

MUSIC NOTE

MUSIC DIRECTOR AND CHIEF CONDUCTOR NICOLETTE FRAILLON TALKS TO ROSE MULREADY ABOUT ARAM KHACHATURIAN'S MONUMENTAL SCORE FOR *SPARTACUS*.



Robyn Hendricks and Kevin Jackson.
Photography Mark Clinton

What was the political context for the composition of *Spartacus*?

Khachaturian's first ballet *Gayane* was written in 1942, and it was a success: his talent for melody and rhythm worked well in a ballet context. But Khachaturian, like Prokofiev and Shostakovich, had a difficult time under the Soviet regime. One moment they would be darlings and the next they would be denounced. Khachaturian was denounced in 1948 and his music was deemed decadent and bourgeois. There was a lot of petty jealousy at work in these times – the committees that sat in judgement on artists were often made up of less successful artists, who were bitter that their own work had been overlooked. But there were all sorts of serious consequences to being denounced: you could be imprisoned, you could be exiled to Siberia, and certainly your work would no longer be performed. Khachaturian eventually apologised and was 'rehabilitated'.

Writing *Spartacus* was one of the ways Khachaturian clawed his way back into favour: it eventually won the Stalin Prize. But like many denounced artists, Khachaturian used subtle elements of his work to get back at the regime. While the Soviets chose to interpret the story of *Spartacus* in a way that was flattering to them, the music that Khachaturian chose to represent Crassus, the oppressor, was also symbolic of the kind of music used in the big Soviet military parades to represent the power of the state.

Khachaturian was born in Georgia, and had an Armenian background. He spoke of folk music as "the natural soil nourishing all my work." What elements do we see in the *Spartacus* score that reference folk music?

The two roots of classical music in Armenia are both vocal – one is religious music, and the other is folk music, in the troubadour tradition. It's music that is based on lyricism and melody. Khachaturian is a great writer of melodies, and that's what we'd expect from a composer versed in Armenian traditions.

Khachaturian was proud of his heritage, but his work wasn't about making a nationalistic statement. Like all the great composers, he heard different elements from a number of traditions and absorbed these and used them, just as Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich and Mussorgsky did.

In Armenian folk music there are instruments similar to a violin, and wind instruments that sound like an oboe or a clarinet. In *Spartacus* you have a lot of violin solos with an emotive, speaking kind of melody. In the slave market scene, Khachaturian uses the wind instruments of the orchestra to create an exotic feel – think of the sound of a snake charmer's instrument in an Oriental market. It's like Tchaikovsky's use of the oboe for the Arabian dance in *The Nutcracker*, or in *Cinderella* where Prokofiev uses oboe and cor anglais for the Prince's journey to the Orient. Of course, it's an idea of the Oriental, rather than an actual translation of oriental music – just as Minkus' score

for *La Bayadère* was a 19th-century Western composer's representation of what Indian music would sound like.

The troubadours were travelling songsters, and went all over Europe and Asia and even Africa, so all the different forms of folk music intermingled and influenced one another. Also, at the end of the 19th century Russia was being opened up to the East and West through the advent of rail travel, so composers were hearing different sounds, different scale and harmonic structures, and these made their way into their music. You hear traces of these different influences in *Spartacus*, for instance in the 'Khachaturian seconds' (intervals), which are really just augmented seconds, as you hear in Jewish klezmer, and in a lot of Arabian music.

What are Khachaturian's strengths as a composer, and how do these manifest in *Spartacus*?

Something to note about *Spartacus*: there are three very different versions of the score. Khachaturian cut bits and added bits to cater for different versions of the ballet. That's just what a theatre composer does, but it does mean that an overriding sense of harmonic architecture, the overarching structure, is missing to a certain extent.

Khachaturian's music is epic, in the true sense of the word, work on a grand scale. The size of the orchestra is massive. It's very cinematic – he wrote for film, and he knew how to write music that told a story. The score is very descriptive. Take the opening scene, which is a triumphal march:

CONDUCTORS

without knowing where you are in the world, or what era you're in, it is clearly a big military parade. He chooses brass and percussion, which are used in military bands around the globe, and he uses the harmonic series of trumpets in the way that military calls do: because military trumpets didn't have valves, they don't play chromatic scales. Just from the sound of those trumpets, one instantly hears a call to arms. It's like designing the right costumes for something: his music creates, a wonderful backdrop to a story. He's very adept at setting the scene.

Melodies flow from him. They're expansive – they start from very low down and rise up very high. That's a classic device used to create a sense of longing, of want, of aspiration. Take the introduction to *Spartacus* and Flavia's central pas de deux. It starts all the way down in the cellos, then goes all the way up into the highest instruments, depicting expectation and yearning. The strings provide the heartbeat, the pulse of their passion: the flute trill at the beginning provides a note of optimism, it has an association with birdsong, with freedom. Then there's the oboe. Tchaikovsky uses it in his *Swan Lake* pas de deux, because it has a singing quality, but also a plaintive quality. You can tell from the wistful voices of the oboe and the solo violin that this love story is not going to end well.

Because he has such a large orchestra, Khachaturian has a massive set of colours with which to paint, and he's very inventive in the way he combines those colours to make new ones; this makes his music really vivid. He loves rich, middle-register instruments, which have an exotic, sexy sound. There's a saxophone in there, which is still an unusual orchestral interloper. In the original scenario for *Spartacus*, a Roman courtesan comes to visit the rebels' camp. He wrote an incredibly sensual clarinet solo for her dance. It has a folk-music feel, but it also has a strong jazz flavour. Soviet composers were really interested in jazz, despite it being a 'decadent' Western art form. There are moments in *Spartacus* where you almost feel like you're at a Weimar-era Berlin burlesque show. In other places, you feel like you're in a 1960s Bond film. It's a real time-capsule piece: it can often feel a bit dated, but it's very catchy, and what makes it such great dance music is the use of driving, energetic rhythms. There are tambourines, wood blocks, the sort of instruments you would shake and bang on if you were sitting around a campfire. It's got that 'come on, let's just jump up and dance and have a good time' kind of feel.

Khachaturian has great moments, but he's not in the league of the super-geniuses like Tchaikovsky. His music doesn't often take us into the expressive, symphonic realms that the great ballet composers evoke. The pas de deux is an exception – it's a stunning piece of music, and suggests emotional growth, the tragedy of the moment, but the longing, the hope for something better. That music transports us beyond the descriptive storytelling.

Rose Mulready is The Australian Ballet's content expert

Nicolette Fraillon gives free talks on the score before selected performances. Check The Music of the Dance section of our website for upcoming dates. australianballet.com.au/stepinside



NICOLETTE FRAILLON AM

Music Director & Chief Conductor

Nicolette Fraillon began her music studies on violin and piano at an early age. At 16 she conducted her first concert with the Victorian Junior Symphony Orchestra. She graduated on viola from Melbourne University in 1982, gaining an equal first place in her year in Performance. From 1984–87 she furthered her instrumental studies at the Hochschule für Musik in Vienna and from 1987–88 in Hannover. During her time in Germany and Austria Nicolette toured with many orchestras, including the Salzburger Chamber Ensemble and the Chamber Orchestra of Bassano, and was a member of the Haydn Quartet, based at the Esterhazy Palace in Eisenstadt.

In 1990 Nicolette moved to the Netherlands, where she became assistant musical director for the 1991–92 season of *Les Misérables* in Amsterdam and The Hague. In 1992 she was admitted to the Netherlands Broadcasting Association's International Conductors' Masterclass, resulting in a performance with the Dutch Radio Symphony Orchestra in the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. This led to an invitation to conduct for the Nederlands Dans Theater. She was then invited to become music director and chief conductor of the National Ballet of the Netherlands, working with such renowned choreographers as Hans van Manen, Toer van Schayk, Rudi van Dantzig and Krzysztof Pastor, and conducting numerous world premieres. During the following five years she worked with the North Holland Philharmonic Orchestra, the New Sinfonietta Amsterdam, Noord Nederlands Orchestra, the Gelders Orchestra in Arnhem, the Limburg Symphony Orchestra, the Residentie Orchestra in The Hague, the Kanazawa Chamber Orchestra in Japan, and the Finnish Ballet.

In 1998 she took up the position of Director at the School of Music, Australian National University, and continued her conducting work with the West Australian Ballet, the West Australian Symphony Orchestra, the Australian Youth Orchestra and the Canberra Symphony Orchestra.

She debuted with The Australian Ballet in 2002, conducting *Spartacus*, and was then invited by David McAllister to become music director and chief conductor, beginning in January 2003. Since joining the company, Nicolette has conducted all programs for The Australian Ballet, including all of its overseas tours, and has been a guest conductor for San Francisco Ballet. Following The Australian Ballet's 2005 tour to the UK, Nicolette was, in 2006, invited back to conduct *The Sleeping Beauty* with Birmingham Royal Ballet. She conducted the ballet again on Birmingham Royal Ballet's 2018 tour of Japan. In 2007 she guested with New York City Ballet. In 2008 she returned to the Birmingham Royal Ballet for a season of *The Nutcracker*, then finished the year with a New Year's Gala in Skopje with the Macedonian Philharmonic Orchestra. In early 2011 Nicolette guested with San Francisco Ballet, conducting their production of *Giselle*; in 2014 she guested with New York City Ballet. In 2016 she conducted the opening night of Birmingham Royal Ballet's production of Peter Wright's *The Nutcracker*, which was also the choreographer's 90th birthday.

Since 2014, Nicolette has also been artistic director of Orchestra Victoria, establishing new concert series, education programs and two regional music festivals.



SIMON THEW

Conductor

Simon Thew has undertaken conducting studies in Sydney, Vienna, Berlin, and Barcelona with mentors including Sebastian Weigle, Nicolette Fraillon, Harry Spence Lyth, Richard Bonyngne, and John Hopkins.

In 2007 Simon was awarded the Dame Joan Sutherland/Richard Bonyngne Travel Scholarship, which enabled further study in Europe, culminating in his position as musical intern at the Bayreuth Festival in 2008.

In 2010 he was awarded the Hephzibah Tintner Fellowship, which gave him performance and mentoring opportunities with The Australian Ballet, Opera Australia, and the Sydney Symphony. Simon was The Australian Ballet's Conducting Fellow in 2011, and in the same year was awarded a Churchill Fellowship. This enabled him to undertake professional development opportunities with ballet companies, opera houses and orchestras in London, Birmingham, Vienna, Berlin, and New York across 2012.

Simon was an assistant conductor with Opera Australia from 2007 – 2010. In 2010 he conducted Opera Australia's Oz Opera regional tour, and in the same year made his conducting debut with The Australian Ballet. In 2012 he acted as assistant conductor on the company's New York tour.

Simon was a regular guest conductor with The Australian Ballet between 2013 and 2016. He conducted performances in most of the company's seasons during that time. In 2017 he accepted an invitation to become The Australian Ballet's assistant conductor. He has also worked as a guest conductor for English National Ballet, Birmingham Royal Ballet and Houston Ballet.

He has an active concert-conducting career and is committed to the education of young conductors and instrumentalists.