

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

Brigitta Davidjants

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 Oriental¹ 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.

¹ 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.