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Mieczysław Weinberg
Complete sonatas for Viola Solo
Fyodor Druzhinin
Sonata for Viola Solo

MIECZYŚLAW WEINBERG
REDISCOVERY OF A FORGOTTEN GENIUS

The death in Moscow of the composer Mieczysław Weinberg in February 1996 was hardly noticed in Russia or abroad. This was perhaps not surprising, considering Weinberg's shadowy existence in the Soviet Union. His status in musical life was in many ways paradoxical: in the capital he was held in great esteem by composer colleagues and by renowned interpreters too, but in wider musical circles and amongst a music-loving public he remained largely unknown. His music was performed only infrequently and over 70% of his works were not published during his lifetime. Weinberg composed music to some of the most famous soviet films, but even this did not do anything for his popularity. He was a real outsider, although he was a member of the Soviet Association of Composers and had at least garnered several official awards. For over 50 years Weinberg lived and worked in Moscow, but remained somehow in a parallel world: he did not take part in the usual business of music, the struggle to secure commissions and privileges, trips abroad and publications. He was Jewish, did not join the Communist Party and spoke Russian with a strong foreign accent. Weinberg was an unusual modest and reserved person, and this explains in some measure why a composer whose music is presently enjoying something of a renaissance around the world was so ignored whilst he was alive. He did not do much to ensure that his pieces enjoyed active reception, instead concentrating on the work at hand; his catalogue contains seven operas, 20 symphonies, 17 string quartets and many other compositions in all genres.

Mieczysław Weinberg was born in 1919 in Warsaw. His father Samuil Weinberg was a talented Jewish musician who had made a name for himself as the musical director of a Yiddish theatre and a violinist. The mother was pianist. Mieczysław the pianist appeared on stage at the age of 10, a true Wunderkind; by 12 he had been accepted by the conservatoire and at 16 he had written a film score. No less a figure than Józef Hofmann (one of the most important pianists of the 20th century) prophesied he would have an international career. In the summer of 1939 Weinberg graduated in piano. And when war broke out the family tried to flee Warsaw, but only Mieczysław managed to escape. His parents and his sister, also a musician, were deported from the Warsaw ghetto to the labour camp Trawniki, where they made uniforms for the *Wehrmacht*. They were all murdered when the camp was liquidated in 1943. Weinberg reached Belarus safely. When German troops attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, he fled to Central Asia. From 1943 onwards Weinberg lived in Moscow, and was one of the closest friends of Dmitri Shostakovich, who counted Weinberg among the best composers of his time.

A contemporary described the young Weinberg: "I had the fortune to know Metek Weinberg from 1942 onwards. He was 22 at the time. Large of frame and slim, with an incredible mane of auburn,

curly hair. His face always bore a smile, and beamed continuously. He was very friendly and, in a manner foreign to the usual Soviet way, quite polite. He was already held to be an interesting composer. When I subsequently learned that Weinberg had been arrested, I could hardly believe that such a mild-mannered and modest man would survive gaol." Weinberg actually spent three-and-a-half months of 1953 in the much-feared prison 'Lubjanka' (the name of which is still inextricably linked with torture and death). "We had just arrived at the Weinberg's after a concert in the Tchaikovsky Hall", a friend recalls. "The premiere of Weinberg's *Moldavian Rhapsody* for violin and orchestra had been a colossal success. The soloist was David Oistrakh. At two in the morning there was a knock at the door. Weinberg was sitting at the piano and improvising. 'Hands up. Give up your weapons', the mob shouted and led Weinberg away quickly." Compared to the millions of victims of the gulags, Weinberg had a more fortunate draw. The death of Stalin in March 1953 had saved him.

The works recorded on the present CDs allow us a glimpse of the various creative periods of the composer. The Sonata op. 28 (the original is for clarinet and piano) from 1945 contains obvious reminiscences of Jewish folklore, especially in the second movement, at the heart of which is a song of lament aspiring to Klezmer music. The Sonata for Viola Solo No. 1 (op. 107) was written in 1971 and dedicated to the violist Fyodor Druzhinin, who recorded the piece as an LP and edited the published score. It is the only viola sonata to gather a notice, but was still ignored. Each of the three following sonatas can boast a highly individual voice. They have not been previously published. In all four sonatas playing technique is pushed to the very limit. The Sonata No. 2 (op. 123) from 1978 is dedicated to the violist of the Borodin Quartet, Dmitri Shebalin. The dedicatee of the Sonatas No. 3, op. 135 (1982) and No. 4, op. 136 (1983) is Mikhail Tolpygo, who was at the time the solo violist of the USSR Symphony Orchestra.

Weinberg's final years were marked by a serious and incurable illness, and for the last three years of his life he was not able to set foot in front of the door. Two days before his death he commented in conversation how sad he was never to have seen his Auschwitz opera *Die Passagierin* (The Passenger) on stage. This opera was completed in 1968 and – like many of Weinberg's other works – never performed during his lifetime. The first staged performance by the Bregenz Festival in 2010 marks a provisional highpoint in the international rediscovery of a composer just a few years after his death.

Fyodor Druzhinin was born in Moscow in 1932. He studied with Vadim Borisovsky at the Moscow Conservatoire between 1950–55 and in 1964 took over his position as violist in the Beethoven Quartet. The final work by Dmitri Shostakovich, the Sonata for Viola and Piano, op. 147 (1975) was dedicated to him. The Sonata dating from 1959 reveals Druzhinin to be a highly talented composer whose virtuoso treatment of the viola is second to none. He also wrote a further piece for viola solo, as well as a viola duet and a Fantasy for viola and orchestra.

Jascha Nemtsov
Translation from the German: Graham Lack