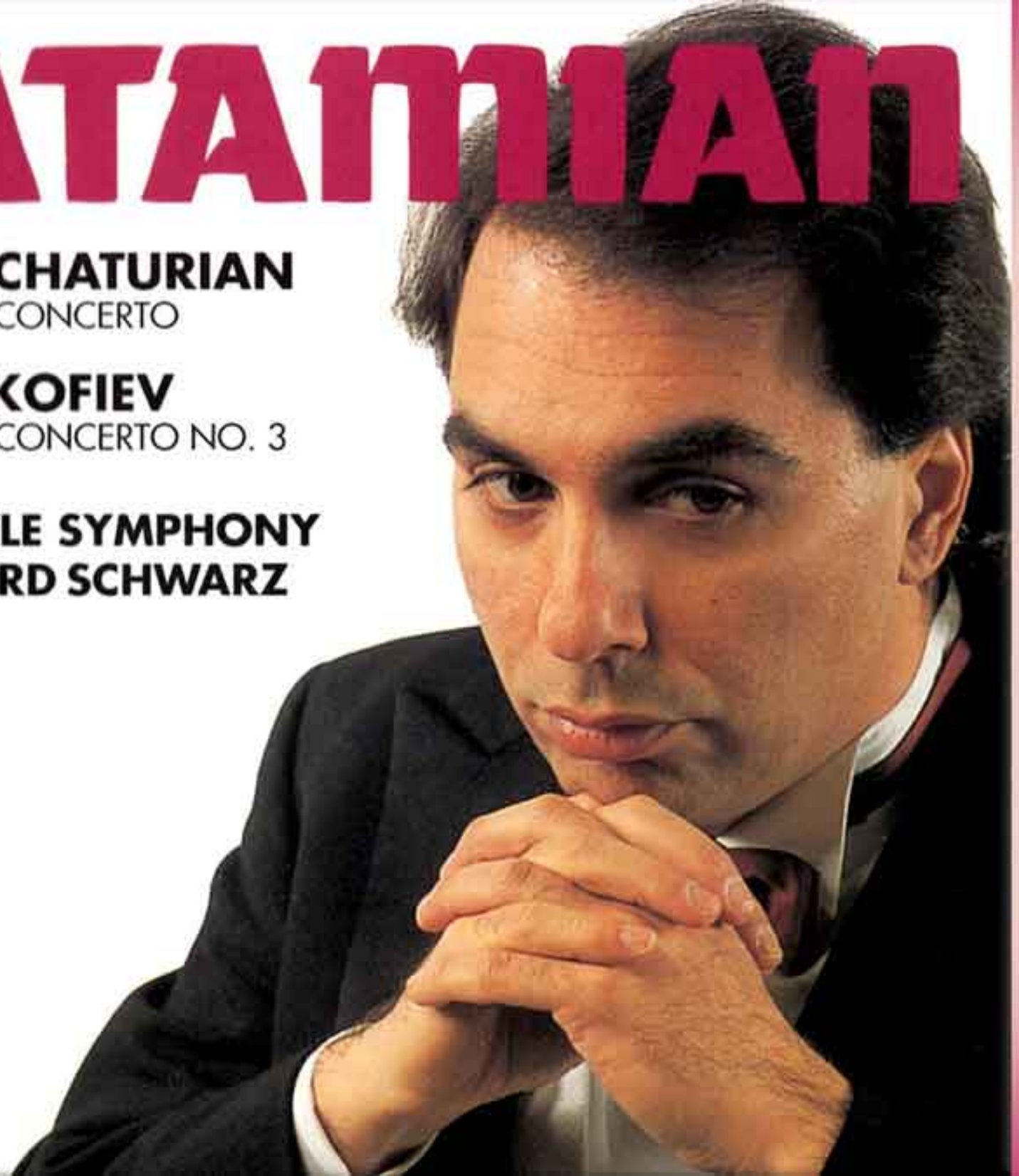
ATAMIAN

KHACHATURIAN
PIANO CONCERTO

PROKOFIEV
PIANO CONCERTO NO. 3

SEATTLE SYMPHONY
GERARD SCHWARZ



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ATAMIAN

Khachaturian: Piano Concerto, 1936 (30:28)

1 I. Allegro maestoso (12:42)

2 II. Andante con anima (8:42)
Larey McDaniel, *bass clarinet*

3 III. Allegro brillante (8:55)

Prokofiev: Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Major, Op. 26 (27:28)

4 I. Andante; Allegro (8:48)

5 II. Andantino (8:47)

6 III. Allegro ma non troppo (9:33)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 57:56

Dickran Atamian, piano
Gerard Schwarz, conductor
Seattle Symphony

From early twentieth century Russia come two brilliant examples of the piano concerto repertoire: Aram Khachaturian's Piano Concerto 1936 and Serge Prokofiev's Concerto III in C Major, Op. 26 (1917-21). Whether steeped in regional lore or giving reverential nod to structural traditions of the 18th century, both concertos were strikingly original for their time, yet easily made their separate ways into the imaginations of concert audiences worldwide.

Like its stage-play counterpart, the piano concerto is a genre in which conflicting forces vie for resolution. Passion, tenderness, confrontation and conciliation hold sway. From its inception, composers found within its formal boundaries not limitations, but rather countless opportunities for exploitation of the dramatic situation: piano as protagonist, suppliant, narrator or commentator, juxtaposed against—or even incorporated within—the fabric of the orchestra. And like the leading actor in a stage play, the concerto becomes a vehicle for the virtuoso pianist as star—an opportunity for commercial success not lost on composers, particularly those who were also pianists.

Although not an outstanding pianist himself, Khachaturian composed early in his career this concerto of astonishing idiomatic flair. Filled with passion and all the elements of a captivating drama, the concerto confirmed to the musical establishment Khachaturian's position as a composer of promise and perhaps even helped define for himself his emerging style. He wrote: "Apparently my attraction for the 'concerto style,' for colorful virtuosity, is characteristic of my creative individuality. I like the very idea of writing a composition with a predominating, joyously vibrant beginning, of free competition between virtuoso soloist and symphony orchestra."

Basking in the glow of success from his First Symphony and the popularity of several earlier piano pieces, Khachaturian undertook the writing of his piano concerto at a time in which the musical modernism of the previous decade had eroded the good will of Soviet officialdom. This must have been

a source of some consternation for a composer whose formative years, musically speaking, were filled with the sounds of contemporary composers, not the masters of the past. Gerald Abraham writes in Eight Soviet Composers:

The Khachaturian of this period was in the position of an eager, intelligent child who has just been given the run of a toyshop. It is really very difficult to imagine oneself in the place of this young man in his early twenties, intensely musical, very gifted, yet who was belatedly making the acquaintance of the great composers all more or less at the same time. And as was quite natural, it was the newest and gaudiest toys in that shop that caught his fancy first; like many other young musicians with fuller cultural backgrounds, Khachaturian discovered music through contemporary music and only later developed a love of the classics.

Perhaps what saved Khachaturian from censure was his inclusion of nationalistic colors in his composition. Folk melodies from his native Armenia, as well as from other regions, found their way onto his musical palette. "My concerto, being the first national piano concerto, might stir the minds of young people," he wrote. "At least it might induce our master composers of the future to consider this genre from the viewpoint of national material..." In particular, the main theme of the Andante derives directly from a familiar folk tune. "But," he explained, "I departed so far from the original, changing its content and character so radically, that even Georgian and Armenian musicians could not detect its folk origin." And contemporary critics failed to detect the origin of that melody, as well, comparing it instead to the Nocturne from Borodin's Second Quartet or the Andante from Khachaturian's own First Symphony.

Nationalist tendencies notwithstanding, stylistic influences both pianistically and compositionally are clearly rooted in the 19th century, rather more so than those of his Soviet contemporaries, Prokofiev and Shostakovich. Khachaturian wrote:

Just a few days after settling down in my brother's home I attended a concert by Nikolai Orlov, a wonderful pianist and a former student of Igumnov's. He played Chopin and Liszt. I was astounded both by the music, which I had never heard before, and by the unusual sound of the piano.

I had never imagined until then that our fingers were capable of such magical strength, such nimbleness and precision, capable of extracting such an array of tonal colors, rhythms, and brilliant passages from the instrument.

Soon after that I attended a performance by Igumnov himself..., with Alexander Hessin conducting. We heard Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and Rachmaninov's Second Concerto. I think it was then that I began to try for a differentiated perception of music, by applying to it my experience in analytical reading.

A little more than 18 months after he began, Khachaturian finished the concerto and presented it in an informal, two-piano performance in the composition class of his teacher, Miaskovsky. The first complete performance, though, took place in July of 1937 at Moscow's Sokolniki Park with Lev Oborin as soloist. The composer later wrote: "When I was working on my concerto I dreamed of hearing it played by Lev Oborin. My dream came true in the summer of 1937. The wonderful performance by this outstanding pianist ensured its success."

Other remarkable performances by legendary pianists have since assured the concerto a permanent place in the repertory, including those by Moura Lympany, Artur Rubinstein, Julius Katchen and William Kapell, whose career was launched by his performance of this work. In a letter to Khachaturian, American composer Samuel Barber wrote of Kapell's performance: "I am very pleased to recall the stunning success of the Piano Concerto's American premiere. Wherever its first performer, William Kapell, appeared the public would make him play the Concerto..."

Adding his own star to this firmament of legendary performers is Armenian pianist Dickran Atamian,

winner in 1975 of the prestigious Naumburg Competition. In a career that has spanned the globe, Atamian performs in the leading concert halls of the world and collaborates with such maestros as Lorin Maazel, Eduardo Mata, David Zinman, James DePreist, and Gerard Schwarz. Orchestral engagements include the Cleveland Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, the Leningrad Philharmonic, Boston Pops, Seattle Symphony and the Detroit Symphony. In his 1979 Carnegie Hall debut, he astonished the music world with a premiere performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* transcribed for solo piano, subsequently recorded for RCA and featured in a PBS television special. Critics agree that he imbues his performances with "daredevil," "earth shaker" and "fire-eating" temperament, as well as auras of "poetic mystery," "elegance and refinement," and "self-effacing sensitivity." There could be no more apt vehicles for the display of his virtuosity and communicative skills than these concertos by Khachaturian and Prokofiev.

Prokofiev, unlike Khachaturian, was himself such a pianist, and the Third Piano Concerto served as his starring vehicle. And star in it he did. After its premiere with the Chicago Symphony in December of 1921, the concerto was heard with the composer again as soloist in major cities in the United States, Europe and Russia, and was recorded. Soviet composer Dimitri Kabalevsky was impressed by the brilliance of Prokofiev's playing, but was even more moved by the communicative power of his lyricism. He wrote:

And again, as after the first concert in Ostozhenka, one was struck far more by the deep feeling with which he played the lyrical episodes than by the phenomenal precision of the technically complex passages, the rich timbre and the dynamic power of his touch. The subordinate theme of the first movement, the exquisite beauty of the theme of the variations in the middle part and the variation episode in the Finale—these are what I remember most vividly from that concert.

If Khachaturian's musical training was unorthodox, Prokofiev's was more usual. That is, it seems easier to explain Prokofiev's interest in such classical forms as sonata, rondo and theme and variations than it is to explain Khachaturian's interest in the same forms. Prokofiev writes in his autobiography of early exposure to music by past masters and traces their influences on his own composition. He refers to these influences as lines:

The first was the classical line, which could be traced back to my early childhood and the Beethoven sonatas I heard my mother play. This line takes sometimes a neoclassical form, sometimes imitates the eighteenth century. The second line, the modern trend, begins with that meeting with Taneev when he reproached me for the 'crudeness' of my harmonies. At first this took the form of a search for my own harmonic language, developing later into a search for a language in which to express powerful emotions. Although this line covers harmonic language mainly, it also includes new departures in melody, orchestration and drama. The third line is the toccata, or 'motor' line, traceable perhaps to Schumann's Toccata which made a powerful impression on me when I first heard it. This line is perhaps the least important. The fourth line is lyrical: it appears first as a thoughtful and meditative mood, not always associated with melody, or at any rate with long melody.

The composing of the Third Concerto, according to the composer, actually took place over a long period of time. It was apparently conceived, at least in scope, as early as 1911, from which time only an idea for parallel ascending triads found its way into the first movement. A theme for variations composed in 1913 became material for the second movement, and two themes from an aborted string quartet became part of the finale of the concerto. "Thus," the composer wrote, "when I began working on the [Third Concerto in 1921] I already had the entire thematic material, apart from the subordinate theme of the first movement and the third theme of the finale."

In the final analysis, the two concer-

tos share many common features. Both composers set out to write brilliantly dramatic starring vehicles for virtuoso pianists. Both works are cast in classical forms, although when heard within the context of late 20th century, the emotional impacts are decidedly neo-romantic. And, interestingly, Prokofiev's concerto can be compared to Khachaturian's in terms of nationalistic traits, as well. Critic Boris Asafyev points out that the Concerto "has a real Russian sweep to it, even though it contains neither folk themes nor deliberate stylization. What is important is that Prokofiev has still not cut himself off from his own country. His work throbs with its strength, and radiates the Russian understanding of art's meaning and value."

Neil Stannard

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Recording Producer: *Adam Stern*
Recording Engineer: *Al Swanson*
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Dickran Atamian plays the Baldwin piano exclusively.

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