

From Russia with Violin: An Interview with Levon Ambartsumian



[Prokofiev Violin Sonatas, Five Melodies](#)

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With three dozen albums to his name, ranging from familiar, mainstream repertoire by Vivaldi, Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Saint-Saëns, Chausson, and Richard Strauss, to 20th-century Modernist works by Schnittke, Vasks, Mikhail Bronner, Efrem Podgaitis, Andrei Eshpai, and others, readers are bound to recognize violinist Levon Ambartsumian from a number of those releases that have been previously reviewed. Today, Ambartsumian is Regent's and Franklin Professor of Violin at the University of Georgia Hugh Hodgson School of Music. Prior to that, in 1995, he was a visiting professor at Indiana University School of Music, where he replaced the legendary American violinist and teacher Joseph Gingold.

As you probably guessed from his name, however, Ambartsumian traces his roots to Armenia, where his parents came from, and to Russia, where he was born in Moscow in 1955. And in 1978, he began a 15-year tenure, teaching at the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory. Ambartsumian is himself an alumnus of the Moscow Central Music School and the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, where one of his teachers was the illustrious Leonid Kogan. In 1977 he won First Prize at the Zagreb International Violin Competition, established by Henryk Szeryng. Two years later he was a prize-winner at the Montreal International Competition, and in 1981 he won the All-Union Violin Competition in Riga.

Ambartsumian has appeared in concert and recital in the major cities across the U.S., Russia, Eastern Europe, Canada, Italy, France, Germany, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Brazil, China, Japan, and South Korea, having collaborated as a soloist with conductors and composers such as Valery

Gergiev, Vladimir Fedoseev, Maxim Shostakovich, Aram Khachaturian, Alfred Schnittke, Karen Khachaturian, and many others. In 1990 he founded the Moscow Chamber Orchestra, ARCO, which regularly performed in Russia and abroad, and he now resides in Athens, Georgia. Since its creation, Ambartsumian has led the University of Georgia's Arco Chamber Orchestra, commercially releasing 15 CDs and performing four times in Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall.

While Ambartsumian remains active as a performing artist (see the review below of his new recording of violin works by Prokofiev), his dedication and devotion to teaching now occupies much of his time and effort, a calling he believes is as important to his legacy as are his founding and continuing cultivation of the Arco Chamber Orchestra and his record as a concert violinist and chamber musician. It therefore came as no surprise to me that in our preliminary discussions leading up to this interview, it was Ambartsumian himself who suggested a first line of questioning related to his teaching activities. I was pleased to entertain this avenue of the interview because I have a particular interest of my own in this area of inquiry.

So, let me begin with just some general biographical and geographical questions.

You taught for 15 years at Moscow Conservatory and then, temporarily, for two years at Indiana University, which is considered by many to have one of the best music schools in the country, and to be one of the most prestigious music schools in the world. How did you end up in Georgia?

It happened accidentally. When my contract with IU was about to expire, a group of students, mostly from my studio and some from others, wrote a petition to the dean, asking him to keep me in this school. The problem for the school was that at that time Mr. Gingold had recovered from his illness and there was no vacancy for me anymore. The irony was that he passed away the same day as I departed for Moscow. But by then, I'd already been invited to some other schools for interviews.

At the same time, a colleague of mine at IU showed me a job opening ad for Artist Level Professor of Violin/Conductor at the University of Georgia. Since I was still conducting a chamber orchestra in Moscow, I decided to look into the possibility of combining teaching with playing and conducting at one place in this country. So, I wrote to the University of Georgia, expressing my interest in the position. The answer was not encouraging. It turned out that the position was a junior professor, and they also requested a lot of additional materials and documentation.

My answer was kind of rude. I said I was not interested in the position, and didn't have the time to work on additional information. To my surprise, they sent me a roundtrip ticket from Moscow to Atlanta, and asked me to come.

The rest was a matter of luck and meeting the right people. While I was in process of interviews at UGA, deans of two other big schools caught me there and asked me to visit them immediately. It became a powerful tool in my negotiation with UGA. The result was an offer I "couldn't refuse," like in the movie. They provided me with four Graduate Assistantships, an additional teaching position for my assistant, and a full/professor piano position for my friend and partner, prominent Russian pianist Evgeny Rivkin.

What is it like to teach in America's Georgia, compared to the previous schools you've taught at both here and in Russia? What effects, if any, do cultural difference in America's Deep South have on teaching methods and recruiting of students, teachers, and professional musicians?

The principal difference is that at the Moscow Conservatory there was no need to recruit students, firstly, because of the prestige of the school and professors. Talented kids from all over Russia and Europe came to study there. Secondly, I was a pretty well-known concert performer as well as a teacher, since from my student years I was playing regularly in the best venues in Russia and Eastern Europe and assisting my professor, Igor Bezrodny, in the Conservatory, while studying there. It was the same in Indiana, for similar reasons. The name of the school has itself been a main attraction; a lot of talented kids just came there to study even without any idea of who to study with. Of course, there have been exceptions, as when students came because of some really great professors there.

In Georgia it's a lot different. Here I need to point out that UGA is the first public university in American history, and according to US News & World Report, 2019, it's #13 on a list of top public national universities. However, it had no tradition of classical music. UGA's School of Music was famous as a marching band school. Obviously, that was new for me, and I had to find out how to establish a successful violin studio in such an environment.

For me, it partly worked as before. Because I was able to bring four of the best graduate students from the Moscow Conservatory, word spread. Starting from the very beginning of my tenure here, I did not have to recruit on the graduate level. My only goal has always been just to find additional financing for all who I wanted to accept.

My violin studio became mostly graduate and international. The average ratio of graduate to undergraduate students has always been around 80 percent to 20 percent, and students have come from Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Canada, Poland, the Czech Republic, Serbia, South Korea, China, and of course from the U.S. and Russia. I can proudly state that almost all my former graduate students got full-time teaching and orchestra positions here in U.S., as well as in Chile, Brazil, and Poland.

On the undergraduate level, it was and still is a completely different story. There are some pretty good teachers in the Atlanta area, mainly the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra players.

There are also a lot of talented kids around, mostly Asian by the way. The problem is that almost all of them are looking for schools up north. Partly that's happening because, firstly, they want to escape from parents, which is understandable. Secondly, they think that it will be easier to get a job after graduation there, which also kind of makes sense, and some parents support them regardless of the cost of tuition. And lastly, those teachers are highly not recommending students to go to UGA, because it will conflict with their financial interest and prestige. This is so obvious. The more kids that get accepted to "prestigious schools," the more private students they have. It's sad, but this is not just my guess; I've heard this many times. Unfortunately, this is our reality; fortunately, it is changing, though slowly.

Here I should mention that our in-state tuition is very reasonable. Besides, we have the so-called Hope Scholarship, which almost entirely covers tuition for Georgia residents that have high grades in high school.

You grew up and studied violin during what might be called the “Golden Age” of Soviet violin playing. Your bio mentions that you studied with Leonid Kogan, but this was also the era of Julian Sitkovetsky and the Oistrakhs, David and son Igor. There seems to be a distinct Russian sound that is fostered through both technical training—i.e., manner of fingering, bow-hold, bow strokes, tone production, and so on—and an approach to musical interpretation that has its roots, essentially, in a 19th-century Romantic Slavism. This has been passed down to modern-day Russian players, such as Ilya Gringolts, Ilya Kaler, and Vadim Repin. I’m sure this is an oversimplification, but might one say that today’s players fall into one of two schools—the Ivan Galamian-trained Russian school, and the Dorothy DeLay, Juilliard-trained American school? How would you characterize the differences in training, technique, style, and interpretive approach?

Yes, I was fortunate to witness that great era of “Soviet violin playing.” But I definitely need to add some more names to your list, firstly simply to be fair to them, and secondly because they influenced me and many violinists of my generation, and maybe no less than David Oistrakh and Kogan did. Sitkovetsky was a fantastic player, but he passed away at the age of 33, at the time when I first got a violin in my hand, so I never heard him live. And there was just one recording of him available until, I think, the late 1970s.

Talking of names, there was also Igor Bezrodny, who studied with the same professor as Kogan and Sitkovetsky. He shared the First Prize with Kogan and Sitkovetsky at the first post-war competition in Prague in 1947. Being, by the way, a high school student at the time, and starting a brilliant career, Bezrodny, in my opinion, was definitely more promising than his older peers mentioned above. He had a hand injury, though, which did not allow him to pursue the career he deserved. There were three other giants of violin at that time: Gidon Kremer, Victor Tretyakov, and Vladimir Spivakov, who cannot be omitted in this list of Soviet /Russian “Hall of Famers.”

Coming back to your question about Russian sound and the so-called Russian School, I will say things that maybe you and many violinists in this country might not like. There are no Russian or American or European violin schools anymore. Let me explain my view on that.

All those labels of national schools of the 20th century applied mainly to bow-hand technique. German, Russian, and Franco/Belgian were distinguished mainly by bow grip and tone production. Looking at all violinists on the “market” now, what do we see? There are only two types of concertizing violinists. For argument’s sake, let’s consider them all talented, regardless of how successful their careers are. One type is with good schooling and the other with no schooling.

It is so very obvious. The first type is characterized by high quality sound, perfect strokes, variety of vibrato, refined taste, understanding and knowledge of style, ability to say something in music, and most important, the deepest respect of the composer. This is exactly what we have been taught in Moscow, according to Russian traditions established by Stolyarsky, Auer, and then Mostras, Yampolsky, Yankelevich, and Oistrakh. The other type lacks almost all of the above, but

has something else which has nothing to do with music. There are many of them out there that have outstanding careers, and unfortunately, audiences and many critics are buying it. I guess this is not what you expected from me in response to your question.

I'm not sure what I was expecting as a response, but I have to say that you gave me a good laugh—"schooling and no schooling." I'll have to remember that, but I won't dare ask you to name any of the "no-schoolers." We could get sued for that. But please continue.

Okay, so you mentioned Dorothy De Lay. She studied with Galamian and was his assistant for many years. Does that not make her his representative and, accordingly, a follower of the Russian School?

From the other side, to my knowledge, all her famous students—superstars—came to her being already superstars. There was nothing that they needed to learn from her. She just motivated them, made them practice, and helped a lot in establishing further career growth by introducing them to right people and artist management. She did a fantastic job in this respect, and all her students have to be very grateful to her, and indeed they are.

What is an American school? Auer, Zimbalist, Galamian, Brodsky, Gingold, and their students? What is American school now? Give me some names that are not related to all of the above please.

What is a European School now? Bron, Kuschner, Chumachenko? My conclusion is that there is only one good school which absorbs all the best achievements of different trends of the 20th century. Period. Some big names in the music world hate Russians, some hate Jews, some hate Asians, some hate gays. So what? Music doesn't care.

You've kind of paraphrased or mirrored something I've expressed on a number of occasions, but with respect to composers rather than players. Many composers have suffered from mental health problems, or have been profoundly damaged and disturbed human beings in one way or another, but I've always said that the "genie" comes unbidden to visit individuals we might think unworthy, choosing his earthly messengers unmindful of their virtues and vices.

Anyhow, as a P.S. to my previous question, I might add that some of the most impressive violin playing I'm hearing these days is coming from Asia—China, Singapore, Japan, etc. Some of these young players, but by no means all, began their training under the Suzuki method. Mostly, these Asian musicians turn out sounding more Western than Russian, but can we say that there's now a third school—an Asian school—of violin playing?

I totally agree, the majority of rising stars come now from Asia. However, some of them were born in the U.S., and speaking of their training, I would put it differently. Despite starting under the Suzuki method, they became professional violinists. They all got real professional violin education from non-Suzuki teachers. How do they sound? I could refer back to my answer on the last question. Where have they all studied? Julliard, Curtis, Boston, etc.? With Bron in Germany and Switzerland? Or, if they studied in their own countries, with whom have they studied there? With former students from Julliard, the Moscow Conservatory, and so on.

I can give a few reasons for the success of Asian kids. First, they're all desperate to learn. You name any discipline—science, business, music, everything. Second, for some reason, they

understand and feel Western music much better than we understand Oriental art. Third, there is a thousand years of culture and tradition. The teacher (Sensei) is the most important person in their lives. Any music professor in any country will confirm that. They are talented, they are dedicated, they are disciplined, and they can work nonstop.

And one more thing: The majority of Asian families teach music to their kids, regardless of plans for their futures. This is just a part of their education, or sometimes this is the only way to get into higher society. That reminds me of 20th-century Russia, and particularly of Odessa, the home town of Milstein, Oistrakh, Gilels, Shura Cherkassky, and many others. To be a musician was the only way to get out of poverty, to feed the family, and finally see the world.

During my time, the violin was considered to be a kind of “Jewish” instrument. We had a joke: Only Jews can play the violin. But if you play violin for 20 years, you automatically become a Jew. According to that I am a Triple Jew. Now the violin becomes an Asian instrument. OK, how about the piano?

You’ve mentioned the names of so many of the 20th century’s great players and how, one way or another, they all come back to the Russian school. Oddly, though, the one name you haven’t mentioned—and who some consider the greatest 20th-century violinist of them all—is Heifetz. Earlier, though, you did mention Leopold Auer, who, of course, was Heifetz’s teacher. But if I’m not mistaken, Auer also taught Milstein, who you did mention in passing just a moment ago. My question relates to the Russian school you’ve been talking about. Milstein and Heifetz were born just three years apart, both grew up in the same culture, and both studied with the same teacher. So, you could say that they were both products of the Russian school. Yet one has only to listen to their recordings to hear that each of them had a very different style of playing and a very different sound. How do you account for such different manners coming from the same school?

Well, I was not intending to name all Russian violinists. I mentioned Milstein in the context of Odessa. But if we talk about Auer, we have to include Elman and Zimbalist as well. Still, to paraphrase an old Russian anecdote about a bad kid on the playground, I would say this: There are good violinists, there are excellent violinists, and then there is Heifetz. So, what do these four—Elman, Zimbalist, Milstein, and Heifetz—have in common? High quality of playing, right? The way they held the bow? I cannot agree more with you that there are differences in aesthetics of sound and interpretation. This is what I call a school. This is the greatness of a great teacher. Now, please, compare Kogan and Oistrakh—almost the opposite approach to almost everything.

In light of what you said earlier about players with good schooling vs. those with no schooling, I’m almost afraid to ask you this, but ask I must. You described the well-schooled as those who play with high quality sound, perfect strokes, variety of vibrato, refined taste, understanding and knowledge of style, ability to say something in music, and most important, the deepest respect of the composer. And if I’ve understood the thrust of your argument, all of those positive attributes come to us via the Russian school. If that’s the case, how do you explain and reconcile the period instrument phenomenon within that world view? Have those who have taken to playing period instruments and adopted historical period practices of performance abandoned the Russian-school and traditions? And is this now an entirely new school which is not Russian, Franco-Belgian, American, or Asian, but totally “international?”

I did not say that everything good came to us from Russian School, and again, what is the Russian School? But if that is your assumption or even conclusion, I wouldn't argue too much. As for "period instrument phenomenon," I wouldn't call it a school; I would rather call it a trend. It's an attempt to come closer to composers and styles of certain epochs—sometimes talented, sometimes not. There are great "period" ensembles led by great musicians. But there are also great pianists who are still playing Bach, Scarlatti, etc., on grand pianos with great success. There are string players who play Bach on modern instruments. But there are also great harpsichord players. For some reason we are not calling this a new piano school. This is just different. Another thing is that this type of violin playing gives a great opportunity to mediocre players to hide the lack of skill behind the so-called "authentic approach." When a violin sounds disgusting, there is no music; this is my strong belief. You can say that the sound quality is a matter of taste. Yes, but our perception of music is subjective too.

While still in Moscow, you started the above-cited Moscow Chamber Orchestra, ARCO, and brought it to the U.S. with you. And it's still going strong. Considering your teaching duties at the University and your still active performing schedule, what is the nature of your continuing commitment to ARCO?

Let me just clarify that ARCO now is a professional-caliber student orchestra made up mainly of UGA graduate students, some of the best undergraduates, and some faculty members.

Why am I committed to it? First of all, ARCO is a great recruiting tool for the UGA School of Music. Second, it's a great opportunity for students to learn this kind of repertoire—string orchestra literature that they will never discover either in symphony orchestra or in chamber music class. Next, students are learning how to play in a large ensemble. They don't have an opportunity to learn this in orchestra class due to lack of time and tough concert schedules.

ARCO is also a motivation for some great contemporary composers to write music for us. We are premiering and recording this music, which you can find in our discography—works by Jeffrey Kaufman, Lewis Nielson, Efrem Podgaits, and Mikhail Bronner. And finally, do you know any student orchestra in this country (and actually in the world) that has more than 20 commercially published CDs, performed four times at Carnegie Hall, and went many times on international concert tours?

I'd like to return to the subject of music education in this country because it relates to a matter of great concern to me, which has to do with the death of classical music in America through attrition and neglect. Attend almost any orchestra or chamber music concert today and look at the people sitting around you. I'm no spring chicken myself, but I often feel like I'm the youngest person in the hall, and that's a very bad sign for the future. Where will the new music lovers come from to fill those seats? I read all the time about one artist or another promoting some ploy to appeal to a young audience, "dumbing down" classical music in some way to make it palatable to a generation that has grown up believing rap is music.

And let's not kid ourselves, the rapidly disappearing market for physical recorded media, namely CDs, is leading the march to the cemetery. There was a time when brick and mortar record shops were everywhere, even in department stores. Now, but for those selling used LPs and CDs, they're mostly gone. As a kid, I would frequent those shops, sampling music, buying records,

and building a collection. But driving it all were the public schools. It wasn't some sudden urge that led me to take up the violin. It was the junior high school I attended that required every kid to learn an instrument or join the school choir.

Today, music and arts programs at the junior and high school levels have been decimated by budget cuts and a redirecting of resources towards "teaching to the test." The transmission of Western history and culture is no longer a mission of the public education system.

The question I'm coming to, Levon is this: You teach at the university level. But music education needs to start well before then. How do you remedy the situation? I'm not talking here about students' technical facility on the instrument. Obviously, you're not dealing with beginners. But what is the state of musical knowledge and sophistication of the students that come to you? Do they know music history? Do they know the literature? Are they familiar with the great players of the past? And do you have the time to fill in the blanks for them that were once provided by earlier education, or are they left, hopefully, to acquire that knowledge on their own?

Unfortunately, you are so right in your first statement about the audience age. The same is true here in Georgia. I can see mostly gray hair at all classical concerts here. I need to say, though, that our concert life here at UGA is amazing. We've had the Cleveland, St. Petersburg, Moscow Radio, and San Francisco Opera Orchestras here, and soloists such as Jessye Norman, Yo-Yo Ma, Pinchas Zuckerman, Itzhak Perlman, and Vladimir Ashkenazy, and ensembles such as the Tokyo and Emerson Quartets, and many others. Still, except for some of our music school students, there were only elderly people in the audience.

How to deal with that? I don't know. The only thing that comes to my mind is a reference to the Soviet (or Russian, since it has been inherited from the pre-Revolution) Music Societies system of music education. In almost each town, and sometimes in rural villages, there were children's music schools where kids, ages six to 17, studied music subjects such as theory, music history, orchestra, etc. In each big city, there was a special music school that combined all academic subjects with music. I guess something similar is happening in Interlochen, but it is unique in this country to my knowledge.

Trying to answer your question about current music students is difficult and frustrating. I'm not talking about my foreign students, who are mostly aware of everything you have mentioned above, but kids who are coming from American high schools. Even the best and most talented of them not only have never heard of the great musicians of the past, they don't know anything except for some current names that are currently very well promoted. They do not know composers; they do not know literature outside of a few novels from their high school curriculum. I'm not an expert in American literature, but I know it better than American students. However, I was raised behind the Iron Curtain, and the only published American writer in Russia was Mark Twain. Later I learned Hemingway, but not in a school program. That's all. Still, we were kind of aware of world literature, reading magazines and obtaining rare editions, sometimes illegally.

It is my goal here to interest my students in the history of violin playing. I am trying to teach them that if they are playing a certain concerto or sonata they have to be familiar with other composers' works, at least from the same period.

Your bio says you've made three dozen albums, you say almost 50. Let's split the difference and say 43. The exact count isn't important. You've recorded a considerable amount of standard repertoire spanning over 300 years, but you've also taken an interest in quite modern works, mainly by later 20th-century Russian composers. How have your musical tastes and preferences evolved over the span of your long career?

I guess my taste developed very naturally. My first music impression was when I was three years old. It was Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto, performed by Van Cliburn at the First Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. That was the beginning of my music journey. The first violin LP I heard a few years later was Paganini's Concerto No. 1, played by Kogan. That jump-started my musical development. Thanks to my great teachers, I went through all the required repertoire up to the age when I started to understand music without any guidance from them, or at least I thought so.

Obviously my long-term preferences of youth were Romantic and virtuosic music. I have played a lot of Paganini, Sarasate, Wieniawski, Ernst, and the like. By the way, how else could you learn how to play violin? Then came Tchaikovsky—everything he wrote for violin—Sibelius, Saint-Saëns, Ysaÿe, and so on. That was my late teens and early 20s.

When the time came to perform a full recital program, it was time for Beethoven and Brahms. It was about this time that I met Gidon Kremer. I had some lessons with him, and he advised me to include any contemporary piece in my recital programs, advice I've carried through my music life. There was a certain period of time when I didn't have a choice as to what I played, since it was a period of competitions, where you have to play a limited number of works required for any particular contest.

But then it was Bartók. I was fortunate to meet the great Hungarian/Belgian violinist André Gertler, who was a friend of Bartók back in Hungary. It was Gertler who introduced me to Bartók's music. Since then Bartók has become my almost life-long love. I've played and recorded his three sonatas, including his student work from 1903, both Rhapsodies, and played his Second Concerto many times. I was obsessed with Bartók's music for a long time, but finally got over it not that long ago. Ah, the chapter for the unwritten book....

My interest in really contemporary music—Bartók is a classic now, right?—came when some young at that time Russian composers invited me to a project promoting contemporary classical music. Those composers were Alexander Tchaikovsky, and Podgaitis and Bronner, who I mentioned before. Today, they're the most famous and most performed composers in Russia. A long-term friendship has started. I have premiered and recorded almost all the violin works they've composed. They are still writing for me and for ARCO, and there are more premieres to come. Finishing the topic of my preferences, I need to say that I'm coming back to Brahms, Schubert, and Mozart. Is it my age, or just the next period of life?

Yes, you were kind enough to send me copies of nine of your CDs, in addition to your Prokofiev album I received for review below. The discs you sent me feature you as violinist in works by Wieniawski and Sarasate, as well as conductor and soloist with your ARCO Chamber Orchestra in works by all of the contemporary Russian composers you've mentioned—Bronner, Podgaitis, Kaufman, and A. Tchaikovsky—plus three you didn't mention—Schnittke, Vasks, and

Arutiunian. There are also recordings of works by Ysaÿe, Gerald Finzi, and let's not exclude Schubert and Brahms. That was quite a haul for me to get through, especially as Fanfare's readers know, I'm not the most sympathetic listener or critic when it comes to ultra-modern music. But tell me more about these many recording projects. Where and when were they done? Did you work directly with any of the composers?

Thank you for this question. It has been always such fun for me to work with living composers. I had the privilege to know them all in person and still have great friendships with those who are still with us. Schnittke was the only one with whom, due his health, I did not have the chance to work as closely with as with the others. And yes, I worked, and still work, directly with some of them. This is a very fruitful cooperation. Here I should point that none of them is "ultra-modern." They all have a conventional music language, mainly tonal, and very emotional and intellectual at the same time. That's why I love their music and promote it as much as I can. The music by Schnittke, Eschpai, Karen Khachaturian, Vasks, and Arutiunian had been recorded before I got to know the composers personally. But they were aware of my performances and were extremely pleased. With others I have a very close relationship; I am premiering their works, and recording them in Moscow and here in Georgia. Some works are written for and dedicated to me. And of course, I am editing the violin parts.

Specifically, if you would, address your Prokofiev CD, since that's the only one I was charged with reviewing.

The First Sonata was recorded a while ago in Moscow, and I was pretty sure I had lost the tape. I found a DAT tape when I was cleaning up my closet at home about a year ago. It was my long-time dream to put together both sonatas and the Five Melodies, since I have always adored this music and played it all my life.

The Second Sonata was also recorded some time ago, but the Five Melodies were recorded recently at our UGA hall. I was just waiting for the right moment to rerecord the First Sonata, but it seemed to me it was never going to come. And it never did. But when I found my old recording, I listened to it and decided that since I would not be ashamed by this playing, I put together all three works.


I've also released quite a few CDs lately on Artservice, the Russian label; half of my published recordings are with them. There've been two to three discs per year—perhaps except for 2017—of music by some contemporary composers, as well as Brahms's three sonatas with Evgeny Rivkin, our remake of those from 20 years earlier.

And what about plans for projects going forward?

As for my next recordings, I have a few projects in my mind. The first one is similar to the Prokofiev. I put together some of my old recordings that I like myself, which doesn't happen very often, and united them with one idea. In this case, it would be two violin/piano concertos by Mendelssohn and Chausson, both recorded with orchestra. Chausson intended it for string quartet with the soloists. It will come out on the Centaur label sometime soon. The second project is a continuation of my long-time friendship with my favorite contemporary Russian composers. You can find some of their works on my CDs, as well as on my YouTube Channel. And for the third

and most unusual project: arrangements of my favorite chamber works for violin and string orchestra. I have already published one. There's a Beethoven violin sonata, Schubert's Arpeggione, and Brahms cello sonatas, all arranged by my friends-composers for me and recorded with ARCO. The next project after that would be Mozart's violin/viola duos, Schubert's Fantasia for Piano Four Hands, Brahms's clarinet sonatas, all in similar arrangements for violin and orchestra.

Well, it sounds like you have your work cut out for you. I'd best not keep you any longer so you can get to it. Thank you.

 PROKOFIEV Violin Sonatas Nos. 11 and 2.2 Five Melodies, op. 35bis2 • Levon Ambartsumian (vn); 1Alexander Ardakov, 2Anatoly Sheludyakov (pn) • PHOENIX USA 184 (61:51)

Technically speaking, Prokofiev composed only one proper sonata for violin and piano, the so-designated No. 1 in F Minor, op. 80. The Sonata No. 2 in D Major, which entered Prokofiev's catalog as op. 94bis, is a near literal transcription by the composer himself of his Flute Sonata, op. 94, originally written in 1943 and premiered by flutist Nicolai Kharkovsky and pianist Sviatoslav Richter in December of that year. Within six months' time, Prokofiev had transcribed the flute part for violin, leaving the piano part essentially intact; and in its new guise, the piece was premiered in June of 1944 by David Oistrakh and Lev Oborin. This is one of those cases in which the offspring (the violin version) has significantly eclipsed the parent (the flute version) in popularity, the latter having some two dozen more recordings than the former.

Similarly, the Five Melodies were originally composed, not for violin, but for voice, expressly for Russian mezzo-soprano Nina Koshetz, while Prokofiev was in California in 1920. These five wordless vocalises were premiered in New York in March 1921. This time four years would pass before Prokofiev arranged the songs for violin and piano, having been inspired by hearing Joseph Szigeti in a Paris recital. Szigeti did eventually record the pieces for Columbia (ML-5178) with pianist Carlo Bussotti, but not until 1954. Whatever did or didn't happen in Paris, Szigeti was not involved in the transcriptions of the songs or their premiere. For that, Prokofiev turned to his friend, the Polish violinist Paul Kochanski, to help transcribe the violin parts and to give the first performance. Three of the five pieces (Nos. 1, 3, and 4) indeed bear dedications to Kochanski; one of them (No. 2) is dedicated to Cecilia Hansen, the wife of one of Prokofiev's pianist friends from Russia; and, almost as an afterthought, No. 5 is dedicated to Szigeti.

That leaves the Sonata for Solo Violin, op. 115, composed in 1947, which Ambartsumian has not included on his Prokofiev CD, and probably with good reason. It's a pedagogical piece commissioned by the Soviet Union's Committee of Arts Affairs for the instruction and advancement of talented violin students. I'm not positive whether it was Prokofiev's intent or not, but a sort of "group therapy" tradition took hold in which an entire classroom of violin students would play the sonata, Suzuki-style, in unison.

So, we circle back to the Violin Sonata No. 1 in F Minor, which, as noted at the outset, is the one and only proper sonata for violin and piano Prokofiev composed. The work was eight years in the making. Prokofiev lingered over it from 1938 to 1946. Because of its long gestation period,

the First Sonata actually postdates the Second Sonata (1943–44). Prokofiev had begun work on the F-Minor Sonata in the aftermath of Stalin’s “Reign of Terror,” and then set the score aside for the duration of World War II. Given what Prokofiev had lived through, it’s not surprising that the sonata bears witness to the horrors. The music’s constant companions are the inescapable visions of violent death and destruction, and the mute expressions of anguish and despair. There’s not a little of Shostakovich in this score, another Soviet composer who experienced many of the same trials and tribulations.

Ambartsumian’s performance of the sonata penetrates to the bone. His reading of the third movement, in particular, gave me chills. Alexander Ardakov’s piano accompaniment provides a ghostly, glassy surface over which Ambartsumian’s violin glides like a levitating wraith. I’ve never heard this movement played with such eerie effect. But both players deliver plenty of muscle and might in the sonata’s second movement and finale.

The Flute Sonata, cum-Violin Sonata No. 2 is an entirely different affair, as one would expect, considering the range, technical capabilities, and limitations of the instrument it was originally written for. But beyond that, Prokofiev made clear that he “wanted to write the sonata in a gentle, flowing classical style.” And that’s exactly what he did. For the most part, the piece is lyrical, light-textured, and even a bit fizzy. But the music can turn quite sad at times, as in the third movement (Andante). Like Poulenc, Prokofiev had a knack for turning a sentimental tune poignantly melancholic, and indeed, there seems to be something decidedly French about this piece. Perhaps it’s just my peculiar association of the flute with French music. In any case, Ambartsumian, here joined by pianist Anatoly Sheludyakov plays the sonata with fine-spun tone and real finesse.

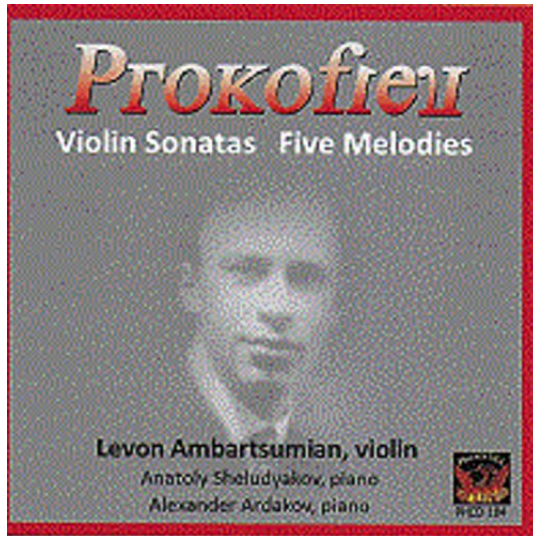
It’s interesting to compare the original vocal scores of the Five Melodies against the Kochanski’s “transcriptions,” for no human voice is capable of the range or of singing in octave double-stops that Kochanski wrote for the violin. I’m tempted to categorize these more as arrangements than transcriptions, but that said, one can’t deny the touching beauty of these pieces or the singing and soaring beauty with which Ambartsumian plays them.

I’m sure that readers already hooked on Prokofiev are bound to have favorite recordings of these works in their collections; it’s not as if there’s a shortage of other versions. But I believe you will be most pleased to add Ambartsumian’s to your shelf. There’s a luminosity to his tone and a multi-faceted emotional dimensionality to his playing that are quite arresting. If, by some fluke, you are among those who don’t already have one or more recordings of these pieces, I can think of no better artist to introduce them to you than Levon Ambartsumian. Jerry Dubins

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Levon Ambartsumian is a real Russian-school violinist. He has a dark tone with a slight edge to it that is basically Slavic. Combined with an at times propulsive bow arm, he represents the school of violin playing that comes down from Jascha Heifetz rather than Fritz Kreisler.

Ambartsumian is not a soloist who tries to create a comfort zone for his listener. His every bow stroke means something, not surprising given that one of his teachers was Leonid Kogan.

Actually, the violinist Ambartsumian most reminds me of is Igor Oistrakh. There is the same liveliness and excitement to the sound, catapulting the hearer into a maelstrom of emotion.

Ambartsumian doesn't take great liberties interpretively, yet one always is aware of a big personality, great magnetism, and a characteristic dynamism. Not that this artist only has one bow to his quiver. When he wants to, Ambartsumian can be the most refined colorist, with an almost chameleon-like ability to make more than one artistic template work. Clearly he has studied the great violinists of the past, drawing particular inspiration from Mischa Elman. Why Ambartsumian is not treading the boards of major American symphony orchestras, as opposed to the young and pretty school of violinists, is a calamity that is symptomatic of what's wrong with our concert life. The present Prokofiev disc is exhibit A that there are great artists who do not enjoy great reputations.

Prokofiev's First Violin Sonata is one of the seminal works of the last century, a document of the Stalinist terror. As the opening movement begins, Ambartsumian and the virtuoso pianist Alexander Ardakov create an atmosphere of foreboding and horror. What Prokofiev described as "wind passing through a graveyard" sounds bone-chilling here. The following Allegro brusco sends shivers down your spine, with an air of madness. Everything screams that people can't take it any more—I was shaking. The next, slow movement is an eerie calm after the storm, taking stock of the psychic damage. A demented Russian dance begins the last movement, before

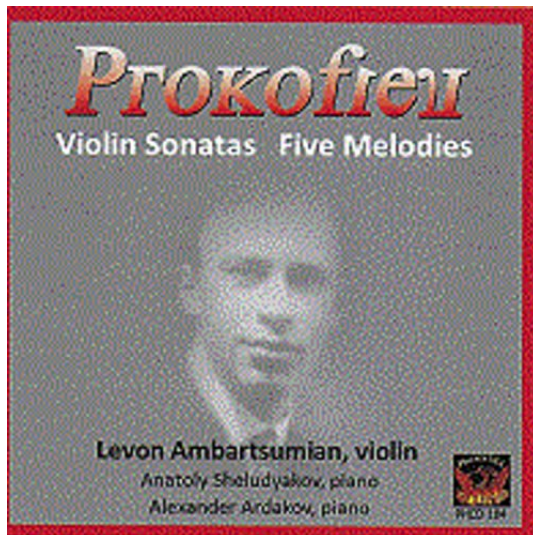
returning to the “graveyard” motif and ending with emptiness. I also like the recording of the First Sonata by Oleg Rylatko and Anna Balakerskaia. It is more measured than Ambartsumian’s, but rivals his in emotional impact.

The Second Sonata receives as fine a performance as I’ve ever heard. In large part this is due to the glorious playing of pianist Anatoly Sheludyakov. He performs with a full tone yet a soft touch, creating a true Prokofiev ethos that combines wit and a big personality with an emotional gentleness. This work originally was a flute sonata, and the agility and spark in Ambartsumian’s bowing elucidates the lightness and flexibility that a virtuoso flutist would bring to this music. If you want to hear the original Flute Sonata, I could suggest no better recording than that by Sharon Bezaly and Vladimir Ashkenazy. It is a great compliment to Ambartsumian and Sheludyakov that their account is just as meaningful.

In some ways, the Five Melodies receive that most amazing performance on the CD. Here Ambartsumian plays with the most ravishing and exotic tone colors, revealing a personality totally distant from his in the First Sonata. When Lisa Oshima renders the Melodies, one is aware of beautiful violin playing. With Ambartsumian, there is a whole other level of artistry, as the violin sings in a variety of voices. The sound engineering throughout the CD is very good. Levon Ambartsumian’s Prokofiev deserves the strongest recommendation. I know of no more powerful entrance into this composer’s world. Dave Saemann



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A brave disc, one might say, to enter into such crowded territory. But Levon Ambartsumian is a fine player, listing Leonid Kogan amongst his teachers in Moscow. His technique is remarkable, especially in the double-stopping in the first movement of Prokofiev's First Sonata. He has a fine partner (note, not accompanist) in Alexander Ardakov in this piece: Listen to the passage of rapid violin scales against ominous, chorale-like piano in the first movement to hear real fusion of intent. The second movement, marked Allegro brusco, is dry and brash (the recording's dryness enhances the effect); the finale of the First Sonata is remarkable, fierce and determined and yet including moments of phantasmagoria.

The Second Sonata's first movement is characterized by a sinewy line from Ambartsumian. His pianist Anatoly Sheludyakov's contribution is superb, his staccato perfectly placed, his moments in the spotlight full of character. The Scherzo is taken at quite a lick, Ambartsumian's agility and perfect tuning impressive, but most of all it is the dialogue between the soloists that delights, while the nostalgia of the Andante is nevertheless spun with a melodic line of steel. Perhaps a touch more feeling of the exultant could have graced the opening of the finale (and the recording makes the piano's end of phrase staccato seem rather too dry), but the movement is powerful indeed in these hands. Those wishing the flute version should head over to BIS for the Bezaly/Ashkenazy version (see the interview and review in Fanfare 41:4).

I see there is a recording on Russian Disc of the Second Sonata by these two performers that was once available (reviewed back in Fanfare 20:2). It is impossible to tell from the documentation here whether this is the same performance, and the Russian Disc is, one assumes, by now deleted and hard to trace—a pity, as the couplings there were Karen Khachaturian, Eshpai, and Schnittke's Second Violin Sonata.

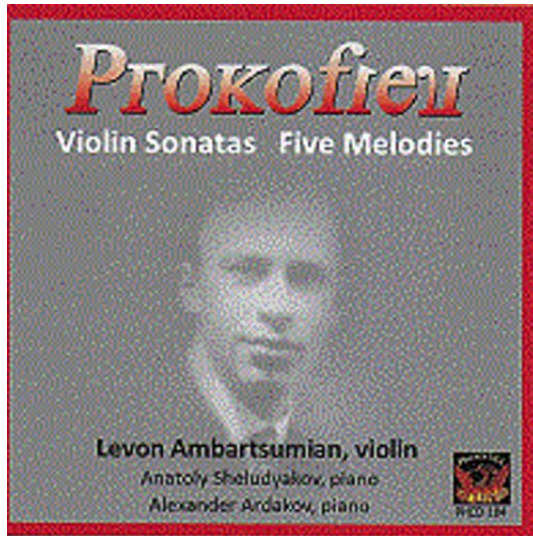
The Five Melodies are adaptations of pieces for wordless soprano and piano (the original was written for Nina Koshetz). The arrangements work beautifully in their violin guise; Ambartsumian is most eloquent throughout.

The same program as this disc is available in a recent Hyperion release by Ibragimova and Osborne, and that should take first place among modern performances of this repertoire. For the sonatas alone, a recent release by Alexandra Conunova and Michail Lifits offers a fine alternative. All that said, there is no denying the strength of character of Ambartsumian's readings.

While the performances honor both violin and piano parts, this is not mirrored in the documentation, in which Ambartsumian receives a whole page of biography (a biography, to make it even more intimidating, written as a single paragraph) whereas there is not one word about his pianists. Colin Clarke



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Sergei Prokofiev began writing his First Sonata for Violin and Piano in 1938, but also worked on other projects. He did not finish the sonata until 1946. Reflecting the anxiety of Russia's Stalin years, its dark music describes a climate of fear and tells of the deaths of millions. The opening trills send a message remind listeners that conversations could be overheard and reported to the police. Only unexpressed thoughts were safe in that atmosphere. Listening to the Allegro brusco, we remember that daily routines are constant, even in the most extreme times. While the piano plays dramatic chords, the violin emits fast but sidwinding runs that the composer described as "wind passing through a graveyard." I think of them as the dying thoughts no one dared to put into words. Artists create masterpieces in the worst of conditions. Their music tells stories and evokes emotion that eludes words. Perhaps these sonatas are Prokofiev's tale of war and survival. He learned how to wend his way through treacherous times.

Ambartsumian and Ardakov play both sonatas with careful attention to the composer's expressed wishes. David Oistrakh, who knew Prokofiev well, said of his body of work, "It is music in which nothing can be omitted, not a single turn of the melody, not a single modulation. It requires the strictest attention to every detail of expression, a fine, but not over-refined, execution of each individual intonation." The result is a fascinating rendition of this uniquely intricate music that takes the listener into the world of Stalinist Russia. Listeners may feel as though they are in a beautifully decorated late 1930s or early 1940s Moscow hotel lobby, wondering who is listening to their conversation.

The Second Sonata presents the sunbeams and glinting colors that are also present in 20th-century Russian music. Summer may be short but it is celebrated all the more for its rare weather. As played by Ambartsumian and Sheludiyakov, the lyricism of the Second Sonata shines

brightly. They give it the contrast it needs to glisten with the violin's jewel tones and a tapestry of color from the piano. Both lines in the sonata tend to evoke deep thoughts in minds of listeners.

In 1920, Prokofiev wrote Five Melodies, actually songs without words, for the Ukrainian/Russian/American soprano Nina Koshetz. She premiered them in New York the following spring. Later that year, Koshetz created the role of Fata Morgana in the premiere of Prokofiev's Love for Three Oranges. In 1925, Prokofiev arranged the Five Melodies for violin and piano, adding harmonies and pizzicato writing. These songs show us the younger Prokofiev and his lighter, tuneful side. Ambartsumian and Sheludyakov play these charming songs with the sophisticated manner of a Paris party animal. They are interesting material and a fine way to end this excellent disc. The only competition for this Phoenix USA disc is a Hyperion CD by Alina Ibragimova and Steven Osborne, who play the same program. Although Ibragimova and Osborne may be more glamorous, I think Ambartsumian, Sheludyakov, and Ardakov give us more of what Prokofiev intended. Their interpretations are plain and sincere, while their sound is clear and pristine. Maria Nockin