

ARAM KHACHATURIAN – AN ARMENIAN SOUL IN THE WORKS OF A SOVIET COMPOSER

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ABSTRACT

The present paper seeks to present the life and works of the famous composer of Armenian nationality – but often mentioned as a Soviet composer – Aram Khachaturian (1903–1978). Starting from this duality, from this interesting parallelism, the article investigates in part – next to the life and works of the composer – the historical motives and issues of this “double identity” and the presence of Armenian national elements in the compositions of Aram Khachaturian. In order to understand this dilemma, and the entire creation of the composer, we must be aware of the fact that since the beginning of the twentieth century, more precisely since 1920, when the Russian army occupied the territory of Armenia and the country became a member of the Soviet Union, Armenian culture was deeply influenced by its cultural policy. The article therefore deals with the life of the composer, his musical career, as well as the historical context of the period, while analysing the way in which Aram Khachaturian’s work is perceived in the history of music, as a result of which this remarkable personality is considered an Armenian and Soviet composer, European and Oriental at the same time.

Keywords: *music, Armenian, Soviet, national identity, Aram Khachaturian*

Introduction

The personality of composer Aram Khachaturian appears in the European musicological thought even today as a personality with a double identity, somewhat controversial, while his works are regarded and interpreted in the light of this fact.

Khachaturian – and his entire creation – can therefore be viewed in several ways: focusing on his nationality, as an Armenian; as an Oriental, Caucasian composer who sought inspiration in various Eastern cultures; or – given his musical education in Moscow, where he lived most of his life – as a Soviet (Russian) composer.

“For the Armenians, he is a symbol of the European character of the Armenian nation and of their cultural affiliation 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 individuality to the supposed expectations of the (Western) audience.”¹

The socio-historical context of Khachaturian’s life and work can only be understood through a thorough knowledge of the political and cultural relations between Armenia and Russia during the two defining political regimes – the Tsarist Russian Empire and especially the Soviet Union. As a result of the long period spent under Russian/Soviet occupation, in Armenia, in the field of music (but also of the arts in general), a thinking was formed based on the combination of Western, Eastern and Armenian elements. In this context, *Western music* means the musical culture based on the European national Romanticism of the nineteenth century and which belongs primarily to the academic, professional repertoire. *Armenian music* refers to authentic Armenian traditional music, and the Armenian character results from the introduction and stylization of the elements of folk music in cultivated music – as in the case of the national schools of the nineteenth century. *Oriental music* refers to that music, which includes typical Oriental elements and also refers to the works of Armenian composers who absorbed this Oriental approach into their music. This synthesis of local and global in the Soviet musical culture of Oriental composers perfectly reflects the heterogeneous nature of the music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, generated by colonization.

1. The life and work of the composer

Aram Khachaturian² was a truly remarkable personality of the Armenian musical life, whose compositions are today part of the series of “classics” of twentieth century music. His name is known and recognized throughout the world,

¹ https://resmusica.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/rm9_2017_7-18_Davidjants.pdf.

² Aram in Armenian means “merciful.”

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and his compositions are performed on the most famous theatre stages and concert halls. He was – next to Komitas – the most famous composer of Armenian nationality, whose compositions are characterized by an effervescent rhythm, specific harmonic chains, melodies pervaded by Armenian folk motifs and a suggestive shading of the images.

Khachaturian was born on June 6, 1903 in the Georgian city of Tiflis (Tbilisi), into a poor but music-loving family, and was fascinated by Armenian folk songs ever since childhood.

He recounted his childhood impressions as follows: “Old Tiflis is a city of sounds, a city of music. It took a stroll along the streets and lanes away from the centre, to plunge into the musical atmosphere which was created by all the various sources ...”³

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Tiflis was a true cultural centre for Armenians, where the different layers of Armenian culture – ancient folk music, the art of the *ashugh*⁴ and Western art – coexisted. Khachaturian recalled hearing the songs of the *ashughs* and *sazandars*⁵ on the streets of Tiflis, and, moreover, he mentioned several times that he had absorbed this music into himself as a child. There are other stories about his contact with authentic Armenian music – how he listened to his mother’s singing, and how he found inspiration in these musical memories later, as a composer. Khachaturian confessed that he remembered many songs sung at home by his parents, but later partially forgot them: “I know the first words or even just some motifs (...) I can remember about 20 songs.”⁶

At the age of 10 he began his studies at the Commercial College (1913-1921). From this period he also began to study music: although he did not yet know the musical notes, he learned to play the tuba and the piano. At the age of 15, he visited the theatre for the first time and was impressed by everything he heard there, deciding to become a musician.

At the age of 18, in 1921, he settled in Moscow, where he then spent the most important part of his life, until his death on May 1, 1978. Initially he went to visit his brother, but remained in the capital, attending the courses of the Department of Physics and Mathematics at the Moscow University – and starting the study of cello and composition at the Gnëssin Institute (1922-1929), where one of his teachers was the composer Reinhold Glière. In 1929 he was admitted to the Moscow Conservatory, where he studied cello, piano and composition until 1934, under the famous professor of composition, N. I. Myaskovsky. According to historical sources,

³ https://issuu.com/volisarings/docs/arts_world_club_41.pub.

⁴ Armenian minstrel – traditionally a singer-poet and bard who accompanies his song. In Armenia, the *ashugh* are known since the 16th century onward, acting as the successors to the medieval *gusan* art.

⁵ Any instrumentalist from Anatolia, the Caucasus or Iran, who played a folk instrument.

⁶ https://resmusica.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/rm9_2017_7-18_Davidjants.pdf.

Ágota Bodurian

Aram Khachaturian – An Armenian Soul in the Works of a Soviet Composer

Khachaturian's professional development was almost miraculous. In a very short time he became one of the best students of the faculty.

In his first year of study he made his debut as a composer, with the composition entitled *Poem* for piano, followed by the pieces entitled *Game Song* and *Song-Poem* (1932) for violin and piano. His *First Symphony*, a composition dating from 1934, was his graduation piece. The latter was presented at the Moscow Conservatory Hall, under the baton of E. Senkara. Through this piece Khachaturian completed a productive period of study and, at the same time, began a new period of life and creative work as a mature composer. The audience, the press, his colleagues and friends noticed the high artistic value of the new composition, the originality and importance of its content, the richness of the melodies, the generosity of the harmonic colours and of the orchestra and, especially, the characteristic national colour. All these early compositions already foreshadowed the characteristic features of his compositional style: the improvisational character, the diversity of variation techniques, the imitation of timbre effects present in Eastern instrumental music, the famous "Khachaturian seconds," rhythmic ostinato, etc. In his own words, Khachaturian stated: "These seconds come from the numerous sounds of folk instruments I heard as a child: sazandartar, kamancha and drum. My organ-point predilection comes from the Eastern music."⁷

In 1932 the *Piano Suite* was composed. Its first piece, "Toccatà," was widely recognized and included in the repertoire of many pianists. Created by Khachaturian in his youth, "Toccatà" has retained its fascinating character until the present day. Rodion Shchedrin wrote: "Many years have passed since the appearance of that dynamic wonderful piece, but even now, its performance stirs enthusiasm of the public."⁸

In 1933 Sergey Prokofiev paid a visit to Myaskovsky's composition class. The meeting with this brilliant composer impressed the young musician. In turn, Prokofiev was so deeply amazed by Khachaturian's compositions that he took them with him to Paris, where they were soon performed.

In 1933, Khachaturian presented a new composition entitled *Dance Suite* for orchestra. Composer Dmitry Kabalevsky wrote of the new masterpiece: "The first performance of this composition, which emitted sunlight, joy of life and spiritual power, was a great success to the young composer, still a student, and immediately ranked him among the top positions of Soviet composers."⁹

Among his first creations are the ballet entitled *Happiness*, the *Violin Concerto*, and the incidental music to *Masquerade*. The *Piano Concerto*, composed in 1936, was also very successful and brought him worldwide fame.

⁷ https://resmusica.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/rm9_2017_7-18_Davidjants.pdf.

⁸ <http://www.khachaturian.am/eng/biography.htm>.

⁹ <http://www.khachaturian.am/eng/biography.htm>.

During World War II he composed a series of patriotic songs and marching bands, the well-known ballet *Gayane* (presented in 1942), as well as *Symphony no. 2*, nicknamed the *Symphony with Bells*, in which are suggested the sufferings of the people during the war years.

The score of the ballet *Gayane* on K. Derzhavin's libretto was completed in 1942. In this composition, Khachaturian successfully synthesized the traditions of classical ballet with Armenian folk music. Since then, *Gayane* has been part of the repertoire of Armenian and international theatres, and the three symphonic suites composed by Khachaturian in ballet music have also gained widespread fame.

In 1944, Khachaturian composed the national anthem of Armenia. A year later, the war ended and the third "victorious" symphony appeared. Indeed, the *Third Symphony* can be considered an ode, a true anthem of the victors.

In the summer of 1946 he finished the score of the *Cello Concerto*, which was performed with great success in Moscow by S. Koussevitzky. At the same time, he composed – for the first time in his career – a vocal cycle to verses of Armenian poets.

In the 1950s and 1960s he began his career as a conductor, and from 1950 he was employed as a professor at the Moscow Conservatory. He performed permanently in Russia and abroad (he played at concert halls in Odessa, Kiev, Yerevan, Riga, Baku, Tallinn, but also in Italy, England, Finland, France, Greece, Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, the USA, Australia).

His famous heroic and tragic ballet, *Spartacus* (presented in 1956 in Leningrad) dates back to 1954, and in 1960 he composed four orchestral suites that included some ballet numbers. In the years 1960–1970 he worked on the three sonatas and three rhapsody concerts: for violin and orchestra, for cello and orchestra, and for piano and orchestra.

Khachaturian died in 1978 in Moscow at the age of 75. He was buried at the Komitas Pantheon in Yerevan, along with Komitas and other internationally distinguished Armenians. Since 2003, an international competition for young instrumentalists has been named after him, and his memory is preserved in the Khachaturian Museum and in his statue in front of the Yerevan Opera.

As can be seen above, Khachaturian composed numerous ballets, symphonic works, concerts for piano, violin, cello, chamber works, sonatas, songs, romances, choral pieces, music for theatre and film. The ballets *Spartacus* and *Gayane* are his largest and most famous creations. The *sabre dance* in the final act of the *Gayane* ballet, greatly popular, is often presented as an independent creation.

His works marked a direction towards a new style, towards discoveries and innovations with a special character, although his entire creative activity, as well as the formation of his own style, evolved under the permanent control of the communist regime. Through his creations he encouraged young composers to boldly experiment with new influences and find their own, personal voice.

Khachaturian's instrumental compositional technique, the colourful orchestral works was praised by both Shostakovich and other renowned composers of the time, and the freshness and vitality of his music, which survives to this day, is an exemplary value for modern composers. Thus, he exerted a special influence on all directions of the cultivated Armenian music tradition. His close connection with Armenian folk music and nineteenth-century Russian musical traditions gives his work a special tinge and deeply defines his compositions. The most important feature of his creation is that in his compositions are found the fiery colours, the rich harmony and effervescent rhythm of Armenian folk music and of other neighbouring peoples.

Khachaturian – an iconic personality of his time, was a worthy example for a number of Armenian composers, such as Alexander Arutiunian, Arno Babajanian, Tigran Mansurian, Edgar Hovhannisyan, Edward Manukyan, Loris Tjeknavorian.

2. The history of the Armenian people (19th-20th centuries) and its effects on the development of Armenian musical life

Armenia is a Christian country (in fact, the first Christian country in the world), but it is located in a region inhabited predominantly by Muslims. Over the centuries – and especially during the Ottoman Empire – the Armenian Christian population had gone through several difficult pogroms, their sufferings culminating in the genocide of 1915, the immense tragedy that has had the greatest influence on the self-consciousness, on the Armenian identity and which has left its mark on the lives of all Armenians in the world. Because of the Genocide, a large part of the surviving population emigrated to all corners of the world, and those who remained in the mother country still suffer from the consequences of serious interethnic problems.

Thus, on the one hand, because of Christianity, and on the other, not forgetting the genocide of 1915, the Armenians oppose the view that Armenia is part of the Middle East. Armenian culture tends to position itself more in the European cultural sphere, emphasizing the Western elements in the field of arts and music as an important part of it. According to this conception, the Armenian cultural elite supports the European affiliation of Armenian cultivated music, regardless of the many elements of Middle Eastern music in Armenian traditional music.¹⁰

For a deep understanding of this internal conflict, there must be outlined, followed and understood in depth the troubled history, the fate of the Armenian people.

¹⁰ https://resmusica.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/rm9_2017_7-18_Davidjants.pdf.

In the nineteenth century, while Western Armenia remained part of the Ottoman Empire (where it had belonged since the fifteenth century), Eastern Armenia became part of the Russian Empire. Thus, for almost 100 years, from 1828 to 1917, before the Bolshevik coup in 1920, the present Armenian Republic was a part of the Russian Empire.

Moreover, the culture of Eastern Armenia was not limited to the territory of present-day Armenia, but also developed in the large urban centres of the Caucasus region, inhabited by significant Armenian communities, such as Tiflis and Baku. The most important cultural centre among these was the city of Tiflis (Georgia), characterized by a special, colourful multi-ethnicity, whose population included a significant number of Armenians. It is also worth mentioning that the city became a centre of Russian colonial power in the nineteenth century, and the multiple economic and political changes – consequently also cultural – led to the partial “Russification” of the population.

Following the evolution of universal history, it can be clearly seen that the relations between the conquering, colonizing peoples and the oppressed nations are characterized by ambivalence and heavy conflicts. The colonizers aim to transform the subjugated into a copy of themselves, but still not entirely, because the colonial relationship cannot exist between equals. On the other hand, although the oppressed nations are forced to adopt the conquering people as an example, the result can never be a faithful copy, as it will always reflect the identity, expression and historical experience of the oppressed.¹¹ Such a relationship characterized the Russia-Caucasus relationship in the nineteenth century. It should be noted that Armenia and Georgia also benefited from becoming part of the Russian Empire: Tiflis being the centre of the local government, education developed and greater religious freedom was allowed, as all three ethnic groups in question were Christian.

Caucasian cultures – located on the borders of different Eastern and Western empires, have always been characterized by a certain hybridity. Ethnic groups with different languages, traditions and religions coexisted in these areas. This context played a particularly important role in the life of the Armenian population, giving a special colour to their musical culture.

Regarding the musical culture characteristic of the Russian Empire, the oriental elements of Russian classical music seem to reflect the influences of political and military events that took place in the process of expanding the Empire: Siberia, the Caucasus and Central Asia, the Far East and the Middle East. Thus, the invasion of the Caucasus coincides with the flowering of Russian romanticism.

The composers of the Russian National School were often inspired by the music of the Orient. The most relevant examples in this regard are the *Scheherazade* by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1888), *Islamey* by Mily Balakirev (1869), or *Prince Igor*

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

Ágota Bodurian

Aram Khachaturian – An Armenian Soul in the Works of a Soviet Composer

by Alexander Borodin (1887). Oriental motifs were included and adapted in cultivated music, which led to the emergence of musical stereotypes, such as the modal harmonization of diatonic folk songs, scales that included chromatic and / or non-diatonic intervals, songs composed in imitation of folk tunes, etc.¹²

Given that, in the view of the Caucasian peoples, Tsarist Russia was closer to Europe than to the East, Armenians shared a closer mentality with the Christian Russian Empire than with the Muslim countries around them. This mentality had probably shaped the musical relations between Armenians and Russians: Armenians adopted Western national ideas through Russia. Among the Armenian composers and researchers who manifested themselves in this way are the famous Komitas (Solomon Solominian), Makar Ekmalian and Romanos Melikian. As composers, they belonged to the Western school of composition, but also greatly valued and cultivated their traditional culture. (For example, the 1868 work entitled *Arshak II* by composer Tigran Tchouhadjian, considered the first Armenian opera, was inspired by the distant history of the Armenian people: the life of Armenian king Arshak II. from the fourth century).¹³

After a short period of time, the Democratic Republic of Armenia, Eastern Armenia, became part of the Soviet Union in 1920 until its fall in 1991. Historical documents attest that Russia subjected all nations and countries included in the Soviet Union to political pressure which influenced all aspects of life, from the educational system to the arts and the physical repression of the population.

Soviet policy regarding the oppression of national minorities was based on Stalin's idea formulated in 1934, which required cultures to be "national in form and socialist in content."¹⁴

In this sense, it was assumed that the culture of the nations included in the Soviet Union would develop so as to suit the Moscow directives, but maintaining and promoting to some extent the national traditions. In the field of music, this policy has resulted in the construction of an opera house in each national Republic and the composition of a repertoire in accordance with these directives.

The inclusion of folk songs in the cultivated music creation resulted in the need to collect, research and systematize folk music. However, composers with a different national historical and cultural background were forced to use folk tunes or other elements of their own folk culture according to the models and compositional techniques of the Russian Romantic composers. In the case of Caucasian composers, this requirement therefore involved imitating certain Eastern aspects, written in the Western tradition.

¹² https://resmusica.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/rm9_2017_7-18_Davidjants.pdf.

¹³ Tigran Grigorian, *Istoria și cultura poporului armean* [The History and Culture of the Armenian People], Editura Științifică, Bucharest, 1993, p. 361.

¹⁴ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/831980?seq=1>.

Khachaturian's reception can be analysed and conceived through the prism of three parallel concepts: the Armenian character, his Orientalism and the European character. The composer's own view of these three elements in his music emerges from his articles published between 1949 and 1973, as well as from private letters to his friends, fellow musicians and musicologists.

3. Khachaturian between Armenian and Soviet identity

Khachaturian's life and compositions provide us with interesting information about Soviet cultural policy.

In 1943 Khachaturian became a devoted member of the Communist Party. Following a period of flourishing life, in 1948 he was removed from the party, the premiere of *Symphony No. 3* generating misunderstandings and problems with its management. But not only Khachaturian was subjected to this trauma: in one sweep – through Zhdanov's Decree¹⁵ – the work of many "Soviet" writers, artists and composers was cancelled. They were required to be in fact servants of the Communist Party, and the heroes of the works could be only workers, party members, engineers and pioneers. Also, artists had to have an optimistic, triumphalist view of life, excluding states of anguish, death (those who did not follow these rules were considered enemies of the people and were punished with imprisonment or even death). The publication and interpretation of Khachaturian's creation was banned, and he, being traumatized by this unjust and even tragic event, ceased "functioning" for a while. The composers of the time were divided into two camps – the "formalists," including Khachaturian, Shostakovich and Prokofiev – the greatest composers of the period, and the "correct" authors – mediocre composers, such as Khrennikov, Asafiev, Zakharov – who were granted positions and fame. Khachaturian experienced these events as a betrayal of those he had worked with for many years.

The sufferings of a people can fully define the life, the fate of the individual, the national origins, the roots and the problems related to the national identity becoming much more accentuated in the case of peoples, nations persecuted by destiny. Thus, Khachaturian's life and work is an example of a personality who, coming from a "minority", managed to integrate exceptionally well into the community, but was treated unfairly, and was not praised according to his true value.

Of course, the situation was later restored, and Khachaturian took his well-deserved position in Soviet society, but this trauma left unforgettable marks on his soul.

¹⁵ Andrei Zhdanov was the key figure in Stalin's relationship with artists, who were forbidden to write outside the norms.

Regarding the way he experienced his integration into Soviet society, it is also very interesting that most of his letters are written in Russian, sometimes including a few Armenian words. Only a few rare letters are written entirely in Armenian. At the same time, his articles written for various newspapers and magazines are clearly patriotic. For example, his article entitled “In Armenia” is an enthusiastic travel diary that describes different regions of Armenia, full of pride in his nation and fatherland.

The Armenian genocide also appears in Khachaturian’s writings, although the subject was considered “taboo” in the Soviet Union at the time. Such an account can be found, for example, in a letter to musicologist Margarit Arutiunian: “(...) Armenians, despite mass destruction and persecution by enemies, have managed to preserve their nation, language, culture and religion.”¹⁶ He also talks about genocide in some interviews, considering it as the reason why his parents had to leave their home and come to Tiflis.

His letter to film producer and politician Gevork Ovanesyan (August 1949) again shows this dual artistic identity: “An honest historian, when he starting to write the history of Soviet music, or the history of Armenian Soviet 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 [...]”¹⁷

Despite living and working in Moscow, he was constantly concerned with his position in the mindset of Armenian society: in his letter to composer Edvard Mirzoyan on February 16, 1969, he wrote that he felt that people (Armenians) begin to forget 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.”¹⁸

From all this it is clear that for Khachaturian it always remained important to be publicly received as an Armenian composer. In 1973, when an article was published in an Armenian Lebanese newspaper in which the author wrote that Khachaturian considered himself a Russian composer, he reacted angrily: in his letter to the editorial office he showed that his music was rooted above all in Armenian folk music and named Komitas and Spenidiaryan as his masters. He listed his long visits to Armenia, how he participated in Armenian music life, and even the fact that there is a street in Yerevan bearing his name.

Armenian musicology resonates with this attitude of the composer himself: the Armenian origins of Khachaturian represent an important aspect of the musicological discourse. It is generally claimed that he remained a son of his people forever, and that he had always retained the bond with Soviet Armenia despite the fact that he never lived there.

¹⁶ https://resmusica.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/rm9_2017_7-18_Davidjants.pdf.

¹⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1879366512000255>.

¹⁸ https://resmusica.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/rm9_2017_7-18_Davidjants.pdf.

In fact, all musicologists associate Khachaturian's music with the experience of Transcaucasia, which they regard as a factor inherited along with blood, already existing in his early compositions. They believe that Khachaturian brought into European music the improvisatory nature, combinations and rhythmic patterns characteristic of Eastern music. In general, Khachaturian's music is presented as a synthesis of Eastern traditions and European music. According to Arutyunov, on a global scale, Khachaturian represented not only Armenian music, but also Transcaucasian, Central Asian and Middle Eastern musical cultures, as a huge complex cultural area.¹⁹ Indeed, he researched and cited in his creations not only Armenian music, but also that of other peoples of the Caucasus.

Khachaturian also had a strong Moscow identity, which can be noticed not only in his music, but also in his letters. For example, he always encouraged Caucasian composers to study in Moscow.

At the same time, he contributed to the creation of the Armenian music school in the sense of national Romanticism and nineteenth-century Russian Orientalism. To this end, he constantly emphasized his Armenian character. He did not limit himself to the Armenian character, but constructed himself more broadly as an exponent of Soviet Oriental composers.

All these stories are reflected not only in Khachaturian's own writings and interviews, but also in his reception by Armenian musicologists.

Many Armenians remain attached to the historical accounts that support the Western self-image, i.e. Eastern Russian, which fitted in very well with Soviet cultural policy. As they want to maintain at the same time their canonic Armenian identity construction, they also emphasize their originality and exoticism, and the threefold narrative of Khachaturian is the most appropriate example in this regard.

Conclusions

Of all the Armenian and/or Soviet composers, Aram Khachaturian was the only one who became world famous and recognized, a lively, spontaneous personality, "often conjugated with the greatness, depth and legendary spirit of Dante."²⁰

His art is characterized by a deep respect and a keen interest in the music of different nations. He retains his Armenian character, but uses the music of neighbouring Caucasian peoples, and at the same time manifests himself as a devout Soviet Muscovite composer. In his creation, "Khachaturian includes an expression that combines the sensual charm of the Armenian people, temperamentally involved in intense feelings, to which is added the behaviour of the highly professional artist,

¹⁹ https://resmusica.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/rm9_2017_7-18_Davidjants.pdf.

²⁰ <http://www.cimec.ro/Muzica/Cronici/GrConstantinescu408.html>.

Ágota Bodurian

Aram Khachaturian – An Armenian Soul in the Works of a Soviet Composer

with his own style, able to contribute to the mosaic of features specific to the last century. Unmistakable, original and distinct by the modernity of the sound alloys in which we recognize an original folk flavour, with its rich ornamentation, capricious rhythms, colour of harmonies, Khachaturian, by his comprehensive creation, particularly varied in terms of musical genres, established himself authoritatively among the representative Soviet composers of the time.”²¹

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²¹ <http://www.cimec.ro/Muzica/Cronici/GrConstantinescu408.html>.