

FEATURE REVIEW by Robert Schulslaper

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)

Grigor Khachatryan's pride in his Armenian heritage is evident in the titles and programs of these two major works, Piano Sonata in F# Minor, op. 2, "Battle of Avarayr," and Piano Sonata in C# Minor, op. 1, "David of Sassoun." The events he's memorialized, one a pivotal battle and the other the stuff of legend, impel composition on a broad canvas: two large-scale sonatas that taken together unfold over the course of an hour and a half. The similarities between the larger-than-life events and the protagonists they celebrate is reflected in the congruence of technical, melodic, and developmental procedures in both sonatas: Put more simply, they employ a common language, tone, and technique, but allow for stylistic variety within their shared framework. Although Khachatryan hasn't deliberately sought to infuse an authentic Armenian voice into his work, he does admit to being the sum of all his musical experiences, and also that he's no stranger to Armenian music of every variety, from folk to classical. Accordingly, there's a subtle national flavor throughout that speaks of ancient, no doubt subliminal, influences filtered through the classical training of a contemporary composer. For example, in the introduction to "Battle of Avarayr"'s concluding movement, I persist in imagining traces of an instrumentally accompanied bardic recitation of an orally transmitted epic. In general, in the slower movements, trills and crisp ornaments lend the gradually unfolding melodies a mildly exotic flavor. That's not to say that antique reminiscences dominate—there are moments that draw unmistakably on Bachian flourishes and contrapuntal devices alongside Brahmsian or Chopinesque leanings. Still, these are transitory moments within the body of these determinably tonal works that are, in the end, shaped by Khachatryan's personal voice.

Programmatically conceived as the sonatas are, it's not surprising to find driving, rhythmically exciting movements illustrating the furious pace of battle, the sweep of cavalries across the plains, the clash of arms. "Battle of Avarayr"'s opening *Presto e molto agitato*, a toccata in all but name, sets the scene, sustained throughout except for relaxed lyrical interludes.

Khachatryan's strong technical training is evident in his forcefully confident execution. Note also the speedy runs and elaborative figures—models of clarity and precision—surrounding the primary melodic kernel of "David of Sassoun"'s concluding *Allegro con fuoco ma non troppo*, together with the uninhibited attack of the final unison descent into the bass. (Perhaps one of those Chopin-inspired moments I mentioned earlier, modeled on the final bars of op. 10/4?) Other movements compelling attention include the *Adagio*'s plaintive, predominantly minor-key waltz; the *Tempo di Marcia*'s gravely funereal rhythm, so familiar from Chopin's or Beethoven's imperishable legacy; the sweetly pastoral suggestiveness of "Battle of Avarayr"'s *Moderato appassionato*, perhaps analogous to the love theme from the "other" Khachatryan's (Aram Khachaturian) *Spartacus* ballet; and the *Grave contabile* from "David of Sassoun," similar in length and structural importance to the "Hammerklavier"'s *Adagio*.

The booklet's stirring cover painting, together with the heroic tales recounted in great detail within, add additional layers of meaning to the sonatas. The music's persistence in my memory, along with the vividly imagined scenarios it inspired, indicates that, to me at least, Grigor

Khachatrayn has accomplished his aim of creating a fusion of art, history, and legend that's worth hearing. **Robert Schulslaper**

This article originally appeared in Issue 43:4 (Mar/Apr 2020) of Fanfare Magazine.