

## Aram Khachaturian, Masquerade Suite

Submitted by Jim Waddelow

Fresh on the heels of the recent success of his violin concerto, Khachaturian was commissioned in 1941 to write incidental music for a revival of the Mikhail Lermontov Russian play entitled *Masquerade*. The drama is a dark and complex tale of a series of misunderstandings and vengeance that lead a jealous man to murder his wife (with poisoned ice cream)—only to find out after the fatal deed has been done that she was faithful. Multiple scenes of balls and dancing proved to be a challenge, and when musical ideas for these party sequences did not come easy to the composer it led him to enlist the help of his former teacher Nikolai Myaskovsky. After delays working through the problems, Khachaturian dedicated the opening waltz to the leading actress Alla Kazanskaya, but the Moscow production would be cut short soon after the June 1941 debut by the German invasion of the USSR. In 1944 the composer released a five movement suite that is the version most often performed today. The famous opening waltz theme haunts the listener with a twisting melody that weaves between major and minor tonalities. Energetic and captivating, the darker subjects of the drama come into play right away. The following Nocturne movement features a singing and memorable violin solo that is seemingly interrupted by the boisterous triple-meter Mazurka that comes next. A movement of just under three minutes, there is a higher diversity of mood and colors than any of the other dances. The composer seamlessly alternates between a driving opening motive, a contrasting—almost dainty secondary woodwind motive, sweeping violin lines, and unexpected interruptions of the pulse. While the string sections shine with Khachaturian's gift of melody in the Romance, it is the unexpected quiet solos of the clarinet and trumpet underscore a sense of seriousness that draw the listener in further. Written in a similar style that is perhaps a preview of the famous Sabre Dance (composed the following year in 1942) a fast and frantic Galop that shows off the brass and percussion sections closes the suite with a stirring ending.

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