

The Passenger, an Opera
La Passagère, un opéra
The Passenger, een opera

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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 (1960) 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 about herself 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 “furthe grasped the beauty and the grandeur of this music”.

Yes, the concentration camps challenge the very question of the irrepresentability 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.

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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 thecomings and goings of the wagons that in turn serve as the...
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 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 four 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 something 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 CDs 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 Lentenryad 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 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 more producive. And then in Tel Aviv, Houston, New York. I was unable to find an opera house that was interested in France and I wonder...