

Piano Concerto

ARAM KHACHATURIAN

BORN 1903, Tbilisi, Georgia

DIED 1978, Moscow, USSR

FIRST PERFORMANCE 12 July 1937, Moscow, by Lev Oborin (piano) and the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Lev Steinberg

DURATION 35 minutes

1 *Allegro ma non troppo e maestoso*

2 *Andante con anima*

3 *Allegro brillante*

In many ways, Aram Khachaturian was the very model of a faithful Soviet artist. His career arguably reached its peak in 1957, when he was appointed to the highly influential post of Secretary of the Union of Soviet Composers, a role he stayed in until his death in 1978. That came after joining the Communist Party in 1943, becoming professor of composition at the Moscow Conservatoire in 1950, and being honoured as a People's Artist of the USSR, the Soviet Union's ultimate cultural accolade, in 1954.

Khachaturian remained enthusiastic about communism all his life. And in fact, he put his entire musical career down to the advent of the Soviet Union. Born in 1903 to an Armenian family in multicultural Tbilisi, Georgia, he lived through the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, then a brief period of independence for his homeland, and finally Georgia's fall to Soviet rule in 1920. His bookbinder father had been too poor to encourage his son's musical talents, but the new possibilities opened up by the Soviet system suddenly made it possible for Aram to travel to Moscow – even at the advanced age of 19 – and study at the prestigious Gnessin School, and then at the Moscow Conservatoire.

Later in his life, Khachaturian came in for his fair share of state censure, being accused – along with Prokofiev and Shostakovich – of the dreaded 'formalism' (in other words, of creating music that was too advanced for the masses to enjoy) in the notorious 1948 Zhdanov decree. He made a full and public apology for his artistic 'errors', but carried on regardless with his colourful, often exotic musical style – and found himself restored to official favour later the same year.



Despite not visiting his Armenian 'homeland' until 1939, he consciously set out to evoke his Armenian heritage through an exploration of the country's folk music, not least in his vibrant Piano Concerto of 1936.

Wartime acclaim

Khachaturian's Piano Concerto was the first of three concertos he composed for the members of the revered Soviet piano trio comprising Lev Oborin (piano), David Oistrakh (violin) and Sviatoslav Knushevitsky (cello). And, as so often, its unofficial premiere was something of a fiasco, with Oborin bashing away to little effect on an upright piano, accompanied by an under-rehearsed orchestra, at a concert in a Moscow park.

The performance was soon repeated with the Moscow Philharmonic under Lev Steinberg, however, and the Concerto was an overnight success, warmly received by audiences, critics and Soviet officialdom. It was also the first work to bring Khachaturian to serious recognition in the West – he found his music strongly promoted in Europe once the USSR had joined with the Allies against the Nazis.

The Piano Concerto's first UK performance was a prestigious premiere in war-torn London, with Moura Lympany as soloist and the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Alan Bush, in March 1940.

The music

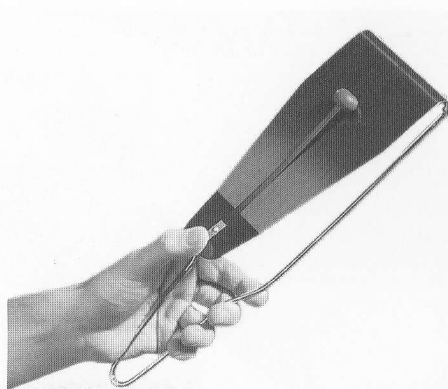
The **first movement** begins with an unmistakable orchestral call to attention, before the piano enters with the movement's first main theme, crisp, rhythmic and full of clangorous octaves. After a grand orchestral restatement of the same theme, the piano interrupts with the first of its many virtuosic solo passages, before the movement's second main theme, a folk-like melody for solo oboe. The piano ruminates in a freely rhapsodic style on this quieter, more reflective material, before the pace suddenly quickens and snatches of the opening melody are thrown around between brass and woodwind. The movement's clangorous opening music soon returns, followed by the oboe's folk tune now on flute and clarinet, then the piano's ruminations re-emerge as a traditional cadenza, faster and flashier than earlier. The movement ends with a huge, definitive

restatement of the opening melody – as if the composer wants us to remember it for the rest of the Concerto.

Khachaturian indicated that the lush, exotic **second movement**'s main theme was a drastic modification of a very popular old Armenian song, which even native Armenians would be hard-pushed to recognise. After a slinky prologue from the bass clarinet, the piano introduces the Armenian theme high up in its register, and when it comes back it's on the striking combination of first violins and ghostly flexatone (see right). A short section develops the folk-inspired tune, building to a thundering restatement on violins, horns and hammered piano chords. Calm soon returns, however – together with the slinky bass clarinet solo – and the movement ends enigmatically with a couple of ambiguous chords from the soloist.

The **third movement** is a breathless, helter-skelter race through jazzy, syncopated material first introduced by a solo trumpet, and with the piano soloist later given a long, powerful *cadenza* with a distinctively oriental-sounding atmosphere. A scampering closing section seems about to propel us into a throwaway ending, but Khachaturian suddenly swerves sideways into a huge restatement of the first movement's clangorous opening theme, which drives the movement on to a powerful, all-consuming climax.

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Ghostly tones

It might play for just a few bars, but the **flexatone** is a striking presence in the second movement of Khachaturian's Piano Concerto. Invented in the 1920s and originally used for sound effects in jazz bands, the flexatone was soon taken up by classical composers fascinated by its weird, otherworldly sound. Not for nothing has it been used in countless movie soundtracks (especially ones involving spooks or aliens), but it also appears in Schoenberg's *Variations for Orchestra* and his opera *Moses and Aaron*, and in Shostakovich's operas *The Nose* and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, among many other classical works.

The instrument itself is very simple, consisting of a flexible steel strip within a metal frame, with two wooden beaters fixed either side of it. The player holds the frame with their thumb on the end of the flexible steel strip, shaking the instrument from side to side so that the beaters hit the steel strip, and controlling the steel strip's tension (and therefore the pitch of the instrument) with their thumb – the harder they press, the higher the note.