

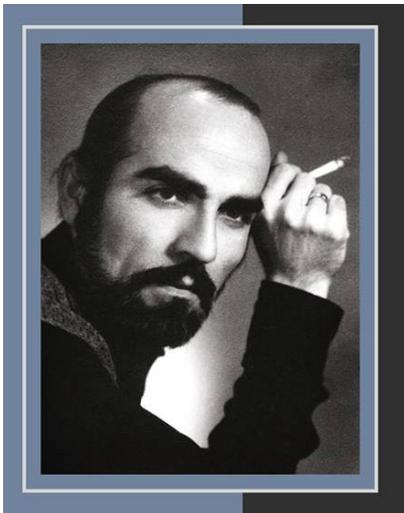
ON THE STAGING OF THE LEGEND OF “ARA THE BEAUTIFUL AND SHAMIRAM” BY CHOREOGRAPHER ASHOT ASATURYAN

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In May 2011 I published my monograph about Ashot Asaturyan¹, an outstanding choreographer and librettist, one of the pathbreakers of the Soviet ballet, who set dance symphony over against dance drama in a series of original productions in Armenia, Russia and Ukraine.

The current study devoted to one of most outstanding productions of Asaturyan – Ara the Beautiful (or Fair) and Shamiram, which has been written after publishing of aforementioned monograph.



Ashot Asaturyan (1937-1999)

Asaturyan’s vast knowledge of music, literature, history and philosophy gave him a deeper vision of the musical and thematic aspects of choreography. Conceptuality, broad analogy and generalization – these are the pillars of Asaturyan’s style. That’s why my book is not just a story of his life but a look into the way he worked, a peek into his artistic laboratory. It is a study of Asaturyan’s professional liaisons with dancers, composers, conductors and painters, a kind of diagram of his choreographic mentality, research based heavily on his extensive personal archives, library, explications, video recordings² as well as on the recollections of his

colleagues³.

The article we are hereby presenting is not a summary of the monograph: Asaturyan’s biography occupies just a small part of it. What we are actually aiming to present is the parameters that constitute Asaturyan’s exceptionality as a choreographer, and these parameters are best seen through the analysis of one of his best ballets - *Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram* by outstanding Armenian composer Grigor Yeghiazaryan (1908-1988).

¹ Саргсян Н., Ашот Асатурян – хореограф последней трети XX века, Ереван, 2011. A short version of it has been published in Հայկազեան հայագիտական հանդես in Armenian (Սարգսեան Ն., Աշոտ Ասատուրեան (1937-1999 թթ.). Ստեղծագործական դիմանկար, Հայկազեան հայագիտական հանդես, Պէյրուֆ, 2010, Հատոր Լ, 2010, էջ. 625-640).

² I’m grateful to Elvira Mnacakanyan, an outstanding Armenian ballerina, the Muse, wife and friend of Ashot Asaturyan, and Ara Asaturyan, the son of Ashot Asaturyan and Elvira Mnacakanyan, for having carefully preserved and kindly provided the choreographer’s archives.

³ I’m also grateful to all those who readily shared their memories of Ashot Asaturyan. Below we give excerpts from the recollections of some of his colleagues.

Ashot Asaturyan received the best choreographic education of his time. At the Tbilisi Ballet School he was coached by the great dancer and choreographer Vakhtang Chabukiani (1910-1992). In 1962, after several years of dancing for ballet companies in Tbilisi and Tashkent, Asaturyan entered the newly established Choreography Department of the Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) Conservatory. His tutor was Fyodor Lopukhov (1886-1973), a great Soviet ballet master, whose groundbreaking ideas inspired the best Soviet choreographers – Yuri Grigorovich, Vladimir Varkovitsky (1915-1974), Konstantin Boyarsky (1915-1994) and not only them... The very idea of George Balanchine's dance symphony comes from the "Dance Symphony" produced by Lopukhov to Beethoven's Symphony No.4 in the early 1920s and performed, among others, by young dancer Georgy Balanchivadze (later George Balanchine)⁴.

What does it mean to be a student of Fyodor Lopukhov and one of the first graduates of the Choreography Department of the Leningrad (St. Petersburg) Conservatory? When producing a ballet, unlike many of his colleagues, Asaturyan consulted the score instead of just listening to the music⁵.

He aptly played from sight and read the score. Well aware of music theory, harmony, musical analysis and polyphony, he was able to see all the nuances of music and to make them "visible" to others by means of choreography.

Asaturyan was also good at painting, appearing as a costume designer for his early ballets – "The Legend of Love" (1968), "Leyli and Majnun" (1973), "Gayane" (1972). Years of study in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), the hub of Soviet culture, were a great opportunity for the young choreographer to see the best ballets and the best dancers of those times, to listen to the best musicians performing both classical and avant-garde music and to know what was going on in the art of ballet worldwide. Worthy of praise is Asaturyan's love for high-quality literature as well as his special interest in philosophy, religion and psychology⁶.

⁴ In her book about Georgy Aleksidze Era Barutcheva writes: «Lopukhov has invited the best tutors, connoisseurs of the classical heritage. At first, he taught the "Art of Choreographer" himself but, later, he divided his twelve students among three tutors... keeping in his workshop his four favorites – Nikolay Markaryants, Ashot Asaturyan, Yefim Khmel'nitsky and Georgy Aleksidze. All of them are bright individualities. And their professor expects miracles from them" (see Э.Барутчева. Георгий Алексидзе. Хореограф божьей милостью. Санкт-Петербург, 2005, с. 19-20.20). Nikolay Markaryants and Georgy Aleksidze both became outstanding ballet masters, while Yefim Khmel'nitsky quitted choreography.

⁵ In this regard, I should like to quote conductor Yuri Davtyan: "I was really impressed with Asaturyan's professional training. He knew the music from A to Z, each measure of it. He was present at all of my orchestra rehearsals and kept asking: 'Yuri Haykovich, in that part the instruments sounded like that, but were they supposed to?' I asked him finally: 'Ashot, are you my censor?' He laughed and said: 'No, but I know this score very well.' And he was right. He perfectly played it from sight. He came to my place and we analyzed the orchestration, the sound. And that helped him to get a feel of the music and to rightly convey all of its aspects."

⁶ It is seen from an archived record of the books he read in the libraries of St. Petersburg.



Armenian National Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet (designed by the Armenian architect Alexander Tamanian) after Alexander Spendaryan

After graduating the Conservatory, Asaturyan worked for the Saratov Opera and Ballet Theater (principal choreographer, 1968-1973), the Yerevan Opera and Ballet Theater (choreographer, 1973-1990) and the Kharkiv Opera and Ballet Theater (principal choreographer, 1991-1997). In late 1997 the illness that had given him pain since early 1990-s began rapidly progressing and he was forced to retire; soon he returned to Yerevan. Asaturyan died on May 23, 1999, at the age of 62.

A prolific choreographer, Ashot Asaturyan produced as many as 23 ballets in St. Petersburg, Saratov, Sverdlovsk (present-day Yekaterinburg), Yerevan, Tbilisi, Chelyabinsk, Kharkiv, Baku. He also co-directed opera and drama productions⁷, adapted classical heritage gems in Saratov and Kharkiv, created lots of dance miniatures. In his archives one can find almost a dozen of ballet scripts – projects that he never realized⁸.

Asaturyan went into ballet in the late 1940s, which means that for over a decade he grew up in the atmosphere of domineering “dance drama” or “choreographic drama.” According to the eminent Russian ballet critic Vera Krasovskaya: “The 1950s marked a new age for the Soviet ballet. The aesthetics of dance symphony began taking a

⁷ Asaturyan cooperated with the artistic director of the Yerevan Opera and Ballet Theater Tigran Levonyan on his productions of “The Crowds Gone Crazy” (interpretation of Avet Terteryan’s “Fire Ring”), Tigran Chukhajian’s “Leblebiji Horhor Agha” (“Chickpea Seller”) and “Arshak II.” In Yerevan, Saratov, Kharkiv he created dances for Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s “The Golden Cockerel,” Charles Gounod’s “Faustus,” Giuseppe Verdi’s “La Traviata,” Camille Saint-Saëns’s “Samson and Dalilah.” We would like to specially note Asaturyan’s dramatic choreography for “Ruzan” by Muratsan and “Ancient Gods” by Levon Shant staged by Vahe Shahverdyan at the Yerevan Gabriel Sundukyan Drama Theater in 1996 and 1999.

⁸ Including “The Idiot” (based on Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel), “Phèdre” (Racine’s tragedy), “Metamorphoses” (Maxim Gorky’s “A Girl and Death” poem; the script was written for composer Roman Davtyan), “Flight” (Mikhail Bulgakov’s play, started with composer Konstantin Orbelyan, etc.

practical shape, inspired by the crisis of dance drama. The latter had a big effect on ballet. But that effect was as good as it was bad. Good were the lessons learned from the classic literature; it was there that dance drama took its plots from. Ideal dance drama had to be real and natural, with a definite conflict, logical actions and deeply motivated characters. This implied a special choice of expressive means, the best one being pantomime, an art where description prevails over expression. As dance drama was reaching its zenith, pantomime was getting more flexible. It had learned to explain what was going on onstage, it freely shifted from close-ups to long shots and it had taught its actors to be eloquent in their poses and gestures. Bad was the neglect of drama in music and of dance as a means that can express that drama. Reality onstage admitted no imagery. In dance drama dance was no longer abstract, ambiguous or metaphorical. Its structural forms were ignored, its functions – restricted”.⁹

Asaturyan appeared in St. Petersburg exactly at the time when dance drama began facing burgeoning opposition and he was one of the first to join the oppositionists, who advocated larger multi-act forms and imbued them with philosophical concepts, abstract situations and psychologically ambiguous and allegorical characters. They saw ballet as dance symphony and scored their choreography just like composers scored their orchestral works.

The rise of the “iron curtain” in the early 1960s caused a drastic shift in the language of the Soviet dance. Inspired with the wide diversity of forms presented by their western counterparts, many Soviet choreographers began actively applying them in their works. Asaturyan also did despite displeasure and defiance.

The list of ballets produced by Ashot Asaturyan:

1. «In Memoriam of the Victims of Fascism» or «The Unconquered» by Dmitry Shostakovich, String Quartet No.8. Libretto by Ashot Asaturyan, Ballet in one act (1967, Leningrad; 1972, Saratov).
2. «The Legend of Love» by Arif Melikov. Libretto by Nazym Khikmet. Ballet in three acts (1963, Saratov; 1971, Sverdlovsk).
3. «The Nutcracker» by Pyotr Tchaikovsky. Libretto by Marius Petipa. Ballet in two acts (1963, Saratov; 1992, Kharkiv).
4. «Walpurgis Night» by Charles Gounod. Ballet-divertimento in one act (1969, Saratov).
5. «Theme and Variations» by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Piano Sonata No. 11. Ballet-divertimento in one act (1970, Saratov).
6. «Bolero» by Maurice Ravel. Libretto by Ashot Asaturyan. Choreographic poem in one act (1970, Saratov).

⁹ В.Красовская, В середине века (1950-60-е годы), see in: Советский балетный театр. «Искусство», Москва, 1976, с. 218-219).

7. «Antonius and Cleopatra» by Eduard Lazarev. Libretto by Pavel Pudalov. Ballet in three acts (1971, Saratov).
8. «Divertimento», Bach/Marcello Oboe Concerto in D Minor. Ballet-divertimento in one act (1972, Saratov).
9. «Gayane» by Aram Khachaturyan. Libretto by Ashot Asaturyan. Ballet in three acts (1972, Saratov; 1982, Sverdlovsk; 1984, Chelyabinsk).
10. «Leyli and Majnun» by Sergei Balasanyan. Libretto by Sergei Tsenin, adapted by Ashot Asaturyan. Ballet in three acts (1973, Yerevan).
11. «The Immortality» by Konstantin Orbelyan. Libretto by Ashot Asaturyan. Choreographic symphony in one act (1975, Yerevan; 1979, Tbilisi).
12. «The Symphony of Light» by Edward Mirzoyan, Symphony for String Orchestra and Timpani. Libretto by Ashot Asaturyan, based on poems by Paruyr Sevak. Ballet-symphony in one act (1977, Yerevan).
13. «Daphnis and Chloe» by Maurice Ravel. Libretto by Ashot Asaturyan, based on «Daphnis and Chloe» by Longus. Choreographic symphony in two acts (1980, Yerevan).
14. «Umay» by Nariman Mamedov. Libretto by A. Asaturyan and K. Batashov. Ballet in three acts (1981, Baku).
15. «Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram» by Grigor Yeghiazaryan. Libretto by Ashot Asaturyan and Vilen Galstyan. Ballet in three acts (1982, Yerevan).
16. «Theme and Variations» by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Suite No. 3 for Orchestra. Ballet-divertimento in one act (1983, Yerevan; 1984, Chelyabinsk; 1991, Kharkiv).
17. «The Heroic Ballade» by Arno Babajanyan. Libretto by Ashot Asaturyan. Ballet in one act (1985, Yerevan).
18. «Orpheus» by Igor Stravinsky. Libretto by Igor Stravinsky adapted by Ashot Asaturyan. Ballet in once act (1989, Yerevan; 1991, Kharkiv).
19. «The Temple of Love» («Kajuraho»), arranged Indian music. Libretto by Ashot Asaturyan. Choreographic divertimento (1990, Yerevan).
20. «The Firebird» by Igor Stravinsky. Libretto by Mikhail Fokin, adapted by Ashot Asaturyan. Ballet in one act (1991, Kharkiv).
21. «Profundos» by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Symphony No.6, 1st Movement. Libretto by Ashot Asaturyan. Choreographic composition in one act (1991, Kharkiv).
22. «Eupraxia» by Alexander Kanerstein. Libretto by Alexander Stilmashenko and Ashot Asaturyan. Ballet in three acts (1994, Kharkiv).
23. «Symphonic Dances» by Sergei Rachmaninoff. Libretto by Ashot Asaturyan. Ballet in one act (1997, Kharkiv).

Thus, only 6 of Asaturyan's 23 ballets (3, 4, 5, 8, 16 and 21) were set to music by the composers of the 17th-19th centuries, while the music of 17 ballets was composed in the 20th century. As many as 14, i.e. more than half of all, were set to music originally designed for dancing, with the rest set to non-ballet music (symphonies, sonatas,

ballades for piano and orchestra, string quarter, concerto). 12 ballets are based on librettos written by Ashot Asaturyan. 3 librettos (“Umay,” “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram” and “Eupraxia”) were co-produced, 5 librettos - adapted. And only in three cases the authors are different (“The Legend of Love,” “Nutcracker” and “Walpurgis Night” from Gounod’s “Faust,” a divertimento requiring no libretto at all). 9 ballets have several acts, the rest are one-act ballets.

Asaturyan’s firm belief was that music was the only clue to character, plot, composition and choreography. From the very first years of his study at the St. Petersburg Conservatory Asaturyan gave preference to composers of the 20th century - Sergei Rachmaninoff, Aram Khachaturyan, Igor Stravinsky, Dmitry Shostakovich. As was mentioned above, only 6 of his 23 ballets were set to music by composers of the 17th-19th centuries. Their list is rather impressive: Benedetto Marcello, arranged by Johann Sebastian Bach, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Charles Gounod, Pyotr Tchaikovsky. Generalizing from this, we can say that Asaturyan never used ballet scores created in the 19th century (except for classical ballets adapted or restored on the stages of Saratov and Kharkiv: “Don Quixote” by Ludwig Minkus, “Sleeping Beauty” and “Swan Lake” by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, “Giselle” by Adolph Adam). The only music from the 19th century that enthused Asaturyan to create something was that of Pyotr Tchaikovsky, namely, Symphony No. 6 (1st Movement), Suite No. 3 for Orchestra (Finale) and “The Nutcracker.”



«Theme and Variations»

Asaturyan demonstrated a special predilection for symphonic forms, more specifically, for sonata form as well as variations. The word “symphony” can be found in almost all of his abstracts and explications. In the explication of “Eupraxia,” a three-act ballet by Ukrainian composer Alexander Kanerstein (1933-2007), he says: “This ballet has the form of a symphony”.

In the abstract of his two-act “Nutcracker” he quotes outstanding music scholar Boris Asafyev (1884-1949): “This is a symphony about childhood.” The analysis of Asaturyan’s multi-act ballets suggests that what he actually meant was symphonic form structure – something we can see throughout his works, irrespective of their formal structure. Below is an example of it, displayed through the analysis of Grigor Yeghiazaryan’s “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram.”



Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram: Shamiram – Elvira Mnacakanyan, Ara – Rudolf Kharatian

Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram

The myths and history of Ancient Armenia contain a plethora of episodes that might serve as plots for ballet. However, we have heard of just four such ballets so far: “The Eternal Idol” by Edgar Hovhannisyanyan (1930-1998), produced by choreographer Mark Mnatsakanyan (1932-2011) in 1967 (concerning the

cult of Goddess Anahit), Grigor Yeghiazaryan’s “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram,” created by Ashot Asaturyan in 1982, “Artavazd and Cleopatra,” choreographed by Rudolf Kharatyan to Symphony No.3 by Avet Terteryan (1929-1994) for his “Ballet of Armenian Television” company in 1984 and, finally, “Birth of Vahagn” choreographic cantata by composer Yervand Yerkanyan, staged by Rudolf Kharatyan and demonstrated just once at the celebration of the 5th anniversary of the Erebuni-Erevan Monument in Erevan on Oct 11, 1987.

Asaturyan was not the first to use the plot of the myth about Ara the Fair (or the Handsome) and Shamiram. Presented by Ilya Arbatov (1894-1967) in 1924, “Shamiram and Ara the Beautiful” was, as a matter of fact, the first national ballet in Armenia¹⁰.

This plot was also used by Zare Muradyan (1913-1979) and Azat Gharibyan (1923-1988) in a choreographic interlude to Tigran Chukhajian’s “Arshak II” in its second edition at the Yerevan Opera and Ballet Theater in 1956.

Now let’s see the history of Asaturyan’s version. “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram” play by writer Nairi Zaryan (1900-1969) was first staged at the Leninakan (present-day Gyumri) Drama Theater in 1946. Later, or, perhaps, at that very time, Yeghazaryan decided to compose a ballet based on the same plot. The libretto was written by outstanding Russian choreographer Leonid Lavrovsky (1905-1967) and actor, stage director and theater worker Vavik Vardanyan (1900-1967) and is still existent. But had that ballet appeared in the 1950s or even in the early 1960s, it would have been one more dance drama. The cover page of the libretto says: “Ara the Beautiful and

¹⁰ The ballet was first shown in Yerevan on September 19, 1924. A reviewer says: “The highlight (of Ilya Arbatov’s tour program) was “Shamiram and Ara the Beautiful,” a three-scene ballet created by Arbatov after the well-known Armenian legend about Shamiram and Ara the Beautiful, mentioned by Movses Khorenatsi. This is the first time anybody has ever created an Armenian ballet. So, we can say: the new achievement of the Armenian art – an Armenian ballet. If Arbatov-Yagubyan devotes himself to this field, he will, certainly, move up this branch of the Armenian art (it was truly a word of prophecy – N.S.)” (Հովհաննիսյան Ռ., Բալետ, - «Խորհրդային Հայաստան», 24 սեպտեմբերի, 1924, № 217). Unfortunately, the reviewer did not say what music was used for the ballet.

Semiramis,” ballet in three acts and six scenes. Libretto by Leonid Lavrovsky and Vavik Vardanyan, 1957.”

The script contains 29 episodes. For detailed analysis of Yeghiazaryan’s “Ara the Far and Shamiram” ballet see the 3rd volume of Georgy Tigranov’s “Armenian Musical Theater.” It should be noted that Yeghiazaryan worked on it for almost 20 years. In his book Tigranov says that, at first, the composer collaborated with Leonid Lavrovsky, then with Armenian choreographer Maxim Martirosyan. The last version of the libretto was written by outstanding Armenian dancer and choreographer Vilen Galstyan and Ashot Asaturyan.¹¹ Tigranov’s book was published in 1975, while the premiere of the ballet took place in 1982.

Asaturyan’s version caused serious controversy due to original interpretation of the plot and transformations in the score. An ardent opponent of dance drama in any form, Asaturyan encountered a bright example of it in the initial script. Naturally, he decided to redo it.¹² Elvira Mnacakanyan recalls that Asaturyan and Yeghiazaryan did really huge work together. “They were running on the stage and then back to the score.” In fact, they were building quite a different musical composition: they were reshuffling fragments and even adding ones from Yeghiazaryan’s other opuses (for example, the 3rd Movement of “Hrazdan” Symphony)¹³ Our purpose is not to find out how exactly they did it.

But the point is that the new score is quite logical and goes perfectly well with Asaturyan’s concept of the ballet. In order to perceive that concept, you should know that, in fact, the first person who interpreted the story of “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram” in his own way and thereby gave ground for controversy concerning Ara’s character was Movses Khorenatsi, Armenian historian of the 5th century. Below is an excerpt from his “History of Armenia”:

“Concerning Ara and his death in war at the hands of Semiramis: Ara, a few years before the death of Ninus, acquired the government of his ancestral lands, being considered worthy of such a favor by Ninus, like his father Aram. But the dissolute and lascivious Semiramis for many years had heard of his beauty and desired to visit him; but she was not able to do such things openly. However, after the death of Ninus, or his flight to Crete, as I believe, Semiramis freely paraded her passion and sent messengers to the handsome Ara with gifts and offerings, [requesting] with many entreaties and the promise of gifts that he come to her in Nineveh, either to marry her and reign over the whole empire that Ninus had ruled, or to satisfy her desires and then return to his own land in peace with magnificent gifts.

¹¹ *Тигранов Г., Армянский музыкальный театр, т. 3. Ереван, 1975, с. 122-129.*

¹² It should be noted that Asaturyan never cut or reshuffled the scores created by composers who were no longer alive. On the other hand, he actively collaborated with composers that were, so to speak, “within his eyeshot.”

¹³ Here, we would like to note that similar reshuffles, cuts and insertions led Yuri Grigorovich to a brilliant version of Sergei Prokofyev’s “The Stone Flower” and the world renowned production of Aram Khachaturyan’s “Spartacus.” Revision of the score is one of the key tendencies in present-day choreography, an instrument used by opponents of dance drama in an attempt to harmonize ballet with symphony. Thus, Asaturyan acted quite in the spirit of “a choreographer of the last three decades of the 20th century.”

Many times the ambassadors came and went, but Ara did not agree. Semiramis became exceedingly angry, and at the end of these negotiations she took the host of her army and hastened to the land of Armenia against Ara. But, as the result was to show, she was anxious not so much to kill him or put him to flight as to subject and dominate him to fulfill her desires. For in the folly of her great passion, at the reports about him she had become madly enflamed as if she had already seen him. She arrived in haste at the plain of Ara, which is called Ayrarat after his name. And when the battle line was formed she ordered her generals that if possible they should attempt to keep Ara alive. But when the conflict was joined, the army of Ara was routed and Ara died in the battle at the hands of Semiramis' troops. The queen sent despoilers after the victory to the site of the battle to seek out her desired and loved one among the fallen corpses. They found Ara dead amid his warriors, and she ordered them to place him on the roof of her palace.

When the Armenian army had regained its confidence to continue the struggle against Queen Semiramis and to revenge Ara's death, she said: "I have ordered my gods to lick his wounds, and he will be restored to life." At the same time she hoped to revive Ara by the magic of her sorcery, being demented by desire for her darling. But when his corpse became stinking she ordered it to be cast into a great ditch and covered up. One of her paramours she had dressed up in secret, and she gave out this report about him: "The gods licked Ara and brought him back to life, fulfilling our wish and pleasure. Therefore from now on they are all the more to be worshipped and honored by us, as they fulfill our pleasures and accomplish our desires." She also set up a new statue in the name of the gods and greatly honored it with sacrifices, pretending to all that this power of her gods had brought Ara back to life. And she spread these reports about him over this land of Armenia and convinced everyone, so bringing the war to an end"¹⁴.

We would like to point out that some scholars identify Shamiram with the legendary queen of Babylon, Semiramis, while others believe that Shamiram is not Semiramis and was, in fact, a mythical queen of Assyria. I support the latter's point of view. That's why in this article I use the name "Shamiram" with reference to the Assyrian rather than Babylonian queen.

The myth about Ara the Fair and Shamiram has been studied in detail by researchers specializing in comparative analysis of myths, gods and ancient heroes. They identify Shamiram with Astarte, Ishtar, Aphrodite, Derketo, i.e., with voluptuous goddesses, first, causing the deaths of their beloved, then, mourning them and, finally, following in their tracks to the other world or bringing them to life. Ara is identified with Adonis, Tamuzz, Osiris, i.e. with dying and reviving gods, gods of earth and fertility. In fact, the story of Ara the Fair and Shamiram is a myth about dying and reviving god.

¹⁴ Movses Khorenats'i. History of the Armenians. Translation and Commentary of the Literary Sources by Robert W. Thomson. Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachusetts, London England, 1978, 1, 15

Consequently, Grigor Ghapantsyan, Manuk Abeghyan and other researchers have reason to believe that in his “History of Armenia” Movses Khorenatsi modified the myth.

First of all, Movses Khorenatsi describes Ara and Shamiram as real historical (rather than mythic) king of Armenia and queen of Assyria. According to M. Abeghyan and G. Ghapantsyan, the initial version was based on the pagan folk belief that Ara revives when spring comes or, vice versa, spring comes when Ara revives¹⁵.

Did Ara the Fair reincarnate or did he die? Was Ara a god and Shamiram a sorceress or are they a king and a queen, who once lived on earth? How to interpret this story? Those were the questions Asaturyan had to answer, especially as the initial libretto by Lavrovsky and Vartanyan was based on Zaryan’s play, where Ara was a human being, hesitating between his kingdom and beautiful (and even beloved) Shamiram. In Zaryan’s drama Ara died.

Below you can find excerpts from three versions of the story. The first and the second librettos were found in Asaturyan’s archives while the third one was written by Asaturyan and Galstyan and published in the handbill. The first version says:

(Libretto I)

Scene I

The curtain rises to the sound of a love hymn, revealing altar lamps gleaming on a misty stage, priests standing between the pillars of an ancient temple with the statue of Goddess Anahit hoisting in the center. The priests are involved in a ceremony worshiping the “Birth of Ara.” They march in a ritual procession and narrate the story of Ara the Fair.

This episode characterizes Ara as a god.

The second version.

(Libretto II)

Prologue

Temple of Goddess Anahit. The holy fire highlights the silhouettes of priests standing between the pillars and narrating the Legend of Ara the Beautiful. A women’s chorus heralds the arrival of Arqayamayr (Mother Queen). She stands in front of the statue of Anahit. The priests and the people welcome her with a profound bow.

Arqayamayr grants her people a son - a leader for the Country of Nairi.

Here Ara is already a human being.

Now let’s see an excerpt from the final handbill version.

¹⁵ For detailed information about the myth of Ara the Fair and Shamiram see Պրոֆ. Օ. Գ. Գալստյան, «Մովսես Խորենացու «Արա Սեպուհի» միտոսի մասին», 1944 ; Օ. Գ. Գալստյան, «Մովսես Խորենացու «Արա Սեպուհի» միտոսի մասին», 1930; Օ. Գ. Գալստյան, «Մովսես Խորենացու «Արա Սեպուհի» միտոսի մասին», 1966, չԳ 62-67:

Epilogue

The priests tell the people that Ara has died. The Armenian warriors bow their unbowed heads. Shamiram is also there. She comes to say goodbye to Ara and to ask for apology.

But the ray of the Sun reminds the people that spring will come again and every spring they must hope for a miracle. And that miracle is the birth of Ara, the incarnation of reviving beauty, which defies death.

Thus, the prologue of the ballet contains an episode of Ara's rebirth. This concept is best seen in the version revised by Asaturyan after 1982 and available on video recording.

Below we present that very version.

The order of episodes as recorded on video and compared with the score revealing the similarity of fragments (fragmentation of choreographic themes)

1

Orchestral introduction

Act 1

Scene I (Exposition – Armenia)

№ 1

a) Procession of Warriors

b) Entrée of Ara the Fair

№ 2 Apotheosis of Nuard

a) Entrée of Girls

b) Entrée of Nuard

c) Pas de Deux of Ara and Nuard

№ 3 Dance of Spring

Functions of the episodes and hypostases of the characters

2

Divinity of Ara - God of spring, fertility, etc.

1st hypostasis of Ara – a warrior-king

1st hypostasis of Nuard – a queen

2nd hypostasis of Ara – a loving and loved husband

Skeleton pattern of the ballet

3

A

B

A₁

N₁

A₂N₁

Nuard stands above the girls, who dance to her glory		N
Ara approaches her in the end	The main hypostasis of Nuard (embodying Anahit – the Top Goddess of the Armenian Pagan Pantheon, and Goddess Nane – protector of the household)	
№ 4 Arrival of Envoys from Assyria. They convey the message of Shamiram	The first invasion of the Assyrian world	C
№ 5		
a) Trio of Apa, Nuard and Shamiram (virtual)	1 st hypostasis of Shamiram – a woman loving Ara. The trio exposes the basic conflict, which develops in the subsequent episodes and results in Ara's death	A ₂ N ₁ S ₁
b) Monologue of Ara. His mind is in a tumult		
c) Pas de Deux-Prayer of Ara and Nuard		A ₁ A ₂
		A ₂ N ₁
Scene II (Exposition - Assyria)		
№ 6 Orchestral overture		
№ 7		
a) Shamiram and sorceress women tell fortunes round a fire. Virtual Appearance of Ara	2 nd hypostasis of Shamiram – she is a sorceress	S ₂ D
b) Virtual Love Duet of Ara and Shamiram	3 rd hypostasis of Ara – dreamed of by Shamiram as her loved and loving man. Development of 1 st hypostasis of Shamiram – a woman loving Ara	S ₁ A ₃
Scene III (Exposition of Ninos)		
№ 8 Assyrian palace, King of Assyria Ninos sitting on the throne.		Nin ₁
a) Dances of Girls and Boys		E
b) Dance of Ninos with Four Coryphées		
c) Shamiram in red flying robe breaks into the palace	3 rd hypostasis of Shamiram – queen of Assyria	S ₃

1

№ 9 Pas de Deux of Shamiram and Ninos

- a) Shamiram scorns Ninos
- b) Ninos is despaired (monologue)
- c) Shamiram insists on being crowned (for just one day)

2

Development of 3rd hypostasis of Shamiram as queen of Assyria

3

S₃Nin₁

№ 10 Burning incense

- a) Dance of Girls
- b) Shamiram sits down on the throne eagerly waiting for the coronation

№ 11 Plot

Shamiram instigates a group of men from the court to kill Ninos

№ 12 Coronation of Shamiram

- a) Coronation
- b) General Dance
- c) Pas de Deux of Shamiram and Ninos. Shamiram defies and threatens Ninos.

The plotters attack Ninos and take him away from the stage.

Shamiram stands near the throne and waits.

One of the conspirers brings a tray covered with a red veil. Shamiram unveils the tray exposing the cut-off head of Ninos.

Now Shamiram is the monarch of Assyria.

Act 2

Scene IV (Armenia – Development)

№ 13 Round Dance	Development 2	
a) Round Dance of Men		AF
b) Entrée of Girls		
c) variation of Nuard		
d) Round Dance of Girls		N ₁ F
№ 14 Pas de Deux of Nuard and Ara	Hypostases of Ara – faithful husband, and Nuard - queen	A ₂ N ₁
a) Adagio		
b) Variation of Ara		
c) Code (with female corps de ballet)		
№ 15		
a) The code is interrupted by Assyrian envoys, who bring precious gifts	The second invasion of the Assyrian world	C
b) Solo of Ara. He rejects the gifts and sends the envoys away	Development of the 1 st and the 2 nd hypostases of Ara	A ₁ A ₂
№ 16 The Rage of Ara (monologue)	Ara realizes that his action may lead to Assyrian invasion	
Scene V		
№ 17		
a) Shamiram is alone in her palace, waiting for Ara's response. Monologue. Dreams of Shamiram.	Development of the 3 rd hypostasis of Shamiram – queen of Assyria, then 1 st hypostasis of Shamiram – woman in love, and 3 rd hypostasis of Ara – virtual lover of Shamiram	S ₃
1	2	3

b) Virtual Pas de Deux of Shamiram and Ninus		S ₃ Nin ₂
c) Virtual Pas de Deux of Shamiram and Ara	Worshipped by Ara in the first virtual pas de deux, Shamiram behaves as a worshiper in the second one	S ₁ A ₃
d) Return of the envoys with the rejected gifts		C
e) The Rage of Shamiram Scene VI		S ₁ S ₃ as A ₁ A ₃
№ 18 Eclipse of the Sun		
a) The people forebode disaster		G
b) Ara stops the eclipse	4 th hypostasis of Ara – he can do magic	A ₄
Scene VII (Conflict)		
№ 19 The Battle of the Armenian and Assyrian armies. The Death of Ara	This episode was interpreted by Asaturyan quite originally: the Armenian army is danced by men, while the Assyrian one – by women wearing dresses similar to the costume of Shamiram. These very “Amazons” kill Ara with arrows. Allegorically speaking, Shamiram killed Ara.	BE (allegorically A ₁ vs. S ₃)
Act 3		
Scene VIII		
№ 20 Shamiram in her palace near the dead body of Ara		
a) Sorceress women try to bring Ara to life		S ₂ D
b) Composition – symbol Dead Ara lying in front of Shamiram, living Ara standing behind her	Here we can see the main hypostasis of Ara – dying and reviving God	A ₅ A ₆ S ₁
c) Shamiram comes down to the music of requiem (chorus and orchestra) The curtain falls. The requiem		

continues

Scene IX

№ 21 The requiem continues.

G

Armenia mourns Ara's death.

Nuard and Shamiram weep

N₁S₁

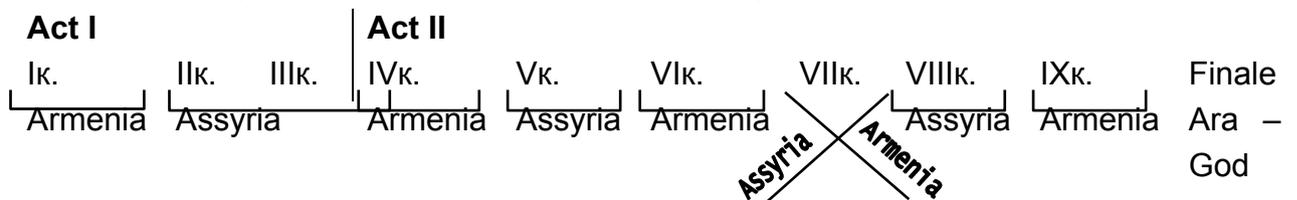
№ 22 Finale

The lamentation turns into a round dance. The stage brightens. Ara appears as God

AF

Comments to Table 3 "Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram"

The form structure of the ballet is based on chiaroscuro (contrast) principle: Armenia – Assyria, except for Scene VII, where they collide.



Scenes I and IV (Armenia) are very much alike. Even though the former is exposition and the latter – development, both are divertimentos containing Ara-Nuard pas de deux, ending in the invasion of the Assyrian world and followed by Ara's monologue.

Scenes III and V are quite dynamic. The divertimento of Scene III serves as a background for the "Ninos Dethronement and Assassination" mise-en-scène

Scene I (Armenia) and Scene III (Assyria) demonstrate polarity: peace and harmony in the Armenian royal family and antagonism on the Assyrian throne, both set in court surrounding.

Scenes IV and V might be qualified as antipodal were it not for the following dramaturgic device: the monologue of Shamiram from Scene V is imbedded with visions of Ninos and Ara.

But the endings of the scenes are identical.

Scene IV. Finale

Assyrian messengers bring gifts from

Shamiram

Ara sends them away

Monologue «The Rage of Ara»

Scene V. Finale

Assyrian messengers bring the gifts back

Shamiram sends them away

Monologue «The Rage of Shamiram»

The two scenes are identical not only in their history but also in their choreography. “The Rage of Shamiram” is almost an absolute copy of “The Rage of Ara.”

The choreographic score of the ballet, and the above-mentioned episodes, in particular, are very complex.

A superficial glance at the table might suggest that the ballet contains pantomime episodes. In reality, this is a *ballet d’action*. It has some divertimentos in the initial scenes but not after Scene V.

The table shows that each of the characters has more than one hypostasis. In the third column they are indexed with the first letters of their names (in the case of Ninós we give the first three letters so as to avoid confusion with Nuard). The number below each letter denominates the character’s hypostasis within a specific episode. A letter without a lower index number implies the character’s divinity. Hence:

Ara the Beautiful

- A – God
 - A₁ – King and warrior
 - A₂ – Faithful husband
 - A₃ – Virtual lover of Shamiram
 - A₄ – Magician, priest
 - A₅ – Dead
 - A₆ – Resurrected
- } Ara - God

Shamiram

- S₁ – Woman loving Ara
- S₂ – Sorceress
- S₃ – Queen

Nuard

- N – Goddess
- N₁ – Queen, wife of Ara

Ninos

- Nin₁ – King
- Nin₂ – Ghost of killed king

Thus, Asaturyan presents Ara in several hypostases in an attempt to develop this rather static character. By presenting Ara and Shamiram as persons capable of doing magic, Asaturyan points to one of the peculiar functions of a king or warrior in ancient society. James George Frazer writes: “At a certain stage of early society the king or priest is often thought to be endowed with supernatural powers or to be an incarnation of a deity, and consistently with this belief the course of nature is supposed to be more or less under his control.”¹⁶ In the “Eclipse” episode, as per Frazer, Ara causes the Sun

¹⁶ See G. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/frazer/gb01701.htm>

to come out, while in Scene VIII Shamiram uses her magic to bring Ara to life. However, according to the same author, Ara's status of a king, a war chief and a magician priest in ancient society implied a whole series of taboos. Therefore, Asaturyan was quite right when picturing Ara as unable – even if willing – to reciprocate Shamiram's love. Such an act would be contrary to his status.

The numbers in the 3rd column of the table help us to discern compositional and choreographic similarities, to see how episodes are replicated so as to ensure compositional integrity.

We have already demonstrated the similarity of Scenes I and IV and the identity of the “rage” episodes. Scenes II and IX both illustrate the magic of Shamiram and her sorceress women, while episodes II and V are both Ara-Shamiram love duets.

Scenes I, IV and VII are also similar. The collision of the Armenian and Assyrian armies in Scene VII combines the dance of warriors preludeing the ballet and the dance of girls in the Assyrian palace.

There are also distinct parallels between the “Eclipse” (Scene VI) and the “Lamentation of Ara” (Scene IX) as well as between the round dances of Scene IV and the Finale.

The arc spanning the ballet from its orchestral introduction to the finale symbolizes the incarnation of Ara the Fair.

The exposition (Act I), development (Act II) and replication (Act III) are distinctly demarcated by means of choreography.

Since the ballet is based on the contrast and collision of two polar worlds – Armenia and Assyria – the natural question is what choreographic systems Asaturyan employs to demonstrate that conflicting polarity.

Having analyzed the choreographic languages of the major Armenian ballet masters - Ilya Arbatov, Azat Gharibyan, Maxim Martirosyan, Vilen Galstyan, Rudolf Kharatyan and Ashot Asaturyan - we have derived four types of regionally affiliated oriental elements:

- Elements of Armenian group song-dance.
- Elements of the system termed as “Caucasian city folk dance”.
- Elements of the dances of the Middle East.
- Elements of the “orientalism,” as seen by the West.

The first type in Asaturyan's choreography you can see in “The Immortality,” “The Symphony of Light,” “The Heroic Ballade” (elements of the Kochari dance), “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram” (an episode in Scene IV (spring round dance), in a part of the Finale) and, of course, in “Gayane.” The latter is one of Asaturyan's ballets where you can find also some Caucasian dance elements.

Elements of Middle East (mostly Iranian) and Arab dance were combined with some original movements to shape a style that he later applied not only in his “oriental” ballets (“Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram,” “The Temple of Love”) but also in ballets having very little to do with the Orient (even though their music was by Armenian

composers, their plots were not about Armenia or the Orient): the ballets about the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) – “The Immortality” and “The Heroic Ballade,” the philosophical “Symphony of Light.” The same style can be seen in “Daphnis and Chloe,” “Orpheus,” “The Firebird,” “Eupraxia,” “Symphonic Dances” and even in some episodes of the Kharkiv version of “The Nutcracker” (1992)¹⁷. That is exactly what they call “a choreographer’s individual style”¹⁸.

These two Oriental systems were most vividly combined and, at the same time, contrasted in “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram.” As Karine Khudabashyan aptly defined: “... Ashot Asaturyan has built his choreographic (plastic) concept on the contrast contained in the score, the contrast between two orients - Armenian and Assyrian. He is very consistent in revealing this contrast. The Armenian Orient is based on a synthesis of classical choreography and Armenian folk dance, while the Assyrian one combines classical pas with Indian and Arab movements, as we have no authentic Assyrian dance materials preserved. Elastic hands, especially, palms and fingers, and soft innocent movements in the Armenian mass and solo episodes contrast with the sharp gestures of the Assyrians, the eroticism of the women, the rigor of the men, the creeping steps of the courtiers.”¹⁹

We have just two remarks to this extract.

“The eroticism of the women” was nothing but the choreographer’s courage to use elements of the “belly dance.”²⁰

The “elastic hands, palms and fingers” of Armenian girls in “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram” (something we can also see in certain episodes of “Gayane”) was the system of hand movements developed by Ilya Arbatov²¹. This system is generally

¹⁷ This style is dominant in “Oriental Dance” (“Nutcracker”) and the dance episodes of “The Golden Cockerel” and “Samson and Dalilah.”

¹⁸ In order to reveal the individual features of a choreographer, one needs a thorough analysis of all levels of his choreography (from separate elements to complex choreographic forms), an insight into the way he correlates dance, music and libretto. This, however, is a matter of a special study.

¹⁹ See К.Худабашян. «Степень верности оригиналу». Ж. «Советская музыка», 1987 г., № 3, с. 43.

²⁰ Belly Dance is very widespread nowadays, with lots of schools and companies popularizing it around the world.

²¹ Ilya Arbatov-Yagubyan is the founder of the Armenian national ballet, the author of the first Armenian ballets, “Happiness” by Aram Khachaturyan as well as “Khandut” by Alexander Spendiaryov (1945), “Sevan” by Grigory Yeghiazaryan and “Marmar” by Edgar Hovhannisyan. Arbatov’s ballets are all dance dramas with specific place and time, socially and professionally oriented characters, logically motivated actions and lots of plotlines and mime scenes. In his ballets Arbatov used dance scenes of two types: scenes based on elements of folk dance (i.e. stage folk dances) and scenes combining classical and folk elements. Though coming from different folk genres, the movements and patterns constituting Arbatov’s compositions are similar in their nature and form of expression. The mass scenes were engrafted with elements of male and female solo dance. Much was changed in the dance pattern. By combining the principle of progression, underpinning the Armenian mass dance, with the principle of symmetry, reigning in the classical ballet, Arbatov developed quite new compositional principles. And, finally, the most important thing Arbatov did was to create a system of hands. The language of female hands is truly his best achievement. It was a whole system of poses and flows, descending from Armenian, Caucasian and other dances. Constituting the foundations of the national ballet choreography, Arbatov’s system was handed down carefully from one choreographer to another, and each of them transformed it according to his artistic principles.

applied in the Armenian stage folk dance and the national ballet and each Armenian choreographer has interpreted it in a peculiar way. Asaturyan was not an exception.

Below we list the peculiarities of “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram” that are characteristic of Asaturyan’s style as a stage director and choreographer.



«Daphnis and Chloe» Chloe - Elvira Mnacakanyan, Daphnis – Sergei Baranov

1. Asaturyan reviews all the scores of his multi-act ballets (“The Nutcracker,” “Gayane,” “Daphnis and Chloe,” “The Legend of Love,” “Antonius and Cleopatra,” “Umay,” “Eupraxia”) with a view to create a ballet based on large-scale pas d’actions and continuous symphonic development.

2. Most of Asaturyan’s ballets have a clear reference or allusion to the rite of initiation ending in incarnation (for deities) or reincarnation (for human beings).

For example, the underlying concept of Asaturyan’s version of Tchaikovsky’s “The Nutcracker” is the initiation of the two main characters – Masha (Clara) and the Nutcracker. Masha’s initiation ends in reincarnation: she comes out of her “dream” to find herself in a different age, i.e. she

reincarnates from a girl to a maiden. The Nutcracker’s initiation is more like incarnation as he comes from a fantastic world just to go back there again.

In “Eupraxia” the heroine goes through ordeals to become a holly woman.

Similar transitions can be seen in “Orpheus,” “Symphonic Dances,” “The Legend of Love,” “Leyli and Majnun,” “The Immortality,” “The Heroic Ballade,” “Antonio and Cleopatra,” “The Symphony of Light.” Hence, we can say that most of Asaturyan’s ballets are based on the ancient rite of “mystery.” In “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram” this tendency is especially apparent. In fact, this ballet is a mystery play about a dying and resurrecting god.

3. The analysis of “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram” has shown that the main characters of this ballet have no less than two hypostases (with Ara having as many as seven). This tendency can be observed in some other ballets as well. For example, Daphnis and Chloe are seen by Asaturyan as Biblical Adam and Eve, while Eurydice, the Black Angel and the Muses in “Orpheus” as respective symbols of an artist’s pain for his creation, his duality and hesitation and the living flesh of inspired art.

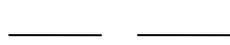
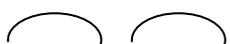
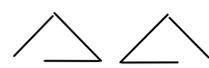
4. Asaturyan’s ballets are full of diverse symbols.

For example, in “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram” we would like to point out the following dynamic composition-level symbol: the dance of Armenian warriors (Scene I of Act I) and the dance of Assyrian girls (Scene III of Act I) are presented polyphonically in

the Battle scene to symbolize the confrontation of Armenia and Assyria. The death of Ara the Fair from arrows shot by Assyrian warrior women, dressed symbolically as Shamiram, clearly says: “Shamiram has killed Ara.”

The static composition in episode from Scene VIII - dead Ara lying in front of Shamiram and living Ara standing behind her – symbolizes Ara’s incarnation as “dying and reviving god.”

In the ending of “Orpheus” Asaturyan demonstrates several graphic symbols, expressed by means of legs, hands and body and denoting death and transition to the upper world.

-  Orpheus – the Black Angel lie on their backs on the floor vis-à-vis.
-  they bend their backs forming two arcs (rainbow signifies a bridge between the upper and lower worlds) and then recover place.
-  «Candle» (upright lifted legs) as parallel words.
-  Almost a triangle with the vertex directed to the upper world.
-  The Black Angel and Orpheus are both lifted face to face. Crucifixes – the Apollonian art of the legendary singer is “crucified” on a cross of ideas.
-  Orpheus and the Black Angel break up forming the “Holy Grail”.
- Death. Eurydice comes out to the center holding a lire. She sits down and inclines the lire towards Orpheus – Immortality of Art (the last symbol is not graphic).

In “Eupraxia” Asaturyan builds his characters and the whole story by means of light symbols accepted in the Slavonic mythology.

Light symbolism is even more profound in Edward Mirzoyan’s “Symphony of Light” and Sergei Rachmaninoff’s “Symphonic Dances.”

Here “light drama” indicates the presence of “mysticism” in Asaturyan’s art: it highlights the hero’s path to perceive the supreme truth, the God, through exultation in the spirit as is reflected in the poem of the great Armenian poet Paruyr Sevak inspired by the “SUN or - LET THERE BE LIGHT”.

*Translated from Russian
by Ara Asaturyan*