

Charles Aznavour

Vaghinag Aznavourian, Armenian: Շահնուր Վաղինակ Ազնավուրեան, *Shahnur Vaghinak Aznavouryan*; 22 May 1924 – 1 October 2018) was a Franco-Armenian singer, lyricist, actor and diplomat. Aznavour was known for his distinctive vibrato tenor voice: clear and ringing in its upper reaches, with gravelly and profound low notes. In a career as a composer, singer and songwriter, spanning over 70 years, he recorded more than 1,200 songs interpreted in 9 languages. Moreover, he wrote or co-wrote more than 1,000 songs for himself and others. Aznavour is regarded as one of the greatest songwriters in the history of music and an icon of 20th-century pop culture.

One of France's most popular and enduring singers, he was dubbed France's Frank Sinatra, while music critic Stephen Holden described Aznavour as a "French pop deity". He was also arguably the most famous Armenian of his time. In 1998, Aznavour was named Entertainer of the Century by CNN and users of *Time Online* from around the globe. He was recognized as the century's outstanding performer, with nearly 18% of the total vote, edging out Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan. Jean Cocteau once said: "Before Aznavour despair was unpopular".

Aznavour sang for presidents, popes and royalty, as well as at humanitarian events. In response to the 1988 Armenian earthquake, he founded the charitable organization *Aznavour for Armenia* along with his long-time friend impresario Levon Sayan. In 2008, he was granted Armenian citizenship, and was appointed ambassador of Armenia to Switzerland the following year, as well as Armenia's permanent delegate to the United Nations at Geneva.

He started his last world tour in 2014. On 24 August 2017, Aznavour was awarded the 2,618th star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Later that year, he and his sister were awarded the Raoul Wallenberg Award for sheltering Jews during World War II. His concert at the NHK Hall in Osaka, on 19 September 2018, would be his final performance.

Between 1974 and 2016, Charles Aznavour officially received around sixty gold and platinum records around the world, representing several million cumulative sales. He remains the best certified French singer in the United States and, in fact, one of the few French artists to hold a certification from the Recording Industry Association of America. At the time of his death, according to his record company, the total sales of the artist's recordings were over 180 million units (which implies the total distribution of the titles made in all the discs released in the world, both in his works and in those of other artists and multi-performer records).

Early life and family

Aznavour was born at the clinic Tarnier at 89, rue d'Assas in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, 6th arrondissement of Paris, into a family of artists living on rue Monsieur-le-Prince. He was named Shahnour (or Chahnour) Vaghinag (Vaghenagh) Aznavourian (Armenian: Շահնուր Վաղինակ Ազնավուրեան), by his parents, Armenian immigrants Michael (Misha) Aznavourian (in present-day Akhaltsikhe, Georgia) and Knar Baghdasarian, an Armenian genocide survivor from Adapazarı (in present-day Sakarya, Turkey). His father, the son of a cook of Tsar Nicholas II, sang in restaurants in France before establishing a restaurant specialising in food from the Caucasus called *Le Caucase*. Charles's parents

introduced him to performing at an early age, and he dropped out of school at age nine, and took the stage name "Aznavour".

World War II

During the German occupation of France during World War II, Aznavour and his family hid "a number of people who were persecuted by the Nazis, while Charles and his sister Aida were involved in rescue activities." Their work was recognized in a statement issued in 2017 by Reuven Rivlin, President of Israel. That year, Aznavour and Aida received the Raoul Wallenberg Award for their wartime activities. "The Aznavours were closely linked to the Missak Manouchian Resistance Group and in this context they offered shelter to Armenians, Jews and others at their own Paris flat, risking their own lives."

Career

Musical career

Aznavour was already familiar with performing on stage by the time he began his career as a musician. At the age of nine, he had roles in a play called *Un Petit Diable à Paris* and a film entitled *La Guerre des Gosses*. Aznavour then turned to professional dancing and performed in several nightclubs. In 1944, he and actor Pierre Roche began a partnership and in collaborative efforts performed in numerous nightclubs. It was through this partnership that Aznavour began to write songs and sing. Meanwhile, Aznavour wrote his first song entitled *J'ai Bu* in 1944. The partnership's first successes were in Canada in 1948–1950.

During the early stages of his career, Aznavour opened for Edith Piaf at the Moulin Rouge. Piaf then advised him to pursue a career in singing. Piaf helped Aznavour develop a distinctive voice that stimulated the best of his abilities.

Sometimes described as "France's Frank Sinatra", Aznavour sang frequently about love. He wrote or co-wrote musicals, more than one thousand songs, and recorded ninety-one studio albums. Aznavour's voice was shaded towards the tenor range, but possessed the low range and coloration more typical of a baritone, contributing to his unique sound. Aznavour spoke and sang in many languages (French, English, Italian, Spanish, German, Russian, Armenian, Neapolitan and Kabyle), which helped him perform at Carnegie Hall, in the US, and other major venues around the world. He also recorded at least one song from the 18th-century Armenian poet Sayat-Nova (in 1988), an Armenian-French song with Bratsch (in 2007), and a popular song, *Im Yare'* (in 2009) in Armenian. "Que C'est Triste Venise", sung in French, Italian ("*Com'è Triste Venezia*"), Spanish ("*Venecia Sin Tí*"), English ("How Sad Venice Can Be") and German ("*Venedig in Grau*"), was very successful the mid 1960s.

1972 saw the release of his 23rd studio album, *Idiotie je t'aime...*, which contained among others, two of his classics - "*Les plaisirs démodés*" (Old-Fashioned Pleasures) and "*Comme ils disent*" (As They Say), the latter dealing with homosexuality, which at the time, was revolutionary.

In 1974, Aznavour became a major success in the United Kingdom when his song "She" was number 1 on the UK Singles Chart for four weeks during a fourteen-week run. His other well-known song in the UK was the 1973 "The Old Fashioned Way", which was on UK charts for 15 weeks.

Artists who have recorded his songs and collaborated with Aznavour include Édith Piaf, Fred Astaire, Frank Sinatra (Aznavour was one of the rare European singers invited to duet with him), Andrea Bocelli, Bing Crosby, Ray Charles, Bob Dylan (he named Aznavour among the greatest live performers he had ever seen), Dusty Springfield, Liza Minnelli, Mia Martini, Elton John, Dalida, Serge Gainsbourg, Josh Groban, Petula Clark, Tom Jones, Shirley Bassey, José Carreras, Laura Pausini, Roy Clark, Nana Mouskouri and Julio Iglesias. Fellow French pop singer Mireille Mathieu sang and recorded with Aznavour on numerous occasions. The English singer Marc Almond was noted by Aznavour as his favourite interpreter of his songs, having covered Aznavour's "What makes a man a man" in the 1990s. Almond cited Aznavour as a major influence on his style and work. In 1974, Jack Jones recorded an entire album of Aznavour compositions entitled *Write Me A Love Song, Charlie*, re-released on CD in 2006. Two years later, in 1976, Dutch singer Liesbeth List released her album *Charles Aznavour Presents Liesbeth List*, which featured Aznavour's compositions with English lyrics. Aznavour and Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti sang Gounod's aria "Ave Maria" together. He performed with Russian cellist and friend Mstislav Rostropovich to inaugurate the French presidency of the European Union in 1995. Elvis Costello recorded "She" for the film *Notting Hill*. One of Aznavour's greatest friends and collaborators from the music industry was Spanish operatic tenor Plácido Domingo, who often performs his hits, most notably a solo studio recording of "*Les bateaux sont partis*" in 1985 and duet versions of the song in French and Spanish in 2008, as well as multiple live renditions of Aznavour's "Ave Maria". In 1994, Aznavour performed with Domingo again and Norwegian soprano Sissel Kyrkjebø at Domingo's third annual *Christmas in Vienna* concert. The three singers performed a variety of carols, medleys and duets, and the concert was televised throughout the world, as well as released on a CD internationally.

At the start of autumn 2006, Aznavour initiated his farewell tour, performing in the US and Canada, and earning very positive reviews. Aznavour started 2007 with concerts all over Japan and Asia. The second half of 2007 saw Aznavour return to Paris for over 20 shows at the Palais des Congrès in Paris, followed by more touring in Belgium, the Netherlands, and the rest of France. Aznavour had repeatedly stated that this farewell tour, health permitting, would likely last beyond 2010; after that, however, Charles Aznavour continued performing worldwide throughout the year. At 84, 60 years on stage made him "a little hard of hearing". In his final years he would still sing in multiple languages and without persistent use of teleprompters, but typically he would stick to just two or three (French and English being the primary two, with Spanish or Italian being the third) during most concerts. On 30 September 2006, Aznavour performed a major concert in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, to start off the cultural season "*Arménie mon amie*". Then Armenian president Robert Kocharyan and his French counterpart Jacques Chirac, at the time on an official visit to Armenia, were in front-row attendance.

In 2006, Aznavour recorded his album *Colore ma vie* in Cuba, with Chucho Valdés. A regular guest vocalist on *Star Academy*, Aznavour sang alongside contestant Cyril Cinélu that same year. In 2007, he sang part of "Une vie d'amour" in Russian during a Moscow concert. Later, in July 2007, Aznavour was invited to perform at the Vieilles Charrues Festival.

Forever Cool (2007), an album from Capitol/EMI, features Aznavour singing a new duet of "Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime" with the voice of Dean Martin.

Aznavour finished a tour of Portugal in February 2008. Throughout the spring of 2008, Aznavour toured South America, holding a multitude of concerts in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay.

An admirer of Quebec, where he played in Montreal cabarets before becoming famous, he helped the career of Québécoise singer-lyricist Lynda Lemay in France, and had a house in Montreal. On 5 July 2008, he was invested as an honorary officer of the Order of Canada. He performed the following day on the Plains of Abraham as a feature of the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the founding of Quebec City.

In 2008, an album of duets, *Duos*, was released. It is a collaborative effort featuring Aznavour and his greatest friends and partners from his long career in the music industry, including Céline Dion, Sting, Laura Pausini, Josh Groban, Paul Anka, Plácido Domingo and many others. It was released on various dates in December 2008 across the world. His next album, *Charles Aznavour and The Clayton Hamilton Jazz Orchestra* (previously known as *Jazznavour 2*), is a continuation in the same vein as his hit album *Jazznavour* released in 1998, involving new arrangements on his classic songs with a jazz orchestra and other guest jazz artists. It was released on 27 November 2009.

Aznavour and Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour, with the collaboration of over 40 French singers and musicians, recorded a music video with the music group Band Aid in the aftermath of the catastrophic 2010 Haiti earthquake, titled *1 geste pour Haïti chérie*.

In 2009, Aznavour also toured across America. The tour, named *Aznavour en liberté*, started in late April 2009 with a wave of concerts across the United States and Canada, took him across Latin America in the autumn, as well as the USA once again. In August 2011 Aznavour released a new album, *Aznavour Toujours*, featuring 11 new songs, and *Elle*, a French re-working of his greatest international hit, "She". Following the release of *Aznavour Toujours*, then 87-year-old Aznavour began a tour across France and Europe, named *Charles Aznavour en Toute Intimité*, which started with 21 concerts in the Olympia theatre in Paris. On 12 December 2011, he gave a concert in Moscow State Kremlin Palace that attracted a capacity crowd. The concert was followed by a standing ovation which continued for about fifteen minutes.

In 2012, Aznavour embarked on a new North American leg of his *En toute intimité* tour, visiting Quebec and the Gibson Amphitheatre in Los Angeles, the third-largest such venue in California, for multiple shows. However, the shows in New York were cancelled following a contract dispute. On 16 August 2012, Aznavour performed in his father's birthplace, Akhaltsikhe, in Georgia in a special concert as part of the opening ceremony of the recently restored Rabati castle.

On 25 October 2013, Aznavour performed in London for the first time in 25 years at the Royal Albert Hall; demand was so high that a second concert at the Royal Albert Hall was scheduled for June 2014. In November 2013, Aznavour appeared with Achinoam Nini (Noa) in a concert, dedicated to peace, at the Nokia Arena in Tel Aviv. The audience, including Israeli president Shimon Peres (Peres and Aznavour had a meeting prior to the performance), sang along. In December 2013, Aznavour gave two concerts in the Netherlands at the Heineken Music Hall in Amsterdam, and again in January 2016 (originally scheduled for November 2015, but postponed due to him suffering a brief bout of stomach flu).

In 2014, 2015 and 2016, Aznavour continued his international tour, including concerts

in Brussels, Berlin, Frankfurt, Barcelona, Madrid, Warsaw, Prague, Moscow, Bucharest, Antwerp, London, Dubai, Montreal, New York, Boston, Miami, Los Angeles, Osaka, Tokyo, Lisbon, Marbella, Monaco, Verona, Amsterdam and Paris.

In 2017 and 2018, his tour continued in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Santiago, Buenos Aires, Moscow, Vienna, Perth, Sydney, Melbourne and Haiti, Tokyo, Osaka, Madrid, Milan, Rome, Saint Petersburg, Paris, London, Amsterdam and Monaco. On 19 September 2018, what was to be his last concert took place in the NHK Hall of Osaka.

Film appearances

See: Filmography Aznavour also had a long and varied parallel career as an actor, appearing in over 80 films and TV movies. In 1960, Aznavour starred in François Truffaut's *Tirez sur le pianiste*, playing a character called Édouard Saroyan, a café pianist. He also put in a critically acclaimed performance in the 1974 movie *And Then There Were None*. Aznavour had an important supporting role in 1979's *The Tin Drum*, winner of the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1980. He co-starred in Claude Chabrol's *Les Fantômes du chapelier* from 1982. In the 1984 version of *Die Fledermaus*, he appears and performs as one of Prince Orlovsky's guests. This version stars Kiri Te Kanawa and was directed by Plácido Domingo in the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden. Aznavour starred in the 2002 movie *Ararat*, reprising his role of Edward (Édouard) Saroyan.

Politics and activism

Civil rights

Aznavour was well known for being a lifelong and active supporter of civil rights, fighting for equality among all races, religions and nationalities as he stated in many of his interviews during his lifetime. He was an early supporter of LGBT rights. His 1972 album, *Idiotie je t'aime...*, contained among others, one of his classics, "Comme ils disent" ("As They Say", the English version of which is titled "What Makes a Man"). The song, the story of a transgender individual, was revolutionary at a time when talking about homosexuality was a taboo. In a later interview, Charles said "It's a kind of sickness I have, talking about things you're not supposed to talk about. I started with homosexuality and I wanted to break every taboo."

Armenian activism

Following the 1988 Armenian earthquake, Aznavour helped the country through his charity, Aznavour for Armenia. Together with his brother-in-law and co-author Georges Garvarentz he wrote the song "Pour toi Arménie", which was performed by a group of famous French artists and topped the charts for eighteen weeks. There are squares named after him with his statues in central Yerevan on Abovyan Street, and in northern part of Gyumri, which saw the most lives lost in the earthquake. In 1995 Aznavour was appointed an Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Armenia to UNESCO. Aznavour was a member of the Armenia Fund International Board of Trustees. The organization has rendered more than \$150 million in humanitarian aid and infrastructure development assistance to Armenia since 1992. He was appointed as "Officier" (Officer) of the Légion d'honneur in 1997.

In 2002, Aznavour appeared in director Atom Egoyan's acclaimed film *Ararat*, about the genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century.

In 2004, Aznavour received the title of National Hero of Armenia, Armenia's highest award. In 2005, He received the Ziad Karim's award. On 26 December 2008, President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan signed a presidential decree for granting citizenship of Armenia to Aznavour whom he called a "prominent singer and public figure" and "a hero of the Armenian people".

In 2011, the Charles Aznavour Museum opened in Yerevan.

In April 2016, Aznavour visited Armenia to participate in the Aurora Prize Award ceremony. On 24 April, along with Serzh Sargsyan, the Catholicos of All Armenians, Garegin II and actor George Clooney, he laid flowers at the Armenian Genocide Memorial.

In October 2016, Aznavour joined other prominent Armenians on calling the government of Armenia to adopt "new development strategies based on inclusiveness and collective action" and to create "an opportunity for the Armenian world to pivot toward a future of prosperity, to transform the post-Soviet Armenian Republic into a vibrant, modern, secure, peaceful and progressive homeland for a global nation."

Along with holding the mostly ceremonial title of French ambassador-at-large to Armenia, Aznavour agreed to hold the position of Ambassador of Armenia to Switzerland on 12 February 2009:

First I hesitated, as it is not an easy task. Then I thought that what is important for Armenia is important for us. I have accepted the proposal with love, happiness and feeling of deep dignit

He wrote a song about the Armenian genocide, entitled "Ils sont tombés" (known in English as "They fell").

Charles Aznavour and his son Nicolas Aznavour created Aznavour Foundation which aims to continue the educational, cultural and social projects started by the artist, as well as to preserve and promote the cultural and humanitarian heritage of Charles Aznavour who fought against any discrimination through his art and his global actions.^[80]

Political involvement

Aznavour was increasingly involved in French, Armenian and international politics as his career progressed. During the 2002 French presidential elections, when far-right nationalist Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front made it into the runoff election, facing incumbent Jacques Chirac, Aznavour signed the "Vive la France" petition, and called on all French to "sing the Marseillaise" in protest. Chirac, a personal friend of Aznavour's, ended up winning in a landslide, carrying over 82% of the vote.

He frequently campaigned for international copyright law reform. In November 2005 he met with then President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso on the issue of the review of term of protection for performers and producers in the EU, advocating an extension of the EU's term of protection from the current 50 years to the United States' law allowing 95 years, saying "[o]n term of protection, artists and record companies are of the same mind. Extension of term of protection would be good for European culture, positive for the European economy and would put an end the current discrimination with the U.S." He also notably butted heads with French politician Christine Boutin over her defense of a "global license" flat-fee authorization for sharing of copyrighted files over the internet, claiming that the license would

eliminate creativity. In May 2009, the French Senate approved one of the strictest internet anti-piracy bills ever with a landslide 189–14 vote. Aznavour was a vocal proponent of the measure and considered it a rousing victory:

If the youth can't make a living through creative work, they will do something else and the artistic world will be dealt a blow ... There will be no more songs, no more books, nothing at all. So we had to fight

Legacy

When Bob Dylan was asked who are some of his favorite musicians are, he stated, "I like Charles Aznavour a lot. I saw him in sixty-something at Carnegie Hall, and he just blew my brains out."

Sting has stated that "To me he [Aznavour] is an icon. Not only as a singer, but as an actor, as a personality, as a master of 'chanson'."

Aznavour was also highly regarded by Frank Sinatra, Celine Dion, Edith Piaf, and Liza Minnelli, with whom he performed and recorded. Minnelli has said of the singer, "He changed my entire life."

In a 1998 poll conducted by CNN and *Time Online*, Aznavour was recognised as Entertainer of the Century, with nearly 18% of the total vote, edging out Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra and Bob Dylan.

In August 2017, at age 93, he was awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Aznavour has sold more than 200 million albums, making him one of the best selling music artists of all time.

Aznavour has been widely regarded as one of the most famous Armenians of his time, and a major pop culture icon of the 20th century.

His musicality and fame abroad had a significant impact on many areas of pop culture. Aznavour's name inspired the alias of the character Char Aznable by Yoshiyuki Tomino in his 1979 mecha anime series *Mobile Suit Gundam*. Char would become a Japanese pop cultural icon and the most famous character over a decades-long franchise.

Music critic Stephen Holden described Aznavour as a "French pop deity".

His song "Parce Que Tu Crois" was sampled by producer Dr. Dre for the song "What's the Difference" (featuring Eminem & Xzibit), from his album *2001*.

He was mentioned in The Psychedelic Furs song "Sister Europe" ("The radio upon the floor / is stupid, it plays Aznavour"), the Kemal Monteno song "Stavi tiho Aznavoura" ("*Play Aznavour quietly*") and the Jonathan Richman song "Give Paris One More Chance".

In 1990, he offered insights into his life to writer-director Michael Feeney Callan in the TV series *My Riviera*, which was filmed at and around Aznavour's home in Port Grimaud, in the South of France.

At the 2022 Winter Olympics American figure skater Nathan Chen performed his team event short program on February 4, 2022 to Aznavour's *La Boheme*.

Personal life

Aznavour was married three times: to Micheline Rugel (in 1946). Evelyn Plessis (in 1956) and his widow, Ulla Thorsell (in 1967). Five children were produced by these marriages: Seda, Patrick, Katia, Mischa, and Nicolas. A sixth child, Charles Jr., supposedly born in 1952, was invented by Yves Salgues, who was Aznavour's first official biographer, but also a heroin addict.

Aznavour often joked about his physique, the most talked-about aspect of which was his height; he stood 160 cm (5 ft 3 in) tall. He made this a source of self-deprecating humour over the years.

In April 2018, shortly before his 94th birthday, Aznavour was taken to hospital in Saint Petersburg after straining his back during a rehearsal prior to a concert in the city. The concert was postponed until the following season, but eventually cancelled since he died six months later. On 5 May 2018, he was a guest on BBC Radio 2's *Graham Norton*.

A week later, on 12 May, he broke his arm in two places in a fall at his home in the village of Mouriès, resulting in the cancellation of all shows until the end of June. This was eventually extended to include the 18 shows scheduled for August, because of a longer healing process. In a program on French television broadcast on 28 September, only three days before his death, he mentioned that he was still feeling the pain.^[97]

Death and funeral

On 1 October 2018, Aznavour was found dead in a bathtub at his home at Mouriès at the age of 94. At the time of his death his tax residence was in Saint-Sulpice, Vaud, Switzerland. The autopsy report concluded that Aznavour died of cardiorespiratory arrest complicated by an acute pulmonary edema. A requiem mass for him was held on October 6 by Catholicos Karekin II at the Armenian Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Paris.

On 5 October, Aznavour was honoured with a state funeral at Les Invalides military complex in Paris, with president Emmanuel Macron lauding him as one of the most important "faces of France". He praised Aznavour's lyrics, which he said appealed to "our secret fragility" and said the singer's words were "for millions of people a balm, a remedy, a comfort ... For so many decades, he has made our life sweeter, our tears less bitter." His coffin was lifted away at the end to the sound of his hit song "Emmenez-Moi" (Take Me Along). Dignitaries attending the funeral also included French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe, former presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande, as well as Armenian President Armen Sarkissian and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and their wives.

He is buried in the family crypt at the Montfort-l'Amaury cemetery.