On the Katchaturian Piano Concerto

From the beginning of his composing career, Khachaturian made extensive use of Armenian folk music and its unique stylistic features. These include driving rhythms in abruptly changing patterns and meters; use of the dissonant interval of the second; a static bass or pedal point; and an improvisational quality. Because of his proletarian origins, non-Russian ethnic origins and Soviet training, Khachaturian eventually became a powerful symbol within the Soviet musical establishment and abroad of the ideal of a multinational Soviet cultural identity. Khachaturian called the Piano Concerto the "first national concerto for piano," and hoped it would be a model for other Soviet composers.

A short, splashy fanfare opens the first movement, establishing a pronounced semitone dissonance that gives the concerto its special "Eastern" quality throughout. Presented in relatively conventional sonata form, an emphatic and percussive first theme contrasts sharply with a plaintive second theme set in a rhythmic pulse common in Armenian folk music. After development and recapitulation, the movement accelerates towards a spectacular climax in an extended virtuosic cadenza based on both themes. Audiences and critics have especially loved the second movement, set in ternary form around a seductive well-known Transcaucasian folk tune Khachaturian had heard in Tbilisi. It spins out in a series of inventive variations, its most unusual feature being the use, in a brief passage of a flexatone, a percussion instrument invented in 1922. Imitating the eerie and "Eastern" sound of a musical saw, the flexatone has a narrow sheet of flexible metal that when shaken is struck by wooden balls hung on either side. (Instead of a flexatone, a musical saw is being used in this performance.

The least obviously "national" movement of the Concerto, the finale chases from C-major to the tonic of D-flat major, in a dance-like pattern in rapid sixteenth-note runs, with the strings providing a steady beat underneath. After a long, rhapsodic and rather introspective cadenza, the Concerto closes dramatically with the thundering return of the first movement's main theme.