

ASHOT SARKISSJAN
VIOLINIST, ARMENIA/UK

1.

DID YOU LEARN THE ANTHEM IN SCHOOL?

The Soviet one. Of course!

2.

AND THE ARMENIAN ONE? I MEAN, THE SOVIET-ARMENIAN ANTHEM?

No!

3.

NO? JUST THE SOVIET ONE? BECAUSE THERE WAS A SOVIET-ARMENIAN ONE.

There was an Armenian-Soviet one. I wonder had I been to an Armenian-language school, if I'd had to learn it. But since I went to a Russian-language school, I didn't. I mean, I kind of vaguely knew the tune, but just kind of vaguely. It was quite a complex tune, actually. It's very long. Not exactly memorable. Prettier than the current one, if you ask me.

4.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE SOVIET ONE?

Yeah, the school-reading books year one through three always had it. The text of the anthem was, like, maybe even the first thing that came up. It was something that you had to learn.

I think we might have had to sing it, like, on the first day of school? But it was an exceptional thing, you would not sing the anthem, the Soviet anthem, on a regular basis, just very sporadically...

But I don't think I ever memorised it, though. It was such a thing that I never even thought about its musical value or qualities or anything. It was just there...the Soviet anthem.

I think the Soviet-Armenian anthem was played on the public radio daily, but, I mean, it would definitely be played too early or too late for me to be awake. And many countries do this anyway. In Germany the public radio plays the anthem at midnight every day. And so do many other countries up to these days.

AND AFTER THE END OF COMMUNISM, DO YOU REMEMBER IF THERE WAS ANY PUBLIC DISCUSSION IN ARMENIA ABOUT CHANGING THE ANTHEM AND WHAT THE NEW ONE SHOULD BE?

No, I just remember it being adopted more or less by acclamation. At that time at least, it was the most obvious thing to do, because it was already being sung at every corner during the independence movement.

It was originally a patriotic song that was adopted as the anthem of the First Republic, during the very brief years of Armenian independence after the fall of the Russian Empire and annexation by the Soviet Union.

It was kind of one of those, sort of, symbols that get adopted more or less automatically. Everyone was familiar with the song. Everyone.

Around me everyone had some sort of opinion on music and, you know, music history. And, it's, like, the song itself is not even Armenian, and it's kind of so... primitive. There is no 100% sort of proof to its origin, but it was a street song that was probably being sung around Istanbul in the late 19th century, probably in Italian. And just the melody got stuck and the text for the anthem was later written on top of it.

Whether it was or wasn't patriotic enough, it's something that would have been discussed within the intelligentsia, of course. But there was appreciation of the fact that, you know, it's a century old... sort of... symbol of independence.

One of the reasons why I'm not very happy with this current anthem, it's because the Armenian-Soviet anthem... you know, it's a tune by Khachaturyan, the very famous composer!... all the while being too long and maybe a bit too unmemorable, but definitely was a much more interesting piece of music. It has kind of more national colour to it, just by sort of like the tones that it uses, the key that it uses, with more cultural references in the music itself.

But we all know that these things, in the end... the actual tune is probably less important than the story behind it and what it represents.

6.

DO YOU THINK THAT A DIFFERENT TUNE COULD HAVE TOUCHED YOU AS A LISTENER?
WHAT TUNE WOULD HAVE MOVED YOU?

The Russian anthem, the one that existed without a text between the end of the Soviet Union and Putin, that one, it kind of elicited respect immediately because the tune was so amazing. That one, you know, had everything that you want from a national anthem, but it was also written at a more interesting time and by a much better composer.

7.

AND WHAT WAS THE COLLECTIVE FEELING WHEN THE SOVIET UNION CAME TO AN END,
AND THE ANTHEM GOT REPLACED?

The tune that was chosen as a future new anthem in the 1990s, this one I just talked about, the one without lyrics, it didn't come from nowhere. First of all, it was already used for a couple of years in the early 80s as the jingle to the news program on Central Television. It didn't stay as a jingle for very long, because that news program, they always kind of experimented with different jingles. But there was definitely a time where this was a tune everyone heard every evening, because that news program everyone watched however useless from the news standpoint it was, but still, there was nothing else to watch. It was on every channel. So, people were familiar with the tune. The story behind the tune was not discussed very much in the 80s when it was a jingle for the news.

But when they brought it back as a future national anthem, then, of course, the story was discussed quite heavily, because it was composed originally as a competition piece for a Russian national anthem under the Romanovs. And it didn't win the competition, but in hindsight it was probably the most prominent and the most interesting entry. So, there were a lot of good reasons to choose that tune. And it's a great tune.

They went back to that time because of history, because Glinka being kind of the first real national composer for Russia of prominence. So, there was both harking back to tradition, but then not trying to pretend that this new Russia is a successor state to the Romanov Russia in some ways.

Then Putin comes and brings the Soviet anthem back. Which had a lot of support at the time. Well, in Russia it had a lot of support.

HOW DID YOU SEE THIS COMEBACK?

I didn't like it.

Even before hearing it from my parents, I felt it myself. It didn't feel right. It really didn't feel right. Because it was a step back to something that one at the time was still very happy to not be part of anymore.

At the time, bringing back the anthem didn't feel quite as dangerous as it proved to be later. Because the Soviet nostalgia, of course, existed in the generation of elderly, unconverted communists who, yes, clearly were not comfortable with whatever new regime they were having to live under. Soviet nostalgia was a thing, but at that time it still felt a relatively marginal thing. That it would become a state ideology, no one could believe it then yet.

I don't think many people were as concerned with the return of the Soviet Anthem as some people in my family were, or some of the more prominent Soviet dissidents were. But there were, of course, voices saying: this is clearly a very bad sign. And those people were really ringing very loud alarm bells; but no one listened.

To us, it didn't feel right, but it didn't feel as dangerous as it should have. Now, in hindsight, of course, that should have been a very, very, very big red something. I mean, all the Putin supporters in the West should have realised it then.