Mieczysław Weinberg

THE

PASSENGER
Mieczysław Weinberg composed his opera *The Passenger* in 1968, based on a novel by Auschwitz survivor Zofia Posmysz.

Early on, Weinberg’s friend Dmitri Shostakovich proclaimed the opera a masterpiece and sought to use all of his influence to bring it to the stage in Russia:

“I shall never tire of my enthusiasm for Weinberg’s opera *The Passenger*. I have heard it three times already, I have studied the score, and each time, I have come to an even deeper understanding of the beauty and greatness of his music. It is a masterpiece, perfect in form and style and, I might add, exceptionally timely in its subject matter. The moral concept at the heart of this opera, its spirituality and humanism, will not fail to impress the listener. The music is profoundly shattering in its drama. It is poignant and vividly formed; it does not contain one single empty, indifferent note.”

The opera deals with guilt and its repression after the Holocaust. Many years after the end of the Second World War, the former warden of a concentration camp in Auschwitz, Anneliese Kretschmar, on a trip with her husband aboard an ocean liner bound for Brazil, recognizes one of her former prisoners: Marta. The chance encounter of these two women gives rise to a powerful drama of utmost intensity.
„When asked in the last years of his life which work he considered to be his most important, Weinberg answered without hesitation: The Passenger."¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Creation</th>
<th>1968</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orchestration</td>
<td>4 S, 3 M, 2 A, 2 T, Bar, 3 B, 3 actors, mx cho; 3-3-3-A sax-3, 6-4-3-bar-1, timp, perc (3), cel, pf, gtr, str; Stage Band: acdn, gtr, pf, perc, db</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>140’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Opera in 2 acts</td>
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<td>Libretto</td>
<td>Alexander Medvedev</td>
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<td>Text Source</td>
<td>Zofia Posmysz, Pasażerka, Warsaw 1962</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concertante Premiere</td>
<td>December 25, 2006, Dom Musiki, Moscow, Russia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fully Staged Premiere</td>
<td>July 19, 2010, Bregenz Festspiele, Bregenz, Germany</td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional Performances</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teatr Wielki Warsaw 2010, 2012, 2016 (Co-production Bregenz)</td>
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<tr>
<td>English National Opera London 2011 (Co-production Bregenz)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baden State Theatre Karlsruhe 2013 (New Production)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Houston Grand Opera 2014 (Co-production Bregenz)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lincoln Center Festival New York 2014 (Guest Appearance of the Houston Grand Opera)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lyric Opera of Chicago 2015 (Co-production Bregenz)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Detroit Opera House 2015 (Co-production Bregenz)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frankfurt Opera 2015 (New Production)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florida Grand Opera in Miami 2016 (Co-production Bregenz)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theater an der Wien 2016 (Guest Appearance of Frankfurt Opera)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ekaterinburg State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre 2016 (New Production)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bolshoi Theatre 2017 (Guest Appearance of Ekaterinburg State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Musiktheater im Revier Gelsenkirchen 2017 (New Production)</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Opera Theatre Moscow 2017 (New Production)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Semperoper Dresden 2017 (Co-production Frankfurt/Main)</td>
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Press

John von Rhein, Chicago Tribune, 2015
“The Passenger is unflinching in what it has to say but is never maudlin – it plays to our humanity rather than our tear ducts. [...] What Lyric [Opera of Chicago] has given us in an experience in the theatre that is not to be missed.”

Die Welt, 2013
“We are only gradually coming to realize how important Weinberg was as a music dramatist. [...] And now the big houses in Germany should finally also step up.”

Frankfurter Rundschau, 2013
“No one but Mieczyslaw Weinberg has risked elevating the unspeakably horrific into such vulnerable musical ‘beauty’ and, in the process, making the impossible nevertheless possible – if anything is an artistic expression of bravery and radicality, then this is it.”

The Times, 2011
“[...] heartbreaking scenes of love and courage. The climax musically and emotionally comes when Marta’s proud violinist fiancé, Tadeusz, sung with compelling anger by Leigh Melrose, is ordered to play the camp commandant’s favourite tacky waltz, but instead strikes up Bach’s magnificent Chaconne... a supremely symbolic confrontation – Germany at its noblest confronting Germany at its foulest. It’s an opera teeming with overt references, from haunting Russian folksong to blaring German marches, as well as astringent string writing reminiscent of Britten. It is a compelling historical document that demanded an airing – lest we forget.”

Kurier (Vienna), 2010
“An exemplary, emotional, powerful 20th century opera that unites the highly personal with the tragedy of world history. [...] One would gladly toss out any one of the worn out warhorses from the opera repertoire for it.”

Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2010
“What a discovery! [...] a 24-year-old opera of grandiose power, drama, and its own entirely unique beauty. This opera is a masterpiece.”

nmz (Neue Musikzeitung), 2010
“The score [...] culminates in a musical combination whose effect may be unique in the history of the 20th century. [...] Music as the human answer to inhuman conditions.”

Die Zeit, 2010
“By far the most important opera in the Russian language since the Second World War. [...] He is one of the most important Russian composers.”
Mieczysław Weinberg [1919-1996]

Mieczysław Weinberg and his family shared a fate not unlike that of countless Jews during the 20th century. During a dreadful Easter pogrom in 1903, his paternal grandfather and great-grandfather were simply murdered along with many other Jews by their otherwise amiable neighbors. After the German invasion of Poland in 1939, the Nazis killed his parents and his sister, and in 1948 Stalin’s secret police murdered his father-in-law. Weinberg himself was arrested on February 6, 1953 on vague anti-Semitic charges, and it was only Stalin’s death just one month later that saved his life. He would live another 43 years and, despite his foreign origins, reach an eminently important position among Soviet composers.

It is almost impossible to imagine how, after such repeated, dramatic strokes of fate, a human being can manage to rise to such unique artistic greatness. The subject matter of his works, though, very often deal with the Jewish fate, they describe the tragedy of children in the midst of war and killing with astounding compassion and reveal an overall pacifist conviction. This is also true of those works that have no - or at least no published - program or text. The composer himself once said: “Many of my works have to do with the subject of war. This, unfortunately, was not my own choice. It was dictated to me by my fate, by the tragic fate of my family. I see it as my moral duty to write about war, about the atrocities that have befallen mankind in our century.”

Mieczysław Weinberg was born in Warsaw, where his father was employed as a musician and composer at a Jewish theater. Both parents were Jewish. At the age of ten, Weinberg himself debuted as pianist and conductor at the same theater and as a twelve-year-old, began studies in piano with Jozef Turczynski at the Conservatory. His future as an international piano virtuoso appeared all but assured. Yet immediately after his final exams in 1939, war broke out, forcing him to flee Warsaw from the advancing German forces. He reached the Belarus capital of Minsk, where he studied composition with Vassily Zolotaryov, a former student of Balakirev and Rimsky-Korsakov.

The day after his final examinations in June 1941, the German army attacked the Soviet Union and Weinberg was forced to flee again, this time to the Uzbek capital of Tashkent where he worked as a rehearsal pianist at the opera and also composed works for the stage. There he married Natalya Michoels, the daughter of the artist Solomon Michoels.

Dmitri Shostakovich had, in the meantime, come to hear of Weinberg’s great talent. Upon seeing the score of his first symphony, he was so impressed that he personally procured an official permit for Weinberg to reside in Moscow. In 1943, the couple relocated to the Soviet capital, where Weinberg would spend the rest of his life, and a close friendship began between the two composers. They consulted one another with each new composition, Shostakovich complementing Weinberg as “one of the most outstanding composers of today” and Weinberg professing how infinitely much he had learned from his older colleague: “Although I never had lessons with him, I count myself as his pupil, his flesh and blood”. In Moscow, Weinberg worked as a freelance composer and pianist. In 1948 the political regime of the USSR began to put pressure on composers, as indeed on other creative artists as well. To put it simply, in the spirit of “socialist realism”, music was to be more folkloristic and easier to understand. Optimism was important and the Soviet Union should be duly glorified. Weinberg was not one of those subjected to particularly harsh criticism, but some of his pieces were placed on the list of banned works, together with music by Shostakovich, Prokofiev and other great composers. This was
enough to instill a certain fear among concert organizers of including Weinberg’s music in their programs, and it forced him to temporarily earn his living writing film and theater music.

His imprisonment in 1953, however, had nothing to do with his music, but with the fact that his wife was a close relative of Miron Vovsi, the main defendant in the anti-Semitic “Doctors’ Plot” trial. Shostakovich courageously interceded on Weinberg’s behalf by sending a petition to the infamous chief of the secret police, Lavrentiy Beria, but it was Stalin’s death that ultimately saved him.

Mieczysław Weinberg’s response to ever-present danger was his life-long enormous musical productivity – music whose poignant intimacy reflects the bitter-sweet existence of one who has lost everything but can still be grateful for his survival. His catalogue contains more than 150 works; there are, in addition, innumerable compositions without opus numbers, many of them for the cinema, theater and radio. He composed 26 symphonies, wrote more than a dozen works for the stage, 17 string quartets and 28 sonatas for various instruments, as well as a vast amount of music for solo instruments and voice, the latter with texts from a broad variety of international authors. Humor and tragedy are of equal importance in a creative output that extends from a requiem to circus music; lyricism and drama complement one another in a compelling architecture to bring about a Gesamtkunstwerk of rare human depth.

Per Skans/Peermusic Classical GmbH
More Works for the Stage:

**The Golden Key, or the Adventures of Buratino, Op. 55**
- **Description:** Ballet in 3 acts, 6 scenes with prologue and epilogue
- **Date of Creation:** 1954, rev. 1961
- **Duration:** 90’
- **Orchestration:** 3-3-3-A sax-3, 4-3-3-1, timp, perc (3), 2 hp, str
- **Libretto:** Alexander Gajamov
- **Text Source:** Aleksey Tolstoy, *The Golden Key, or the Adventures of Buratino*
- **Premiere:** June 10, 1962, Moscow, Russia

**The Madonna and the Soldier, Op. 105**
- **Description:** Opera in 3 acts
- **Date of Creation:** 1970-1971
- **Duration:** 95’
- **Orchestration:** S, M, 3 T, 2 Bar, 2 B, mx cho; 3-3-3-3, 4-3-3-1, timp, perc (3), hp, cel/pf, mand, acdn, str
- **Libretto:** Alexander Medvedev
- **Premiere:** March 17, 1975, Leningrad, Russia

**My D’Artagnan, Op. 109**
- **Description:** Opera in 3 acts
- **Date of Creation:** 1971
- **Duration:** 120’
- **Orchestration:** 2 S, 2 M, 3 T, 2 Bar, 1 B, 6 actors, mx cho; 2-1-2-2, 3-3-3-0, timp, perc (3), gtr, hp, mand, cel/pf, str
- **Libretto:** Elena M. Galperina
- **Text Source:** Alexandre Dumas, *The Three Muskateers*
- **Premiere:** December 23, 1974, Moscow, Russia (variation)

Celebrate with us the 100th birthday of Mieczysław Weinberg in 2019.
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