distinct tonal direction (Ling Ying, 2021).

The final four bars of the third movement present an octatonic scale, where the melodic progression ascends with whole tones and half tones.

However, the harmonization of this scale does not strictly adhere to the octatonic pattern, as the lower harmonies use notes outside the scale. To better understand how Rimsky-Korsakov uses harmony, let's compare the melody notes with their underlying chords.

Overall, the first three beats of each bar contain major triads, while the fourth beat has dominant seventh chords, with the chord inversions determined by a continuous descending bass line, suggesting a whole tone scale: D-C-Bb-Ab-F#-E. The root motion follows a consistent pattern, alternating between augmented fifth intervals and descending major thirds, creating a relationship between strong and weak beats, and hinting at a secondary dominant relationship. Moreover, the weak-beat chords and the subsequent strong-beat chords often exhibit a sixth interval relationship. Regarding harmonic progression, if we look at the major triads on the second and third beats, we see that A is sustained, while C and E move down by a half step, to C and F, respectively. This mirrors the harmonic progression among minor third chords at the beginning of the first movement.

At first glance, it might seem like a simple ascending octatonic scale. However, upon closer examination, it reveals a blend of elements from the hexatonic and whole-tone scales. In a brief gesture, Rimsky-Korsakov successfully combined three different techniques for symmetrically dividing the octave. This phrase stands out not only because of its bold harmonies but also because its rigorously structured harmonic progression supports the melodic development (Yan Huiqing, 2023).

The use of whole-tone and octatonic scales in "Antar" would eventually become a hallmark of Rimsky-Korsakov's mature style, providing material for his most adventurous melodies and harmonies in his operas. This approach also influenced several of his notable students, including Anatoly Lyadov, Maximilian Steinberg, and Igor Stravinsky. Besides hinting at Rimsky-Korsakov's preference for whole-tone and octatonic scales, "Antar" also reflects his fascination with symmetrically dividing the octave. The six-note scale introduced at the symphony's outset is one of his typical methods, where the symmetrical pitch combinations produce music that is tonally ambiguous but structurally precise, characterized by strict harmonic progressions and predictable transposition patterns.

#### 4. Orchestration

Rimsky-Korsakov's earliest exposure to orchestration knowledge came in the 1850s, influenced by Glinka's opera scores and Berlioz's "Treatise on Instrumentation". Not long after he composed "Antar". The work exhibits how he

integrated personal stylistic elements into the existing orchestration framework.

The first movement's introduction uses a strict hexatonic scale and minimalist orchestration to evoke the desolation, vastness, and barrenness of the Syrian desert. This hexatonic scale, unfamiliar to Russian listeners, contrasts with stable functional tonality, evoking a sense of alienation and an uninhabitable landscape. Additionally, the harmonic progressions derived from this musical material lack a clear tonic, much like an Arab Wanderer in the desert who sees endless sand in all directions (Yasuko Nohara, 2019).

In the woodwind section, the F# major seventh chord gives this part a refined and pure atmosphere, especially in contrast to the oppressive music dominated by the hexatonic scale and minor keys. The delicate, soloistic orchestration enhances the fantastical charm of the fairy tale. Despite the lack of functional relationships between these chords, the sustained C# in the brass keeps the music anchored to the bright F# major tonality, which aligns with the subsequent celebratory singing, dancing, and feasting. Most of the first movement emphasizes major keys, complementing the festivities at Gulnara's palace. The orchestration reflects refined emotions, highlighting the bright colors of the flute, clarinet violin, contrasting with the introduction's preference for the darker tones of bassoons, and basses, timpani, and violas. The fleeting appearance of the Antar theme injects a touch of minor-key melancholy, indicating that Rimsky-Korsakov's protagonist, much like Berlioz's "Harold in Italy" (Berlioz's second symphony, composed in 1834, originally at the request of Paganini), is more an observer than a participant in the celebrations.

## 5. Conclusion

"Antar" is a pivotal work in Rimsky-Korsakov's compositional career, showcasing many aesthetic principles absorbed from "The Five" and composers like Berlioz, while also hinting at the stylistic characteristics of his mature period. It is a multi-movement symphony with a cyclic theme, the only Russian work of its kind until Tchaikovsky's "Manfred Symphony".

Rimsky-Korsakov revised the score in 1875 and 1897, making adjustments to the orchestration and tonal transitions before republishing it. However, the original 1888 version has been preserved in subsequent publications. In his autobiography, written decades later, he reflected: "Now, after many years of reviewing the structure of 'Antar', I can say that I am quite satisfied with the overall coherence and logical structure of the entire work, how I achieved this consistency at that time is difficult to explain, but from my current perspective, I find the structure quite commendable." "Antar" represents a culmination of everything Rimsky-Korsakov learned from Balakirev while serving as a forward-looking work with both inspiration and logical structure, contributing to his status as one of the most influential educators and theorists in Russian music.

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