

**“THE CONCERT PRELUDE” OF THE COMPOSER  
ALEXANDER SPENDIARYAN AS A GENUINE COMMENCEMENT  
OF THE CREATIVE ACTIVITIES**

(The article is dedicated to the 145<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the composer)

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The role of the Armenian renowned composer, conductor and cultural figure Alexander A. Spendaryan (1871-1928) in the cause of founding and development of the Armenian symphonic music is undeniable. He was born and grown up far away from the Motherland, in the Crimea, and got his preliminary education in the classical gymnasium of Simferopol, after which he proceeded to study in the faculty of jurisprudence of the Moscow University.



**A. A. Spendaryan, the student  
of the Moscow University, 1892**

Nevertheless, he loved the arts since his childhood. Spendaryan was preoccupied with the fine arts at first but showed great interest toward the music later on. Learning to play piano first and then violin as well, Spendaryan took first creative steps just in his school years. One of the compositions of his early period which deserves a mention is the romance “I am fascinated by your beauty”, written at age 16 and dedicated to his first love, Yelizaveta Arendt. However, the young Spendaryan was not even imagining during those years that someday he would indeed become a serious composer. Appearing as a first violin in the orchestra under the guidance of the famous conductor and pedagogue Nikolay Klenovski, he decided to be more seriously involved in music and took private classes from the violinist of the Bolshoi Theatre’s orchestra, Pekarski, intending to become a violinist. His first romances and songs were heartily performed by his best friend of youth, Varvara Apolonovna Eberlen, who desired to become a singer and attended private vocal classes. However, the acquaintance with the poet Alexander Tsaturyan, still young in those days, was crucial for the life of Spendaryan. Tsaturyan delivered his poem “Ah, Rose” to an evening party, which affected Spendaryan too much. Being fascinated and inspired by this beautiful poem, Spendaryan decided to turn it into romance.

The theatrical figure Mamikon Gevorgyan relates in his memoirs how this romance was written and how warmly it was accepted by the public when performed at the home of the Moscow University professor of jurisprudence, Nerses Nersesov, for the first time.

“The success was indescribable, M. Gevorgyan writes, everyone was in ecstatic mood, everybody felt that a new contribution is being made to the Armenian musical art, that a talented composer of an unusual strength is entering into the Armenian musical family”<sup>1</sup>.



N. A. Rimski-Korsakov, 1900

Nonetheless, the opinion of importance for Spendiaryan was especially that of N. Klenovski who advised him to be seriously involved in the composing art after being familiarized with his compositions of that period [the romances “No questions for a long time” (1892), “Ah, Rose” (“Eastern Melody”) (1894), 2 waltzes for violin and “Scherzo” (1892-95)]. The aforementioned view was also supported by one of Spendiaryan’s fellows during his young years, the famous violinist and pedagogue of later times, the professor of the St. Petersburg conservatory Ivan (Hovhannes) Nalbandyan who writes in his memoirs that after listening to the first compositions of Spendiaryan, he was convinced that he would become a composer as a matter of course<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, Spendiaryan needed the honest opinion of a composer namely, a serious and competent one, in order to be able both to believe in his potential and to make a decision. Nikolay Rimski-Korsakov was such a professional whose compositions fascinated and charmed young Spendiaryan.

Spendiaryan was nourishing a secret wish to be his pupil, which became a reality in 1896. Having been familiarized with the first compositions of Spendiaryan, the professor of the Petersburg’s conservatory, famous composer, conductor, pedagogue and cultural figure Nikolay Rimski-Korsakov agreed to give him private lessons on composition theory.

The creative and aesthetic visions of Spendiaryan were formed and developed in 1896-1900 in the Petersburg warm musical atmosphere under the influence of Rimski-Korsakov’s realistic school; certain principles and a taste took roots.

The serious symphonic compositions such as “Menuet” and “Concert Prelude” were created during those



“Young A. Spendiaryan with N. Rimski-Korsakov”  
by S. Aslanyan

<sup>1</sup> Ժամանակակիցները Ալ. Սպենդիարյանի մասին (կազմ. Ալ. Թադևոսյան), Երևան, 1960, էջ 134:

<sup>2</sup> For the part of Nalbandyan’s memories under question see Սպենդիարովա Մ., Սպենդիարով, Երևան, 1966, էջ 32.

years. These compositions along with the romance «Eastern Melody» («Ah, Rose»), already beloved and popular, brought the author fame, heralding the entry of the composer Spendaryan into the world of the professional composers' art.

Spendaryan completed the symphonic composition “Concert Prelude” in Yalta in the autumn of 1900 when the private lessons from Rimski-Korsakov were also terminating. The fact that he was writing such a composition was known to many of his friends and close acquaintances. Levon Yeghiazaryan, a singer, musical critic and cultural figure, who had been in close relations with Spendaryan since the 1890s, offered the latter in his letter from Paris, dated May 4, 1900, to perform the composition in Paris for the first time, making a promise of assistance for that arrangement<sup>3</sup>. But the young composer presented it first to the trial of his teacher, willing to get to know his opinion. Rimsky-Korsakov and his students, supporting «The Mighty Handful» (a group of prominent Russian composers active in Saint Petersburg), were often gathering in the house of the musical critic and publisher Mitrofan Petrovich Belyayev to discuss musicological problems or just to listen to a new composition of somebody from the group.



The members of these society called themselves the “Belyayev circle”; F. Akimenko, N. Amanin, S. Blumenfeld, V. Zolotaryov, I Krizhanovski, A. Lyadov, N. Cherepnin, V. Stasov, A. Borodino and others were among them. As the wife of the composer, Varvara Leonidovna Spendiarova recalled, the “Concert Prelude” of Spendaryan was sounded during a rehearsal of the Palace Orchestra for the first time just in the presence of the “Belyayev circle”'s members<sup>4</sup>. Rimsky-Korsakov liked it greatly and Spendaryan decided to present officially the composition during a concert. The first live performance of the composition took place during a Russian symphonic concert under the guidance of the prominent conductor of the time, Nikolay Vladimirovich Galkin, in Pavlovsk,

in the great hall of Pavlov's station, on June 5, 1901.

<sup>3</sup> Спендиарова М., Летопись жизни и творчества А. А. Спендиарова, Ереван, 1975, стр. 67.

<sup>4</sup> See Սպենդիարովա Մ., op. cit., p. 78.



The work was warmly greeted by the audience; the press also reacted, though the opinions in papers were contradictory<sup>5</sup>. The boyhood friend of Spendaryan, George Melikentsev in his memoirs expressed his genuine thoughts on the composition and controversial treatment of the press in the following way, "Thus, the name of A. A. Spendaryan appeared on the poster of the Pavlovsk's symphonic evening for the first time on June 5, 1901. The Prelude had a great success in society; and the author came on stage repeatedly at the request of the audience. The press treated him not so favorably, publishing scathing remarks together with the positive reviews as was the critique of «Novoye Vremya» («The New Time»), the most common organ of those days"<sup>6</sup> (Melikentsev probably means the article of Mikhayil Ivanov, published in N 9071 of «Новое время» on June 7, 1901).

The musical score of the composition together with the voices of the orchestra was first published in Petersburg by the Vasili Bessel publishing house in 1903 as op. 4<sup>7</sup>. «It is dedicated to my greatly esteemed teacher Nikolay Andreevich Rimski-Korsakov» is noted on the cover of the first edition<sup>8</sup>. The unanimous great interest expressed towards the "Concert Prelude" inspired the young author. He dedicated himself fully to the creative work, writing compositions of the symphonic genre over the years such as the symphonic poem «Three Palms», the symphonic series of «The Crimean Sketches» and the wonderful «Yerevan Etudes»<sup>9</sup>, as well as composing wonderful songs and romances, serious instrumental works. The opera «Almast», written on the basis of the poem "The Capture of Tmkaberd" by Hovhannes Tumanyan, is not only the masterpiece of Spendaryan's works but also one of the gems of the Armenian opera.

In the last years of his life (1924-28) Spendaryan lived and worked in the homeland, Armenia. He died on May 7, 1928, leaving glorious treasures of musical culture among which is the «Concert Prelude», occupying an honorable place, as well.

***Translated from Armenian  
by V. M. Gharakhanyan***

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<sup>5</sup> See "Новости," 08/06-1901, N 155, "Новое время," 07/06-1901 N 9071.

<sup>6</sup> See Ժամանակակիցները Ալ. Սպենդիարյանի մասին (կազմ. Ալ. Թադևոսյան), Երևան, 1960, էջ 44.

<sup>7</sup> А. Спендиаров Концертная увертюра для большого симфонического оркестра, Москва, изд. В. Бесселя 1903 /op 4/.

<sup>8</sup> After having learned that the composition is dedicated to him, N. Rimsky-Korsakov thanked Spendaryan through a letter. In the same letter he also expressed condolences on the death of Spendaryan's father (he died a few months before, on June 11, 1901). The original letter was not preserved, but M. Spendiarova has published the copy, maintained in her archives, in her book (see Спендиарова М. Летопись жизни и творчества А. А. Спендиарова, Ереван, изд. АН. Арм. ССР, 1975, стр.-75, 77).

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bvf8A0mI\\_SI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bvf8A0mI_SI)