

David Fanning

What counts is the music

Mieczyslaw Weinberg's life and work

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A friend of Shostakovich and one of the great composers of his era, how did Mieczyslaw Weinberg get so lost? His biographer explains not only how Weinberg disappeared from view, but why we must listen to his work.

If someone were to tell me that there is a Soviet composer of whom I've barely heard, who composed 26 symphonies and 17 string quartets, many of which deserve to be in the standard repertoire, my first reaction would probably be to assume they meant Nikolay Myaskovsky, that modest, noble-minded "musical conscience of Moscow" who composed 27 symphonies and 13 quartets, some of which do speak with a unique and treasurable voice. But if that same informant said no, it's someone entirely different, then I'd probably have to stifle a groan. What! Yet another "neglected genius"? Presumably one of those countless moderate or eccentric talents who deserved a better roll of the dice but who is never going to be more than a footnote in musical history?

And even if I should come to share my enthusiast's point of view, isn't life too short to add such a quantity of must-know music to the in-tray?

And if those are my hypothetical reactions as a supposed specialist in the field, what can I expect when I'm the one trying to do the persuading?

Well, since you are reading this essay, I suppose I can, at least, count on your curiosity. And if I claim that there are symphonies and string quartets, as well as operas, concertos, sonatas and song cycles, by Mieczyslaw



Weinberg that deserve to be heard, known and never forgotten, that is because I believe not only in his talent and his individuality, but in the potential power of his music to change lives for the better.

That's not a belief based merely on sympathy for the struggles he had to endure. Yes, he had a difficult life. Yes, he encountered all sorts of practical obstacles to performances of his work. And yes, those circumstances contributed to why his music is as it is and to why most of us in the West still know comparatively little of it. All that is part of a fascinating back-story. But the story itself is what counts. In this case the music. It is music with profound emotional content and ethical awareness, produced not only in response to suffering, but also by rock-solid technique and thorough assimilation of a rich heritage of folk and art sources. Much of his output engages directly with the world around him, especially in its response to the World War II and its aftermath. But an equal amount of his work faces inwards, to themes of love and longing, mortality and the search for meaning. That's not so easy to write about, but encountering it in the concert hall is equally inspiring.

Tempting though it may be to set Weinberg up as some kind of moral beacon, his message has nothing – or almost nothing – to do with pro-or anti-communism, or with political engagement of any kind. He would have answered to the label of “anti-fascist” but not to any other. His message, if we want to call it such, has to do with what it is to be a human being and artist living close to the turmoils of the mid-twentieth century.

To take the full measure of his achievement, things have to get worse before they get better. Not only do we have to reckon with 26 symphonies, of which four are titled Chamber Symphony, (three others are for chamber forces and six involve voices) and seven operas – eight if you include Weinberg's one operetta, six if you subtract one of the operas that is an operetta in all but name. There are also three full-length ballets, one of them lost, six concertos, roughly 30 song-cycles and six cantatas – roughly, because in Weinberg's case the border between the last two genres is somewhat hazily drawn – some 28 sonatas, plus handfuls of orchestral suites, tone-poems, rhapsodies and so on. Not to mention upwards of 60 film scores, plus music for theatre, radio and even the circus. After Weinberg's first flush of public success in the Soviet Union in the mid-1940s, mainly in the field of chamber music, it was primarily with such applied music that he made his living. That was especially true after 1948, when he was persecuted by the Soviet



authorities, and again in 1953. In that respect the life undoubtedly has some bearing on the work.

I don't by any means wish to suggest that all Weinberg's 154 works are equally inspired. The best can stand proudly beside the best of his great friend and mentor, Dmitri Shostakovich. If asked to shortlist just a dozen of the finest, I would nominate his first opera, *The Passenger*, the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the String Quartets Nos. 4-8, the Clarinet Concerto and his two song cycles Op. 13 and Op. 17 on Jewish texts. I would then be impatient to name another dozen or so that would not be out of place in any festival of twentieth-century masterworks. These would include the Clarinet Sonata, the Concertos for Trumpet, Violin and Cello, the Piano Trio and the Piano Quintet, the first Sinfonietta and the Moldavian Rhapsody. Then there are others in which the flame does not burn so brightly. That is particularly true of his output in the last two decades of his life, when failing health and waning reputation meant that creative work became an end as well as a means. Friends and family have testified that in those years Weinberg increasingly gave little thought to whether what he was working on would even be performed, deriving sufficient fulfilment from the act of composing itself. In his own words:

As for me, I must say that composition causes me ever more problems. But there is one good thing about my character: so long as I am writing, the work interests me. When the piece is finished, it doesn't exist any more. Its fate (whether ostracism by the Philharmonic Societies, lack of performances, silence in the press, scorn from the music critics) is all the same to me.' [1]

Yet even when first encounters suggest music running on auto-pilot, sympathetic performance can tease out hidden depths. [2] Finally, there are a few works that suggest that his heart and mind were not always fully engaged, especially, again, around that difficult period 1948-1953. The life story helps to explain why, so let me tell it from the beginning, pausing along the way to consider what is unique about the music in each phase.

The wander years: Warsaw, Minsk, Tashkent, Moscow



Weinberg was born in Warsaw on 8 December 1919, and his early musical activities were as pianist and ensemble leader at the Jewish Theatre where his father was composer/arranger and violinist. From the age of 12 he took piano lessons at the Warsaw Conservatoire and was shaping for a career as a concert pianist, until the German invasion in 1939 deprived him of the chance to take up an invitation to study with the legendary Josef Hofmann in Philadelphia. [3] He fled the German occupation (in which his parents and sister were murdered at Trawniki) to Belorussia (now Belarus), where a border guard reportedly inscribed his documents with the stereotypically Jewish first name, Moisey. This became the appellation by which all official sources thereafter referred to him, while friends and family used the pet name Metek. In the Belorussian capital of Minsk from 1939 to 1941, Weinberg attended the composition classes of Vasily Zolotaryov, one of Rimsky-Korsakov's numerous pupils, where he acquired a solid technical grounding.

When German forces invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, Weinberg had to flee again; he left Minsk just a few hours after his graduation concert. He then spent two years in Tashkent, capital of the Central Asian Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan, where a number of composers and other artists were in evacuation, including the famous Jewish actor, Solomon Mikhoels, whose daughter, Nataliya, Weinberg met and married. Talent-spotted by fellow-composers, he received an invitation from Shostakovich to go to Moscow in 1943, when wartime conditions permitted the journey. There he settled for the remaining 53 years of his life, rarely travelling outside the city and only twice outside the country: once to Poland for the 1966 Warsaw Autumn Festival, where his role as part of the official Soviet delegation meant that he was viewed by his former compatriots as "one of them", and once more, in happier circumstances, for the premiere of his opera *The Portrait* in Brno in May 1983.

Until his arrival in the Soviet Union, Weinberg was more or less self-taught as a composer, absorbing techniques and styles from his piano repertoire, from the incidental music played by his father's theatre band and from concert life around him in Warsaw. A small number of pieces survive from his teenage years, mainly for piano or violin and piano duo, among them his Op. 1 Lullaby for Piano and a highly-wrought First String Quartet, whose extensive revision, made 50 years later, is the version we hear today.

During his two years in Minsk, under the tutelage of Zolotaryov, Weinberg

composed five opus-numbered works: the first of his six piano sonatas, his first two song cycles, a graduation piece symphonic poem, with hindsight a dry run for the first movement of a symphony, and his Second String Quartet, in whose scherzo movement the first signs of a characteristically wistful tone of voice may be detected. It was in Minsk that he had a life-changing encounter with Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony when he played the important celesta and harp parts on the piano, since the orchestra lacked those instruments. Here he discovered music that was entirely contemporary yet also spoke to a broad public. And with this epiphany, his style turned away from the Neo-impressionism of his early output towards a serious brand of Neo-classicism as a vehicle for embattled humanism.

Weinberg's own First Symphony dates from his Tashkent years and shows him still grappling with, rather than mastering, the demands of full-scale symphonic composition. The work is dedicated to the Red Army, which he considered had saved his life. But undoubtedly the most characteristic achievement of this period is the cycle of *Children's Songs*, Op. 13, where the Jewish texts and their tragic content go hand-in-hand with elements of the klezmer idiom of the Ashkenazi musical tradition in eastern Europe, using them to convey pathos and moral outrage. This was the magic ingredient that at once personalised and, paradoxically, universalised Weinberg's musical language. He would turn to it time and again, either to channel the ethical content of his chosen verses, narratives or subject matter, or simply to enrich and deepen his expressive palette. A second set of *Jewish Songs*, Op. 17, now explicitly so titled, dates from soon after his move to Moscow. Both collections almost certainly inspired Shostakovich to compose his own cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry* just a few years later, by which time the context of anti-Semitism in Russia lent such projects new cultural resonance. [4]

Moscow maturity: Dialogues with a master

Weinberg settled in Moscow at a time when ideological pressures on Soviet composers were relatively light because of the over-riding concerns of wartime. He rapidly made his mark both as pianist and as composer, and between 1943 and 1948 produced a remarkable succession of chamber masterpieces. His ascent is perhaps most dramatically illustrated by the four quartets from this period. Their expanding horizons are expressed in their outward form: No. 3 is in three movements, No. 4 in four, No. 5 in five and No. 6 in six. At the same time, their concentration, originality and



independence from inherited forms progressively increases, so that No. 6 stands as a pinnacle of achievement in this first maturity, closely followed in that respect by the Clarinet Sonata, the Piano Quintet and the Second Symphony (for string orchestra). All these are confident, extravert works, capable of holding a place in concert programmes alongside Shostakovich or any other mid-twentieth-century composer without embarrassment.

Weinberg was also adding to his output of song cycles. These now branch out in several directions at once; more settings of poems from his Polish homeland are balanced by Soviet patriotic texts and foreign classics such as Schiller and Shakespeare. The post-war era also sees the first signs of Weinberg's awareness that all Soviet composers were expected to pay their dues to the doctrine of Socialist Realism. This he sought to do by cultivating the folk idioms of his Jewish, Polish and Moldavian heritage. [5] Compositions such as the Festive Pictures for Orchestra, Op. 36, with its Jewish Rhapsody second movement, may not be among his most carefully wrought or most individual, but from the sociological point of view they are highly revealing. In this instance, Weinberg seems to have been responding directly to the 1946 Composers' Plenum, whose exhortations to tuneful folksiness were a sign of more draconian instructions to come.

Weinberg came into contact with Shostakovich almost immediately on his move to Moscow. In creative terms this was never an official teacher-pupil relationship, nor was it one based on the exchange of high-flown ideas and opinions. Rather, it was a dialogue based on mutual respect and common interests that was developed through each one showing the other his latest work, often played through at the piano, whether solo or in duet. Shostakovich rarely offered advice and when he did, he confined it to a few sporadic reactions and hints. Weinberg could not but be influenced by the colossal personality of his great friend and mentor, and though never officially enrolled as a student, he readily acknowledged: "I count myself as his pupil, his flesh and blood." [6] Echoes of Shostakovich's Cello Sonata, Second Piano Trio and Fifth String Quartet resonate through dozens of Weinberg's works.

But for every such example, another comes to mind where Weinberg has precedence. The two sets of Jewish songs already mentioned are not even the earliest example. Already in 1944 Shostakovich's Second Quartet borrows its main first movement motif from Weinberg's Second Quartet, composed five years earlier. And from the same work Shostakovich took one

of his most enigmatic gestures, known to every fan of his music. This is the much-discussed faux-naïf perfect cadence that ends each movement of his Sixth Quartet (1956), which in context sounds like a longed-for but never regainable lost innocence. Maintaining the cycle of influence, when Weinberg revised his Second Quartet in the 1980s, at the same time rescoring it as his First Chamber Symphony, he adjusted the cadence to bring it closer to the way in which Shostakovich had appropriated it. These examples are but the tip of the iceberg. The two composers' musical gestures, instrumentation, choice of subject matter, number of movements and even overall dramatic conception, all show the reciprocal influence at work.

When Shostakovich died, in August 1975, Weinberg wrote an obituary tribute. He ventured a characterization of Shostakovich, almost every word of which could be applied to himself, his music and his attitudes to it. Given that he said so little about his own work, these comments are, paradoxically, the nearest we have to a personal credo.

Shostakovich's personality was extremely enigmatic. There was no person to whom he would open his soul, not a single one. Secretiveness must be seen as one of the main qualities of his character. The amplitude of his perception of life was extremely wide, many-sided, and it was a guarantee of his one hundred per cent artistic integrity. [...] He said that he was omnivorous, that he loved every kind of good music and that the genre did not matter. Only the quality was important. [...] He knew how to separate the essential from shallow, everyday things. [...] Until the very end he always wrote music honestly: music of any form, thematicism and genre. Compare, for example, his Eleventh and Thirteenth symphonies: they were written by one and the same composer and with complete efficiency. When I heard music by Shostakovich, it made me want to speak about it in sublime words: this was, after all, the work of genius, or on the verge of that. But what could I say?! I had a reverential attitude towards him, and it was always difficult to speak. Whenever he was praised, he would turn the conversation to other subjects. And one thing I noticed in the course of those thirty years was that he did not describe his own works as much as one single time. If he sometimes happened to say something, he would rather tease himself, even though he was quite self-assured. [7]

The relationship with Shostakovich was founded additionally on music making. In Moscow, Weinberg was evidently reluctant to put himself forward as a concert pianist, though he participated in several premieres of his chamber works. Possibly his somewhat fragile health restricted him: he suffered from tuberculosis of the spine, resulting in a stoop that became more pronounced with age and that would have hindered him from powerful projection in a large hall. However, his skills on the piano were otherwise at a professional level. Before long, he was on the shortlist of those Shostakovich trusted to help present new work to the Composers' Union in the normal vetting procedure before publication and performance, or to conductors preparing for a premiere, as was most famously the case leading up to Yevgeny Mravinsky's premiere of Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony in 1953. In that instance a recording was made of Shostakovich and Weinberg's duet performance. Their virtuosity and instinctive large-scale structural pacing make this an inspiring document, which has since been released several times on LP and CD.

Crises and coping strategies

After Weinberg's Sixth Quartet of 1946, there is an 11-year gap before No. 7. In this same period his ongoing production of sonatas for piano and violin-piano duo is balanced by sonatinas. Similarly there is only one symphony – No. 3 written in 1949 – but a host of orchestral suites, overtures, rhapsodies and the like. His songs continued to develop along established lines, but new among their choices of text is a paean to Stalin, from the *Four Romances on Verses of Soviet Poets* (1947). Apart from the Moldavian Rhapsody and the Sinfonietta No.1, which rank among his freshest and most popular works, almost all of these compositions give an impression of circumspection, far removed from the bold panoramic sweep of his first Moscow maturity. And the reasons are not hard to fathom.

Once victory had been won in 1945, the social and cultural climate in the Soviet Union changed. During the war, the Party had other priorities than supervising artistic production, and the artistic intelligentsia willingly adopted the overriding imperative of patriotic solidarity. In the post-war era, intense suspicion of the West percolated down from Stalin and his henchmen to every level of officialdom, blighting the sciences and the arts alike. Although composers felt the lash later than writers or filmmakers, the signs were obvious as early as the Composers' Plenum of October 1946. It is from this point that Weinberg, in common with his peers, increased the emphasis



on folk-like idioms, general tunefulness and clear, undemanding structures. The Festive Pictures, Op. 36 are the clearest example of these things in practice. Consisting of a Greetings Overture, Jewish Rhapsody and Triumphal Ode, they could hardly have been better calculated as an offering for “The 30th Anniversary of the Great Socialist October Revolution”, the dedication on the manuscript.

Two more things are symptomatic about this apparently innocuous opus. The fact that Weinberg could offer his Jewish Rhapsody in the spirit of Socialist Realism is not so surprising; until late-1948 he had no reason to suppose that there was any contradiction in this. In addition the Triumphal Ode is missing from his archive, as indeed are a good half dozen other works from this time with similarly inoffensive titles. The most likely explanation for this is that they were all submitted for publication and performance but for one reason or another deemed unsuitable and not returned to the composer. That is unlikely to have had anything to do with political incorrectness or stylistic transgression. Far more probable is over-cautious low-grade officials, worried that they might be taken to task at some future point if they had allowed something to be played that was subsequently deemed unacceptable. Whatever the case, this was the beginning of Weinberg’s troubles, troubles that would by no means end with the death of Stalin.

When the storm broke early in 1948, Weinberg was not among the main composer targets. Bigger names, such as Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Myaskovsky, Khachaturyan and Popov were singled out, as supposed exponents of “formalism”. They and others then queued up to beg forgiveness for their sins. Still only 28, Weinberg counted as one of the great hopes for the future of Soviet music. As such, he was treated with a mixture of solicitude and condescension. A few of his works were condemned in speeches or publications, partly, it would seem, because of his association with Shostakovich, partly because of over-zealous application of official exhortations to give guidance to “the young”.

When the “little Shostakoviches” are mentioned, as Yury Shaporin has strikingly characterized the composers who blindly copy the most negative traits in Shostakovich’s style, Weinberg springs to mind first of all. The striving for originality at any price, the tendency towards dry linearism, towards harmonic harshness, towards the break-up of melody, strangle the depth of thought and feelings almost everywhere when they appear in his music. [8]



When Weinberg produced his version of a creative response to just criticism, it was with his *Sinfonietta No. 1*, composed in March 1948. If there is a cause célèbre in his output, this would be it. Those who like to think of Soviet composers as either martyrs or time-servers can point to the fact that the piece has a stronger Jewish accent than anything in Weinberg's output since the two collections of Jewish songs, and that the manuscript contained a quotation from his father-in-law, the great Jewish actor Solomon Mikhoels, who had just died in suspicious circumstances, only much later confirmed as a state-sponsored murder. According to this logic, here is a prima facie case of courageous covert dissent, and this is indeed how the composer's first wife Nataliya Vovsi-Mikhoels sees it. [9]

The evidence to the contrary is that the *Sinfonietta's* folk-like tone and tuneful accessibility were just what the Party had ordered, that these qualities arose organically from Weinberg's artistic output throughout the 1940s, and that the Mikhoels quotation – “In the kolkhoz fields a Jewish song also began to sound; not a song from the past, full of sadness and misery, but a new, happy song of creation and labour” – in any case reads like pure socialist realist propaganda, stressing as it does the friendliness of the Soviet Union towards its Jewish population, is there as a personal tribute. In addition, the *Sinfonietta* was singled out for praise by Tikhon Khrennikov himself. Khrennikov was only six years older than Weinberg but had been thrust into the limelight as Secretary of the Composers' Union and was the main interlocutor between the Party and his fellow-composers. Weinberg had plenty of opportunity later in life to claim victim/hero status. But he never did so. Asked in the era of glasnost for his recollections of the events of 1948, he echoed the Khrennikov line: the oppression was not as bad as history has painted it, and composers who claimed victim status were merely being self-serving.

In the end, it is the job of critics and polemicists to make their case, and the job of scholars to assemble evidence and draw conclusions. No one has the right to judge. Pending further revelations, my own opinion is that Weinberg continued to believe in the fundamental justice of the Soviet system, knowing full well that it harboured absurdities and individuals of ill-will; and that he did his best to negotiate a path that would enable him to retain individuality and, increasingly as he moved into middle age, to address the moral issues that burned within him.



Remarkably, his belief in the system – if such it was – survived not only the buffeting of 1948, in which his Sixth Quartet along with his Festive Pictures and the song-cycle, Shakespeare Sonnets, were put on the banned list by the Soviet authorities. Even his arrest five years later could not destroy his faith. It is a myth, propagated principally by Khrennikov, that no Soviet composers were arrested or eliminated. But it is true that of the half dozen or so composers who suffered this way, a tiny number compared to writers, Weinberg is by far the best known. It seems to have come about because of family connections. His wife's uncle, Miron Vovsi, was one of the doctors implicated in the notorious "Doctors' Plot" dreamed up by Stalin in his paranoid final year. Moreover, since the murder of his father-in-law Solomon Mikhoels in 1948, Weinberg had been shadowed by the secret police. The arrest came out of the blue in February 1953, while family and friends were celebrating after a performance of the Moldavian Rhapsody by David Oistrakh. Weinberg faced the patently absurd charge of "bourgeois Jewish nationalism" and the Sinfonietta was one of the sins held against him. In solitary confinement, with little chance of sleep, Weinberg's already delicate health was further damaged. Shostakovich himself wrote a testimonial on his behalf to Beria, head of Stalin's secret police. Whether this would have had any effect had Stalin not died when he did, precipitating the mass release of prisoners, is impossible to say. At any rate Weinberg was freed in April, and a long process of personal and creative recovery began.

Shostakovich's act, one of his boldest, but by no means his only one on behalf of those wrongfully imprisoned, reinforced the bond between the two composers. Less than a year on, they would record their famous piano duet of Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony, and Weinberg would perform similar services for many years to come. His piano technique, at least, had evidently returned almost at once. And he took the unusual step for him of speaking in public, defending the Tenth during its four-day trial-by-musicology in March and April 1954.

Recovery as a composer would take rather longer. There is at least one masterpiece from the year of Weinberg's release. This is the Fifth Sonata for Violin and Piano, dedicated to Shostakovich, possibly in gratitude for his intervention earlier in the year, and entirely worthy of the dedication in artistic terms. But not until 1957 did he venture to resume his production of symphonies (No. 4) and quartets (No. 7). It was worth the wait. The symphony's energetic first movement seems like a manifesto for Weinberg's recovery of symphonic potency, while the slow movement is the first



definitive statement of his lyrical persona in his orchestral output: profound, sympathetic and warm, yet also subdued and circumspect, and above all elusive. While the Fourth Symphony builds on the achievement of the Third, notably in the folk-like elements of the finale, the Seventh and Eighth Quartets strike off on a very different path from the monumental Sixth. Both co-opt elements of the klezmer idiom to give Weinberg's lyricism an even more distinctive colour.

One reason for his relatively fallow period in terms of concert works between 1953 and 1957 is that he was extraordinarily busy writing film scores. He developed a particular gift with music for cartoons, which would reach a pinnacle around 1970 with his three scores for Fyodor Khitruk's Russian versions of *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1969, 1971, 1972). Of the feature-film scores, by far his most famous was for Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes are Flying*, a masterly film that won the Palme d'Or at the 1958 Cannes Film Festival. The story is of a family torn apart by the son's enlisting for war service, and the title refers to the traditional Russian symbol of love and hope, twice glimpsed in the film. The music became so popular that several extracts were made for various kinds of ensembles, and Weinberg's pastiche Rachmaninoff, for the scene where the hero's girlfriend is seduced by his cowardly composer-brother in the middle of an air-raid, was arranged as a Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra by Paul Haletzki.

Music for the circus, theatre and radio had long since proved effective as coping strategies, helping Weinberg to keep body and soul together in the difficult late-Stalinist years. But the most ambitious of his theatrical efforts from the 1950s were undoubtedly for the ballet. *The Golden Key* (1954-1955) is fairy tale retold by the popular Soviet author Aleksey Tolstoy, using puppet characters as an allegory of the goodness and eventual triumph of the weak over the strong. *The White Chrysanthemum* (1958) is even more explicitly a Cold War document, telling of a Japanese girl who, having been blinded during a US air-raid at the end of the War, has her sight restored by expert Soviet doctors during her visit to the Sixth Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow, and is then reunited with the faithful boyfriend of her childhood. If such storylines seem almost laughable in their sentimentality and political correctness today, we should remember that few ballet scenarios can be retold without raising a smile. Moreover, Weinberg was always likely to be receptive to tales that paralleled his own experience of displacement, loss and resettlement in a land that gave him a living and a career. In any case, all these projects for stage and screen were storing up

musical-theatrical experience that would bear fruit when Weinberg turned to opera at the end of the 1960s.

“Starry” years

Before that, Weinberg composed a succession of symphonic masterpieces, starting with probably the finest of all his symphonies, No. 5 (1962). This was just the kind of piece that a conductor of the magnetism of Kirill Kondrashin would relish, and Kondrashin’s recording for the Melodiya label is a superlative account of a demanding score. The characteristically “Weinbergian” images and moods are subject to interrogation, rather than being affirmed and celebrated, and the process of statement, interrogation and reaffirmation becomes the essence of the musical drama, raising the work’s horizons beyond those of his own previous symphonies to the level of the great twentieth-century symphonists. Shostakovich acclaimed Weinberg’s Fifth as “a symphony on a heroic level”. [10] In a way, it emulates the achievements of Shostakovich’s Fourth, which had recently received its belated premiere, and from which Weinberg borrows a number of musical images, and his Tenth. Weinberg never repeated the feat and only rarely attempted to do so.

He then moved on, first to the choral symphonies (Nos. 6, 8, 9 and 11) and then to symphonies for chamber forces (Nos. 7 and 10). Not until No. 12 of 1976 did he return to the abstract-epic symphony for full orchestral forces. That, significantly, was his memorial tribute to Shostakovich, a fine work, but by no stretch of the imagination a masterpiece of the order of the Fifth. Of all the intervening symphonies, No. 6 has been the most played and recorded, and its use of children’s chorus to convey a message of damaged innocence is certainly profoundly touching. This symphony was composed alongside Shostakovich’s Thirteenth. Given its fourth movement orchestration of the song “Red Clay” from Weinberg’s Op. 17 Jewish Songs, it seems likely that it may have played a part in inspiring Shostakovich’s composition. In turn, Shostakovich’s five-movement layout and revivification of the Soviet oratorio-symphony may have inspired Weinberg.

Weinberg’s subsequent choral symphonies develop the moral-ethical content of protest against war, particularly as it affected his Polish homeland. As such they point forward to his first opera, *The Passenger*, of 1967-8. Meanwhile, the symphonies for chamber forces are arenas for more abstract, indeed experimental thoughts and open the way to Weinberg’s



long succession of later sonatas and chamber music. Both endeavours, incidentally, suggest strong kinship with Benjamin Britten, whose operas, *War Requiem* and solo cello works – composed for Rostropovich – are godfathers and cousins to Weinberg's output from the 1960s to the end of his life. Weinberg's own symphonies after the Twelfth reflect a synthesis of the two main lines: the forces are in almost all cases orchestral and the content of several continues to reflect his ethical preoccupations (Nos. 17, 18 and 19 are a trilogy explicitly denouncing war), while the musical language is more elliptical and contorted, along the lines of the symphonies for chamber forces.

Weinberg himself referred to the 1960s as his “starry” years, a reference not so much to his own productivity – he was far too modest to indulge in such self-promotion – as to the support he received from the cream of the USSR's performers, such as Mstislav Rostropovich, David Oistrakh, Leonid Kogan, the Borodin String Quartet, Elizaveta Gilels and Kirill Kondrashin. It was certainly a period of growing self-confidence, and it set him up to tackle the most demanding and, especially in the Soviet Union, most problematic genre of all: opera.

Operas and operetta

Weinberg was in his late-forties, with over 90 opus-numbered works to his name, before he embarked on his first opera. It was not so easy to write operas with any pretensions to dramatic depth in a culture blighted by Socialist Realism, and harder still to get them staged. The Holy Grail for an independently-minded composer such as Weinberg was a text that would touch the deepest personal chords but at the same time be unimpeachable in terms of official ideology. He found precisely that fusion in Zofia Posmysz's short novel, *The Passenger*. [11] Her tale of the traumas of Auschwitz and the memories of the survivors was brought to the composer's attention in the mid-1960s by Shostakovich and their mutual friend Alexander Medvedev, who fashioned the libretto. What made it the stuff of opera is its two-tiered drama: of the Auschwitz inmates Marta and her fiancé Tadeusz, and of the former overseer Anneliese and her husband Walter. The composer and all those close to him knew full well that the resulting work was a masterpiece and his most important achievement.

A dozen or so years after the war, on a liner travelling to Brazil where Walter

is to take up a diplomatic position, Anneliese thinks she recognises Marta – The Passenger – and so feels compelled to confront her former self. Will she address Marta face-to-face, and how will Walther deal with discovering the truth of his wife’s past? In a series of flashbacks to Auschwitz, we see Marta and Tadeusz enjoying fleeting moments of contact, facilitated by Anneliese, who seeks to use Marta to control the other women. Tadeusz is forced to play the violin in a show-concert. However, instead of the prescribed salon waltz, he delivers the Bach Chaconne – played by both orchestral violin sections in unison how is this possible with one violinist? – in effect throwing German high-culture back in the face of the Nazis. In the spine-tingling climax, his violin is smashed and he is led off to execution.

Clearly conscious that the story tapped into the most profound and personal things he wanted to say as an artist, Weinberg deployed the full range of styles he had mastered, from folk-like melody, through salon-jazz, to free atonality and occasional twelve-note rows. In that respect, comparisons with Berg’s *Wozzeck* are almost unavoidable, and indeed there are other, more detailed references to *Wozzeck* in the score, alongside passages that display affinity with Shostakovich’s *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, which Weinberg certainly knew well, and with several of Britten’s operas – *Peter Grimes*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Billy Budd*. The very opening gesture is a spin-off from Britten’s *War Requiem*, which Shostakovich promoted to everyone in his circle. But *The Passenger* has no need to fear such comparisons, such is the force and concentration of its drama, and such the overwhelming power of its moments of truth.

At the opposite pole from the tragic climaxes are islands of lyrical repose, expressed in Weinberg’s own inimitable voice. Surely the most potent of these is Marta’s aria in Scene 6, where she sings of how she would elect to die if God were to give her the choice. Here Weinberg draws on his *Seven Romances to words* by the nineteenth-century Hungarian revolutionary poet, Sándor Petöfi, composed eight years before the opera. This is just one of dozens of examples of interpenetration between his songs, operas, symphonies and quartets, which are only beginning to come to light as the entirety of his output gradually becomes known.

None of these qualities, and not even Shostakovich’s public enthusiasm and behind-the-scenes advocacy, were enough to secure *The Passenger* a premiere in the composer’s lifetime, despite plans with several theatres. Medvedev and Weinberg’s care to minimize references to the Jewish



holocaust, always a problematic topic for the Soviets, who regarded their national suffering in wartime as more significant than that of any ethnic subgroup, was insufficient to deflect the nebulous charge of “abstract humanism”. Under the aegis of Socialist Realism, works such as this could easily be blocked if they were regarded as too negative, or if the negatives were not balanced by sufficient affirmation of the Soviet system. That was a potential weakness Medvedev and Weinberg addressed in their next collaboration.

The Passenger carries a motto from Paul Eluard, sung by Marta in the Epilogue: “If the echo of their voices disappears, then we will die.” Similarly, Weinberg’s next opera, *The Madonna and the Soldier*, is headed by lines from Alexander Tvardovsky: “War: the Cruellest of Words” sung by the chorus in the introduction. Set in Poland at the battlefield in 1945, Alexander Bogomolov’s story tells of the encounter of Red Army soldiers with Polish villagers. Such scenarios make painful reading for Poles, all too aware of the Red Army’s war crimes, which were by no means solely against the fleeing Nazis. But even had Weinberg heard reports of such atrocities, he would most likely not have believed them. For him, the Red Army had been his salvation in 1939 and that was that. In dramatic terms *The Madonna and the Soldier* is perhaps strongest in its delineation of the undeclared love of the two title characters, and weakest in its generic scenes of folksy virtue and comradeship between the peasants and their liberators.

Weinberg let himself be swayed by Shostakovich and ended the opera on a defiantly upbeat note, with the Soviet soldiers going off to fight. That unhappy suggestion may well have been made – and indeed adopted – with one eye on the necessary approval of the powers-that-be. The absence of any dark roles, apart from the silent role of Death, who dances around the characters at strategic points, weakens the drama and also looks like another nod towards Socialist Realist principles. But at least *The Madonna and the Soldier* was staged, albeit only after a minor scandal in which Bogomolov accused the libretto of plagiarism – he might have had a better case on grounds of narrative distortion – and Shostakovich had to straighten things out by a visit to the Ministry of Culture.

After these two operatic denunciations of war, Weinberg turned to less heavyweight subject matter. With its extensive spoken dialogue, *D’Artagnan in Love* is in fact more operetta than opera. For its required succession of tuneful set pieces Weinberg could draw on his early years as a theatre



musician and on his experience with film and theatre scores. With the best will in the world, it is hard to find any show-stopping numbers in the surviving material of *D'Artagnan in Love*, though it has to be said that the chaotic nature of the sources makes it hard to know precisely what was intended or actually performed at its premiere in December 1974.

D'Artagnan in Love certainly bears less resemblance to Weinberg's two other comic operas than to his only operetta so designated, *The Golden Dress*, also to a libretto by Eleonora Galperina, this time written in collaboration with her husband Yuly Annenkov. Set once again during World War II, the storyline consists essentially of the marriage, separation and eventual reunion of a naval officer and his sweetheart. In a similar way to Weinberg's ballets, the Golden Dress of the title is a symbol of youthful hopes and dreams. The musical setting is concise, modest and tuneful, in a manner appropriate to performances in the provinces or perhaps by students. But once again, the state of the source material is problematic, since only a vocal score without dialogue is currently accessible.

Weinberg's operas can be thought of in pairs. Apart from the two tragic commemorations of War and the two that are, in effect, operettas, there are two short comic operas from the mid-1970s, which may even have been conceived as a double bill. *Mazl tov!* (the traditional toast at Jewish weddings and other celebrations) takes a turn-of-the-century tale by Sholom Aleichem, best known for the story that would be turned into *Fiddler on the Roof*, of a cook and a serving-girl on a country estate, who after much gentle banter and reluctance pair off with a hawker of books and a lackey. All this gives scope for Jewish dance idioms of the kind Weinberg had grown up with in his father's theatre band. Acceptability in Socialist Realist terms is ensured by the caricature of the exploitative mistress of the house – heard but not seen in the opera – and by a preachy conclusion that tells us that the social order is changing in favour of the peasants and workers.

Edgier in its satire, and probably more appealing to twenty-first-century tastes in its humour, is *Lady Magnesia*, based on George Bernard Shaw's *Passion, Poison and Petrification*. This somewhat heavy-handed send-up of late-Victorian melodrama shows Lady Magnesia's lover, the lackey Adolphus, poisoned by her husband by means of a soda siphon. Having thus been reconciled, the married couple administer an antidote (quicklime), which has the unfortunate effect of turning Adolphus into a statue. Weinberg's pacey score mixes near-atonal jazz with some delicious self-parody, made all the more piquant by the scoring for chamber ensemble including two electric



guitars. Apart from the possibility of a double-bill with *Mazl tov!*, *Lady Magnesia*, which went down well at its Liverpool concert premiere last November, would make a near-ideal partner for William Walton's Chekhov one-acter, *The Bear*.

For his last two operas, Weinberg turned to the novels of Gogol and Dostoyevsky for *The Portrait* and *The Idiot*, respectively. Medvedev had begun drafting *The Portrait* for Shostakovich; after the latter's death he offered the completed libretto to Weinberg. The story concerns the painter Chartkov, who achieves fame and fortune under the malign influence of the portrait of a moneylender that mysteriously comes to life, but who ultimately loses his artistic soul and his sanity. Apart from its inherent horrific fascination, the subject matter is obviously relevant to all societies and all times, not excluding the officially approved and therefore richly-rewarded artists of the late-Soviet era. As elsewhere in his operatic output, Weinberg seizes the attention as much by his cannily arranged oases of lyricism as by his depiction of the macabre, which admittedly rather pales beside the likes of Schnittke or Karetnikov. Key moments include the Professor's eulogy to art and beauty, set to a chorale that is one of the few instances of tonal language in the opera not being used for satirical purposes. The chorale returns to haunting effect when Chartkov prays for restoration and relief, then again shortly before his death, where he begins to hear voices from the past.

With *The Idiot*, Weinberg tackled one of the pinnacles of Russian literature, perhaps drawn to tackle it by resonances with his own life-story. Returning from treatment for epilepsy in Switzerland, Prince Mishkin brings his naive, compassionate nature to St Petersburg society, only to be dumbfounded by the way everyone he encounters there takes advantage of him and/or of each other. Not contained in the book, but added by Medvedev and Weinberg, are the Prince's philosophizings, which pick up the obsession with "Truth" from *The Portrait* and declare, in a crucial line, "Sympathy is the only law for mankind." Such passages, along with Mishkin's description of his homesickness in Switzerland and the fact that children were the only people he felt comfortable talking to, are the nearest things to arias in the opera. And Mishkin's experiences as an exile, learning an unfamiliar language, cut off from a family he was never to see again, and increasingly infirm, must surely have touched a chord with the composer. They certainly inspired some of the subtlest, most sympathetic character delineation in all his operas.

It is somehow emblematic that *The Idiot* was premiered on 19 December 1991, at the Chamber Opera Theatre in Moscow under the direction of Boris Pokrovsky, just two days before the official end of the Soviet Union, and was consequently lost in the noise of time. Good fortune has come the way of Weinberg's operas only a decade after his death, and if the current trend of new stagings continues, Russian audiences' loss stands to be Western audiences' gain.

Retreat and withdrawal

From his fifties on, progressively enfeebled by Crohn's disease, Weinberg was seen less and less in public. True, he received recognition of an official kind, more or less with the turn of each decade: in 1971 he was made Honoured Artist of the Russian Republic, in 1980 People's Artist of the Russian Republic and in 1990 he received the State Prize of the USSR. But as Shostakovich himself had also found, professional and public interest was shifting away from humanist realism towards the kind of alienated western-style modernism that had been taboo under Stalin. Weinberg himself was not entirely unaffected by that trend. His Requiem (1965-1967) is a good example of a work that seeks to ally an idiom of tortuous linear polyphony, not unlike that of the young Schnittke, to the same moral-ethical imperatives underlying his symphonies and cantatas, and soon to burst through in his operas. His later string quartets and sonatas, especially the increasing number composed for solo instruments, suggest an interest in the idioms of Bartók and Britten, and to a modest degree in the "sonoristic" innovations of the modern Polish school.

But that was as far as Weinberg went. Not for him the exhibitionist "polystylism" that Soviet composers, led by Schnittke, adopted in droves as a distinctively eastern take on the avant-garde, nor the religio-symbolist-minimalism that proved so productive for the likes of Sofia Gubaidulina, Valentin Silvestrov, Galina Ustvolskaya, Gia Kancheli and Awet Terteryan. Indeed, the most distinctive feature of Weinberg's later years is to be found in his turn to the "chamber symphony". When he joked that he had only taken this direction because he thought that 19 full-sized symphonies was enough, many took him seriously. In fact, he continued to add to that main cycle, eventually reaching No. 22, which remained unorchestrated. And what he neglected to mention was that the first three chamber symphonies are all arrangements or reworkings of his early string quartets (Nos. 2, 3 and 5, respectively). Like Shostakovich and Prokofiev in their last years, Weinberg



returned to youthful topics and even music from his own youth, now re-imagined as objects of wistful longing.

On his seventy-fifth birthday in December 1994, bedridden and in severe discomfort, he received telephone calls from all over the world. But he could hardly have been unaware that the occasion drew no musical celebration. Such tributes came only after his death in February 1996: notably in Moscow for the eightieth anniversary of his birth in 1999, at the Eastman School, Rochester N.Y., in September 2006, as part of the Shostakovich centenary celebrations, and in Manchester and Liverpool in November 2009. So the festival at Bregenz in the summer of 2010, with two operas, the Requiem, sundry other pieces and a conference, comes on the crest of a wave of rediscovery. After that, the question will surely not be whether Weinberg's music was worth it, but how it could have taken so long for it to receive its true desserts.

Footnotes

1. Letter from Weinberg to Krzysztof Meyer (received 25 November 1988), as relayed to Per Skans, 24 April 2000.
2. I think, for example, of the Quatuor Danel in the later quartets, Rebekka Adler in the sonatas for solo viola.
3. In later life his fluency as sight-reader and score-reader was much vaunted, and among his recordings is a fine rendering of his own Piano Quintet with the Borodin Quartet (Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 18, 1944).
4. Nelly Kravets, From "The Jewish Folk Poetry of Shostakovich and Jewish Songs Op. 17 of Weinberg: Music and Power", in Ernst Kuhn u.a. (Hg.), Dmitri Schostakowitsch und das jüdische musikalische Erbe. Berlin 2001, 279-297.
5. His family roots were in Kishinev, the capital of the imperial Russian province of Bessarabia, now Chisinau in Moldova.
6. Anon., "Pis'ma o lyubvi" (Love Letters), Muzikal'naya zhizn', 2000/2, 18.
7. Sofia Khentova, V mire Shostakovicha (In Shostakovich's World), 185-189.
8. Re-mi (= Grigory Bernandt), "Notograficheskiye zametki" (Notes on Music), Sovetskaya muzika, 1948/2, 157-8.
9. "It was dedicated from the beginning to the Friendship of the Peoples of the USSR (Druzhbe narodov SSSR), and he placed a quotation from my father on the subject of the equal rights of the Jews in Russia at the top of the score. The idea of dedicating it to the 'Friendship of the Peoples' was his own, as a protest against the murder of my father. He wanted to emphasize that a man must not be killed simply for being Jewish. When the work was printed, the motto, the quote from my father was removed." Letter to Per Skans, 18 May 2000.
10. Pravda, 21 October 1962.
11. Zofia Posmysz, Pasazerka (The Passenger), Warsaw 1962.