

FEATURE REVIEW by Jerry Dubins

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)

No, the name is not misspelled. This is not Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian, whom everyone is familiar with. This is Armenian composer and pianist Grigor Khachatryan (b. 1986), here making his *Fanfare* debut. Heretofore, the only Khachatryan I’d previously encountered was violinist Sergey on recordings of the Sibelius and Khachaturian violin concertos and of Brahms’s violin sonatas. Coincidentally or not, Sergey was also born in the same Armenian capital city of Yerevan, and in 1985, one year before Grigor. Are they related, or is Khachatryan a common name in the Yerevan phone book? I don’t know.

Khachatryan began his musical studies at Barsej Kanachyan’s Music School of Yerevan. Shortly thereafter, he came to the U.S. to continue his musical studies at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University under the tutelage of distinguished professor of piano, Luba Edlina-Dubinsky. There he earned his Bachelor, Master, and Performer Diploma degrees. Khachatryan also holds a doctorate degree in Piano Performance, Composition, and Music Theory from the Jacobs School of Music.

Recognized as a prominent soloist, chamber musician, composer, and pedagogue, Khachatryan is Assistant Professor of Piano at Concordia College, Moorhead. In addition to applied piano lessons, he also teaches piano literature and piano pedagogy courses and serves as the coordinator of the secondary piano area. Khachatryan is also the director of the annual Concordia Piano Competition and Concordia Midwinter Piano Festival.

As a concertizing pianist, Khachatryan’s solo and chamber repertoire is vast, with works ranging from Bach to Ligeti. And as a prizewinner of major international piano competitions, such as the Cincinnati World Piano Competition, the Russian International Piano Competition, the Bloomington Symphony Orchestra Competition, Arabkir National Piano Competition of Yerevan, and the Elite Generation Armenian National Competition, Khachatryan has performed concertos of Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, Grieg, and Tchaikovsky throughout the world. Recently, he toured nationally with the Concordia Symphony Orchestra, performing Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto, which you can watch and listen to on YouTube.

Regarding Khachatryan’s output as a composer, thus far, all we have to go on are these two sizeable, programmatic piano sonatas on this two-CD set. Assigned opus numbers 1 and 2, they’re the only compositions listed on Khachatryan’s website (grigorkhachatryan.com/compositions), which conveniently provides the full scores to both works.

As noted above, the sonatas are sizeable—four movements over a timespan of 42 minutes for the Sonata No. 2 on disc 1, and five movements over a timespan of 48 minutes for the Sonata No. 1 on disc 2. I do not know why Khachatryan chose to present the sonatas in reverse order, and he

doesn't tell us in his extensive album note. The printed scores on his website are displayed in normal order.

Also as noted above, the sonatas are programmatic—not contemporarily political *per se*, but historical in nature. Each sonata pays tribute to one of ancient Armenia's inspirational leaders and heroes. The legends are long and complex—more so than Khachaturyan's sonatas themselves—so I'm not going to relate the entire epic that played out on the stage of history between 428 and 484 AD. The full story is laid out in the accompanying booklet. The “Cliff Notes” version is the tale of the Armenian Kingdom losing its independence to the Sassanid Empire, followed by the Sassanids' suppression of the Armenians' religious freedom, enforcing their conversion from Christianity to Zoroastrianism. You can guess what happens next. Hundreds of thousands on both sides of the holy war between competing faiths die on the battlefield. The bloodletting over, the story has a sort of David and Goliath ending, with the inferior Armenian forces, led by General Vardan Mamikonian, prevailing, leading to the signing of the Treaty of Navarshak, which guaranteed the Armenians the exercise of religious freedom, the first such treaty of its kind in history to be adopted.

Given that Khachaturyan's “Battle of Avarayr” Sonata purports to depict the trajectory of these events, with special attention to the bloody battle, its aftermath, and its consequences, you could say it's as much a multi-movement tone poem for solo piano as it is a sonata. My trepidation, of course, was that I was about to listen to 42 minutes of post-Modernist, pre-Apocalypse cacophony from a composer young enough to be my grandson. You can imagine then my surprise, relief, and genuine pleasure when the music turned out to be nothing like that at all.

In fact, it's in a key and as tonal as can be. In part, the *Presto e molto agitato* first movement *almost* sounds like it could be one of the fleeter-paced preludes from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. I say *almost* because the overall impression is more like a Bach prelude that was written as an étude by Alkan and turned into a cadenza by Busoni. All I can say is that it's really neat—a sort of gigue for a giant clattering pianola—and I love it, which goes to prove once again that the correlation between music and visual imagery is non-specific at best. If this music is meant to depict a mighty battle, we would only make that connection if it were told to us in advance, and even then, each listener might well substitute his or her own mental picture.

There's no question, to my ear at least, that very late Liszt, Scriabin, and Debussy are at the heart of the very beautiful Impressionistic second movement (*Moderato appassionato*). The third movement, marked *Tempo di marcia*, is clearly in tread, tone, and mood, a funeral march. I presume this to be a dirge for the thousands killed in the war. The dolorous atmosphere is palpable in its poignancy. At the 3:59 mark, a comforting cadence that resolves in the major mode reminds me of something from one of the later piano sonatas by Beethoven. The finale begins with a *Grave* introduction, which very, very slowly accelerates into the *Allegro con forza*, which has the character of some ancient ritualistic dance. This soon gives way to a contrasting section that's slower, quiet, and ruminative. The ritual dance returns, followed by the quiet section again, and then finally a reprise of the dance, making the movement a sort of A-B-A¹-B¹-A² modified rondo.

Khachaturyan has embraced fairly traditional standards of Classical form and wedded them to an eclectic array of late Romantic and mainstream 20th-century styles and modes of expression that make for a very beautiful sonata, and a riveting one that holds the attention for its entire duration. That, in itself, is an exceptional accomplishment for only the young composer's second opus. This listener's attention was held unflagging for 42 minutes, and that is testament to a structural integrity occasionally lacking even in some later works by some of the greatest and most famous composers.

The story that Khachaturyan's Sonata in C# Minor, op. 1, on disc two, purports to relate is not as straightforwardly based on historical events as is "The Battle of Avarayr." Part history, part fable, part *Lord of the Rings* fantasy/action/adventure tale, *David of Sassoun* is the third cycle of the Armenian epic titled *The Daredevils of Sassoun*, often cited as one of the most important works of Armenian folklore. Passed down through the generations by oral tradition, "this recital of the legendary deeds of four generations of strongmen in a warrior community in the Armenian highlands is in the tradition of heroic folktales that dramatize the story of a whole nation and voice its deepest sentiments and aspirations." Scholars have noted certain parallels between the ancient Armenian legend and specific characters and events chronicled in *2 Kings* and *Isaiah* of the Bible. But the trials, tribulations, and eventual triumphs of David of Sassoun follow a long and circuitous path that may be difficult to follow for the non-Armenian Westerner unfamiliar with the nation's history and culture. Luckily, no such prerequisites of knowledge and understanding are required to respond to and appreciate Khachaturyan's "David of Sassoun" Sonata.

If the composer's second-born sonata, as described above, embraced fairly traditional standards of Classical form and wedded them to an eclectic array of late Romantic and mainstream 20th-century styles and modes of expression, his first-born sonata is even more unabashedly Romantic, and now with a rather strong Armenian ethno-musical scent hanging in the air. One can smell the camels plodding across the Eurasian Steppes in the short, two-minute introductory movement. With but a few chromatic adjustments and redirections of harmonic progressions, this could be a Bach chorale prelude, borne from afar by the cheerless caravan.

The toccata-like second movement (*Allegro vivace*) once again calls Bach's counterpoint to mind, though this lengthy movement goes off in a number of different directions. For a moment or two, we hear a bell-like chiming that echoes passages in Beethoven's last piano sonatas. Other moments suggest the late piano pieces of Brahms. Add to those two more Bs of Russian pedigree, Borodin and Balakirev, and possibly one A, Khachaturyan's Armenian compatriot, Alexander Arutiunian, stir well with several other ingredients from the late 19th- and early 20th-century solo piano literature, and you'll have a good idea of the aromatic "synthecol" cocktail Khachaturyan has distilled, which you can consume to your heart's content without suffering a hangover.

The gorgeous slow movement (*Grave cantabile*) seems to find its roots in the slow movements of Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" and Schubert's Bb Sonata, D 960. At almost 17 minutes, this sustained third movement of Khachaturyan's C#-Minor Sonata strikes me as the heart and soul of the work. Its beauty is breathtaking, and memory of it will haunt you long after it's over. I'll take two words to describe the fourth movement (*Adagio*): "sad Satie." The finale (*Allegro con fuoco*

ma non troppo) is another of Khachaturyan's jazzy, gigue-like movements, but it leans heavily towards the minor, painting the jaunty music poignant, and ending with a flourish of rolling chords that sound like they came right from the closing measures of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata.

On the whole—attractiveness of the music aside—I find Khachaturyan's "David Sassoun" Sonata to be less cohesive—i.e., not as much of a piece—than his "Battle of Avarayr" Sonata. My first impression was that "David Sassoun," assumedly being the composer's first major, large-scale work, gave false credence once again to the discredited axiom that "the first pancake never comes out any good." But on second and third hearings, I concluded that there was a different cause for the seeming lack of continuity and coherence in Khachaturyan's First Sonata. The work follows—or attempts to—a very long and twisted literary narrative that is not necessarily linear in its expository methods of storytelling. Eventually, it gets to where it's going, but in a roundabout, meandering way. The saga of *David Sassoun*, near and dear to the hearts of the Armenians as it is, may not be a story best told in a musical setting.

When it comes to the performances of the two sonatas, I think we have to allow that *pianist* Grigor Khachaturyan knows the mind and heart of *composer* Grigor Khachaturyan better than anyone. Besides, no one else, as far I know, has thus far played these works. Following the scores, as Khachaturyan's website enables one to do, it's evident that the technical difficulties the composer/pianist has set himself are formidable. It's also evident that he plays what he has written in an authoritative and convincing manner.

The criticism that is sure to be heard from certain quarters is that there's nothing new here, that the music is eclectic and highly derivative. I can't argue with that. But when you listen to the *Grave cantabile* movement of the C#-Minor Sonata, none of that will matter, for you will be carried off, in Dylan Thomas's words, to Khachaturyan's "emporium on the hill." **Jerry Dubins**

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