



Raffi Besalyan
piano

The Sound of Black & White

A. Khachaturian | O. Levant | G. Gershwin

Waltz from "Masquerade" suite A. Khachaturian	[3:56]
Adagio from ballet "Spartacus" A. Khachaturian (arr. for piano by M. Cameron)	[8:33]
Sonatina in C major I. Allegro giocoso	[1:50]
II. Andante con anima, rubato	[3:03]
III. Allegro mosso A. Khachaturian	[3:41]
Lullaby from ballet "Gayane" A. Khachaturian (arr. for piano by O. Levant)	[4:32]
Sonatina for Piano I. Con Ritmo	[3:28]
II. Andantino poco mosso	[4:21]
III. Allegro deciso O. Levant	[3:04]
7 Virtuoso Etudes based on Gershwin Songs Etude No. 2 based on "Somebody Loves Me"	[3:00]
Etude No. 7 based on "Fascinatin' Rhythm"	[1:48]
Etude No. 4 based on "Embraceable You"	[3:17]
Etude No. 3 based on "The Man I Love" E. Wild	[2:50]
Three Preludes for Piano I. Allegro ben ritmato e deciso	[1:31]
II. Andante con moto e poco rubato (Blue Lullaby)	[3:34]
III. Allegro ben ritmato e deciso (Spanish Prelude) G. Gershwin	[1:20]
Rhapsody in Blue G. Gershwin	[15:41]
Sabre Dance from ballet "Gayane" A. Khachaturian (arr. for piano by O. Levant)	[2:24]
Total Time:	[72:04]

The Sound of Black and White

This program is a loving tribute to A. Khachaturian, the towering musical figure from my native Armenia and to G. Gershwin, the musical genius from my adopted home, the United States. These two composers are bridged here by the phenomenal pianist/composer and Hollywood superstar, Oscar Levant. Some of the works on the album have been my loyal recital companions since childhood, the others have become such upon my immigration to America as a young adult.

The CD includes a world premiere recording of Oscar Levant's jazzy Sonatina.

Raffi Besalyan, piano

Hailed as “a true heir of the mainstream of Russian pianism, like Horowitz” (Chopin Magazine, Japan), “a keyboard phenomenon” (Fanfare Magazine), “a formidable pianist with a commanding presence and rich interpretive gifts” (American Record Guide), “a master of his art” (The Record Geijutsu Magazine, Japan), Raffi Besalyan has established an international reputation of a magnetic and passionate performer.

Award-Winning pianist and Associate Professor of Piano at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Dr. Raffi Besalyan has toured North and South America, Europe, Russia, and Asia performing in such prestigious venues as Carnegie Hall and Merkin Hall in New York City, Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., Orchestra Hall in Chicago, Atlanta Symphony Hall, Max M. Fisher Music Center in Detroit, Moscow Conservatory’s Rachmaninoff Hall and Maly Zal, Izumi Hall and Phoenix Hall in Osaka. He dazzled his audiences appearing as a soloist with many prominent orchestras, including the Osaka Symphony Orchestra and Kansai Philharmonic in Japan, the Orchestra Sinfonica Del Festival Di Chioggia in Venice, Italy, the Atlanta Symphony Youth Orchestra, the Yerevan Symphony Orchestra in Armenia, the Belgorod, Symphony in Russia, the Kharkov Symphony in Ukraine, the New Jersey Festival Orchestra, and the Moscow Chamber Orchestra among others.

Besalyan’s performances have also been heard on National Public Radio, WQXR and WNYC NY, WGBH Boston, WFMT Chicago, WABE Atlanta, CBC Public Radio Canada, and Tokyo FM Japan. Critics on both sides of the Atlantic have praised his performances for their virility, poetry and extraordinary technical command.

Besalyan received international accolades for his solo albums “Dance, Drama, Decadence” (IMC Music, Japan, 2012) and “The Return” (Sono Luminus, 2015). He is also featured on the “Bach-Busoni Edition, Vol. I” for Koch International Classics with pianist Sara Davis Buechner. In addition Dr. Besalyan edited important piano music by composers from his native Armenia like Eduard Baghdasarian, for Muse Press of Tokyo, Japan.

Among Besalyan’s competition awards are top prizes received from the Josef Hofmann International Piano Competition, Artists International Competition, the New York Frinna Averbuch International Competition, and the MTNA National Piano Competition.

Dr. Besalyan studied at the Yerevan State Komitas Conservatory in Armenia, Rowan University, Manhattan School of Music and the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory.

www.raffibesalyan.com



Oscar Levant (1906–1972) is best-remembered today as a star of film and television. A string of high-profile movie appearances in the 1940s and 50s secured Levant’s popular reputation as a Hollywood all-rounder, a character actor, comedian, always ready with a sardonic one-liner, and stage pianist—an ideal combination for the Golden Age of musicals. But Levant came to Hollywood as a classical musician, a gifted pianist and aspiring composer. Bridging the worlds of music and film allowed him to bring new audiences to classical music, especially to the works of contemporaries Aram Khachaturian (1903–1978) and George Gershwin (1898–1937). Both composers rose in popularity in mid-century America thanks to Levant’s many concert appearances and recordings.

The Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian was one of the leading composers of the Soviet Union. He is best-known for his ballets, especially *Gayane* (1939) and *Spartacus* (1956). *Gayane* is set in modern-day (i.e., Soviet) Armenia, while *Spartacus* tells of the slave uprising against the Romans in the first century BC. Both are love stories, with an inter-ethnic romance in *Gayane* and a focus in *Spartacus* on the relationship between the title character and his wife, Phrygia. Spartacus and Phrygia are enslaved and separated at the start of the ballet, but escape and are reunited in the second act. The famous *Adagio* is danced by the couple, in celebration of their escape. In *Gayane*, Khachaturian explores the folk traditions of his native Armenia and neighboring countries. The Lullaby is a wistful folksong, while *Sabre Dance* is the Kurdish episode in a sequence of national dances at the ballet’s conclusion. The Waltz from *Masquerade* is incidental music, for a 1941 production of the play by Mikhail Lermontov. The number was prompted by a line from the play’s heroine, Nina, “How beautiful the new waltz is! ... something between sorrow and joy gripped my heart.”

Levant programmed Khachaturian's music regularly throughout his later career. In 1950, he made a high-profile recording of Khachaturian's Piano Concerto with Dimitri Mitropoulos and the New York Philharmonic. His most celebrated Khachaturian recording was of the *Sabre Dance*. This was taken from the soundtrack to the 1949 MGM musical *The Barkleys of Broadway*. The film stars Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers as a fictional husband and wife comedy team. Levant has a starring role, as Ezra Millar, a friendly but sharp-tongued composer, clearly modelled on Levant himself. Three versions of the *Sabre Dance* reached No.1 in the Billboard Best-Selling Records by Classical Artists chart in 1948, but Levant's piano version comfortably outsold the two orchestral recordings, from the Chicago Symphony and the New York Philharmonic.

Though these dances are transcriptions of orchestral works, Khachaturian also wrote solo piano music throughout his career. The Sonatina in C Major, op. 93, was written in 1959. Khachaturian had just completed an extensive tour of Siberia with fellow composer Dmitri Kabalevsky. Both composers felt a strong commitment to writing music for youth and education programs, and the Sonatina was dedicated to the children at a music school in the Siberian city of Prokopyevsk. The music is simple in structure and its mood is light and lyrical. But the piano writing is often intricate and complex, especially in the sparkling finale, with its gently off-kilter toccata rhythms.

When Levant moved to Hollywood, in 1928, talking pictures had just arrived, and he soon began writing film scores, composing music for over 20 movies in the 1930s and 40s. From the early 1930s, he also pursued a career as a composer of concert music, and studied briefly under Arnold Schoenberg, who was also resident in Los Angeles. Levant's *Sonatina for Piano* was completed in 1932. The project began cautiously. After writing just the first movement, Levant performed it at an event organised by George Gershwin. Aaron Copland was present, and encouraged him to complete the work. The finished piece was premiered by Levant in April 1932 at the Yaddo American Music Festival, organised by Copland at Saratoga Springs, New York. The work's three short movements demonstrate a range of influences. The style is predominantly classical, but the rhythms often settle into jazz riffs. Advanced harmonies from jazz are also widely employed, giving the music a distinctively 30s sound.



That combination of jazz and classical also suggests Gershwin, and the two composers were close friends. Levant played an important role in Gershwin's own composition, and together they workshopped two-piano arrangements of *Cuban Overture* and *Second Rhapsody* as Gershwin worked on the orchestral scores. Gershwin's piano and orchestra works—*Rhapsody in Blue* and *Concerto in F*—were already central to Levant's concert repertoire when Gershwin died in 1937. A year later, Levant performed the *Concerto in F* at the Gershwin memorial concert at Hollywood Bowl, and was soon considered the leading interpreter of Gershwin's music.

Gershwin's *Three Piano Preludes* date from 1926. That year, the composer made a joint recital tour with the alto Marguerite d'Alvarez. He composed several preludes to perform on the tour, and later selected three for publication. Gershwin described the second Prelude as "sort of a blue lullaby" and the third as having a Spanish character. Oscar Levant performed the Preludes regularly in the 30s and 40s. He often included them as encores to performances of Gershwin's piano and orchestra works, including at the Gershwin Night concerts at the Lewisohn Stadium, Manhattan, an annual event which regularly featured Levant as soloist.

Rhapsody in Blue was commissioned by the bandleader Paul Whiteman and first performed, by Gershwin with Whiteman and his band, in 1924. The work was pivotal in Gershwin's career, as it successfully combined jazz and classical styles and established Gershwin, who was already well-known for his songs, as a classical composer. Gershwin initially created versions for solo piano (presented here) and for two pianos. The two-piano score was arranged by Ferde Grofé for piano and enlarged jazz band, and this was the version premiered by Whiteman. Grofé later revisited the score several times, and created a full orchestral version in 1942.

In 1945, Oscar Levant appeared in a Gershwin biopic, also entitled *Rhapsody in Blue*. Levant appeared as himself, but also dubbed the re-creations of Gershwin's own performances of *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Concerto in F*, which were mimed by lead actor Robert Alda. The same year, Levant made a recording of Grofé's orchestral version of *Rhapsody in Blue* with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, which, thanks in part to the publicity for the film, became one of Columbia Records' best-selling albums.

Virtuoso Etudes after Gershwin are a collection of piano works, based on Gershwin show songs, written by the American pianist Earl Wild (1915-2010). The *Etudes* were published in two sets, the first in 1954, and the second in 1973. The four numbers presented here are from the 1973 collection. Wild follows the example of Chopin's Etudes in combining clear melodic lines with virtuosic piano textures. These textures are often highly complex: multiple tempos are heard simultaneously in *The Man I Love*, while *Embraceable You* complements the melody with rich textures of descending scales and arpeggios. The style leans more to classical than jazz, although a swinging syncopation drives *Fascinatin' Rhythm* and rich jazz harmonies underpin *Somebody Loves Me*.

Like Wild, Oscar Levant often performed piano arrangements of Gershwin's show songs, or accompanied singers, especially in films. Many of Gershwin's songs are performed by Levant on the soundtrack to the *Rhapsody in Blue* biopic, and he also performs *Somebody Loves Me* on the soundtrack to the 1951 film *An American in Paris*, a musical comedy inspired by Gershwin's piece of the same name. Levant again stars, as usual cast to type, as the fictional pianist Adam Cook, an American in Paris himself, whose cynical but piercing wit provides the film its comic relief.

Thanks to Georgia State University for partial financial assistance of this recording project.

Recorded in Pyramix with Merging Technologies
Horus. Mastered with Merging Technologies Hapi.
Recorded in DXD at 24 bit, 352.8kHz in Native 7.1.4



Mixed and mastered on Legacy Audio speakers.
legacyaudio.com



Producer: Dan Merceruio
Recording, Mixing & Mastering Engineer: Daniel
Shores
Editing Engineer: Dan Merceruio
Piano Technician: John Veitch
Photography: Max Eremine (Cover); MacK Booth (p. 3);
Joshua Frey (background)
Liner Notes: Gavin Dixon
Graphic Design: Joshua Frey
Executive Producer: Collin J. Rae

Recorded September 14 - 19, 2020 at Sono Luminus
Studios, Boyce, VA



© & © 2021 Sono Luminus, LLC. All rights reserved.
PO Box 227, Boyce, VA 22620, USA
sonoluminus.com • info@sonoluminus.com
WARNING: Unauthorized reproduction is prohibited by law
and will result in criminal prosecution.

