

## FEATURE REVIEW by Huntley Dent

**KHACHATRYAN Piano Sonatas: in f#, op. 2, “Battle of Avarayr”; in c#, op. 1, “David of Sassoun” • Grigor Khachatryan (pn) • ALBANY 1795/96 (2 CDs: 89:46)**

National and personal memories figure at the heart of these two pictorial piano sonatas by the talented pianist-composer Grigor Khachatryan. The enclosed program note speaks with gratitude about Khachatryan’s American experience after arriving from his homeland of Armenia at 15. Sponsored by a family in rural Indiana, he showed exceptional musical talent, becoming in time the student of Luba Edlina-Dubinsky at the music school of Indiana University. Her name will sound familiar to many readers, since she was the widow of the legendary Rostislav Dubinsky, a founding member of the Borodin Quartet who served as first violin from 1945 to 1975. (Luba wonderfully expressed her status as a musical aristocrat when she told her students, “I don’t charge money for piano lessons because my lessons are priceless.”)

Khachatryan remained at Indiana University from 2002 to 2015, gaining multiple degrees, including a performance doctorate in piano. Before listening to this release, I was reminded of *My Armenia*, a CD of music for violin and piano by Sergey Khachatryan, perhaps the best-known musician from that country today (reviewed in *Fanfare* 39:4). I don’t know if there is a family connection between the Khachatryans, but on both albums the issue of national identity is bound up with musical identity. The father of Armenian classical music, Komitas Vardapet (1869–1936), figures prominently in Sergey’s program, not only for musical reasons but because Vardapet was a political prisoner under the Turks during the infamous genocide conducted against Armenia during World War I. This horror cost between 800,000 and 1.5 million lives. International pressure led to Vardapet’s release, but the trauma of what he witnessed broke him psychologically, and his composing career ended in 1916.

In these two piano sonatas, Grigor Khachatryan fuses music and history at a farther remove from raw emotions, since the titles refer to medieval events. Still, the theme of foreign oppression lingers. In the sonata on CD 1, which bears the early opus number of op. 2, the Battle of Avarayr took place in 451 AD against the empire of the Sassanid Persians and is considered the first armed defense of Christianity against an invader. The sonata’s first movement is an exciting *moto perpetuo* that can be heard as battle music, or more abstractly as a toccata in the manner of Schumann and Prokofiev. The second movement is ballad-like, followed by a slow, halting funeral march. The finale returns to the mode of keyboard excitement, and its modal idiom links it back to Vardapet’s style, which fused classical elements with traditional Armenian folk material.

The Piano Sonata “David of Sassound” on CD 2 is Khachatryan’s op. 1, dedicated to the hero of Armenia’s national epic, which also bears his name. Dating to the eighth century, the poem was passed down orally and recounts the hero’s struggle against another invader, this time the Arabs. Khachatryan’s style here is not pictorial, and to my ears the five movements are like traditional *pièces caractéristiques* made popular in the Romantic era, with a strong folk-music feeling, akin to the Nordic element in Grieg’s *Lyric Pieces*. The second and fifth movements are fast and dance-like. The songful first movement, along with two slow movements, bring Khachatryan’s considerable melodic gift to the fore.

Despite the early opus numbers, both sonatas were composed in 2019. They are immediately accessible and winning pieces, communicating the heartfelt feelings one also finds in the program notes. The composer offers fine performances as pianist, and the recorded sound is all it should be. Warmly recommended. **Huntley Dent**

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