

Program Notes

Text by Robert Markow

Aram Khachaturian remains one of the most brilliant composers to come out of the former Soviet Union. So highly regarded was Khachaturian in Russia that his obituary was written by none other than Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Communist Party at the time. One of the pallbearers at the funeral was the Premier of the Soviet Union, Aleksey Kosygin.

Tonight's concert presents two of Khachaturian's best-known compositions, plus a work seldom heard outside of Russia, the Second Symphony, a work glowing with patriotic fervor, folk influences of Armenia, and dazzling orchestration.

The composer described his native Tbilisi as "a city rich in a music tradition of its own. From boyhood I was steeped in an atmosphere of folk music. As far back as I can remember, there were always Armenian, Georgian and Azerbaijani folk tunes played and sung ... The original substance of these impressions, formed in an early childhood in close communion with the people, has always remained the natural soil nourishing my work." With these words in mind, it is not surprising to find that most of Khachaturian's music is thoroughly steeped in modal melodies, driving rhythms, exhilarating dance patterns and instrumental combinations reminiscent of folk orchestras of his Armenian heritage. He lies buried in Yerevan, Armenia.

Khachaturian: Experts from the ballet "Gayane"

Gayane (also variously spelled Gayané or Gayaneh or Gayne) was first seen on December 9, 1942 in Molotov (today Perm) in the course of a visit of the Kirov Theater from Leningrad. Khachaturian revised the score twice. The original story revolved around a patriotic Armenian peasant girl Gayane and her brutal husband Giko. Giko turns traitor, nearly kills Gayane and their daughter, and is eventually destroyed. Gayane is saved by Kazakov, Commander of a Red Army patrol.

From the full-length, four-act complete ballet, we hear at this concert

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a suite of five excerpts, four from the First Suite, and one from the Third (the “Sabre Dance”), all compiled by the composer shortly after the ballet’s premiere.

Ayesha is a Kurdish girl in love with Gayane’s brother Armen. Her alluring dance is set to the waltz rhythm. There is no mistaking the kind of men the Mountaineers are: rough, tough, easily incited to anger. Heavy use of percussion and trombones lends an element of menace to their music. “Gayane’s Adagio” is a quiet, hauntingly austere number for strings alone. No *Gayane* Suite would be complete without that blazing, two-and-a-half-minute “Sabre Dance,” Khachaturian’s single best-known piece. The composer dashed it off in a single evening and was greatly surprised by the enormous popularity it achieved. It is now commonly used by figure skaters, at circus performances, and in numerous films, animated films, TV series, video games and commercials. It exists in almost countless arrangements, including for concert band, several for solo piano, and one for violin and piano by Jascha Heifetz. The suite heard at this concert ends with the fiery, powerfully rhythmic “Lezghinka,” a folk dance originating among the Lezghin people of the Caucasus.

Aram Khachaturian: Born in Tbilisi (formerly Tiflis), Georgia, June 6, 1903
Died in Moscow, May 1, 1978

Work composed: 1939-42 **World premiere:** December 9, 1942 in Perm performed by the Kirov Ballet

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, alto saxophone, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (tambourine, side drums, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, glockenspiel, xylophone), harp, strings

Khachaturian: Violin Concerto in D minor

Khachaturian’s Violin Concerto has been described as “a virtuoso’s dream,” and justly so. It bristles with fearsome difficulties, incorporating a good many of the soloist’s repertory of special effects and techniques: pyrotechnical displays of scales and arpeggios, pizzicato (plucking the strings), *spiccato* (bouncing the bow on the strings), double stops (playing two notes simultaneously) and quadruple stops as a grand gesture at the

conclusion. But the lyrical element is not overlooked, and one can find lush, romantic themes in all three movements. Two of the three themes in the opening movement are of this nature, and Khachaturian thought highly enough of one of them to bring it back in the final movement as well. Grigory Shneerson, in his study of Khachaturian, observes that the central movement suggests the improvisations of Armenian *ashugs* (bards). The brilliant finale adheres to the traditional rondo form with a memorable principal theme and enough virtuoso high-jinks to keep a soloist on his or her toes and listeners on the edge of their seats.

David Oistrakh, the concerto's dedicatee, gave the world premiere in Moscow on November 16, 1940, Alexander Gauk conducting. In 1968, Jean-Pierre Rampal, with the composer's permission, transcribed the solo part for flute, in which form it has become nearly as popular with flutists as the original has with violinists. The concerto won Khachaturian the Stalin Prize in 1941.

Work composed: 1940 **World premiere:** November 16, 1940 at the Soviet Music Festival in Moscow conducted by Aleksandr Gauk with David Oistrakh as soloist

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (tambourine, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, glockenspiel, xylophone), harp, strings, solo violin

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Khachaturian: Symphony No. 2 in E minor "The Bell"

Like Shostakovich's Seventh and Eighth Symphonies, Khachaturian's Second is a wartime symphony directly inspired by and descriptive of the tremendous suffering the Russian people endured during the Great Patriotic War (as they called World War II). The work takes its subtitle, "The Bell," from the tocsin (alarm bell) heard in the powerful opening moments and several times later in the symphony. A tocsin is traditionally sounded to warn of approaching invaders, but to Khachaturian it also represented "a call for vigilance and for struggle against the forces of evil." The world premiere of the Second Symphony was given by the USSR State Symphony Orchestra in Moscow on December 30, 1943, with Boris Khaykin conducting.

In his Second Symphony, Khachaturian successfully combined elements of native Armenian folk music, forms derived from the western symphonic tradition, and program music. Its opening is one of the most arresting in all music – an assault on the ears that biographer Victor Yuzefovich likens to a burst of molten lava, while “the sounds of the tocsin draw the audience into the suffering it expresses.” Following the introductory material, which contains the seeds of what is to follow, violas quietly announce the movement’s main theme. This rises to a climax, at which point the full orchestra hammers out a furiously driving rhythmic pattern that will serve as the basis of the second theme (solo bassoon) and that will accompany most of the development section. Piano, xylophone, triangle, piccolo and trumpets contribute to the bright, at times almost brittle sound that characterizes much of Khachaturian’s music.

The second movement vividly evokes the exotic sounds, swirling motion and colorful costumes of Armenian dance music.

The third movement consists of two main elements: a solemn, lyrical theme derived from an Armenian lament accompanied by the incessant, almost hypnotic rhythm of a funeral march, and the thirteenth-century Gregorian chant for the dead, the “Dies irae.” One, then the other, is heard, and at one point the two are combined. The movement rises slowly, inexorably, to a massive climax, then expires to the ponderous, quiet tread of the funeral march.

The finale is ushered in with brass fanfares. Brass continue to dominate the soundscape in the movement’s main theme, a chorale first heard in the horns and trombones. The chorale-theme returns in various colors in the course of the movement, always proudly and denoting a sense of victory. “This is Khachaturian at his best,” writes Yuzefovich, “a master of sweeping orchestral frescos.” Near the end, the main theme from the first movement returns as a countersubject to the finale’s main theme, the tocsin is sounded again as a reminder of the eternal vigilance needed to ward off the forces of evil, and the symphony ends in a blaze of jubilation.

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Khachaturian revised the symphony several times. The version we hear at this concert was made in 1969, in which the original order of the two inner movements is reversed, the brass is strengthened in the finale, and various other details have been adjusted.

Work composed: 1942-43 **World premiere:** December 30, 1943 at the Moscow Conservatory by the USSR State Symphony Orchestra conducted by Boris Khaykin

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, E♭clarinet, 2 B-flat clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (side drum, bass drum, cymbals, wood block, tubular bells, Glockenspiel, xylophone), 2 harps, piano, strings

Formerly a horn player in the Montreal Symphony, **Robert Markow** now writes program notes for orchestras as well as for numerous other musical organizations in North America and Asia. He taught at Montreal's McGill University for many years, has led music tours to several countries, and writes for numerous leading classical music journals.

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2022 Season Subscription Concerts Lineup

September

Thu. Sep 15, 19:00
at Tokyo Opera City Concert Hall

Fri. Sep 16, 19:00
at Suntory Hall

Mon./Holiday Sep 19, 15:00
at Bunkamura Orchard Hall

conductor: Andrea Battistoni,
Chief Conductor

Liszt/Battistoni: *Années de pèlerinage, Deuxième année - Italie*, S. 161: No. 7,
Après une lecture du Dante
(After a Reading of Dante from Years of Pilgrimage "Second Year: Italy" S. 161 No. 7)
Mahler: *Symphony No. 5*

Single tickets available

October

Thu. Oct 20, 19:00
at Suntory Hall

Fri. Oct 21, 19:00
at Tokyo Opera City Concert Hall

Sun. Oct 23, 15:00
at Bunkamura Orchard Hall

conductor: Myung-Whun Chung,
Honorary Music Director

Verdi:
Opera "*Falstaff*" in concert style
with Japanese supertitles

Libretto by Arrigo Boito
from William Shakespeare's
"*The Merry Wives of Windsor*"

Single tickets available

Inquiries about tickets > <https://www.tpo.or.jp/en/>