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Essay: Aram Khachaturian (1903-1978)

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Aram Khachaturian (1903-1978) was a Soviet-Armenian composer and conductor who, along with Shostakovich and Prokofiev, was considered as one of the great Titans of Soviet music. He wrote in virtually all genres including symphonies, ballets, chamber works, and concerti. Well described by music critic Edward Greenfield:

Khachaturian's music notably outshone other Soviet contemporaries in creating a sharply identifiable style, something which his successors have found impossible to emulate. In memorable ideas he stands in some ways as the archetype of the Soviet composer, geared [through his ballets, film scores, incidental music and utilitarian work/march songs] to communication with the widest audience.

This essay will focus on Aram Khachaturian's violin concerto, written in 1940 during his main compositional

period from 1936-1948. It will also examine his friendship with musicians such as David Oistrakh, the prominent Soviet violinist who the concerto is dedicated to. Additionally the paper will briefly take a look at his relations to the communist party; hence how this impacted his compositions and his career.

Aram Khachaturian was born on June 6, 1903 into a middle class family in the city of Tiflis, now Tbilisi, modern Republic of Georgia. Tiflis was at the time a multicultural centre in the Caucasus, bringing together Armenian, Georgian, and Azerbaijani people. It was this cultural environment that became the musical basis of all his works, inarguably contributing to his eccentric compositional style. In an article titled "My Idea of the Folk Element in Music" (1952), Khachaturian wrote:

I grew up in an atmosphere rich in folk music: popular festivities, rites, joyous and sad events in the life of the people always accompanied by music, the vivid tunes of Armenian, Georgian and Azerbaijani songs and dances performed by folk bards [ashugs] and musicians – such were the impressions that became deeply engraved on my memory, that my musical thinking. They shaped my musical consciousness and lay at the foundations of my artistic personality.

At eighteen years old, Khachaturian moved to Moscow and enrolled at the Gnessin Musical Institute in 1922. His composition teachers included Mikhail Gnessin, Reinhold Glière, and later at the Moscow Conservatory, the notable Nikolay Myaskovsky and Sergey Vasilenko. It was after his graduation from the Moscow Conservatory in 1936 that Khachaturian's musical output greatly increased. His most notable works, including his First Symphony, his piano, violin, and cello concertos, the ballet *Gayane*, and the *Masquerade Suite* were all written during this twelve year stage from 1936-1948. In fact, his trilogy of concertos shortly became important staples of Soviet classical music.

In 1939, Khachaturian made a six month trip to the Soviet Republic of Armenia. This visit proved to be of utmost importance, as he was greeted with the opportunity of seeing his native homeland, its people, musical traditions and lifestyle. "Khachaturian's long stay in Armenia brought him a wealth of vivid impressions. His communion with Armenia's national culture and musical practice proved for him, as he put it himself, 'a second conservatoire': The musical impressions which had so influenced the mind of Khachaturian the boy and the youth presented themselves in a new light to Khachaturian the mature artist". It was on this trip that he devoted his soul to the ballet, *Happiness*, which premiered in Yerevan at the Spendiarov Opera and Ballet theatre in September of 1939. "Work on *Happiness* and participation in the festival of Armenian art had brought Khachaturian still closer to Armenia's spiritual life and culture." The ballet was later reworked to *Gayane* in the spring of 1941, when Khachaturian left to the city of Perm alongside the relocated Leningrad Kirov Opera and Ballet Theatre. *Gayane* was an instant sensation, and it used traditional Armenian and Caucasian folk melodies and dances, such as the Georgian dance *Lezginka*. One of the numbers, the *Sabre Dance*, is still performed internationally as a stand-alone orchestral work and often utilized in films.

Khachaturian's life however, was not always a smooth course. In February of 1948, the Communist Party's Central Committee, including head Andrei Zhdanov, denounced the music of Khachaturian, Shostakovich and Prokofiev – declaring it as formalist and anti-Soviet. All three composers had their repertoire omitted from performance halls and institutions, and were forced to publicly apologize. This had a tragic impact on Khachaturian, who was an enthusiastic communist, having officially joined the Communist Party in 1943. He recalled, "I was crushed, destroyed. I seriously considered changing professions". Khachaturian had joined the Union of Soviet Composers as Deputy Chairman in 1937, and two years later he became the Deputy President of the Moscow branch. The denunciation by Zhdanov was more a denunciation of the progress of the Union of Soviet Composers rather than Khachaturian's music itself. The denunciation was restored after the apology, although his musical style stayed the same. In fact, From then on, Khachaturian turned his interest to conducting and teaching at the Gnessin Institute and the Moscow Conservatory. He became the secretary of the Composer's Union in 1957, holding the position until his death. Khachaturian wrote his second ballet *Spartacus*, which premiered in 1956 and effectively proved to be his last internationally renowned work. He died on the first of May, 1978, and was buried at the Komitas Pantheon in Yerevan alongside other Armenian intellectuals and artists.

Aram Khachaturian wrote his violin concerto in a very short period of time. He spent the summer of 1940 in the Ruza Composer's Home, a stretch of cottages and parks along the Moscow River where composers would go to rest, work, and be filled with creativity. The work was finished in about two and a half months – a result of his highly active and imaginative mind. Khachaturian claims "I worked without any effort, sometimes my

thoughts and imaginations outraced the hand that was covering the staves with notes. The themes came to me in such abundance that I had a hard time of putting them in some sort of order". The premiere of the concerto took place in Moscow on November 16, 1940, performed by its dedicatee, David Oistrakh, who Khachaturian kept close contact with while writing the work. The concerto was enthusiastically received, and just one year after its premiere, won the highest artistic award of the Soviet Union, the Stalin Prize, which was later renamed as the State Prize. Khachaturian's goal in writing the work was "to create a virtuoso piece employing the symphonic principle of development and yet understandable to the general public". This proved to be a success, as upon hearing the opening movement of the concerto, the listener is instantly hooked on the driving rhythms and the wealthy memorable melodies that dominate the entire work. The concerto is characteristic of traditional Armenian melodies, yet it does not directly quote any folk songs. Instead it uses rhythms reminiscent of folk music as well as melodic passages incorporating intervals of a second – particularly an augmented second. "This discordant interval haunting me comes from the trio of the folk instruments consisting of the tar, kamancha, and tambourine. I relish such sonorities and to my ear[s] they are as natural as any consonance". Although Khachaturian himself never admitted any extra musical association with his violin concerto, in my opinion, the three movements can be interpreted as a chronological history of the Armenian people, particularly the genocide of 1915. However, during the USSR, the genocide was largely ignored by the Soviet government, so it would not have been appropriate for Khachaturian to publicly state this.

The first movement describes the years of ancient Armenia, when the kingdom was constantly in battle with surrounding empires such as the Persians, Romans, and the Arabs. Two contrasting themes are presented and developed throughout the entire movement. The orchestra enters with a powerful introduction, and the violin comes in shortly after with a rhythmic passage (see figure 1.a) followed by a fast dance-like figure. Listening to the opening rhythmic passage, it is hard not to imagine a horse's gallop – which is a loose imagery of going to battle.

Figure 1.a: rhythmic opening of the violin solo depicting a horse's gallop

From the first moment the violinist has the opportunity to show his/her virtuosity, as the first movement is filled with fast and complex passages. The orchestra part too is not in the 'background' as traditional accompaniment, but instead serves as a solid foundation throughout the movement, developing rich harmonies and flying rhythms. The first theme juxtaposes the second theme, which comes in almost as a surprise to the listener. It is a highly poetic and lyrical melody that is characteristic of an Armenian folk tune, especially noting the abundant use of the interval of a second. This lovely romantic theme in my opinion is a love scene of two lovers in the midst of a chaotic battle between two kingdoms. The use of portamentos in the violin part and its dramatic conversation with the string section of the orchestra gives hint of a scene dominated by romance. Throughout the movement we see the development of these two themes, as the movement alternates between lyrical and rhythmic passages. It ends triumphantly, as if the "battle is won," after a virtuosic cadenza leads directly to the recapitulation of the main theme, and the movement crescendoes in drama and intensity all the way until the last chords.

Prior to an analysis of the second movement, it is important to understand the history of the Armenians during World War One. Since the last 19th century, with the rise of the Young Turks government, the large Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire, which amounted about two and a half million people, was facing acts of discrimination for their Christian religion. Armenians were forced to change their names to protect their identity, as well as pay taxes simply for their race. On April 24 1915, over two hundred Armenian intellectuals, town leaders, artists, and professors were rounded up and sent to be executed. That day officially marks the beginning of the Armenian Genocide, and for the next four years Armenian women, children, and men would face starvation, torture, death marches, and massacre to unimaginable degrees. Yet even today, the Turkish government, which directly transitioned from the Ottoman Empire, refuses to acknowledge that what happened in 1915 was in fact a genocide. Their 'version' of the massacres was that the government was merely evacuating the Armenian people to a safer region, and that many unfortunately died on the way due to poor organization.

The second movement is in my opinion a tragic reflection of the Armenian Genocide. The movement opens with the bassoon playing a slow passage that the clarinet later takes over. Suddenly, the orchestra in tutti plays five clashing chords which is followed by a slow waltz-like interlude before the soloist comes in. The

violin enters with the melancholy theme which becomes the backbone of the movement. Khachaturian himself marked the opening as “cantabile espressivo,” or “expressive, in a singing style”. The use of the hairpin, in the third bar of the melody is a good tool to bring out the expressive character. Additionally, in the last two bars of the excerpt below Khachaturian decorated the motif to have three détaché notes instead of one dotted quarter. We hear the use of portamentos and decorative shifts which further contribute to the sorrowful mood of the movement (see figure 2.a).

Figure 2.a: main theme uses slow shifts and portamentos to create a somber feel

The sorrowful harmonies in the orchestra add to the sense of hopelessness so well depicted in the violin part. Again we can see the use of folk-like characteristics in the movement, especially in the solo violin part, where the use of fast triplets and grace notes are present. The movement continues to a ‘marche funebre’ section, where the second theme is first presented in the violas with descending pizzicati lines in the lower strings. The soloist enters playing the figure ‘con sordino’, giving the sense of extreme sorrow and as if it is being played from a distance. The rhythmic eighth notes in the orchestra gives the section a march-like feel (see example 2.b below).

Figure 2.b: the muted solo line with the rhythmic accompaniment by orchestra. Note: for formatting reasons, the piano reduction is used.

The third movement is a typical finale for a concerto, combining brilliant virtuosity and exciting passages. “In point of form it is a kind of rondo with the lively and graceful dance theme recurring again and again”. It is in a fast 3/8 time, and the entire movement has a joyful, dance like mood, notwithstanding however the intense and powerful score writing (see figure 3.a).

Figure 3.a: the opening main theme that is repeated in a ‘rondo form’ manner throughout the third movement. There is a lyrical middle section that brings back themes already heard, but in varied form. The main joyful theme shortly returns and excitingly ends the movement. The persistent sixteenth note passages in such a vivace tempo make this movement an outstandingly challenging work in violin repertoire.

Khachaturian’s violin concerto is one of his most celebrated works. Since its premiere, which was an instant sensation, it has been played by almost every renowned violinist, and is to this day considered, on an international level, as one of the main pillars of violin repertoire. With its memorable melodies, rich, illustrious harmonies, and fantastic rhythms, Khachaturian has succeeded his goal of writing a concerto to rival the violin concerti of Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Mendelssohn. The work is also an excellent example of twentieth century music that is liked by the majority of classical musicians. The concerto does not try to imitate the old nor does it copy modernistic trends. Instead Khachaturian is a “searching and original composer, [who] does not strive to obey the dictates of modernistic fashion”. This is not only visible in his violin concerto, but in all his works. His unique compositional style is a result of his childhood in Tiflis, where he was consistently exposed to Armenian and Caucasian folk music. This, combined with his education in Moscow, where he studied with one of the most well known Soviet composers, Nikolai Myaskovsky, produced the individuality of Khachaturian’s music that is unlike anything else of its kind. Aram Khachaturian is considered as a national treasure in the present day Republic of Armenia, being the only Armenian classical composer to rise to international fame.

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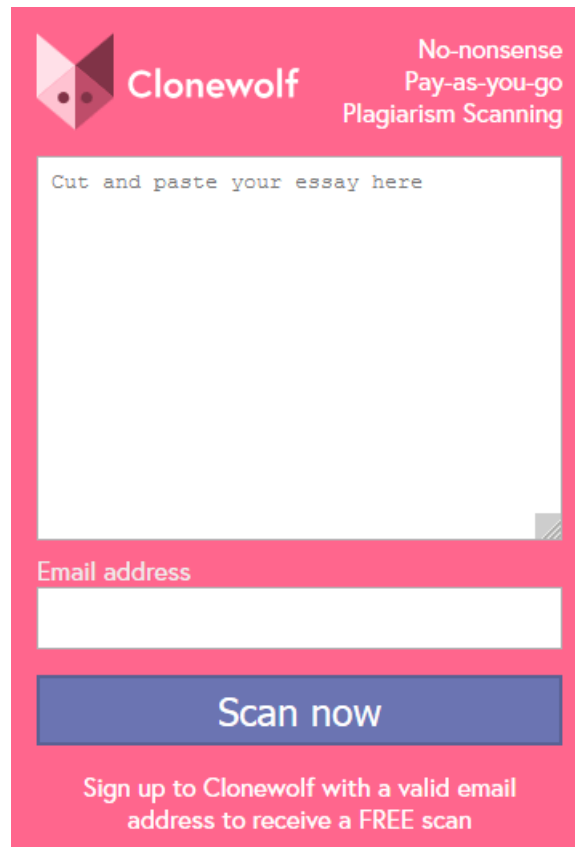
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