

Aram KHACHATURIAN
(1903 – 1978)

Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia from "Spartacus"

Born into an Armenian family in Tbilisi in 1903, Aram Khachaturian's musical identity formed slowly. A tuba player in his school band and a self-taught pianist, he wanted to be a biologist and did not study music formally until entering Moscow's Gnesin Music Academy - as a cellist - in 1922. His considerable musical talents were soon manifested and, by 1925, he was studying composition. In 1929, Khachaturian joined Nikolai Miaskovsky's composition class at the Moscow Conservatory. Khachaturian graduated in 1934 and before the completion of his postgraduate studies, the successful premieres of such works as the *Symphony No. 2 in a minor* and the *Piano Concerto in D-flat Major* established him as the leading Soviet composer of his generation. During the vicious government-sponsored attacks on the Soviet Composers' Union in the late-1940s, Khachaturian withstood a great deal of criticism even though his music contained few of the objectionable traits found in the music of more adventuresome colleagues. In 1950, following a humble apology for his artistic "errors", he joined the composition faculty of the Moscow Conservatory and the Gnesin Academy. During the years until his death in 1978, Khachaturian made frequent European conducting appearances and, in January of 1968, made a culturally significant trip to Washington, D.C., to conduct the National Symphony Orchestra in a program of his own works. In addition to the aforementioned compositions, Khachaturian's other works include film scores, songs, piano pieces, and chamber music. The degree of Khachaturian's success as a Soviet composer can be measured by his many honors, which include the 1941 Lenin Prize, the 1959 Stalin Prize, and title, in 1954, of People's Artist.

Spartacus is Khachaturian's most sweeping ballet and one of his greatest creations. The scenario, by Nikolai Volkov, was based on the slave uprising that occurred in ancient Rome in about 70 B.C.E. and was recorded by both Plutarch and Appian. Audience members are probably familiar Kirk Douglas' portrayal of the lead character in Universal International's 1960 production by the same name. Volkov proposed the idea for a ballet on the subject of Spartacus to Khachaturian as early as 1938, and two years later the project was announced by the Soviet press. Khachaturian did not undertake composition until the summer of 1950, noting on the first page of the manuscript that he was "beginning with a feeling of great excitement." However, work proceeded slowly and the score was not completed until February of 1954. More than two years passed before the premiere was given at the Kirov in Leningrad on December 27, 1956.

"I wanted the score to express clearly the drama of the plot," he said. "I believe that the theme of Spartacus and the slave uprising in ancient Rome has great importance and appeal today. I thought of Spartacus as a monumental fresco describing the mighty avalanche of the antique rebellion of the slaves on behalf of human rights . . . The era of Spartacus was an important one in the history of mankind. Today, when most of the world's oppressed people are waging an intense struggle for national liberation and independence, the immortal image of Spartacus has acquired particular significance. When I composed the score of the ballet and tried to capture the atmosphere of ancient Rome in order to bring to life the images of the remote past, I never ceased to feel the spiritual affinity of Spartacus to our own time."

OF NOTE:

Khachaturian's colleague, Dmitri Kabalevsky, wrote, "The especially attractive features of Khachaturian's music are in its roots in national folk fountainheads. The captivating rhythmic diversity of dances of the peoples of Transcaucasia and the inspired improvisations of the ashugs [Armenia's native bards] — such are the sources from which have sprung the composer's creative endeavors. From the interlocking of these two principles there grew Khachaturian's symphonism — vivid and dynamic, with keen contrasts, now enchanting in their mellow lyricism, now stirring in their tension and drama."