

FEATURE REVIEW by Henry Fogel

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)

If you insist that new music be cutting edge, or at the very least that it opens some considerable new ground, this release will disappoint you. Grigor Khachatryan is an Armenian-born composer and pianist who is 32 years old now. He serves as a professor on the faculty of Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. In his bio in the booklet, Khachatryan traces his love of traditional piano repertoire to a gift of recordings by Van Cliburn and Sergei Rachmaninoff when he was a student. There are many passages in his own piano sonatas that sound as if they could have been composed by Beethoven, Schumann, or Rachmaninoff, and there are no passages that will challenge even the most resolutely conservative listener. These are conventional sonatas largely in the Romantic idiom, except for an occasional passage in the Second Sonata that stretches the harmonic language slightly.

Both of these sonatas draw their inspiration from Armenian history. Khachatryan grew up near two monumental statues in the capital city Yervan. One commemorated Vaerdan Mamikonian, who led the battle of 451 AD against the repressive Sassanid Empire; the other portrayed David of Sassoun, another legendary national hero. While Khachatryan provides notes that describe the heroic deeds of these historic figures, I hear very little that is pictorial in the music, except for occasional martial hints. What I do hear are two very attractive piano sonatas which juxtapose lyricism and drama in much the way that traditional composers have been doing since the 18th century. If these works lack the aura of greatness found in Beethoven and Schumann, they nonetheless express enough imagination and depth of feeling to make a very attractive impression.

The composer plays the two works very well, making me interested to hear him in standard repertoire. The recording, which Khachatryan himself oversaw, is excellent, with space around the piano but not so much as to lose clarity. I think that any collector with a taste for Romanticism will find this disc a very pleasant listening experience. **Henry Fogel**

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