

# National Identity Construction in Music: A Case Study of Aram Khachaturian

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## Abstract

In this paper, the national element in the reception of the Soviet-Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian (1903–1978) is explored. Armenian culture has been profoundly influenced by the cultural politics of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, both of which perceived the Caucasus as an exotic object. Armenians have been used to seeing Russia as a window to Europe. Therefore they also conceive themselves as an exotic “other.” Music is an element of such self-representation and can be used for national identity constructions. In this paper, the author illustrates these processes by analysing the reception of Aram Khachaturian, who belongs to the Armenian system of national symbols. He is considered to be a specifically Armenian, European and Oriental composer at one and the same time. The author suggests that descriptions of his music in Armenian musicological discourse serve the wider ideological aims of Armenian cultural identity constructions in its history writing, which are characterised by a cultural ambivalence that wishes to prove that Armenians belong culturally to Europe but also presents them as exotic subjects.

## Introduction

In the present paper, national identity constructions in Armenian musicological discourse are observed through the musicological reception of the composer Aram Khachaturian (1903–1978) as well as in his writings.

Ethnicity is often used for constructing borders that preserve cultural identities (Chapman, McDonald, Tonkin 1989: 17). Cultural phenomena can be related to ethnicity, which is also often the case with Khachaturian. He has an unusual position on the borderlands of different, even controversial approaches to musical composition. Khachaturian can be viewed in many ways: focusing on his nationality as an Armenian; as an Oriental<sup>1</sup> composer, who sought inspiration in different Eastern cultures; or in terms of his education in Moscow, where he also lived most of his life, with the result that he can also be seen as a Russian composer. For Armenians, he is a symbol of the Europeanness of the Armenian nation and of their belonging culturally to Europe. In his reception, the self-image of Armenians can be interpreted in two ways: either in terms of the exotic, with an emphasis on their national originality, or as a simplification and adaptation of their individual-

ity to the supposed expectations of the (Western) audience.

As far as the context is concerned, the socio-historical background of Aram Khachaturian is best understood in terms of Armenian cultural relations with Russia during the two political regimes – the Czarist Russian Empire (1828–1917) and the Soviet Union (1918–1991). The central theoretical standpoint comes from postcolonial thought, and more precisely from the hybridisation of the Western, Oriental, and Armenian. Here, Western music means the music culture that is rooted in the Western national romanticism of the 19th century and which belongs to the academic, professional repertoire. Armenian music refers to Armenian traditional music, and Armenianness derives from the use of folk music in art music. Oriental music relates to the music which includes Oriental stereotypes; it also means the repertoire by Armenian composers who absorbed the Oriental approach towards their music that reflects the Western representations of their culture. Such synthesis of local and global in the Soviet music culture of the Oriental composers reveals the hybrid nature of the material analysed and the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonisation.

<sup>1</sup> Orientalism is here meant as a general Easternness, representations of the Soviet East among Soviet composers as one encounters the term in Russian musicological discourse, and not in terms of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism.

Names of people in Armenian are mostly transliterated according to eastern Armenian pronunciation and orthographic rules, or according to the most common version of the name.

### **1. Armenia and Russia: ambivalent relations between the centre and the periphery of the empire**

The Armenian cultural and political background accounts for the complexity of the case of Khachaturian. Armenia is a Christian country in a predominantly Muslim region that suffered several pogroms during the Ottoman Empire over of many centuries. The sufferings concluded with the genocide of 1915, which has had the greatest influence on the identity constructions of Armenians. Because of the genocide and their Christianity, Armenians resist the representation of their state as a part of the Middle Eastern region. They position themselves insistently in the European cultural sphere, accentuating the Western elements in their culture and music as an important part of this. By shaping the national musical canon in this way, the Armenian cultural elite, too, positions it in Europe, regardless of the many elements of Middle Eastern music in Armenian traditional music.

In discussing identity constructions in music, colonial and dominant relations must be taken into account, irrespective of how the ethnic group prefers to present itself (Chapman, McDonald, Tonkin 1989: 8–9). The musical self-representation of Armenians reflects the outcomes of the cultural and political realms of the Russian Empire and later on the cultural politics of the Soviet Union. In the 19th century, while Western Armenia remained in the Ottoman Empire, where it had belonged since the 15th century, Eastern Armenia became a part of the Russian Empire. For almost a hundred years, from 1828 to 1917, before the Bolshevik coup in 1920, the present Republic of Armenia was a part of the Russian Empire. Furthermore, Eastern Armenian culture was not limited to the territory of the present Republic of Armenia, but developed also in regional urban centres such as today's Tiflis and Baku. The most important among these was the provincial capital Tiflis in Georgia, the population of which was multiethnic and included many Armenians. The city became the centre of Russian colonial power in this region throughout the 19th century, and the

resulting economic, political and cultural changes involved the Russification of some social groups of Armenians and Georgians. (Suny 1994: 41)

With its position on the borderlands of different Western and Eastern empires, Caucasian cultures have always been characterized by hybridity. Ethnic groups with different languages, traditions, and religions have lived together in widely spread settlements. Therefore, the linguistic, cultural and religious groups do not overlap to form the basis of a common ethnic identity (Eriksen 2002: 36; Jenkins 1994: 208). These circumstances have been particularly relevant with regard to Armenians, who have a vast diaspora, and this mixes their musical culture even more.

Relations between the coloniser and the colonised are often characterised by ambivalence, where both fascination and opposition occur. The coloniser is interested in turning the oppressed into a copy of itself, but not to the full extent, since the colonial relationship cannot exist between equals. Moreover, though the colonised are forced to adopt the coloniser as an example, the result can never be an exact copy, as it will always reflect the experience, identity, and expression of the oppressed (Bhabha 1994: 85–92). Such a relationship was also common to Russia and Caucasia in the 19th century. On the one hand, Armenia and Georgia benefited in many respect from being part of the Russian Empire. Tiflis became the centre of the local government, education developed, and greater religious freedom was allowed, as all three ethnic groups involved the Christian culture. On the other hand, the ambivalence expressed itself in different nuances of communication representing a typical attitude of an empire towards its periphery.

In the arts, many stereotypes emerged for representing the East during the 19th century. With regard to the musical culture of the Russian empire, the Oriental material in Russian classical music is usually divided into internal and external references. The first category includes references to Siberia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia; the second refers to the Far and Middle East (Taruskin 1998: 194). In such way, Russian musical Orientalism reflected the military events which took place in the process of expanding its territory by revealing the correlation of colonial relations and Orientalism. Chronologically, the invasion of the Caucasus coincides with the blooming of

Russian romanticism. The composers drew inspiration from the Orient, for example, *Antar* (1868) and *Scheherazade* (1888) by Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, *Islamey* (1869) by Mily Balakirev, and *Prince Igor* (1887) by Alexander Borodin. Oriental clichés were embraced, through which many musical stereotypes emerged, such as the modal harmonisation of diatonic folk melodies, scales including different chromatic or non-diatonic intervals, imitations of folk tunes (Frolova-Walker 1998: 338–351). As far as story-lines are concerned, the representations of the East often were militant whereas the Caucasus was perceived as something exotic and romantic.

For Caucasians, Czarist Russia was widely identified with Europe, regardless of its politics. The Armenians and Georgians shared a closer mentality with the Christian Russian Empire than with the Muslim countries around them, although all three represent different branches of Christianity. Such an environment also shaped musical relations between Armenians and Russians. Armenians adopted the Western national ideas through Russia. (Geodakyan 1969: 18) Such Armenian composers and researchers as Komitas (Soghomon Soghomonyan), Tigran Tchoukhajian, Mark Yekmalyan and Romanos Melikian emerged. As composers, they represented the Western composition school, but valued their traditional culture. As researchers, they observed the latter from the 'outside' (Tigranov 1959: 22–23), and synthesized it with Western classical music, i.e., they wrote homophonic music using the European genres and Western notation (Geodakyan 1969: 11). These were typical 19th-century national romantic and Russian Orientalist works with plots seeking inspiration in the glorious past. For example, Tchoukhadjian's opera *Arshak Erkrord* from 1868, considered as the first Armenian opera, was inspired by the life of the Armenian king Arshak II from the 4th century (Geodakyan 1969: 18). To portray the East, the composers took over the compositional techniques of Western art music following the models of the Russian composers belonging to the famous *Moguchaya Kuchka* ("mighty handful") (Tigranov 1959: 22–23).

After the period of the short-lived Democratic Republic of Armenia, Eastern Armenia became a part of the Soviet Union in 1920 until its fall in 1991. After colonising countries, Russia submitted the various nations to political pressure in almost

every aspect of life, from reforming the educational system to physical repression of the people. The cultural politics of the USSR continued the processes that had begun in the Russian Empire. The USSR, with its centre in the biggest cities of Russia, represented the West, Caucasian and Central Asian republics the East. The Soviet policy oppressed national minorities based on Stalin's formula from 1934, which demanded cultures to be "national in form and socialist in content" (Stalin 2003 [1934]: 3). The culture of Soviet nations was supposed to develop in agreement with directives from Moscow, and although it remained colonial, it was able, at least to some extent, to preserve and promote the national traditions while at the same time belonging to a homogeneous family of Soviet people. This was particularly pertinent in the years of Stalinism, from the 1930s until the late 1950s (Frolova-Walker 1998: 331–336).

In music, amongst other things, this policy brought with it the requirement for each national Republic to build an opera house and compose a suitable repertory. The insistence on using folk tunes resulted in the need to collect, research and systematise the folk music. The use of folk music had to be formal, and as the authorities were not exactly interested in its peculiarities, distorted approaches to folk music were quite common. It also meant that composers with very different cultural and historical backgrounds had to use folk tunes or other elements of folk culture according to the models and compositional techniques of the Russian classical composers. For Caucasian and Central Asian composers, who wrote in the Western tradition, this entailed imitating certain Eastern aspects. The imported culture was presented as a development of authentic, traditional music (Frolova-Walker 1998: 331–336).

Here the culturally simplified geopolitical world views of the authorities became particularly visible. Before the Soviet Union, the Czarist power had not considered the location of ethnic groups when drawing up the borders of the governorates. Thus the geographical boundaries of the new Soviet republics followed neither ethnic, linguistic, cultural nor religious compatibility, but rather reflected the consecutive territorial conquerors of Russia (Frolova-Walker 1998: 334–339). Examples of the outcomes of such cultural politics are easy to find: for instance, the composer Sergey Balasanyan, of Armenian-origin, was born

in Turkmenistan but became a national composer of Tajikistan.

Under these conditions, Armenian national culture was in a better position than that of the Central Asian countries. The doctrine of Socialist Realism drew primarily on 19th-century national romanticism, and for Armenians this meant that they did not have to start to create the Western Soviet musical culture from scratch, as was the case in the Central Asian countries. There was already a lot of art music in the Western tradition in Armenia which had been composed since the 19th century. In both Armenia and the Central Asian countries the outcome of such cultural politics was a hybrid music culture that included elements of Soviet Oriental music inside a Western art music style, a style widespread throughout the whole of Caucasia and Central Asia.

During the Soviet years, a well-formed canon was established in Armenian classical music that is valid up to the present day. In this canon, three composers are highlighted: Komitas (born Soghomon Soghomonyan; 1869–1935), Alexander Spendiaryan (1871–1928), and Aram Khachaturian. All three belong to the system of national symbols of Armenia that is used for promoting national ideologies – symbols that are also related to the birth of national-romantic sentiments in the 19th century and their development in the 20th century. In addition to these, many cultural figures from this period have a symbolic meaning reflecting the importance of the national movement. Such figures include Khachatur Abovian (1809–1848), who wrote the first modern Armenian novel, and political and spiritual leader Catholicos Mkrtych Khrimian (1820–1907), as well as author Hovhannes Tumanyan (1869–1923), poet and writer Avetik Isahakyan (1875–1957), and the creator of the modern Armenian art school Martiros Saryan (1880–1972).

## 2. Methodology

In this article, methods of discourse analysis and music reception will be combined. The reception of Khachaturian is analysed through three parallel concepts: observations about his Armenianness, Orientalism, and Europeanness. His opinions concerning these three features are found in his letters to his friends and in his formal letters to journal-

ists and musicologists, but also in public articles written between 1949 and 1973. The articles were published in following newspapers: *Sovetskaya Muzyka*, *Kul'tura i zhizn'*, *Sovetskaya Kul'tura*, *Kommunist*, *Nedel'ya*, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, *Pravda*. External observations derive from Soviet musicological texts about Khachaturian from the period 1959–1990 (Shneerson 1958; Tigranov 1978; Arutyunov 1983; Yuzefovich 1990). Finally, reviews of Khachaturian's *Song-Poem (In honour of ashughs)* for violin and piano (1929) by different authors will be compared, and their observations set in the context of the three-dimensional Armenian-Oriental-European cultural space.

## 3. Case study: Aram Khachaturian in the context of his era

Khachaturian's work and life provide interesting material for studying Soviet cultural politics. He was a Western-style national composer, who used not only Armenian but also Russian, Georgian, and Ukrainian elements, fragments of folk tunes, and non-western rhythmic patterns in his music (Steyn 2009: 11). Khachaturian's compositions are often presented as the best examples of Armenian music in which fragments of Armenian folk tunes can be recognized. At the same time, his music can be perceived as Russian music with exotic, Oriental elements. Today, his compositions based on Armenian themes and melodies may also be seen as examples of Orientalism in music in the Saidian sense, where images of the East by the West are far more important than the East itself with all its variations.

This wide-ranging approach in his music also reflects well the multifaceted life of Khachaturian.

Although by nationality Armenian, Aram Khachaturian was born in Georgia, which had a significant Armenian community. From 1913–1920 he studied at the Tbilisi Commercial College, played in an amateur wind orchestra and started composing piano pieces. At the beginning of the 20th century, Tiflis was an important cultural centre for Armenians, where the different layers of Armenian culture – old folk music, *ashugh*<sup>2</sup> art, and Western art culture – came together (Yuzefovich 1990: 10–11). Khachaturian recalled listening to the *ashughs* and folk trios with *sazandars*<sup>3</sup> on the streets of Tiflis. Notably, he mentioned that he ab-

<sup>2</sup> *Ashughs* – Middle Eastern minstrels who were narrators, singers, instrumentalists, dancers and actors all in one.

sorbed this music into himself (Yuzefovich 1990: 14, 26). Such stories about Khachaturian are typical – how he listened to his mother’s singing in his childhood, and later, as a composer found inspiration in these musical memories.<sup>4</sup> Khachaturian himself said that he remembered many songs sung at home by his parents and others, but later mixed up the titles: “I know the first words or even just some motifs. Perhaps, I can remember about 20 songs.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1921 he moved to Moscow, and a year later entered the Gnessin Institute to study cello, where one of his teachers was the composer Reinhold Glière. In 1925, he began his composition studies at the Moscow Conservatory under the composers Mikhail Gnessin and Nikolay Myaskovsky, graduating in 1934. Over the years, he also taught composition at the Gnessin Institute and the Moscow Conservatory. In 1932, he was accepted as a member of the Composers’ Union, but being accused of formalism, along with Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich, in 1948, his activities were curtailed by officialdom for almost ten years. From 1957 until his death in 1978 Khachaturian served as secretary of the board of the Composers’ Union (Sarkisyan, retrieved 20.03.2015).

In Armenian music, Khachaturian was novel for many reasons. His graduation piece from the Moscow Conservatory, the First Symphony, is considered to be the first Armenian symphony, and his Piano Concerto was the basis of instrumental concertos in Armenian music. Khachaturian was also the first composer who wrote music for Armenian films with sound. From 1950 onwards he worked as a conductor, performing in over 30 countries. Many of his pieces received state prizes, including the Second Symphony, the ballet *Gayane*, and the Violin Concerto. He also received many official recognitions, and was awarded the Order of Lenin in 1939 and the title Hero of Socialist Labour in 1973, to name but two (Sarkisyan, retrieved 20.03.2015).

Among Soviet Armenian and Soviet Eastern composers, Khachaturian was the only one who

became world famous. The Soviet authorities also needed artists to put into practice its national ideologies, the idea of forging a homogeneous Soviet people by merging different nations. In Khachaturian’s music Soviet patriotic elements were mixed with Armenian national traits, so he fitted perfectly this role; his music was composed in accordance with the doctrine of socialist realism. Due to “his proletarian origins, non-Russian ethnic backgrounds, and Soviet training, Khachaturian became a powerful symbol of the Soviet musical establishment of the ideal multinational Soviet cultural identity” (Robinson 2007: 429).

#### 4.1 The self-portrait and musicological discourses

In this chapter, three parallel narratives about Khachaturian as an Oriental, Armenian and Russian composer are discussed. To map his self-representations and discover how they match the texts written about him in Armenian musicological discourse, Khachaturian’s letters and articles are analysed alongside Armenian musicological discourse about him.

The first important aspect in Khachaturian’s writings is that they give the reader the impression of a typical diasporic Armenian, although in the Soviet Union nobody spoke or thought in such terms. His letters are mostly in Russian, sometimes including some words in Armenian. The last seems to carry rather a symbolic value, as in some cases he says that he would like to write in Armenian, but cannot.<sup>6</sup> Only a few rare letters are written in Armenian. At the same time, his texts for newspapers and journals are clearly patriotic. For example, the article “In Armenia”<sup>7</sup> fits well into the discourse of diasporic Armenian texts even today. This is an enthusiastic travelogue from different regions of Armenia, full of pride in his nation and finding in each area something special. For example, Kirovakanians are real enthusiasts of their area, in Zangezur there are great mines, Goris has incredibly beautiful views, and so on. (Khachaturian 1980: 344)

<sup>3</sup> *Sazandar* – one of the musicians in an instrumental trio performing *mugham* (system of melodic modes used in Middle Eastern music; similar to *maqam*) together with a singer. The trio consists of *tar*, *kamancha* and *daf* players.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Yuzefovich 1990: 273.

<sup>5</sup> A letter to M[argarit] Arutiunian, dated March 18th, 1966 (Khachaturian 1983: 106).

<sup>6</sup> A letter to the E[dvard] Mirzoyan, February 1963 (Khachaturian 1983: 93).

<sup>7</sup> Article published in *Sovetskaya Muzyka*, in 1949, No. 8.

Another typically Armenian, also diasporic, narrative in Khachaturian's writings concerns Armenian genocide, though the topic was taboo in the Soviet Union of those times (Whitehorn 2015: 140). Such narrative can be seen, for example, in a letter to the musicologist Margarit Arutiunian: "[...] Armenians, despite mass destruction and persecution by enemies, have managed to preserve their nation, language, culture, and religion."<sup>8</sup> Also, in his interview in 1973 to Grigory Shneerson in the journal *Sovetskaya Muzyka*, he refers to the genocide and its mass destruction of the Armenian population in Western Armenia, which he sees as the reason why his parents were forced to leave home and come to Tiflis.<sup>9</sup>

Another important aspect that comes out of Khachaturian's correspondence is that the composer was very concerned to be received as a Caucasian and at the same time, specifically, as an Armenian. He consistently observed whether he was mentioned in an Armenian context, also in texts about Soviet Eastern music in general. He apparently considered himself the creator of Soviet Eastern music and took note of Shostakovich's and Kara Karayev's (Garayev)<sup>10</sup> judgements with regard to this question.<sup>11</sup> His typical rhetoric in this matter can be seen, for example, in a letter to the musicologist Georgii Tigranov: "In the East, the first symphony, sonata, and fugue were written by me."<sup>12</sup> When feeling forgotten by official institutions or researchers, he used to draw writers' attention to his role in that field. For example, in his letter to the film maker and politician Gevork Ovanesyan in August 1949, he says:

An honest historian, when starting to write the history of Soviet music, or the history of Soviet Armenian music, an honest historian [...] is obliged to say: "But, by all means, the first symphony in the history of Armenian music was written by Khachaturian [...]." This

should not be forgotten, but unfortunately, somebody wants to dismiss me.<sup>13</sup>

In such cases, he also contrasted the nation and officialdom, claiming that at least the Armenian nation cherished him.<sup>14</sup> He was also very proud that some of his songs were considered to be folk songs and were sung on the streets, such as the main melody from the movie *Pepo*.<sup>15</sup> However, he was afraid of being forgotten not only by the institutions but also by the Armenian people. For example, in his letter to the composer Edvard Mirzoyan on February 16th, 1969, he wrote that people were starting to forget about him. He continued:

Armenia – my fatherland! People – yes! They always raised me and loved me. I never thought so much about myself as an Armenian as I do now. (Khachaturian 1983: 128)

This brings us to another important aspect in Khachaturian's self-image – the importance of being publicly received as an Armenian. This becomes evident in many cases. For example in 1973, he sent an angry letter<sup>16</sup> to the Lebanese-Armenian newspaper *Azdak* that had published an article in which the author claimed that Khachaturian called himself a Russian composer. The composer also argued that his music was deeply rooted in Armenian folk music and pointed to Komitas and Spendiaryan as his teachers. He listed his visits and longer stays in Armenia, his honorific titles, how exactly he had participated in Armenian music life, and the fact that there is even a street in Yerevan bearing his name. (Khachaturian 1980: 139–141)

Armenian musicological literature resonates with those attitudes of the composer himself. Khachaturian's Armenianness is an important aspect of the discourse and is taken for granted. For example, Tigranov claimed that Khachaturian

<sup>8</sup> A letter to M[argarit] Arutiunian in July 1970 (Khachaturian 1983: 136).

<sup>9</sup> Article published in *Sovetskaya Muzyka*, No. 6, in 1973 (Khachaturian 1980: 110).

<sup>10</sup> Kara Karayev (1918–1982) – a prominent Azerbaijani composer.

<sup>11</sup> Letter to M[argarit] Arutiunian dated July 4th, 1959 (Khachaturian 1983: 79).

<sup>12</sup> Letter to G[eorgii] Tigranov dated October 23th, 1970 (Khachaturian 2003: 41).

<sup>13</sup> Letter to G[evork] A. Ovanesyan, August 1949 (Khachaturian 1983: 37–38).

<sup>14</sup> Letter to editorial board of newspaper *Azdak*, Lebanon, dated August 27th, 1973 (Khachaturian 1983: 37–38).

<sup>15</sup> Article published in *Sovetskaya Muzyka*, No. 11, in 1950 (Khachaturian 1980: 347–348).

<sup>16</sup> Letter to the editorial board of newspaper *Azdak*, Lebanon, dated August 27th, 1973 (Khachaturian 1980: 139–141).

would remain a son of his people forever, and that he had retained blood bond with Soviet Armenia (Tigranov 1978: 6) despite the fact that Khachaturian never lived in Armenia. Just as in Khachaturian's self-representations, approaches to his music in the writings of Armenian musicologists are not limited to specifically Armenian features, but also deal with Soviet Caucasian and Eastern characteristics in general. Often, Armenianness and Easternness are considered under the same subject. All the writers relate Khachaturian's music to the experience of Transcaucasia, which they see as something genetic, inherited together with blood, existent already in his early compositions. Arutyunov, for example, claims that the bright, creative individualism of the composer is vitally connected with the musical culture of the Transcaucasia (Arutyunov 1983: 19). Yuzefovich says that Khachaturian brought into European music the improvisatory nature of Eastern music as well as Eastern rhythmic combinations and patterns (Yuzefovich 1990: 277–279). Broadly speaking, Khachaturian is presented as “the synthesizer of Eastern traditions and European music” (Arutyunov 1983: 9). According to Arutyunov, on a worldwide scale Khachaturian represented not only Armenian music but also Transcaucasian, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern musical cultures as a huge compound cultural area:

With his output, embodying in itself the principles of large-scale symphonism, he had a strong, even determining impact on the formation of the Armenian Soviet school of musical composition, on the directions and speed of its development; his artistic experience generated original interpretations in the works of many composers of the national republics of our country and abroad. The oeuvre of Khachaturian set a model for expressing the most significant patterns and tendencies characterising Eastern music in general. (Arutyunov 1983: 3)

In this way, the versatile nature of Khachaturian's reception becomes apparent. It does not make much sense to discuss whether he is a more generally Oriental or specifically Armenian

composer – the shift of focus in the discourse may change within the same paragraph. Such a multifaceted reception is supported by Khachaturian's self-representations, intrinsically connected to each other, one relying on another and vice versa. The concept of Armenianness is supported by some arguments, at least – in the examples in the following sections we shall see how it is related to *ashugh* art, for example. The concept of Soviet Oriental, however, does not find too much theoretical support. It is likely that it is used as an expression covering an enormous geographical area, from Central Asia to Caucasia. These claims usually rely on essentialist rather than well-developed arguments. It is also interesting to note that whether the book was written in the 1950s or the 1980s, the judgements about Khachaturian have remained the same, regardless of different cultural-political background of the authors.

Although Khachaturian's patriotic sentiments with regard to Armenia are evident from the above, when reading his letters it is sometimes hard to distinguish which national elements in music are important to him – whether Georgian, Armenian, or Azeri. Indeed, he often travelled to Armenia, even lived there occasionally, collected folk tunes, met with people (Shneerson 1958: 29) and wrote about his experiences in many letters. Nonetheless, he repeatedly expresses his wider ambition to research several national musical cultures living side by side: Georgians and Armenians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and so on.<sup>17</sup>

Khachaturian also said that although he does not reject the method of quoting authentic folk melodies, he prefers “the method of the courageous and free implementation of folk tune elements, through the will of the artist in the development of a composition”,<sup>18</sup> thus presenting himself as a Russian Orientalist, i.e., a Western composer. He also deconstructs the romantic approach concerning the Oriental aspect of his music, which shows that he was acutely aware of creating a myth around himself and of his exploitation of Armenian exoticism from the Western point of view. Many examples of such an attitude may be given here. For example, in his letter to art historian Viktor Vanslov he says:

<sup>17</sup> Article published in *Kul'tura i zhizn'*, No. 6, in 1971 (Khachaturian 1980: 28).

<sup>18</sup> Published in *Kul'tura i zhizn'*, No. 6, in 1971 (Khachaturian 1980: 26).

Here's how they write about me: *ashugh, gussan*,<sup>19</sup> Southern temperament, folk rhythms! I do not deny all of this, but this is all just a smokescreen, an opportunity for my fantasy, opportunity – sorry for not being humble – for my creation.<sup>20</sup>

In a letter to writer A[lexandr] Y. Gayamov, he also clearly positions himself into the West by declaring himself as European Armenian:

As much as I toss between different musical languages, I still stay Armenian, but European Armenian, Armenian who, together with others, forces Europe and the whole world to listen to our music. (Yuzefovich 1990: 268)

Another example from a letter to film director Armen Gulakyan shows his full awareness of the creation of new trend:

At the moment, the process of development and formation of the Armenian national musical school is taking place. Works in multifaceted volumes will be written about our epoch. I consider myself as an active builder of the new Armenian music culture.<sup>21</sup>

Khachaturian emphasised many times the importance of creating new Armenian music in the Western sense. He continued the Armenian-Russian school that was born in the 19th century during the period of national awakening. We should note that the role models of the composers such as painter Martiros Saryan, writer Avetik Isahakyan and many others also originated from that period.<sup>22</sup> Khachaturian, after all, had a strong Moscow identity that can be seen not only in his music but also in his letters.<sup>23</sup> For example, he always encourages Caucasian composers to study in Moscow, and in his letter to musicologist Tigranov he shows concern about the research conducted about him in Leningrad:

Most of all I am worried that the book is written in Leningrad. You ask why? Because it seems that *leningradtsy* are not fully objective towards *moskvichy*, especially concerning me.<sup>24</sup>

This all reflects his ambivalent position between different cultures and his awareness of the main differences between the cultures he wanted to represent.

#### 4.2 The Song-Poem (In honour of ashughs) for violin and piano by Aram Khachaturian as an example of threefold national narrative

Concerning the national (i.e., Oriental) element in Khachaturian's music, the discussion usually focuses on his ballet *Gayane*, in which many quotations from different Eastern nations' folk tunes can be recognised. However, Khachaturian composed many pieces both interesting and intriguing from the standpoint of Armenianness.

As a little considered example, the musicological reception of the composition entitled *The Song-Poem (In honour of ashughs) (Pesnya-poema, v chest ashugov)* for piano and violin will be presented here. The piece is from his early period, written in 1929 while studying at the conservatory, and is considered to be one of his best early works (Yuzefovich 1990: 46). *The Song-Poem* was first performed in 1929 by the violinist A[vet] Ter-Gabrielyan, while the pianist's name is not mentioned (Shneerson 1958: 17). The end of the 1920s was the time Khachaturian later counted as his starting point as a composer.<sup>25</sup> In his letters, he does not write very much about his compositions, although sometimes he gives instructions for performances. He mentions what is probably this piece in a letter to composer Aro Stepanyan (May 7th 1929), in which he expresses delight that Stepanyan liked the [new] piece (Khachaturian 1983: 9). Shortly before that, on 23rd Novem-

<sup>19</sup> *Gussan* – narrator, singer, instrumentalist, dancer and actor in one. Tradition dates back to sources from the 5th century.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Viktor Vanslov dated July 30, 1977 (Khachaturian 2003: 44).

<sup>21</sup> Letter to Armen Gulakyan dated March 2th, 1953 (Khachaturian 1980: 63).

<sup>22</sup> Article published in *Kommunist* (Yerevan) on October 15th, 1954 (Khachaturian 1980: 357).

<sup>23</sup> For example, in a letter to E[ldgar] S. Oganesyanyan of July 21st 1950, where he says that he is a *Gnesinets* and has to be attentive and faithful to them. He also mentions occasionally the importance of the Gnessin Institute to him, for example in *Sovetskaya Kul'tura*, March 17th, 1962 (Khachaturian 1980: 169).

<sup>24</sup> Letter to G[eorgii] Tigranov dated October 23rd, 1970 (Khachaturian 2003: 40–41).

<sup>25</sup> Article published in *Kul'tura i zhizn'*, No. 6, in 1971 (Khachaturian 1980: 10–11).



ber, 1928, he had mentioned in another letter to Stepanyan that he was writing a small piece for piano and violin, which was probably *The Song-Poem* (Khachaturian 1983: 8).

There are certain common traits in the reception of *The Song-Poem*. The most common tendency is to link it not only with specifically Armenian but also with Transcaucasian experience in a wider sense. The composition is highlighted as one of the best examples of Armenianness and Orientalism among Khachaturian's early works. For example, Tigranov says that instrumental works from this period are characterised by the influences of different branches of Eastern music (songs, dances, *ashugh* art) together with the rich, creative experience of European, primarily Russian composers (Tigranov 1978: 27). He also claims that in this and other pieces from the same period, an Oriental foundation meets not only the traditions of Russian classical music but also elements of the French impressionism of Ravel (Tigranov 1978: 30). Thus, two different, even contradictory narratives – global and local – appear together here. The first, local one emphasises specificity, whereas the second, global one does exactly the opposite, speaking in general terms; this brings together a vast area with very different music cultures from Central Asia and Caucasus to Europe.

Secondly, all the Armenian musicologists referred to draw links between *ashugh* art<sup>26</sup> and *The Song-Poem*. For example, musicologist Shneerson explains this connection with such traits as poeticism, lyrical pathos, and developments in the manner of free improvisation. He also draws attention to the piece's subheading, calls it grandiose, rhythmically rich, and improvisational, and quotes musicologist G[eorgii] Hubov who called the piece a "concert transcription of *ashugh* art":

Similarly to the *ashugh*, who reaches emotional culmination with his storytelling while starting to sing, in "Song-poem," from the recitative introduction, the melody is born and widely developed, and accompanied by ex-

pressive subsidiary voices and rhythmical patterns. (Shneerson 1958: 17)

Musicologist Arutyunov also finds that *ashugh* art – which was still vital in those times in the South Caucasus – had the biggest impact on Khachaturian's style. He attributes its influence on Khachaturian's style to its synthetic nature where different national folk elements meet: aesthetic comprehension of a certain spirituality, traditions of Armenian nationality, a certain imagery of emotionality, certain types of themes and methods of musical thinking, principles of using folklore, an elevated and enthusiastic or touching and passionate nature, lyricism in certain emotional and psychological shapes (Arutyunov 1983: 12). *The Song-Poem* is, according to him, one of the most typical examples of Khachaturian's compositional style being influenced by *ashugh* art (Arutyunov 1983: 19–20). He adds that Khachaturian could sing *The Song-Poem's* theme as an *ashugh* in a moment of inspiration (Arutyunov 1983: 345). Thus, as one can see, the connection with *ashugh* music is not made very analytically.

As far as its music is concerned, authors point to the fact that *The Song-Poem* is freely improvisational, rhythmically diverse, with expressive subsidiary voices, etc. The composition is also praised for its original harmonic language and for its wide-ranging violin part. (Shneerson 1958: 14–17) Thus, although music-related links are made, the terms are all quite obscure; in any case it is not easy to measure whether all these features indicate the influence of *ashugh* art which, in fact, is highly improvisational and enjoys rich rhythmic diversity. However, such features might also be seen merely as the compositional principles of Russian Orientalism or French impressionism, which exhibit similar characteristics. At the same time, in conceptual terms the idea of *ashugh* art fits very well with Khachaturian's personal story – the musician of Armenian origin from Georgia living in Russia links well with the notion of musician travelling throughout Caucasia and the Middle East. *Ashughs* fit in very well with this narrative, as

<sup>26</sup> In the 17th and 18th centuries, the art of *ashugh* spread across Caucasia, also Armenia. The name *ashugh* appears in many languages and comes from Arabic, meaning 'in love' (Pahlevanian, 20.03.2015). The tradition included narrators, singers, and instrumentalists. *Ashugh* art was mostly based on the poetic formulas of Middle Eastern literature: it had much in common with Azeri *mughams*, and Persian and Arabian *maqams*, and it was often performed to the same audience (Kushnarev 1958: 240–258; Pahlevanyan 2005: 33–34; Atayan 1965: 26–52).

they were symbols of Armenia and Transcaucasia in one – they existed both among Armenians but also among Azeris, Persians, and others.

It is not only musicologists who exploit the idea of *ashughs*: Khachaturian himself does it, too. In his letters he wrote a lot about Armenianness and *ashugh* art in general, especially about the latter. From year to year he returns to the *ashugh* topic, whether he seeks inspiration for some composition or dreams about creating an opera about the Armenian-origin *ashugh* Sayat Nova, who was the most famous in the whole of the Middle East,<sup>27</sup> or envies and praises his friend, composer Alexander Arutiunian, for writing just such an opera (*Sayat Nova*, 1967). Khachaturian also mentions, in his letter to Arutiunian, that “you shall know that the topic Sayat Nova was meant for me.”<sup>28</sup>

Another common tendency is to compare the harmony of the piece with the original sound of folk instruments. All the authors emphasise that Khachaturian, with Western instruments, imitates Eastern instruments. Shneerson claims that the melody is full of rich embellishments in Eastern style, rhythmic diversity, in a mood of bright meditation. He also finds many harmonic solutions and thematic developments that remind him of the sound of the folk instruments the *tar*<sup>29</sup> and *kamancha*<sup>30</sup> (Shneerson 1958: 17). Arutyunov, too, compares it with the sounds of the folk instruments the *saz*<sup>31</sup> and the *tar* (Arutyunov 1983: 144), as does Tigranov (Tigranov 1978: 29–30, 1987: 22–23). In general, here, too, the link is made more in a philosophical sense; statements tend to be made without any detailed theoretical explanation.

The composer himself also supports such link. For example, he writes that he loved very much the sound of the *tar*. He says that his passion for major and minor seconds in terms of harmonic intervals comes from listening to the trios of *sazandars* playing the folk instruments *tar*, *kamancha*, and *buben*,<sup>32</sup> during his childhood, where seconds were aesthetically valued.<sup>33</sup> That

seconds and fourths were so dear to the composer is also the reason why *The Song-Poem* is believed to imitate folk ensembles (Arutyunov 1983: 151, 327). Armenian musicologists consider seconds – which became so popular in the 20th century – common to Georgian folk songs, and according to Yuzefovich this was Khachaturian’s contribution to 20th-century music in the context of the Soviet East (Yuzefovich 1990: 276). However, seconds and fourths were common not only to Khachaturian but also to French impressionists from the turn of the 19th and 20th century.

## Conclusion

A picture unfolds of a composer who was very aware of his ideological position, actively constructed himself as a symbol of Armenianness and took part in his own myth-creation. At the same time, he contributed to the creation of the Armenian music school in the sense of national romanticism and 19th century Russian Orientalism. For this, he constantly emphasised his Armenianness and constructed discourses about it. He did not limit himself, however, to Armenianness, but also constructed himself more broadly as an exponent of Soviet Oriental composers. For this, he used significant symbols, such as *ashughs*. All these narratives are reflected not only in Khachaturian’s own writings and interviews but also in his reception by Armenian musicologists, who have embraced all the narratives about him. Nowadays, it remains rather unclear how much Khachaturian – in addition to what was contained in his compositions – consciously contributed to constructing the myth about himself as an Armenian and/or Oriental composer, or whether he merely adapted to his reception. One can assume that it was a symbiosis of both, as comments in his letters reveal that he was very aware of the ideological aspects of his music.

Right up until the present, in Armenian history constructions we often see how the antiquity and the originality of the culture are emphasized. At

<sup>27</sup> Letter to A. Danielyan dated January 3rd, 1940 (Khachaturian 1983: 23).

<sup>28</sup> Letter to A[leksandr] Arutiunian dated December 20th, 1969 (Khachaturian 2003: 38, 146–147).

<sup>29</sup> Plucked string folk instrument.

<sup>30</sup> Bowed string folk instrument.

<sup>31</sup> Plucked string folk instrument.

<sup>32</sup> Folk instrument similar to tambourine.

<sup>33</sup> Published in *Kul'tura i zhizn'*, No. 6, in 1971 (Khachaturian 1980: 9–30; see also Shneerson 1958: 21).

the same time, a self-image through a Western paradigm, which usually means Russia, is constructed. It is common for Armenians to identify themselves through Russian reflections, as in texts written by Valery Bryusov and Osip Mandelstam, but also through music by composers who helped to position Armenian culture clearly in the West such as Khachaturian. Many of Ar-

menians remain attached to historical narratives that support the Western, i.e. Russian Orientalist self-image, which fitted in very well with Soviet cultural policy. As they also want to preserve their canonic Armenian identity construction, they also emphasise their originality and exoticism, and the threefold narrative of Khachaturian is a good example here.

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