

# *The Passenger* depicts the Holocaust and its aftermath in opera form

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Mieczyslaw Weinberg's 1968 opera *The Passenger* recently had its New York premiere as part of the annual Lincoln Center Festival. The performances showed that this challenging work, dealing with the Holocaust and its aftermath, deserves a permanent place in the operatic repertoire.

Weinberg, born in Warsaw in 1919, narrowly escaped the Nazi invasion of Poland, arriving in the Soviet Union before his 20th birthday. His parents and younger sister were sent to the Lodz Ghetto and later perished in a concentration camp. Weinberg, who lived the remaining 56 years of his life in the USSR, was a prolific composer of symphonies, string quartets, operas and film music. Among his film scores was that for the award-winning *The Cranes Are Flying*.

(Interestingly, one of Weinberg's cousins, following the Russian Revolution, was the secretary of the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Baku Soviet commune and was executed by counterrevolutionary forces in September 1918 along with the other 26 Baku commissars.)

In eight scenes over two acts, *The Passenger* tells the story of a prosperous German couple in the early 1960s, Liese and Walter, who have embarked on an ocean voyage to Brazil, where the husband, a West German diplomat, is to take up a new post.

In the midst of what should be a time of satisfaction and happy anticipation, however, Liese observes a mysterious passenger onboard, and becomes convinced that this is in fact Marta, who as a young Polish woman was an inmate of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Liese was an Auschwitz guard, something she has tried to leave behind and suppress psychologically, and has never even spoken about to her husband.

The opera, with a libretto by Alexander Medvedev and music by Weinberg, then compellingly develops the theme of the Holocaust and its aftermath. The action takes place on two levels, both in its staging and in its time frame. The upper level is the ship itself, including Liese and Walter's private cabin. Stairs lead to a lower level, the concentration camp barracks and the railroad tracks leading to the camp. The scenes alternate, forcefully depicting the memories that increasingly haunt Liese as the story progresses.

We are soon introduced to Marta as a young concentration camp inmate. Her fellow prisoners include Tadeusz, Marta's beloved, whom she finds after a separation of two years. Liese is the only character that appears on both levels of the opera, with the events of nearly 20 years earlier clearly seared into her memory. In her role as a camp guard, she threatens and taunts the prisoners, and in

particular tries to take advantage of Marta and Tadeusz's relationship for her own purposes.

The work explores the issue of the aftermath of the Holocaust, for both victims and perpetrators. *The Passenger* is set in the early 1960s, in the midst of the postwar economic boom in Germany, and also in the shadow of the Eichmann trial in Israel, which brought the issue of the Holocaust and its architects before a new generation of Germans as well as to a global audience. A generation of young people in Germany, as elsewhere, were radicalized by the war in Vietnam in particular as the 1960s unfolded and attempted to come to terms as well with their own traumatic national history. This was the period that saw the publication of some of the best-known novels of German writers such as Günter Grass and Heinrich Böll, as well as the first films of Rainer Maria Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff and others.

The historical issues are deliberately not spelled out in *The Passenger*. The story is presented without even settling the issue of whether the mysterious woman is in fact Marta, or perhaps only the vivid reflection of Liese's guilty conscience.

The opera also does not portray Liese as a kind of stand-in for Germany as a whole, a symbol of collective guilt. It does, however, show the impossibility of ignoring the past. It raises the inevitable issues of the causes of the descent into barbarism. The portrayal of both the younger and middle-aged Liese suggests the self-satisfied layer of the middle class that finds itself, under definite social and political conditions, capable of the most monstrous crimes.

The opera is based on a novel by Polish writer Zofia Posmysz, a concentration camp survivor. Posmysz, alive and well at the age of 90, has been involved in the belated production of the opera, and appeared at the New York premiere.

Arrested as a young girl because of an association with an anti-Nazi group, Posmysz spent three years as a prisoner. Some years later, as a journalist on assignment in Paris, she thought she saw someone who had been a guard at Auschwitz. This episode led first to a radio play, which was later turned into a novel, in which the relationship is reversed, with a conscience-stricken former guard believing she has glimpsed a former inmate.

The novel became enormously popular in Poland. This was a time of political ferment following the working class protests in Poznan in 1956. The book was turned into a film—*Passenger* (1963)—by the talented young Polish director Andrzej Munk (*Man on the Tracks*, 1956), completed by colleagues after Munk's

untimely death in an auto accident in 1961. Somewhat later, Weinberg's close friend and colleague Dmitri Shostakovich urged him to consider a project based on the novel.

Weinberg's music is impressive, as we have had occasion to note in the past. It reflects his lifelong association with Shostakovich, whom he first met in 1943, when he was only 23 years old and Shostakovich himself was 13 years older. Highly dissonant at times, the score remains tonal and emotionally involving. The composer is especially effective in combining and alternating several styles while still adhering to a distinctive musical language.

The influence of Shostakovich is clear, but the music is not derivative. Weinberg depicts the growing apprehension and panic of Liese, the concern of her husband for his career prospects, and above all the suffering and heroism of the prisoners. The music is at times anguished, jazz-influenced in its depiction of some of the shipboard activities, and briefly but strongly lyrical in the reunion of Marta and Tadeusz.

If there is one major weakness, it is in the vocal writing itself. In an opera, this is of course an issue that can't be overlooked. There were times, especially in the opera's first act, when an emphasis on orchestral writing, and an imbalance between the orchestra and performers, tended to detract from the dramatic action. The second act was more affecting, especially the exchanges between Marta, Tadeusz and Liese.

Both Marta and Tadeusz resist Liese's attempts to enlist their cooperation, even though it will mean their deaths. A high point of this act, and the climax of the entire opera, comes when Tadeusz, a violinist, is commanded to play the camp commandant's favorite waltz, and instead defiantly performs the famous Bach Chaconne from the *Second Partita for Violin*, before being led off to his death.

Weinberg's orchestration is masterful. Strings and winds are joined by powerful writing for the brass section, and above all, a percussion section that includes almost every imaginable instrument, including timpani, triangle, tambourine, whip, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, marimba, vibraphone, xylophone, bells and glockenspiel.

The Houston Grand Opera production was also striking. Director David Pountney was responsible for the English translation of the libretto. The opera, originally presented in Austria in 2010, was staged in Houston last winter, and it is the Houston production, including the orchestra under Patrick Summers, that was brought to New York for three performances. The opera was first presented in Moscow in concert version in 2006, nearly 40 years after it was written.

The New York performances took place in the historic Park Avenue Armory, in a building dating to 1880 and for decades the headquarters of the 7th New York Militia Regiment, which had fought in the Civil War. The huge vaulted space of the Drill Hall, at the center of this building, is a music venue unlike any other in New York. The size of the space made some amplification of the voices necessary, a rare occurrence in the opera world. In this case it was carried off in so understated and effective a fashion that some listeners would not even have been aware of it. Although the opera was sung in English, the use of supertitles was also effective,

as was the unusual placement of the orchestra, to the side of the two-tiered set.

The singers were uniformly excellent, particularly soprano Melody Moore as Marta. Tadeusz was sung by Morgan Smith, Katya by Kelly Kaduce, Liese by mezzo soprano Michelle Breedt and Walter by tenor Joseph Kaiser.

Mieczyslaw Weinberg is one of the "lost composers" of the twentieth century. Strictly speaking, he is not of the generation that came of age musically between the imperialist world wars, or whose career was interrupted by the rise of fascism during those decades, including some promising composers who perished in the Holocaust. Although Weinberg was younger and had a full musical career, the environment in which he worked was shaped by the tragedies of this era.

In connection with the belated appearance of *The Passenger*, little has been said about why it languished in obscurity for decades. Shostakovich was enormously taken by the work, but for reasons that were not spelled out, it was not staged, although many other works of Weinberg were regularly performed in the Soviet Union.

The Stalinist regime, which still used a heavy hand in cultural matters in this period, may have decided that an opera that focused on concentration camps and dealt with Polish victims did not mesh with its own continuous efforts to build up nationalist feelings. The authorities decreed that emphasis had always to be placed on the Russian and Soviet toll in the war, which of course was massive, to the exclusion of others. It was for this reason that Shostakovich encountered such official opposition to his *13th Symphony*, subtitled "Babi Yar," dedicated to the Jewish victims of Nazi extermination at this site in Kiev.

Weinberg's life was shaped in no small part by horrific Nazi barbarism on the one hand, and the Stalinist degeneration of the Russian Revolution on the other. While he and many others found refuge in the Soviet Union, they also confronted the regime of the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy, which used anti-Semitism for its own purposes.

Weinberg married the daughter of the famed Soviet actor and theater director Solomon Mikhoels. In 1948, Mikhoels was murdered by the Stalinist regime in what was made to look like an auto accident. Weinberg himself was arrested in 1952, in the last spasm of Stalin's own murderous anti-Semitism. Shostakovich intervened in a desperate attempt to save his friend, and the younger composer was only spared by the death of Stalin himself in March 1953.

Today's headlines, including the prominent role of admirers of Nazism in Ukraine itself, demonstrate the relevance of the themes explored in *The Passenger*. One hopes for regular performances both of this opera and of other music by Weinberg and composers of his generation—and that younger composers will find themselves drawn to such crucial social and historical themes as well.



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