KHACHIG MEETS KHACHATURIAN

Posted on May 15, 2015 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 14 May 2015

Growing up in the Armenian Convent of Jerusalem, in the '50s, and occasionally hearing the "Saber Dance" on the piano at the Hoyechmen (HEM—Hye Yeridasartats Meeyoutyoun) Armenian club gatherings, it never occurred to Khachig-Toros Aladjadjian that one day he would become not only friends with Aram Khachaturian but would, along with his girlfriend and sister-in-law, help in the recovery of the composer at a Paris hospital.

By the mid-'70s Khachig-Toros had been living in France for nearly a decade, working as a photographer. He had also developed and printed the work of such photography giants as Henry Bresson, Robert Doisnoix, and Willy Rouis. "I was a pretty good photographer but I thought I was much better than I really was. As we, Armenians, say: 'Hover aradz eyee.' (I had put on airs)."

An active member of the Armenian community, Aladjadjian had not been to Soviet Armenia. When the 'Getronagan Sanouts' association of Paris organized a trip to the homeland, he and his girl-friend Veronique eagerly joined the group. On the way to Yerevan, the tourists stopped in Moscow where they met Armenian community leaders who told them of the upcoming Aram Khachaturian Jubilee commemorations in Yerevan.

In Yerevan the group made a point of attending the composer's birthday party. In addition to Khachaturian, the banquet featured poet Silva Gaboudigyan, the minister of tourism and other senior government officials. Per the eastern Armenian tradition at such celebrations, vodka flowed like River Arax as endless toasts were made, wishing long life to Khachaturian, to Yerevan, to Armenia, to the Armenian nation…In addition to participating in the celebrations, Toros was floating around, taking pictures of the Armenian cultural superstars. Then, out of the blue, Khachaturian said: "Toros! I want to hear you make a toast." After Toros' toast, Khachaturian asked the young photographer to sit next to him. He also had a long chat with Veronique.

Months later in Paris, Toros had a call from an acquaintance who was a leader of the Armenian community. The man told Toros that Khachaturian was at the Nocaire Hospital in Paris following surgery. Would Toros go to the hospital and see if the composer needed anything?

Of course he would. While Khachaturian was elated to meet Toros again, he was a bit morose: he hadn't wanted to be operated. He had come to Paris only for a check-up, he repeated. Paris Armenian community leaders, who had facilitated the trip, had assured him he would be spared the knife. However, during examination the doctors had decided to operate.

For the next 15 days, Toros, Veronique, and his sister-in-law Araxie played Florence Nightingale to the composer of "Gayane" and "Spartacus" and "Masquerade". Araxie prepared Khachaturian's favorite Armenian dishes, including fish done in a particular way. Veronique and Toros took him on walks in the hospital corridors and grounds to lift his spirits. Khachaturian had not forgiven the surgeons for the operation. He joked that the biggest liars in the world were physicians and lawyers.

He also talked, at some length, about the less-than-adequate health care system in the Soviet Union.

When he had fully recovered, Toros took him on drives in his green Volkswagen. "Here was a man who was used to Bentley, Rolls-Royce, Zil… but now he was sitting next to me in my jalopy as we drove down Champs- Elysees."



One of the places they visited was a retail outlet which had a large collection of classical LPs. After flipping through the Khachaturian section, the composer picked "Aimez-vous Khachaturian" album and complained to Toros that he was unhappy with the album because the conductor had played it too fast so as to save time.

During the scenic drives the composer and the photographer talked about everything under the sun. He wanted to know about Toros' life in Jerusalem and career in Paris. Khachaturian also asked Toros not to publish the photo of his visit to the Armenian St. John the Baptist Church on Rue Jean Goujon. It wouldn't have been judicious during the Soviet era. "It wouldn't hurt me, but it could hurt our people," said the composer.

When Toros asked him who was his favorite composer, Khachaturian diplomatically said: "Music is like a fruit. At different times you like different fruits… for their flavor, aroma…"

Talking about the "Masquerade Suite", Khachaturian cryptically said that when people put on the mask, they became the person they truly are.

Always a gentleman, Khachaturian showed at an Armenian gathering that he didn't suffer fools gladly. He had been invited by a left-leaning Armenian club to celebrate his career. In his introduction of the composer, the MC had said that Khachaturian couldn't have been huge musical

success had he not lived in the Soviet Union. Khachaturian replied: "A person who has the skill, a love for his profession, and gets the right education, would be successful even if he lived on the moon."

"I always called him 'Varbed' or 'Maestro'," says Toros. "Although I knew how great he was and, of course, loved his music, I was casual. I guess I was not intimidated by his stature because I was going through an anarchist phase."



When Khachaturian returned to Moscow, he kept in touch with the Paris photographer. The following year (1978) when Toros heard that Khachaturian had died at the age of 75, he says he felt an indescribable grief. "It was as if our nation had been amputated. But at the same time I remembered his visit to the Armenian church and the applause he received from the congregation. I remembered the joy in his eyes as he lit a candle at the church."