

Pianist Menahem Pressler, refugee from Nazism, performs at the Berlin Philharmonic

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In January, an audience of thousands experienced a moving event: a slight, 90-year-old man sat nimbly at the piano in a Berlin concert hall and played Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 17 in G Major (1784). During his performance, he was visibly cheerful, communicated with the orchestra, particularly with the wind section, and spoke through Mozart's music to the audience—urging the listener to enjoy every trill.

The pianist was Menahem Pressler, born Max Jacob Pressler in 1923 in Magdeburg, Germany. Seventy-five years ago, in 1939, he and his family were barely able to flee the Nazi terror against the Jewish population.

His family's clothing store was ransacked and destroyed on November 9, 1938, during the Nazi's Kristallnacht pogroms, and Max Jacob was expelled from high school. He continued to take piano lessons in secret. His uncles, aunts and grandparents were murdered in Auschwitz. His family, via Italy, fled to Palestine and thereafter to the US.

When he was 17, Max Jacob adopted the name Menahem (Hebrew for comfort or solace). He studied piano under fellow émigrés Leo Kestenberg and Eliahu Rudiakov, among others. In the US, he founded the renowned Beaux Arts Trio in 1955, an ensemble in which he performed internationally, including in Germany, until its dissolution in 2008.

After 73 years, on September 27, 2012, Menahem Pressler's German citizenship was restored. At the ceremony in Berlin, he said that Germany had remained his cultural home throughout. He had always spoken German at home with his family, had read Goethe and Heine and played Beethoven, Schubert and Mozart on the piano. "I can understand those who could not face all that after Auschwitz," said Pressler, "but for me, there has always been this land of culture that I clung on to."

Pressler's three concerts January 10-12 were his first performances with the Berlin Philharmonic, the elite orchestra that performed for the Nazi dictatorship up until 1945. One had the impression that both he and his audience realised this concert was a historic occasion.

The applause after Pressler's performance was thunderous, and many in the audience rose to their feet to show the musician their appreciation and respect. During the latter's encore, Chopin's Nocturne No. 20 in C sharp minor (1830)—gentle, full of feeling, but with no melodramatic exaggeration—there was silence in the room, no one coughed.

Mozart was 28 years old when he composed his Piano Concerto No. 17. Written for his pupil Barbara Ployer, it was the last of four piano concertos that Mozart produced in the early part of that year.

In the concerto, Mozart allowed the pianist to perform on an almost equal footing with the other instruments, rather than in the usual manner as a soloist accompanied by an orchestra. The desire for new timbre and for unorthodox and surprising moments is exemplified in the development section when Mozart moves through no fewer than 13 different keys. Minor-key episodes suddenly enter the andante section and, in contrast to the conventions of a classical concerto-sonata movement, the piano is granted a third theme of its own. Mozart features an almost chamber music-like dialogue between piano and winds or strings.

Shostakovich's "The year 1905"

The second half of the Berlin Philharmonic concert featured Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No. 11,

subtitled “The Year 1905.” The symphony attempts to find musical expression for the events of the 1905 Russian Revolution, including “Bloody Sunday” (January 22, 1905) in St. Petersburg, when the troops of Tsar Nicolas II shot down an unarmed demonstration of workers and their families.

Again, at the conclusion of the piece, there was great applause from the audience, who rightly celebrated the remarkable musical efforts of the orchestra and its guest conductor, Semyon Bychkov from St. Petersburg.

Nonetheless, this interpretation did not have the same emotional impact as Pressler’s Mozart concerto. One could sense a certain distance between the orchestra, the conductor and the significance of the Russian revolution. As a result, in spite of the technical precision, the soul of the music was missing.

Shostakovich composed his Eleventh Symphony in 1957, and the piece received its first performance during the 40th anniversary celebrations of the October Revolution in Moscow. This was only a year after the crushing of the Hungarian workers’ uprising by Stalinism, an uprising that won the sympathy of many in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Shostakovich commented in his memoirs, as recorded by Solomon Volkov, that his symphony was also rooted in the present: “It’s about the people, who have stopped believing because the cup of evil has run over.” (*Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, 2004, 8)

The four movements of the Eleventh Symphony depict four moments or scenes from January 22, 1905 (January 9 in the old Russian calendar): “Palace Square,” “The 9th of January,” “Eternal Memory” and “Tocsin.”

The movements are performed without a break, so that the symphony develops a remarkable dynamic.

In the opening, the strings evoke the repressive atmosphere of the tsarist regime, accompanied occasionally by flutes, distant brass and drumbeats—all in all, an unsettling atmosphere. The first theme, based on the hymn “Lord have mercy on us,” points to the religious illusions of the people. A second theme takes up a song of Siberian forced labourers, and a third, a song from the 1860s entitled “Prisoner.” In the second movement, the attack by the tsarist guards is initiated by a fugue and salvos of percussion.

Shostakovich also uses many famous themes in the

following movements; for example, the popular revolutionary song “You fell as victims” appears in the third movement as the funeral march for the dead. This song was also sung at Lenin’s funeral in 1924. Among the march-like rhythms in the final movement, quiet and reflective tones join in again—the victims should not be forgotten. In his music, Shostakovich always remembered the victims of the Stalinist terror, who included many of his friends.

In certain ways, the Eleventh Symphony draws on the Seventh, the famed Leningrad Symphony. As with that symphony, the Eleventh was dismissed as mere propaganda music by many Western critics at the time and, as a result, was rarely performed.

In the Berlin concert programme notes, Susanne Stähr opposes the charge of propaganda. She notes that Shostakovich had in principle sympathised with the original ideas of the revolution, which were perverted by Stalinism. At the same time, like many other critics, she attempts to uncover the failure of these revolutionary ideas in the Symphony No. 11.

This is the problem with the Berlin performance. Although the orchestra’s playing was technically superb, the passion of the revolution, with all its heroism, self-sacrifice and tragedy, hardly finds musical expression. As a result, the contrasts between quiet and reflective sections, on the one hand, and the booming, martial portions sometimes seem too stiff—brilliant, but without inner connection or a deeper understanding.

In comparison, the author would like to suggest a performance by the Leningrad Philharmonic under the direction of Yevgeny Mravinsky. In a recording of a 1959 concert, a different tone can be detected—a tone that suggests participation in the revolutionary upsurge and defeats in the Soviet Union, which so moved Shostakovich himself.

A brief sample of the Berlin concert is available here:

<http://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/16878/bychkov-pressler-mozart-shostakovich>



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