



*Alan Hovhaness*

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## Alan Hovhaness: Armenian Composer, Universal Spirit

APRIL 22, 2021

by **Muriel Mirak-Weissbach**

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ARLINGTON, Mass. — “I welcome you to this special event dedicated to the 110th anniversary of the birth of Alan Hovhaness, one of the greatest composers of the 20th century.”

This is how Dr. Ara Ghazarians, curator of the Armenian Cultural Foundation (ACF) opened a moving tribute on April 17. Conducted over zoom, the commemoration was organized by the Board of Trustees of the ACF, and co-sponsored by Amaras Art Alliance and the Friends of Armenian Culture Society and Alessandra Pompili.

For an hour and a half, participants from the US and Europe would hear from scholars as well as personal acquaintances of Hovhaness, learning not only about his extraordinarily vast compositional achievements but gaining insight into him as a person. Renowned musicians contributed performances of his works, on the violin, clarinet and piano. A special guest would be Hovhaness himself, in a video recording of the composer playing his “Shalimar” on the piano.

As Ghazarians noted in his introductory remarks, much of his early work has unfortunately been lost, as he reportedly destroyed 1,000 of his compositions in 1940. The extant works include chamber operas as well as works for soloists, chorus, and orchestra. He wrote for keyboard instruments as well as chamber ensembles, composed over sixty-six symphonies and other orchestral compositions, including scores for films.

For many reasons, it was fitting for the Armenian Cultural Foundation to be among the organizers; it is located in Arlington, Massachusetts, which was the home of Hovhaness. In addition, Ghazarians said, the ACF “is proud to house one of largest archives on Alan Hovhaness in the world, which is available for academic researchers and musicologists.” Other important collections of the composer’s materials, Ghazarians continued, “made up of scores, sound recordings, photographs and correspondence, are located at several academic centers, including Harvard University, University of Washington, the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., **Yerevan**’s State Museum of Arts and Literature in Armenia.”

The first to speak was Dr. Jack Johnston, who had known Alan Hovhaness since childhood. Johnston, a long-term resident of Arlington, grew up in the same neighborhood as Hovhaness.

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In fact, they lived on the same street, Johnston began. Johnston did know the family very well and still maintains contact with the composer's wife. In the 1930s and 1940s, Alan Hovhaness "taught my sisters music, violin and piano," he recalled. Although one sister turned into an accomplished pianist, the would-be violinist "sounded as though she were strangling a cat," as family members put it at the time.

Alan Hovhaness enjoyed sharing music with the neighborhood. As Johnston recalled, he would open three large living room windows wide and then play a variety of pieces, from classical to popular and his own works on the piano. There would be 20 to 30 neighbors sitting on their steps or lawn chairs, grateful participants in an open-air concert.

After Johnston lost his own father while still a teenager, Hovhaness became "a surrogate father." Hovhaness studied at Tufts University and the New England Conservatory of Music, after which he became the choir director at St. James Armenian Apostolic Church in Watertown.

Hovhaness rose to prominence, performing at Boston Symphony Hall (while his father sat in the balcony), receiving an invitation by Jack Kennedy to the White House and celebrating his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday at Carnegie Hall. Though gaining fame for his music, Hovhaness did not forget Johnston; he showed a page from a score of *Mount St. Helen's Symphony*, a gift the composer had given him on his 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday, with best wishes from his "Arlington neighbor and lifelong family friend."

Following this rare look into the personality of Hovhaness, the participants heard the first piece selected for the program, *Yeraz* (Dream) No. 2, Op. 56, played brilliantly by Levon Chilingirian, founding member of the world Chilingirian Quartet. Chilingirian is a faculty member and Chamber Music Artist in Residence at the Royal Academy of Music and professor of violin and Chamber Music at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, both in London.



*Levon Chilingirian*

## A 'Musical Polyglot'

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To introduce the next speakers, Ghazarians turned to the different cultural influences on Hovhaness from South Asia and the Far East, India and Japan in particular. The first to address this theme was Dr. Craig Parker, professor of music history at Kansas State University. Parker is the author of numerous articles and has served on the advisory Board of *Dictionary of American Music* (2013) and was the College Music Society Board Member for Musicology (2014-16). He is the recipient of the Society for American Music Distinguished Service Citation “in recognition of his sustained contributions to the society and its appreciation for nurturing our national music.”

Dr. Parker characterized Hovhaness as a “musical polyglot,” one who could communicate musical ideas in many different languages, from the modal sounds of Armenia to the ragas of India, and avoided atonal music. During his studies at Tufts University and the New England Conservatory, Dr. Parker said, Hovhaness became acquainted with Greek painter and mystic Hermon di Giovanni, who introduced him to the music of Greece, Egypt and India. After meeting the older brother of sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar in Boston, Hovhaness became more interested in Indian music and decided to take up this classical Indian string instrument.

Hovhaness had studied his Armenian heritage, especially through the music of Komitas, while he was working as choir director of the St. James Armenian Apostolic Church, and later, he related this heritage to elements of the Asian musical culture. In 1959-1960, he studied in India as a Fulbright Resident Scholar, and was the first western composer at the Musical Festival at the Academy of Music in Madras in 1960.

His compositions, which combine diverse cultural elements, speak a universal language and can transport listeners into distant musical universes. Parker said that his *Symphony No. 8*, composed in 1948, may have been based on Armenian modal music, but was perceived by Indians as partaking of their musical culture. He was the first western composer for an Indian orchestra, and composed Indian ragas himself. His *Symphony No. 7 Opus 178*, inspired by the Himalayan mountain peaks, led one concert attendee to exclaim that he had “brought the Himalayan mountains to Pittsburgh.” His 1966 *Symphony no. 19, the Vishnu*, was said to “circulate divine energy throughout the universe.” By the 1960s, largely through the efforts of Hovhaness, Indian music became well known in the United States.

His fascination with Eastern music took him also to Japan, where he composed with Japanese-like melodies and Armenian themes.

Following Dr. Parker’s presentation, participants heard a piece Hovhaness wrote in 1935. The composition for solo clarinet, *Lament No. 2, Op. 25*, was played by Einar Jóhannesson from Iceland, in a recording from April 15 in the Reykjavik Cathedral.

The renowned clarinetist is a graduate of Reykjavik College of Music and the Royal College of Music in London with Bernard Walton and John MacCaw. He is the winner of several competitions among them Sir Yehudi Menuhin’s Live Music Now in 1976, and three years later the Sonning Prize for young Nordic Soloists. He has appeared as soloist and chamber musician all over the world and recorded for various radio and television networks, often presenting pieces especially written for him. Einar Jóhannesson was principal clarinet of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra from 1980–2012 and is a founding member of the internationally recognized ensemble, the Reykjavik Wind Quintet.

### **Enriching Western Music from the East**

The second speaker, Dr. W. Anthony Sheppard, picked up where Dr. Parker had left off – in Japan. Dr. Sheppard is Marilyn and Arthur Levitt Professor of Music at Williams College. He is the author and editor of several books and articles and has served as the editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* and is currently Series Editor of *AMS Studies in Music*.





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Dr. Sheppard said that in the 1950s and 1960s American and European composers became interested in Japanese music, especially ancient ensemble music of the court. Hovhaness stands out among them for his active approach, learning to play Japanese instruments. In a letter he wrote to the Rockefeller Foundation for a grant, Hovhaness expressed his intention to enrich western music with Japanese elements.

When he travelled to Japan in 1960, he studied 6 traditional instruments. Together with his wife Hinako Fujihara, a virtuoso soprano, he would play gagaku, a traditional genre of court music, every night. As always in his dialogues with a new musical culture, he adopted the principles, but not the melodies, in his own compositions. Dr. Sheppard stressed that while he drew on earlier musical traditions with Indian, Arabic or Japanese elements, his compositions always displayed his mark of originality. In Japan, it was not only the music, but also historical sites, cultural events like NO theatre, and poetry that influenced his creative output.

In 1962 he composed sonatas for the *jho*, a traditional Japanese wind instrument, and incorporated related musical elements, like the sliding between pitches. In two orchestral works from 1964, he expressed the Japanese concept of changes through pitch clusters. The Japanese influence is present also in operas Hovhaness composed between 1959 and 1969, be it certain harmonic sequences or traditional drum rolls (which prefigured Benjamin Brittan's use in the 1960s).

In discussing Hovhaness's compositions in this period, Dr. Sheppard spoke of a syncretic approach, in which diverse elements come together; Hovhaness wrote Japanese and Indian ragas, works for Japanese instruments, and developed "neo gagaku," in which influences from India, Korea, Japan, Armenia and Indonesia play a role. There is a religious expression, a kind of mysticism, that pervades the music throughout.

To conclude the program, a piece which Hovhaness wrote back in 1944 was performed, the first movement from the *Greek Rhapsody No. 1 Op 63*. Introduced by Ghazarians, renowned pianist Alessandra Pompili played with profound expression and sensitivity. She has performed for years as a soloist to critical and public acclaim in Italy, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Iceland, Germany, Poland and the US. In addition to the traditional repertoire, Alessandra is an advocate of the music of Alan Hovhaness often performing and/or recording it as premières (for example, Hovhaness's Sonata *Cougar Mountain* op. 390 and *Fantasy* op.15).

### **Return to the Alma Mater**

An appropriate conclusion to this tribute to Alan Hovhaness came from Dr. Pasquale Tassone former director of music program of Arlington High School, which Hovhaness attended and graduated from in 1929. Tassone is a graduate of the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory in Milan, has an honors diploma from the Chigiana Academy in Siena, Italy and a PhD from Brandeis University. He has composed a number of pieces among them an opera, which have been performed on major stages, and is the winner of a number of national and international awards.

He began his series of amusing anecdotes with the recollection of an event that took place in the old alma mater he shared with Hovhaness. The famous composer had received an invitation to the high school for a weekend music festival, and Tassone was to conduct one of his compositions, the *Symphony for Band*. At the end of the piece, all was quiet. When Tassone turned around, he found Hovhaness standing silently on stage. Tassone remembered that when the harpist did not show up, Hovhaness settled in at the piano and played the harp part on the keyboard. He also remembered the restaurant they went to afterwards for lunch. Hovhaness stayed in Arlington for the whole weekend, and Tassone spoke admiringly of how gracious he had been to the students there.



Though 40 years passed and he had no further direct contact with the composer, Tassone had several encounters with other people that involved Hovhaness: it might have been a colleague he knew after his graduation from Brandeis, who had taken piano lessons from the maestro; or his dentist, whose father had hired Hovhaness to play, back in the years when he was choir director at St. James church. In 2009, Tassone was a member of the committee set up to sponsor a commemorative plaque for Hovhaness and composed a piece, *Dzon* (Ode) for the occasion, inspired by Hovhaness.

Now, it turns out that Arlington High school, where Tassone and Hovhaness completed their pre-college studies, is to be torn down and rebuilt. What better way to honor that school's most famous musical graduate, than to name the performing arts center of the new building after him?

### **The Voice of the Artist**

Alessandra Pompili offered closing remarks, in which she communicated the highly moral understanding of art that motivated Hovhaness and did so by letting him speak. She referenced Symphony no. 11, *All Men Are Brothers*, which premiered in 1961, and read a passage Hovhaness had quoted in his introduction to the score: "And the voice of the Lord Buddha was heard like the sound of a great gong hung in the skies, saying that though one met a thousand men on his way they would all be one's brothers." The composer then wrote: "The symphony is an attempt to express a positive faith in universal cosmic love as the only possible ultimate goal for man and nature. Let all unite in peace on our tiny planet, our floating village, our little space ship, as we journey across mysterious endlessness."

Again, letting us hear the words of the composer himself, she quoted from one of his Guggenheim applications: "I propose to create a heroic, monumental style of composition simple enough to inspire all people... It is not my purpose to supply a few pseudo-intellectual musicians and critics with more food for brilliant argumentation, but rather to inspire all mankind with new heroism and spiritual nobility. This may appear to be sentimental and impossible to some, but it must be remembered that Palestrina, Handel and Beethoven would not consider it either sentimental or impossible. In fact, the worthiest creative art has been motivated consciously or unconsciously by the desire for the regeneration of mankind."

Lastly, she read from an interview he gave in 1971, in which he addressed the dangers of human self-destruction, and the rebellion among youth against this danger. Expressing his sympathy with the younger generation and at the same time, rejecting any appeal to violence, Hovhaness stated: “the older generation is ruling ruthlessly. I feel this is a terrible threat to our civilization. It’s the greed of huge companies and huge organizations which control life in a kind of brutal way.... I hope something can be done about it. It’s gotten worse and worse, somehow, because physical science has given us more and more deadly weapons, and the human spirit has been destroyed in so many cases, so what’s the use of having the most powerful country in the world if we have killed the soul. It’s of no use.”

Such reflections by the composer, Pompili said, demonstrate why he is so relevant. Through the ethical tension thus created, Hovhaness makes clear what role music and art should play in our society.

If hearing his own words brought that ethical tension close, experiencing the composer as musician heightened it even more. The evening closed with perhaps one of Alan Hovhaness’s best known pieces, *Shalimar* op. 177, played by Alan Hovhaness himself in a 1988 video recording.

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