

ALAN HOVHANESS

In the pantheon of twentieth-century composers, Alan Hovhaness (1911-2000) ranks amongst the most intrepid of musical explorers. Although best known by a handful of evocative but rather conventional scores, he was amongst the first to trail-blaze a path melding East with West and archaic with modern. In ‘joining the dots’ between geographically distant and seemingly disparate styles, his extraordinary musical excursions revealed a fascinating homogeneity between the world’s great musical traditions. Not only ground-breaking but unusually communicative, Hovhaness’ transcultural brand of avant garde enraptured audiences and confounded critics in equal measure at the time of his most fully-consummated works, from the 1940s to ’60s.

Hovhaness, the son of an Armenian immigrant, hailed from Boston, Massachusetts, and had a conventional musical training which included a very thorough study of counterpoint. Soon after, mixing with Boston’s Indian, Middle Eastern and Armenian communities, he absorbed these cultures and their music, and enquired into Eastern philosophies too. Hovhaness relished the possibilities opened up by this alternative musical universe, and came to dislike the “all clever and dissonant” Western vogues of Neoclassicism and atonality. He found early support and friendship in 1940s New York from other Eastward-looking pioneers – Henry Cowell, Lou Harrison and John Cage – but retained greater adherence to the very essence of Eastern music: melody, serenity and beauty. At this time he declared “it is a European sophistication ... to force melody to submit to the dictatorship of harmony”.

The early Hovhaness style was bold and prophetic. The music often evokes a sense of stasis, purity and otherworldliness which, had he come along a few decades later, might have categorized him as anything from ‘holy minimalist’ to ‘world music classicist’. Over the years, diverse ingredients were added to his musical

melting pot (informed by extensive research periods in India, Japan and Korea), but one is rarely in any doubt as to the identity of the music's creator. Also prophetic was Hovhaness' crossover appeal beyond the highbrow classical music audience (he composed "not for snobs, but for all people") and the establishment of his own record label, Poseidon, to help achieve this.

Like that other demolisher of musical barriers, Henry Cowell, Hovhaness composed restlessly (over 500 works survive), seemingly interested more in the next commission than in penning a series of polished masterpieces. For all the inevitable unevenness of such a vast output, Hovhaness stands as one of the pioneers who forged the vital 'connective tissue' between Eastern musical idioms and their migration and assimilation into our modern-day, multi-cultural musical experience – arguably the most significant musical shift of the last half-century.

JANABAR

Janabar (Armenian for 'Journey') was completed on Christmas Eve 1950, and is subtitled *Five Hymns of Serenity for Trumpet, Violin, Piano and String Orchestra*. Premiered at an all-Hovhaness Carnegie Hall concert in March 1951, it was conceived as a vehicle for two of that concert's soloists, the sisters Maro and Anahid Ajemian, a contemporary-focused piano and violin duo who were the first recitalists to record and promote Hovhaness coast-to-coast and in Europe. Their parents are the work's dedicatees, having perished in an air disaster the previous year – hence, *Janabar's* title alludes to a spiritual, rather than physical journey.

Janabar's musical language draws upon two distinct aspects of Hovhaness' Armenian period: a non-harmonic linear style (featured on piano and violin) and a harmonic modal counterpoint (trumpet and strings). The linear style derives from Hovhaness' expert knowledge of Armenian liturgical music, clearly heard in the melismatic solo violin and piano writing. As in liturgical

chanting, the notation for these two soloists is without the employment of measures, nor do they have any accompaniment, except an occasional background drone or clouds of rhythm-less pizzicato. Additionally, the piano writing fuses the liturgical influence with an imitation of the kanun, a Near Eastern zither. Whereas the solo violin plays only in the second and fourth movements, a trumpet is heard in odd numbered movements, sounding with the strings in a sort of church choir role.

Janabar is one of many Hovhaness works that seem composed only to an extent. Technical facility and ingenuity often carried this habitually nocturnal composer only so far...then something else seemed to take hold. In parts of *Janabar* one can imagine Hovhaness as a portal through which some otherworldly music has passed into our own – timeless, ageless, occasionally foreboding ... but unquestionable in its assuredness and sincerity.

TALIN

The early Hovhaness concerto design was usually a series of short, contrasting movements scored for soloist and strings, without recourse to antagonistic or showy solo writing. The viola concerto *Talin* (1951) is a particularly fine example, and a puzzlingly well-kept secret of the American viola repertoire. Its no-nonsense melodic and harmonic expressivity imbues the work with an aura of purity and spiritual fervor that belies its modest dimensions. Dating from Hovhaness' Armenian period, *Talin* takes its title from Armenia's Talin Cathedral, an impressive 7th century structure, long-since in ruins. The opening *Chant* has an arresting solemnity which the composer likened to "the spirit of a priest-like incantation" (here clearly modeled on Armenian liturgical chanting). A calm but foreboding stasis is maintained by absence of modulation and through tension between 'major' and 'minor' third degrees of the mode. The following brief *Estampie* is a lively polytonal canon evoking a festive spirit. It is inspired by the kamanche, a Near Eastern bowed string instrument traditionally

used in Persian art and folk music.

The closing *Canzona* is “religious and choral-like in spirit and sound, suggesting angelic choirs joined by earthly choirs in a spirit of grandeur creating a tower of sound like the Armenian cathedrals”. Beneath both of the viola’s ornate solos one hears Hovhaness’ trademark chattering pizzicato strings, whereby players independently repeat a designated melodic phrase over and over (a quasi-aleatoric technique later adopted by European composers). The movement spirals upwards, with ever-intensifying spiritual uplift.

SHAMBALA

Shambala is the mythical kingdom beyond the snow-peaks of the Himalayas, as described in ancient Tibetan texts. The nineteenth-century writings of Theosophical Society founder Madame Blavatsky propagated this myth to the West, and is the likely source for Hovhaness’ choice of title for this distinctly Indian-sounding concerto.

Hovhaness’ credentials as a scholar of Indian music were impeccable – and are a much overlooked attribute in deciphering the enigma of this American maverick. He first witnessed it in 1936, when Uday Shankar’s touring dance troupe performed in Boston (with 16-year old Ravi Shankar on sitar) and he subsequently met with many Indian musicians who passed through Boston. In the early 1950s Hovhaness was Director of Music and composer for the Near and Middle East sections of the Voice of America, and in 1959/60 spent a year in India on a Fulbright Scholarship, becoming the first Westerner to have his works performed at the Madras Music Festival.

In India Hovhaness had met Ravi Shankar, who by the late 1960s (with a little help from The Beatles) was rousing a huge surge of Western interest in Indian music. Hovhaness provided some rather

technical liner notes for the sitarist's 1966 Columbia release *The Sounds of India*. 1967's *West Meets East* then saw Shankar duetting with violinist Yehudi Menuhin, also an acquaintance of Hovhaness from a summer stay in Switzerland. Perhaps wanting something more substantial in this East-West vein, Menuhin commissioned Hovhaness for a concerto for violin, sitar and orchestra. The result was 1969's *Shambala*, the first orchestral concerto to incorporate the sitar. For reasons unclear, it was never performed and Shankar subsequently composed his own *Concerto No.1 for Sitar and Orchestra* the following year.

Whereas Shankar's concerto employs several notated sitar passages, ironically it is Hovhaness, the Westerner, who preserves Indian tradition, with just improvised music for the sitar (in the specified modes of Bhairav, Todi, Gunkali, Jait) supported only by Hovhaness' trademark rhythm-less textures. The violin part, however, is more notated than improvised.

As Shankar never performed this work, it is fitting that one of his most cherished disciples, Gaurav Mazumdar, undertakes the sitar part for this premiere performance and recording. No less fitting is the appearance of Christina Fong, who to date has digitally recorded more Hovhaness (and Feldman) than any other violinist/violist. Fong has long since championed little-known repertoire over the 'standard warhorses', following very much in the generous musical spirit of the aforementioned Ajemian sisters and Yehudi Menuhin himself.

by Marco Shirodkar