

Marlow U3A Music Appreciation Group, July 2009

Aram Khachaturian (1903-1978)



Aram Khachaturian (1903-1978)

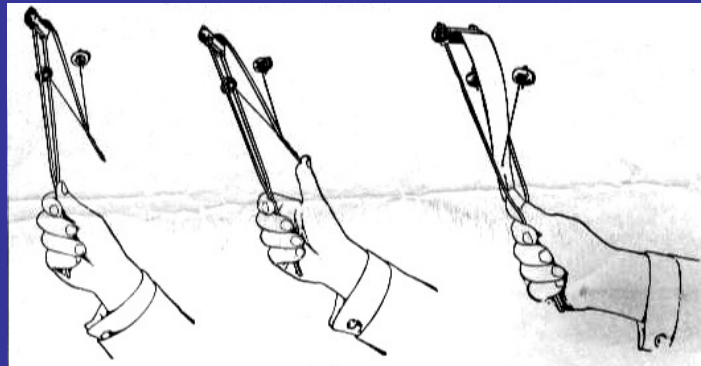
- Born in Tbilisi into a relatively comfortable middle-class family
- Showed no interest in pursuing a career in music until, at the age of 19, he approached the composer Mikhail Gnesin to give him lessons in composition
- Attended the Moscow Conservatory where he came under the influence of Nicolai Myaskovsky, and composed small pieces for piano, which showed a pronounced Asiatic character.

- ♪ Gradually he attempted more ambitious music, moving from the rustic *Armenian Folksong and Dance for wind orchestra* of 1932 to his *First Symphony* in 1934. This work established him as a composer to be reckoned with.

Piano Concerto (1935-6)

- ♪ More dramatic in impact was the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* of 1935-36. Its popularity in the Soviet Union was immediate. After it was introduced to American audiences in 1942, it became a staple part of the performing repertoire of several pianists.
- ♪ The second movement is a series of variations on a Tbilisi folk song, and contains a part for the **flexatone** – in imitation of an Armenian folk instrument (though nowadays the flexatone part is often omitted).

- ♪ The Flexatone is a modern percussion instrument consisting of a small flexible metal sheet suspended in a wire frame ending in a handle.
- ♪ A wooden knob mounted on a strip of spring steel lies on each side of the metal sheet. The player holds the flexatone in one hand with the palm around the wire frame and the thumb on the free end of the spring steel. The player then shakes the instrument with a trembling movement which causes the beaters to strike the sides of the metal sheet. While shaking the handle, the musician makes a high- or low-pitched sound depending on the curve given to the blade by the pressure from his thumb.



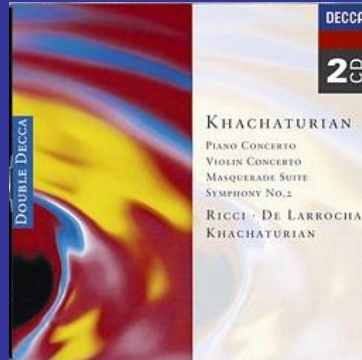
Position for lowest note

Position for ascending the scale

Position for highest note

Violin Concerto (1940)

- ♪ Khachaturian followed this with the *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D minor* (1940), which was equally successful in the Soviet Union. It won the Stalin Prize and the advocacy of the brilliant young violinist, David Oistrakh.



Violin Concerto

- ♪ We'll hear the third movement: *Allegro vivace*
- ♪ Khachaturian carefully balanced his folk-like elements with the type of virtuosity which appealed to top-flight violinists, and the work is still heard regularly in concert halls.

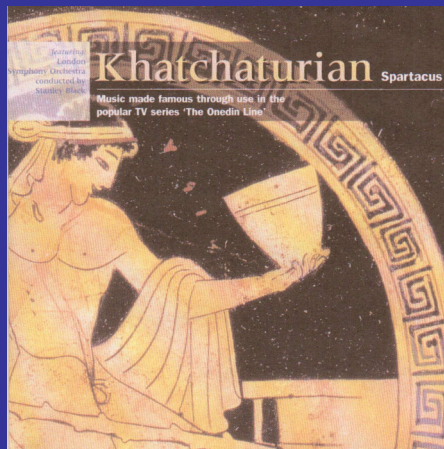
Masquerade (1941)

- ♪ In 1939 Khachaturian was invited to compose incidental music for the satirical-romantic play *Masquerade* by Mikhail Lermontov.
- ♪ The play was performed in 1941 and the Suite was prepared in 1944.

Masquerade (1941)

We'll hear two movements:

- ♪ Waltz
- ♪ Nocturne



Gayaneh (1942)

- His first ballet *Gayaneh*, named after an Armenian saint, set great store by his Armenian roots. Some of the dances are positively rustic, the rhythms violent and marked with clanging percussion, the melodies extremely vocal. Khachaturian made no bones about using as many kinds of Armenian dance as he could fit into the score, which runs for over an hour in its uncut version.
- The famous Sabre Dance has taken on a life of its own, played so often out of context that few who hear it are able to name its composer or the ballet from which it comes.

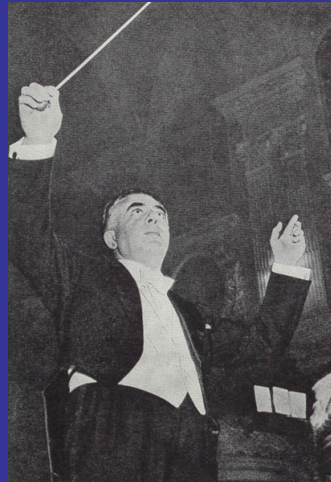
Gayaneh (1942)

We'll hear two movements:

- Sabre Dance
- Dance of the Rose Maidens

Second Symphony “The Bell”

- His Second Symphony, subtitled *The Bell* (1943), contained a third movement which the composer felt conveyed “the superhuman sufferings caused to the Soviet people by the Nazi monsters”.
- Thankfully, the finale is more optimistic.



Political interference

- Although he wrote a *Third Symphony* (1947), a *Cello Concerto* (1946) and various chamber works, he became typecast as a composer of folk ballets, theatre music and film scores.
- Like most Soviet composers of any worth, Khachaturian suffered in the attack launched in 1948 by the Central Committee of Communist Party against so-called “anti popular trends” and the sin of “formulism”. He was one of the few to criticise his critics publicly, winning for his colleagues some respite from the suffocating attention of Stalin's cronies.

- ♪ He was removed from his job and his works disappeared from the theatres
- ♪ Khachaturian moved to the world of film music and waited for the storm to blow over.

Spartacus (1954)

- ♪ Early in 1950, he was allowed to travel to Italy with a Soviet delegation, where he was inspired by the Roman Coliseum to compose a ballet on the life of *Spartacus*.
- ♪ The story tells of a Thracian prisoner of war who led an uprising out of a gladiator school in 73 B.C., raised an army of peasants and other marginal societal groups, and defeated nine Roman legions and generals before finally being defeated by Roman general Crassus. Khachaturian finished the score in 1954.

Spartacus (1954)

- **Act 1 introduces Crassus, Spartacus, Phrygia, and Aegina as the main characters. The plot focuses on the slave market, where Phrygia and Spartacus are separated and sold. Act 1 ends with Spartacus initiating the revolt in the gladiators' barracks, and the oath they all take to fight the Romans.**
- **Act 2 centres around one of two major battle scenes, where Crassus and Spartacus fight each other, but both survive. Spartacus's election as the revolt leader, and Aegina's depravity towards the revolution, are also depicted.**
- **Act 3 is the huge final battle scene between Spartacus and Crassus, where Aegina is able to seduce some of Spartacus's lieutenants and discover his battle plans. At the end of the ballet, Spartacus is killed and there is a huge victory celebration for Crassus in Rome.**

Spartacus (1954)

- **Variation: Aegina and Bacchanal Scene**
- **Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia**
- **Dance**