

David Fanning

*Mieczysław Weinberg
In Search of Freedom*

wolke



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CONTENTS

Introduction	7
1. Weinberg in Warsaw (1919–39).	15
2. Weinberg in Minsk (1939–41)	21
3. Weinberg in Tashkent (1941–43)	30
4. Wartime in Moscow (August 1943–45)	40
5. From Victory to Suppression (1945–47)	47
6. Annus Horribilis (1948)	58
7. Music for the People(s) (1949–52)	73
8. Arrest and Aftermath (1953–55)	83
9. Recovery (1956–59).	95
10. Starry Years (1960s)	103
11. Recognition and Productivity (1970s)	125
12. Retreat into Art (1980s)	143
13. Weinberg in the 1990s, and Beyond.	159
Notes	169
Bibliography	177
Selected Recordings	183
Work-list	189
Index.	213



Weinberg with Dmitry Shostakovich and members of the Beethoven Quartet, early 1970s

Introduction

There are composers whose lives were marked by the cataclysms of the 'short twentieth century';¹ there are composers who deserve far more space than they have been allocated in histories of music; there are composers who were exceptionally prolific. Mieczysław Weinberg presents a rare case of all three in one.

This is undoubtedly a story with tragic aspects, especially as regards the extermination of Weinberg's family in his native Poland and of so many others both there and in his adopted Russia. Almost uniquely among musicians, he emigrated eastwards—fleeing the advances of one tyranny, only to end up in the arms of another.

That experience was certainly the frame for his life and work, and he devoted a significant portion of his creative energies to memorializing the victims of Nazi aggression. Yet he himself would hardly have recognised his emigration to the Soviet Union as a tragedy, nor its system as a tyranny, despite the oppression, (briefly) incarceration and (later in life) neglect he suffered there. In his own eyes he was emphatically not a victim. Moreover, the music he composed—amounting to 154 opuses and a good deal else besides—not only enshrines but also rises above his life-experiences. What makes his legacy so inspiring is the depth of its humanity and the quality of its artistic imagination. In the classic humanist tradition, his music creates an alternative reality, often engaged with and inspired by the real world, but not confined by it or to it.

Weinberg therefore represents a Search for Freedom in two dimensions: freedom to live and freedom to compose. In both respects the odds against him were heavy, and the freedom he found was both limited and problematic. Anyone concerned with the fate of Jewish cultural figures and/or neglected, supposedly conservative, composers should

automatically find his story fascinating. But his significance transcends all special interest groups. In his determination to keep his search on a broad and positive track, his message is addressed to all.

IN A NUTSHELL

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 and violinist. From the age of 12 he took piano lessons at the Warsaw Conservatoire, and in later life his fluency as a sight-reader and score-reader was much vaunted; among his several fine recordings are his own Piano Quintet with the Borodin Quartet and the piano duet version of Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony, alongside the composer. In 1939 he fled the German occupation (in which his parents and sister were murdered) to Belorussia, where a border guard reportedly inscribed his documents with the stereotypically Jewish 'Moisey'. This became the first name by which all official sources thereafter referred to him (though close friends and family favoured the affectionate *Metek*), until in 1982 he finally succeeded in readopting his Polish given name, the Soviet authorities having previously resisted his request owing to his missing documents.

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, acquiring a solid technical grounding. Following the Nazi invasion of the USSR, he moved further east to Tashkent, capital of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan in Central Asia. Then at the direct invitation of Shostakovich, who had been impressed with the score of his First Symphony, he settled in Moscow, where he lived from 1943 until his death.

There were to be many more encounters with Shostakovich, and the two men developed the habit of playing each other their major works before they had been publicly performed. When Weinberg was arrested, interrogated and imprisoned in February 1953, as a consequence of family connections at the height of Stalin's trumped-up Doctor's Plot, Shostakovich took it upon himself to write to Lavrenty Beriya, the

feared head of the MGB (which became the KGB a year later), and Weinberg was released at the end of April, not long after the death of Stalin. Even so, throughout the succeeding years of the Khrushchev Thaw, Brezhnev's stagnation, Gorbachev's glasnost and the break-up of the Soviet Union, Weinberg declined to exploit any image of victimhood, preferring to recall with pride that his music had been championed by many of the starriest musicians and conductors in his adopted country. Official recognition came in the form of honorary titles, in ascending order of prestige: Honoured Artist of the Russian Republic in 1971, People's Artist of the Russian Republic in 1980, and State Prize of the USSR in 1990.

Though never enrolled as one of Shostakovich's official pupils, Weinberg readily acknowledged the inspiration, reportedly declaring: 'I count myself as his pupil, his flesh and blood.'² And Shostakovich lost no opportunity to commend Weinberg's music to friends and colleagues. Both composers worked across a wide range of genres and in a gamut of styles, from folk idioms (including, especially for Weinberg, Jewish ones) to twelve-note elements. Yet for all the unmistakable echoes of his revered role-model, Weinberg retained a higher level of independence than many of his Soviet colleagues, distancing himself both from official academic conservatism and, in the 1960s and after, from the younger generation's fervent embrace of Western-style modernism. In fact respect and influence flowed in both directions. Both Weinberg and Shostakovich left an imposing body of symphonies and string quartets, in Weinberg's case numbering 26 and 17, respectively. In addition Weinberg composed some six concertos, seven operas, an operetta, three ballets (one of which is lost), four cantatas, 28 sonatas and upwards of 200 songs. His more than 60 film scores, together with a good deal of theatre and even circus music, were a principal source of income, enabling him to avoid teaching or administrative posts that he did not find congenial.

Among champions of Weinberg's work in his lifetime he could count artists of the stature of violinists David Oistrakh and Leonid Kogan, cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, pianist Emil Gilels, the Borodin Quartet, and conductors Kirill Kondrashin and Vladimir Fedoseyev. Yet it was not in his nature to self-promote or seek publicity. Because of

this, and not helped by his atypical Polish-Jewish background, he was never considered to be a marketable export. Hence his music was not promoted internationally, and some of it encountered opposition that prevented performance in his lifetime, most notoriously in the case of his greatest masterpiece, the Auschwitz-based opera *Passazhirka* (The Passenger). Following the death of Shostakovich in 1975, Weinberg's physical energies declined, though creatively he still worked at a rapid pace. Sadly for him, just as he had lost the support of his great friend and mentor, interest among audiences, performers and critics turned towards the equivalent of radical chic in Soviet music—embodied by the likes of Alfred Schnittke, Edison Denisov and Sofiya Gubaydulina. In the West their music also had the cachet of greater exoticism, thanks to its mixture of technical and conceptual features, deemed progressive both during and after the collapse of faith in modernism.

The growth of Weinberg's reputation outside Russia has largely been a posthumous phenomenon. But it has been steady and exponential, reaching one peak in 2009–10 with major celebrations in Manchester, Liverpool and Bregenz. One aspect of his work, highlighted in these retrospectives, deserves to be flagged here. Weinberg's music commemorating Nazi atrocities, especially those committed in his native Poland, is, to put it soberly, among the most powerful of its kind. It culminates in two works from the late 1960s: his first opera, *The Passenger*, and the Requiem. Both works were too hot for Soviet authorities to handle at that time and had to wait until 2006 and 2009 for their respective premieres (2010 in the case of opera's first staging). Together with a number of symphonies and other vocal works, these works represent Weinberg's direct engagement with the ethical issues at the heart of the 'short twentieth century'. Yet their marginalisation in his adopted homeland cannot be put down to anything remotely anti-Soviet on Weinberg's part. On the contrary, their anti-fascist, internationalist humanism was—or at least should have been—entirely in accord with declared Soviet ideals.

This is a paradox that should be recognised at the outset. It was not necessary to be a dissident, or anything remotely like that, in order to fall out of official favour; and those who did so rarely harboured such thoughts. It was enough to be suspected of such nebulous sins as 'ab-

stract humanism' (i.e. being too general or philosophical in one's outlook, insufficiently pro-Soviet or 'realist').

Moreover, Weinberg regarded the Soviet Union in general, and the Red Army in particular, as his salvation. For all his occasionally dire personal suffering at the hands of the communist system, there is no evidence that he lost faith in its core values. That is not to say that he necessarily devoted his full creative energies to the various celebratory cantatas and suchlike that were expected of all Soviet composers, especially in the period between the end of the War and the death of Stalin, or that he condoned the system in all its manifestations, still less that he actively worked on behalf of it. Indeed any political views he may have held, beyond those implicit in his music, were kept strictly to himself. When Mstislav Rostropovich is quoted as referring to Weinberg's 'party affiliation',³ this can only be put down to a mixture of the great cellist's well-known propensity for exaggeration, plus a rift with Weinberg, the details of which are not entirely clear.⁴

Weinberg's loyalty and gratitude towards, yet also distance from, the organs of power in the Soviet Union, is one indication of the complexity of his persona. Also more complex than one might imagine is the phenomenon of traditional genres in his output, together with their language of moderated modernism, akin to that of Shostakovich and Benjamin Britten, plus the fact that the majority of his works—not speaking now of the commemorative ones mentioned above—make no explicit socio-political statement. In the West, even in his native Poland, all these things could have been viewed as symptoms of straightforward conservatism. Even some in the Soviet Union would have taken them for precisely that. In fact, however, this act of cultural preservation had very different connotations in that society. Where positive social engagement was more or less *de rigueur*, Weinberg's disengagement from the events and institutions of the outside world meant that he was going against the grain, indeed against two grains. He was resisting both the careerist Socialist Realist establishment and, from the 1960s on, the club mentality of the Soviet avant-garde. His output thus takes on a multiple ethical dimension—of a different kind from more obviously non-conformist artists, but of no less enduring significance.

That significance was, of course, dependent on artistic quality as much as on good intentions. And such quality is not something a book can hope to prove. However, it is certainly the animating belief behind what follows. It is something that increasing numbers of listeners have been directly experiencing. And it is to such listeners in the first instance that this book is addressed, exploring the context of the music and engaging with the expressive power and humanity that emanate from it.

TRANSLITERATION

The system of transliteration adopted in this book follows that of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, London, Macmillan, 2001.

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Without the devotion and collaboration of my wife, Michelle, I cannot imagine how this project would have come to fruition, and the end-product is much the better for her critical acumen. Weinberg's music was the occasion of our first meeting (his Piano Quintet in Paris, 15 January 2006), and it has now become a joint enterprise for us. This book comes near the beginning of our journey together. May it also be a small part of a long and glorious journey for Weinberg.

David Fanning, Hale Barns, April 2010