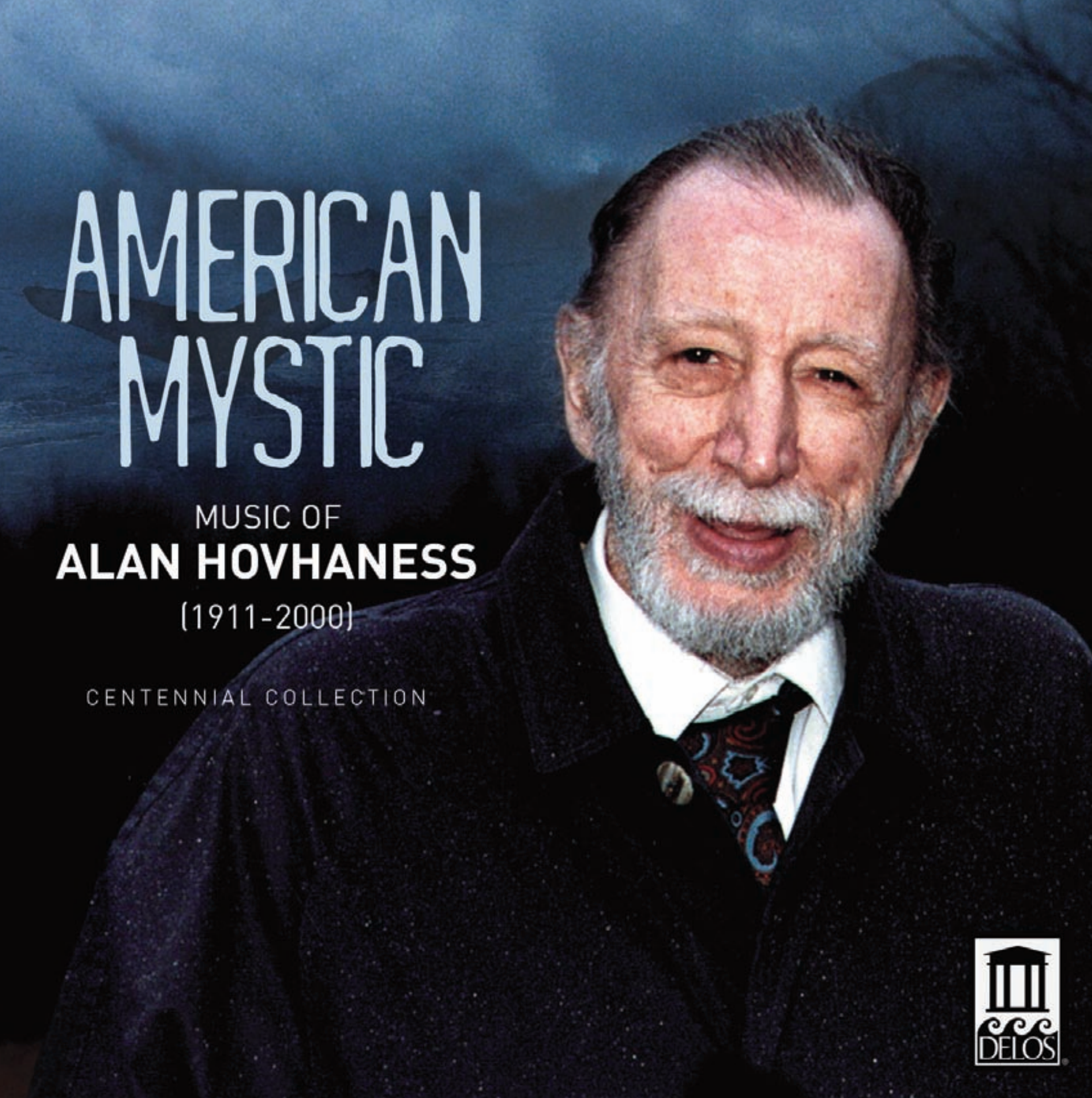
AMERICAN
MYSTIC
MUSIC OF
ALAN HOVHANESS
(1911-2000)
CENTENNIAL COLLECTION
DELOS

AMERICAN MYSTIC

MUSIC OF **ALAN HOVHANESS** (1911-2000) – CENTENNIAL COLLECTION

1. **Prayer of St. Gregory, Op. 62b** (4:53)
   Charles Butler, trumpet • Seattle Symphony Orchestra • Gerard Schwarz

2. **The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam, Op. 308** (13:54)
   Michael York, narrator • Diane Schmidt, accordion
   Seattle Symphony Orchestra • Gerard Schwarz, conductor

3. **4 Bagatelles, Op. 30 No. 1** (2:04)
4. **4 Bagatelles, Op. 30 No. 2** (1:06)
5. **4 Bagatelles, Op. 30 No. 3** (2:00)
6. **4 Bagatelles, Op. 30 No. 4** (3:40)
   Shanghai Quartet

Symphony No. 2, Op. 132, "Mysterious Mountain"

7. **I. Andante con moto** (6:04)
8. **II. Double Fugue** (5:37)
9. **III. Andante espressivo** (5:26)
   Seattle Symphony Orchestra • Gerard Schwarz, conductor

10. **String Quartet No. 2, Op. 147, Gamelan in Sosi Style** (1:44)
11. **String Quartet No. 2, Op. 147, Spirit Murmur** (1:25)
    Shanghai Quartet

The Flowering Peach, Op. 125

12. **Overture** (2:07)
13. **Lifting of Voices** (1:17)
14. **Building of the Ark** (:44)
15. **Intermezzo** (3:31)
16. **Rain** (1:24)
17. **Love Song** (1:41)
18. **Sun and Moon** (1:57)
19 **Rainbow Hymn** (2:41)
    Ohio State University Concert Band • Keith Brion, conductor

20. **And God Created Great Whales, Op. 229, No. 1** (12:16)
    Seattle Symphony Orchestra • Gerard Schwarz, conductor

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 75:31

“My purpose is to create music not for snobs, but for all people; music which is beautiful and healing – to attempt what old Chinese painters called ‘spirit resonance’ in melody and sound.”

— *Alan Hovhaness*

Thus, in a nutshell, did this incomparably eclectic and universally appealing composer encapsulate his musical goals and philosophy. And when he said “all people,” he meant people everywhere; not just westerners. The quote also gave notice to the twentieth-century international musical establishment that he was something of a creative misfit by the standards of his day. Right from the start, he blithely bucked the prevailing compositional trends of his time, marching to the beat of his own inner “drummer,” consistently refusing to align himself with any of the trendy musical fads, schools or “isms” of his era. He repudiated the forbiddingly complex, intellectually fashionable serialism and atonality that the mid-century’s musical “brain trust” favored, in lieu of good old-fashioned melody and harmony: the primary building blocks of “real music,” as he saw (and heard) it. As with any truly original musical visionary, he fearlessly trod his own path, and let the chips fall where they may. But artists like Leopold Stokowski, Fritz Reiner, Yehudi Menuhin, Martha Graham, and others saw (and heard) something special in his unique approach – and helped to propel his creations to broad acceptance and respectability among the musical public.

The music of Hovhaness has been one of the Delos label’s musical mainstays for nearly two decades now. How, then, might we best celebrate his unique and prolific contributions to musical art in this, the hundredth anniversary year of his birth? One of several approaches lies in his unique penchant for weaving the musical techniques, moods and

flavors of many and varied foreign cultures into his otherwise thoroughly western music: material that – while often based on specific national or regional influences – tends to resonate strongly in the ears, hearts and souls of sensitive listeners anywhere on earth. In fact, during his periods of study in Asian nations, his music was immediately grasped and appreciated by his hosts. In India, his Hindu colleagues regarded him as a "priest of music"; in Japan, he was surprised and delighted to find that his music was better-known and understood there than it was in America at the time. It's even said that the extensive and reverential press attention he got in Japan did much to reinforce the American musical establishment's interest in his music. The musical forms and characteristics that he explored during these travels – as well as his earlier exposure to ancient Armenian (and other) music – have much to do with the often-cited "mystical" qualities – or, as Hovhaness himself put it – the ever-present "spirit resonance" of his style.

May we therefore suggest that Hovhaness' works (at least some of them) can be seen as early examples of what we now call "world music"? Some have even likened the "mystic" qualities of his work to the quasi-spiritual category of "new age" music – even though Hovhaness transcends – by far – the relatively simplistic, non-classical nature of that genre. Let us then examine some of the historical and influential factors that have led to such comparisons.

Born in Massachusetts to an Armenian father and a mother of Scottish stock, young Alan enjoyed a thoroughly American, if rather structured, upbringing. His parents saw to his early piano training, but otherwise discouraged his musical activities – particularly his early efforts at composition. Still, they contributed in several other important ways to his musical future. One of the most significant of these was thanks to his father, who took the boy on lengthy hikes, often in remote mountainous areas. This awakened his love of

and spiritual association with the natural world: “Nature is my great inspiration; I feel nature is, one might say, the outer clothing of God.” A significant incidental effect was his lifelong reverence for mountains, which he came to see as “…symbols, like pyramids, of man’s attempt to know God.” His father also gave the precocious boy his first exposure to Armenian music via a recording of the choral music of composer-priest Komitas Vartabed, whom Hovhaness later described as “… the original minimalist, and it was through Komitas that I got the idea of saying as much as possible with the fewest possible notes.” Another salient early interest that later resonated in his music was astronomy.

Hovhaness’ early exposure to the great classical composers resulted in various periods of youthful “fever” for composers like Bach, Handel, Mozart, Wagner and (later) Sibelius, among others. But it was the music of Schubert that, even as a child, touched him most profoundly, instilling in him his vaunted penchants for pleasing melody and harmony. In one interview, he recounted how, as a boy, he spent his evening free time playing and singing Schubert Lieder to himself, sending him to bed “in an ecstasy of weeping and admiration.”

His broader encounters with music of foreign origin came to pass in his twenties, during his Depression-era periods of formal study and other activity in Boston and New York. He was drawn to performances of Armenian and Kurdish folk music, as well as the classical music of northern India. His appointment in 1940 as organist at St. James Armenian Church in Watertown, MA, made for a much deeper familiarity with the traditional modes, monody and pure-interval intonation of the Armenian liturgy; an influence reinforced in later visits to Armenia. Throughout the 1940s, his circle of Armenian-American musical associates and champions grew steadily, leading to the first high-profile concerts, initial recordings, and major-media praise of his music in and around Boston and New York. As his reputation grew, so did his prestigious fellowships,

awards and commissions – enabling him to study in Greece and the eastern Greek islands. From there, it wasn't musically far to other middle-eastern traditions. In the course of his subsequent studies of Turkish, Arabic and Persian styles, he learned to play the oud and the saz: variants of the middle-eastern lute.

Leopold Stokowski gave Hovhaness his biggest break to date when he premiered his *Symphony No. 2*, "Mysterious Mountain," with the Houston Symphony in 1955 (abetted in 1958 when Fritz Reiner and his Chicago Symphony recorded it). His national reputation now secure, opportunities for further enrichment of his art soon followed. Despite his previous musical adaptations of Indian music's unbridled melodic impulse and complex "Talas"-based rhythmic patterns, he felt the compulsion for further study. As a Fulbright Research Scholar, he travelled to southern India in 1959 to study the Karnatic tradition: the foundation for most Indian classical music. While there, he directed performances of his existing works, and composed at least one work commissioned strictly for Indian instruments. Titled *Nagooran*, it remains unpublished (and probably unperformed in America), despite the composer's later transcription for western instruments. Among several native Indian instruments he learned to "play at" and compose for, he did particularly well on the veena: a plucked string instrument similar to northern India's sitar.

His next major foreign foray was in 1960: to Japan (the first of several trips there), where he again led several acclaimed performances of his own music while soaking up native musical traditions like the Bunraku and Gagaku styles of ancient ceremonial and court music – not to mention the theatrical Noh style that influenced several of his later operas. Native instruments he learned to play (though, by his own admission, he hardly mastered them) include two different kinds of the lute-like shamisen, the oboe-like hichiriki, and the sho, a kind of mouth organ. His hosts even invited him to play the

latter two instruments in actual temple orchestra performances: an activity he particularly cherished. His next stop was South Korea, where he studied the ancient Ah-ak court music tradition, with its roots in even older Chinese classical music.

We may thus conclude that Hovhaness, of all the great composers of his century, was probably *the* most widely and thoroughly steeped in pan-global music traditions. Yet he hardly ever used genuine folk or traditional materials (melodies, rhythmic patterns or forms) in his own compositions. In fact, among his many hundreds of works, only his early pair of *Armenian Rhapsodies* and his set of *12 Armenian Folksongs* employ actual, unaltered folk materials. His melodies and rhythmic patterns are almost always his own, inspired by various international influences though they may be. Hovhaness simply absorbed all of the above-mentioned "alien" styles, sounds, moods and forms into his overall musical consciousness, and drew upon them at need to suit his own original artistic designs and purposes. And all this goes far to explain why most of his music has an exotic, often mystically spiritual ring to western ears. There are certainly complex aspects to many of his works – like highly detailed counterpoint (he no doubt wrote more fugues than any other American composer); his rhythmic schemes are likewise often forbiddingly "offbeat" (patterns of 7, 13, or 17 beats, among others), and therefore quite tricky for western musicians to play. Nonetheless, he rarely, if ever, allowed such intricacies to detract from the meditative and spiritually therapeutic nature of his wondrous creations.

Finally, consider the fact that many of today's finest and most popular world music artists favor "fusions" of their native music with more modern American or European styles and techniques. For example, some of the best contemporary African musicians perform with ensembles of both native and western instruments, while incorporating elements of mainstream blues, jazz or rock into their final products. Yet there's no

doubt in any listener's mind that what they're hearing is quintessentially African. May we therefore suggest that the utterly original compositions of Hovhaness are just such fusions: music often combining a multitude of multicultural impulses, yet cast in predominantly (and obviously) western sonic and instrumental contexts. If that's not "world music" – though on a more exalted plane than most – then what is? Let's then briefly explore this album's selections, primarily in terms of their cross-cultural qualities.

The ever-popular ***Prayer of St. Gregory*** (1946), for trumpet and strings, was first heard as an intermezzo from Hovhaness' opera *Etchmiadzin* – but it soon found favor as a separate work. The composer characterized it as "a prayer in darkness," honoring St. Gregory, "the Illuminator," who first introduced Christianity to Armenia in the fourth century. This rather brief, but soul-satisfying work lays down a soft, chorale-like bed of typically Armenian modal string harmonies, drifting beneath a serenely aching trumpet solo. The piece gradually increases in sacred fervor and entreaty – as if rising heavenward – without ever losing its pervasive sense of radiant calm.

With ***The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*** (1975) – for narrator, solo accordion and orchestra – Hovhaness offers a rather unconventional work, in that the music serves as a framework to spoken recitations of well-known love-poetry by the 11th-century Persian writer Omar Khayyam. Another unusual aspect is that the piece is uncharacteristically hedonistic, with its prevailing theme of romantic love … there's little, if any, of the composer's usual lofty sense of spiritual questing or comfort. Reinforcing its comparatively lightweight, "common" mood is the solo accordion, well-matched by the traditional Greek dance-rhythms employed. Still, his use of modal melodies and harmonies impart his usual sense of the exotic to this unabashed example of "love music."

The ***Bagatelles***, Nos. 1-4 – for string quartet – date from the 1960s, and are revisions of materials used in earlier compositions. Short and fairly simple, the prevailing pattern spins flowing, freewheeling modal solo violin melodies, soaring over shimmering, subtly shifting harmonic foundations – with plucked-string textures predominant. The general regional flavor is middle-eastern, with whiffs of pentatonic scales in evidence.

By the time Hovhaness composed his three-movement ***Symphony No. 2,*** **"Mysterious Mountain"** in 1955, he had already been exploring modal scales and harmonies for some time in his compositions. Here, he employed mostly the Phrygian mode, variants of which are known from Medieval Europe and Greece; in Arabic regions, it's known as the "Kurdish mode." The mystic-toned first and third movements are richly expansive and hymn-like – with uneven, yet smooth-sounding rhythmic patterns reminiscent of Indian ragas. The second movement – a beautifully crafted double fugue – interweaves a seemingly aimless, songlike subject melody to magical effect before abruptly shifting to a rapid, skittish second subject that is soon underscored by a more sonorous counter-subject from the rest of the orchestra. This remains Hovhaness' best-known work, despite the fact that the composer never considered it to be one of his best or most representative works.

"Gamelan in Sosi Style" and **"Spirit Murmur"** were originally composed as the fifth and first movements, respectively, of Hovhaness' *String Quartet No. 2* (1952); they are also the first two of three movements of a later suite drawn from that work. Like the *Bagatelles*, these are short pieces for string quartet, with one instrument providing the melody over foundation textures from the remaining players. In the first piece, the title's "Gamelan" connotes both the highly varied instrumental ensembles and unique musical styles of Indonesian and other south-Pacific regions. Listen for a sweet, pentatonic-

scale tune over a steady drone and plucked strings. In “Spirit Murmur,” we hear a free-flowing and mournful melody (with lots of half-steps) over a hushed pizzicato base.

The Flowering Peach (1954) is a concert suite for chamber ensemble (alto saxophone, clarinet, harp, and varied percussion) drawn from Hovanhess’ incidental music to Clifford Odet’s fanciful Broadway play that retells the familiar Biblical story of Noah and the ark with an irreverently humorous twist. The saxophone is the voice of Noah, portrayed in the play as a boozy visionary. In the course of its seven short movements (plus overture), the music remains classic Hovhaness throughout, encompassing a variety of his usual Armenian, Indian and Arabic influences – with a touch of the Jewish idiom thrown in. The music is impressionistically descriptive in several places – as in the “Building of the ark” movement (you can hear the hammer-strokes) and the particularly magical “Rain” movement, where harp and percussion conspire to evoke musical raindrops and other fluid sounds.

What better way to end our survey of the “world music” of Alan Hovhaness than with his ***And God Created Great Whales***? After all, what greater – and least-understood – “regions” of earth are there than its vast oceans? And what better creature is there to guide us through the mysteries of their uncharted deeps than their most massive (and intelligent) denizen, the whale? The work – a tone poem for full orchestra – frames four passages of actual recorded whale-songs, mostly from the exceptionally vocal humpback whale.

Of all the works offered in this album, this is the only one that is distinctly aleatoric (or “ad libitum”) in nature. Thus there are extended episodes wherein the musicians (mostly the string players) are given carte blanche to improvise, in whatever rhythm or modality

they choose. The resulting indistinct sonic “soup” seeks to convey some impression of the unbridled chaos of our surrounding seas: their ever-changing conditions, movements, moods, and still-mysterious global functions. That also means that – even though the composer anchors the music in his customary modal language – no two performances of this work will ever sound quite the same.

Just think … these fascinating leviathans have – over eons – borne witness to submerged natural wonders that no mere human can ever hope to see or comprehend: vast undersea plains, mountain ranges, volcanoes and seemingly bottomless trenches. Still, who among us can tell of what they sing? But, as this amazing music envelops us, let’s take the whales at their musical “word” for now – as interpreted by Hovhaness – and allow our freshly-fired imaginations to transport us to deep and watery places we’ve never been to before.

— Lindsay Koob

Executive Producer: Carol Rosenberger
Associate Producer: Kira Bielfield
Recording Producers: Walter Gray, Carol Rosenberger, Stephen Basili
Engineers: John Eargle, Al Swanson
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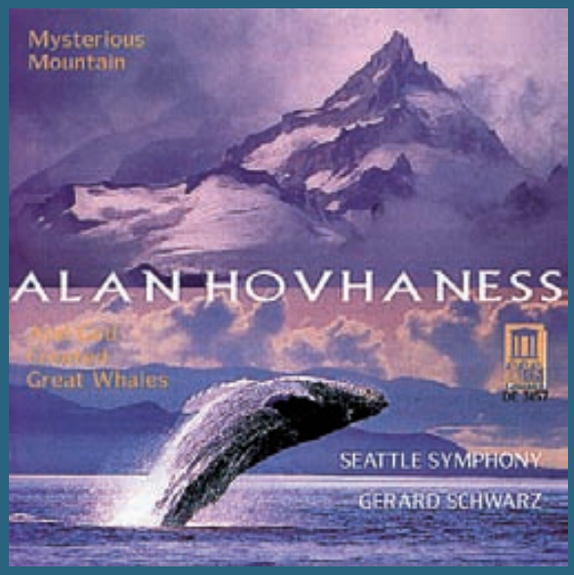

MYSTERIOUS MOUNTAIN
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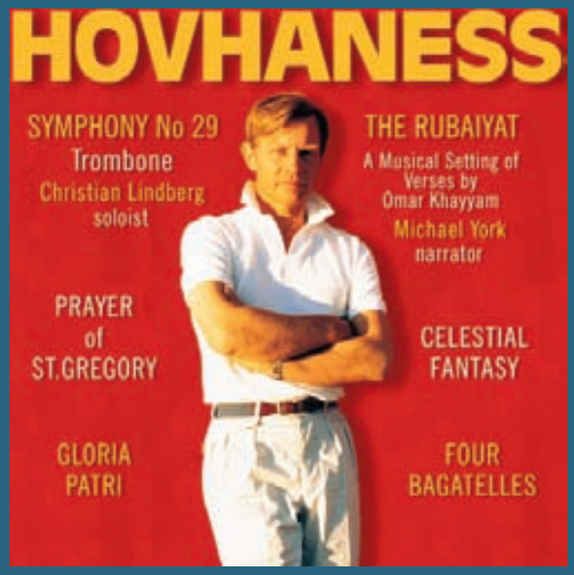

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MUSIC OF **ALAN HOVHANESS** (1911-2000)

CENTENNIAL COLLECTION

Prayer of St. Gregory, Op. 62b • The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam, Op. 308
4 Bagatelles, Op. 30 Nos. 1-4 • Symphony No. 2, Op. 132, Mysterious Mountain
"Gamelan in Sosi Style" & "Spirit Murmur" from String Quartet No. 2, Op. 147
The Flowering Peach, Op. 125 • And God Created Great Whales, Op. 229, No. 1

Delos Founder Amelia Haygood, conductor Gerard Schwarz and composer Alan Hovhaness at a "Mysterious Mountain" recording session (1993)

Seattle Symphony Orchestra
Gerard Schwarz, conductor
Charles Butler, trumpet
Michael York, narrator
Diane Schmidt, accordion
Shanghai Quartet
Ohio State University Concert Band
Keith Brion, conductor

Total Playing Time: 75:31

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