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THE PASSENGER, AN OPERA

OPERA FROM OUT OF PURGATORY

In the previous edition of *Testimony*, we devoted our chronicle to *The Emperor of Atlantis* by Viktor Ullmann. This time, we would like to look at another opera, again one that is not very well-known: *The Passenger* by Mieczyslaw Weinberg. Its last performance, in London, aroused a few debates.

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Until today, the opera *The Passenger*, composed by Mieczyslaw Weinberg (1919-1996) and completed in 1968, has hardly been staged more often than *The Emperor of Atlantis*. It was performed for the first time in 2006 in Russia, however only as a concert, and it was performed on stage for the first time in Bregenz in Austria in 2010. The last time it was put on stage was in London at the Coliseum in 2011, by David Pountney and the English National Opera orchestra directed by Sir Richard Armstrong. It was then a repeat of the production of the world scenic creation of the Bregenz Festival in 2010. Of course, we know much better Andrzej Munk's eponymous film (1963) that was adapted from the radio drama *Passenger from Cabin Number 45*, written by Zofia Posmysz and edited in 1959.

The story: Lisa, a former SS officer in Auschwitz and now the wife of a diplomat, is travelling on a transatlantic sailing for Brazil. During a port of call, she thinks she recognizes Marta, a former prisoner and Polish member of the resistance whom she believed had died in the camp. Emotional shock, guilt, fear of being recognized and denounced, Lisa finally admits her past to

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her husband and revives the episodes of her ambiguous and domineering relationship with the prisoner.

At the performance on 20 September in London, English critics from *The Guardian* to *The Financial Times*, from *The Evening Standard* to *The Telegraph* highlighted with a troubling unanimity the quality of the staging and the commitment of the singers, only to better deplore the music of the opera. One critic reckons that the work is a "total dud", whereas another recommends against the opera to people who wish to spend an evening that ends by "feeling good about themselves or humanity". They all find opposite reasons to discourage adventurous music-lovers. For example, some claim "there's too much music for such a subject!", while others hammer "there isn't enough music to interest music-lovers!". Regarding the representation of Auschwitz on stage? Some say it is too realistic, others find it too dramatized. Essentially, English newspapers spontaneously offered the same analysis as the carefully deliberated one of Bolshoi (that has always refused to perform this opera), as the work is "musically" unsuitable.

How can such a cacophony of analyses be explained? Indeed, the first act is slowly set, beginning with the white light of the liner before descending (literally and figuratively) into the hell of Auschwitz. Admittedly, the second act follows and examines in detail a psychological and dramatic exploration combined at the same time with a musical and lyrical intensity. What is precisely remarkable is Weinberg's capacity to manage his time, the progressive building of tension,

the economy of music thus marking the difficult time in the camp, counterbalanced by orchestral and vocal bursts that draw the spectator in.

From listening and studying the music sheets, Dmitri Shostakovich, composer of the Symphony No. 13 Babi Yar and a friend of Weinberg, said he "further grasped the beauty and the grandeur of this music".

Yes, the concentration camps challenge the very question of the irrepressibility of extreme violence. Yes, it's a question of finding a particularly precise approach so as not to fall either into an unhealthy voyeurism, or into an unbearable sense of pathos. The strength of the libretto allows him to beautifully avoid all caricature. "Lisa the SS" who we would like to hate is more complex and interesting than her diplomat husband who has a clean conscience, yet who will finally choose the most shameful attitude. He wants to forget all of his wife's and his country's past, not for her sake, but to preserve his own reputation and social status. What is closest to us becomes the most despicable.

In this London performance, Michelle Breedt played an excellent Lisa, just as good as the version reproduced in the DVD of Bregenz.¹ Giselle Allen as Marta was exceptional. She astounds us with her harrowing song, that does not care about the "prettiness" of the sound in order to reach the truth of the music and of the drama. Her air of grandeur in the second act is of an overwhelming strength.

The tense direction from Sir Richard Armstrong brought out the qualities of the orchestration, sustaining the rhythm without rushing the necessary slowness proper to the narration. The staging by David Pountney and the sets were remarkably efficient, with a constant back-and-forth movement between the deck of the liner and the floor of the camp, as well as the comings and goings of the wagons that in turn serve as the



(1) The DVD was released in 2010 and is available at NEOS (<https://neos-music.com>).

••• barracks, the walls of the camp and as a reminder of the crematorium furnaces.

An addition to the opera in comparison to the book, the character of the Tadeusz, the fiancé and violinist, brings a dramatic climax at the end of the opera: summoned to play a vulgar waltz for the head of the camp and his Nazi acolytes, he interprets *Chaconne* by Bach. It is a lesson and a challenge set by the artist, highly knowledgeable in German music, even if he was Jewish, against impostors in uniform. He paid with his life for this provocation. This theme of the prisoner defending European culture against those who are violating it, is not a fictional invention. It echoes the Terezin Requiem by Josef Bor that tells the true story of conductor Raphaël Schächter who managed to practice and to perform Verdi's *Requiem* in front of Eichmann at the camp of Terezin.

A book about guilt, the incomprehension of others and of oneself (Lisa seems sincere when she complains to her husband that she was hated by all the prisoners), memory, *The Passenger* is also a reflection on love, the necessity of holding onto one's moral values and onto culture like a challenge that is both derisory and supreme against barbarism. *The Passenger* is a real and pure moment of opera, carried out magnificently, about a theme that cannot be more delicate. It waited more than forty years to be played. A few more years of patience are still needed for it to be appreciated for what it is.

At the end of the performance, a slender elderly woman approached to pay tribute, cautiously crossing the rails. It was Zofia Posmysz, the author of the initial text, who lived and survived Auschwitz and who "knew" Lisa. Yes, the Marta of the opera is still alive and by her work and by her presence she is telling us that those who suffered must not be forgotten. ■

Jean-Christophe Le Toquin
(Translation: Sarah Voke)

This text is an adapted and updated version of the chronicle dating from 20 September 2011 written by Jean-Christophe Le Toquin and published in *Res Musica*.

The opera was performed on 10 July 2014 in the Lincoln Center in New York: <http://culture.pl/en/article/operatic-holocaust-onstage-rouses-new-york>



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Interview with...

Reinhard Flender, director of the Peermusic Classical

Peermusic Classical is the European classical music branch of the Peermusic group that was founded in 1928 and that is today the largest music editor worldwide with 600,000 works in its catalogue. ResMusica met with its director Reinhard Flender regarding *The Passenger* by Weinberg.

ResMusica. Mieczyslaw Weinberg is today part of the most important composers of your catalogue. How did you discover this composer who forged most of his career during the Soviet era?

Reinhard Flender: It was from the Quatuor Danel in 1999, and the first movement of the Quartet No.7. At first I was not very impressed, because this movement taken on its own doesn't reveal who Weinberg is. It was with the Quintette that I decided to go to Moscow. Thirty works had been published by Sikorski, and all the rest was available. It was important to move quickly, because it had dragged on for years and another editor was interested in it. We began by the quartets and the Quintette.

And *The Passenger*?

Reinhard Flender: It was only later that I heard of an opera with a theme, how can I put it... that has some-

thing to do with us, that concerned Germans. I was highly impressed by the sheet music, written with such intensity. And there also exists a recording where Weinberg himself sings the entire opera whilst playing the piano. We understand that he had everything in his mind!

How was the opera organised, and why in Bregenz?

Reinhard Flender: I made a proposition to every opera house, including Bregenz. David Pountney, whom I had never met, was the director of this festival. I was shocked when he immediately replied: "We will do this opera. Bring me the sheet music." It was later that I understood that Pountney knew the entire country and spoke Russian. It was a godsend. He worked as a perfectionist, went to Auschwitz and spent a lot of money. He was seized by a passion for the opera. At the time there were seventeen CD's of Weinberg. He bought them all and, in 2006, the opera was played as a concert in Moscow and a recording was sent to him. He loved it immediately.

Because of its libretto?

Reinhard Flender: The fact that Marta (namely Zofia Posmysz, the author of the source text, see *supra*) is still alive, added something. Her book is incredible, very rich and not polemic. There were many theories. Shostakovich could have read Zofia's book and given it to Weinberg, though nothing is certain. The final scene, where Tadeusz plays the *Chaconne* by Bach instead of a waltz, is an idea from the librettist Alexander Medvedev. Zofia was not so happy about this, but it was necessary.

Weinberg composed eight operas, *The Passenger* being the first. What place does this opera hold in the work of the composer?

Reinhard Flender: We already knew that *The Passenger* was key to his work. Weinberg said himself that everything was tied to it, everything he wrote before and after. The more we know his symphonies, the more we see that there is incredible command in the opera. He is Schnittke's predecessor on polystylism. We re-encounter the theme of *Leningrad* by Shostakovich and quotes of Kurt Weill. The most revolutionary is in the shack scenes. Each time the German soldiers enter, we hear the initial theme of Beethoven's Fifth, altered, militarized. This systematic association of the army and of Beethoven is completely crazy... If the musicians



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were aware of it, they would make it clearer. There are also many quotes, which require an in-depth analysis to be heard. And, as Bach quotes himself in his *Passions*, Weinberg recycles material.

The work was played in Bregenz, Warsaw and now in London. Did they have different approaches?

Reinhard Flender: The English musicians played with more individuality, I heard details that I had never previously noticed. It was impressive.

Do you know what is next?

Reinhard Flender: The next interpretation will be in Karlsruhe, with a new production. And then in Tel Aviv, Houston, New York. I was unable to find an opera house that was interested in France and I wonder why... ■

17 October 2011 by Jean-Christophe Le Toquin