



Transposition

Musique et sciences sociales

9 | 2021

Musique et sexualité

Daniel Elphick, *Music behind the Iron Curtain: Weinberg and his Polish Contemporaries*

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020

Beata Bolesławska-Lewandowska



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transposition/5851>

DOI: [10.4000/transposition.5851](https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.5851)

ISSN: 2110-6134

Publisher

CRAL - Centre de recherche sur les arts et le langage

Electronic reference

Beata Bolesławska-Lewandowska, "Daniel Elphick, *Music behind the Iron Curtain: Weinberg and his Polish Contemporaries*", *Transposition* [Online], 9 | 2021, Online since 15 January 2021, connection on 19 October 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transposition/5851> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.5851>

This text was automatically generated on October 19, 2024.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-SA 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

Daniel Elphick, *Music behind the Iron Curtain: Weinberg and his Polish Contemporaries*

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020

Beata Bolesławska-Lewandowska

REFERENCES

Daniel Elphick, *Music behind the Iron Curtain: Weinberg and his Polish Contemporaries*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 298 p.

- 1 Daniel Elphick is a musicologist specialising in the music of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. His interests range from music analysis to the socio-political contexts of music and musical life. With regards to the music of the past century created in the Soviet Union and the so-called Eastern Bloc, this perspective is particularly crucial as the whole spectrum of musical creativity (as well as in the case of other arts) was included into the sphere of political propaganda serving the communist authorities.
- 2 Mieczysław Weinberg's life reflects many aspects of the complicated history of Eastern Europe in the 20th century. Born in Poland in 1919 as a Polish citizen of Jewish descent, he graduated the Warsaw Conservatoire as a pianist in 1939. After Hitler's attack on Poland on September 1st, 1939, Weinberg joined thousands of Warsaw refugees defecting to the eastern parts of the country. And, like many of them, after the unexpected invasion of the Soviet Union, attacking Poland from the East on September 17th (following the settlements of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, signed by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union on August 23rd), he found himself under the auspices of the Soviet Army. Unable to return to Warsaw, he decided to stay in Minsk (now in Belarus), which became part of the Soviet Union after the invasion. Thus, thanks to this decision, he became a citizen of the Soviet Union and was allowed to continue his musical studies at the Minsk Conservatoire. This is how his professional musical life

began. Later, particularly following the success of his *First Symphony* and after meeting Dmitry Shostakovich and moving to Moscow, he became a part of the Soviet music world, where he was well respected. He never returned to Poland, with the exception of his short visit to Warsaw in 1966 as a member of the official delegation of the Soviet Composers' Union to the Warsaw Autumn festival. He died in Moscow in 1996.

- 3 Elphick begins his book with a crucial question about the composer's identity. The question seems even more important if one considers the book's sub-title: "Weinberg and his Polish Contemporaries". For his whole artistic life, Weinberg was a part of the musical scene in the Soviet Union. He left his native Poland young, as a nearly 20-year-old graduate of the Warsaw Conservatoire. However, in Poland before the outbreak of WWII, he had not been able to make a name for himself as a pianist, and even less as a composer. Even after 1945, while already living in Moscow, the Polish music society only considered him a part of the Soviet delegation of composers when he visited Poland in 1966. In this respect, his situation was quite different from Andrzej Panufnik or Roman Palester, who both emigrated from communist Poland (Palester in 1947, officially announcing his decision to stay abroad in 1950; Panufnik in 1954) as fully respected composers and acknowledged members of Polish musical society, including activities in the Polish Composers' Union. Weinberg's entire professional life was connected to the Soviet Union; for the duration of his lifetime, he was never treated as a Polish composer in Poland.
- 4 Elphick is fully aware of this problem. He states it firmly (and rightly): there is no point in defining Weinberg in the context of one nationality. On the contrary, he proposes to refer to him as a "Polish-Jewish-Soviet composer", the definition which best describes his complicated biography. The author demonstrates that both Jewish and Polish sentiments were extremely close to Weinberg and are fully evident in many of his works. The composer spoke fluent Polish until the end of his life and, as Elphick states, "Poland and Polish music clearly played a key role" for him (p. 263). Poland was the country in which Weinberg was born and where he had spent his childhood and youth. Poland and Polish culture shaped his worldview as a man and an artist. Eventually, Poland was also the soil on which his entire family were murdered in the Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust. Therefore, it is not surprising that the composer's strong sentiment towards Poland resonated in many of his works, culminating perhaps most poignantly in his opera *The Passenger*, with a libretto based on the novel by Zofia Posmysz¹, who was a prisoner at Auschwitz. According to Elphick, the atmosphere of Weinberg's sentiment to his homeland had changed after his visit to Warsaw in 1966, when he realised that Poland governed by the communist authorities had little in common with the country he remembered. Since that moment, Elphick argues, Weinberg's love for Poland turned into nostalgia.
- 5 It should be noted that Weinberg's Polishness was often combined with his Jewishness, as was often the case with Polish-Jewish artists, including the poet Julian Tuwim, whose poetry was particularly familiar to Weinberg. He used Tuwim's poems several times, the most notable example being his *Symphony No. 8 "Kwiaty polskie" (Polish Flowers)*, with the words of Tuwim's most famous poem, praising the beauty of Polish landscapes. The references to Jewish motives and themes, though present in some of his early works (such as *String Quartet No. 5* composed in 1945), became stronger in the composer's later years, especially in compositions dedicated to the memory of his family members, and

culminating in his dramatic and extremely moving *Symphony No. 21 "Kaddish"* (1991), his last large-scale work.

- 6 Elphick's book is not a simple biography or monograph on the composer's life and music. The author sought to undertake a much more challenging and complex task: to describe Weinberg's life and music both in the context of the music of his fellow composers in Poland, and in the context of the socio-political situation in both countries. This task seems risky, at least with regard to my earlier point: the composer had little in common with his Polish contemporaries, and it would be more natural to discuss his output in the light of the Soviet musical life to which he belonged. However, Weinberg's life in the Soviet Union had already been examined by Verena Mogl.² Therefore, Elphick decided to take a different approach. His idea was to analyse music composed in Poland after 1945 and find some comparison with Weinberg's works. It would be impossible to discuss all of Weinberg's music from such a perspective, so he decided to focus solely on string quartets. This was a good decision, providing both a clear line for drawing the evolution of the composer's music and biography, and a concise structure for the book.
- 7 The book proceeds chronologically. It is divided into six main chapters: 1. Weinberg in Warsaw (pp. 15–42), 2. The War (pp. 43–87), 3. Socialist Realism and Socrealizm (pp. 88–130), 4. Avant-Garde(s) (pp. 131–175), 5. Return and Retreat (pp. 176–206) and 6. Late Style(s) (pp. 207–260). It begins with an Introduction (pp. 1–14) and ends with some short Conclusions (pp. 261–265). There are also lists of figures, tables and musical examples (at the beginning of the book), as well as three appendixes, an extended bibliography and an index.
- 8 The author starts each part of his story by describing the historical situation in Poland and/or in the Soviet Union at a given moment, then drawing a picture of the musical life and providing information about Weinberg's biography. After that, he brings selected musical works into the discussion, analysing the music by chosen Polish composers first, and later focusing on Weinberg compositions. This combination gives readers a good orientation in the structure of the book and supplies them with a great deal of information about the composer's biography, as well as about a complex situation of Polish and Soviet musical life in the second half of the 20th century. Elphick definitely made a huge effort to learn about not only the life and music of Mieczysław Weinberg but also the music world in Poland and works composed there. His choices of Polish composers being compared with Weinberg are fully convincing. He starts with Panufnik, whose *Piano Trio* Weinberg premiered in Warsaw in 1936, playing the piano part. Later, he turns his attention to Penderecki's *String Quartet No. 1* (1960) and Lutosławski's single *String Quartet* (1964), as the main representatives of avant-garde trends in Polish music. He also discusses string quartets by Krzysztof Meyer (b. 1943), whose connections with Weinberg seem particularly significant. Meyer is himself the author of 15 string quartets. He is also one of the few Polish composers who stayed in close contact with Soviet colleagues, namely Shostakovich, on whom Meyer wrote a monograph.³ He also knew Weinberg personally, visited him in Moscow and regularly exchanged letters with him. Therefore, Meyer definitely belongs to the composers close to Russian tradition, with his admiration of Shostakovich and his warm feelings for Weinberg as well.
- 9 Among the younger generation of Polish composers, Elphick mentions Eugeniusz Knapik (b. 1951) and Paweł Szymański (b. 1954), placing them in the context of post-

avant-garde music, marked by bringing back some traditional elements into their own works. This is a starting point for discussing Weinberg's late style, characterised by many returns to his own earlier music. The author briefly discusses the younger generation of Soviet composers (Edison Denisov, Arvo Part, Sofia Gubajdulina), showing that their ideas remained rather distant to Weinberg's. He kept his own style, rightly defined by Elphick as "reactive modernism".

- 10 The most challenging part of the book—in the context of music created in Poland—is Chapter 4, devoted to avant-garde(s). In 1956, after years of socialist realism, experiments close to the ideas presented in Darmstadt and Donaueschingen came into the Polish music scene. Elphick provides a great deal of highly interesting information about the official contacts between Polish and Soviet musical societies, underlying the differences in their attitudes: while Polish music turned drastically towards the West after the political relaxation (the so-called "political thaw") in 1956, the Soviet Union kept pursuing socialist realism, which imposed on composers many restrictions, including accusation of "formalism" when musical language was recognised as too sophisticated and too modern. This was why Weinberg's music at the time was only slightly "modernised", while generally keeping the similar "reactive" line. The comparison with Shostakovich seems obvious, but Elphick proves that Weinberg managed to create his own original musical style.
- 11 Elphick's *Music Behind the Iron Curtain: Weinberg and his Polish Contemporaries* definitely deserves attention. In fact, the only problematic aspect, in my view, is the author's differentiation between socialist realism and the Polish "sorealizm". "Sorealizm" is simply the direct translation of "socialist realism" into Polish, and in my opinion, the use of Polish for this term (considering it is the only Polish word in the book) is not only unnecessary but might even be confusing. It might wrongly suggest that there was some kind of Polish version of "socialist realism", which was not the case. The whole doctrine of socialist realism, imposed on Polish composers in 1949, was taken directly from the Soviet model, and there were really no differences. If, as the author seems to suggest, the realisation of the doctrine was different from that of the Soviet Union, this was the result of the Polish Composers' Union strategy, using their own diplomacy and tactics with the party authorities—which resulted in less persecution towards composers. Also, socialist realism in Poland lasted a comparatively short period of time, becoming less strict soon after Stalin's death in 1953, and ending permanently in 1956. However, this slight reservation does not impact my view, that *Music behind the Iron Curtain: Weinberg and his Polish Contemporaries* is a high-quality contribution to the research on the connections between music and politics in both the Soviet Union and Poland during the second half of the last century. Weinberg's complicated biography reflects very well the traumas of the two horrific totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, while his music transcends them, telling us "what it means to be human". The powerful music and fascinating biography engagingly described by the author, make this book recommended reading for anyone interested in the music created behind the Iron Curtain.

NOTES

1. POSMYSZ Zofia, *Pasażerka (Passanger)*, Warszawa, Czytelnik, 1962. The novel was translated into 15 languages. It was also adapted for a feature film by Andrzej Munk (1963). Mieczysław Weinberg wrote his opera in 1968 but its full version was not performed until 2010.
 2. MOGL Verena, “*Juden, die ins Lied sich retten*”: *Der Komponist Mieczysław Weinberg (1919–1996) in der Sowjetunion* [“*Jews who save themselves in song*”: *The Composer Mieczysław Weinber (1919–1996) in the Soviet Union*], Münster, Waxmann, 2017.
 3. MEYER Krzysztof, *Szostakowicz*, Kraków, PWM Edition, 1973 (1st edition), 1986 (2nd edition); German version published in Leipzig in 1980. New version published in Paris (1994); Bergisch Gladbach (1995); Amsterdam (1996); Madrid (1997); Mainz (1998), St. Petersburg (1998); Warszawa (1999); and an extended edition in Mainz (2008).
-

AUTHORS

BEATA BOLESŁAWSKA-LEWANDOWSKA

Beata Bolesławska [Bolesławska-Lewandowska], PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences. She is the author of: *Panufnik* (PWM Edition, 2001), *Górecki. A Portrait in Memory* (PWM Edition, 2013), *Panufnik. Architect of Emotions* (PWM Edition, 2014), *The Life and Works of Andrzej Panufnik (1914–1991)* (Ashgate, 2015), *Mycielski. Noblesse oblige* (PWM Edition, 2018), *The Symphony and Symphonic Thinking in Polish Music since 1956* (Routledge, 2019) and the editor of the two-volume correspondence between Zygmunt Mycielski and Andrzej Panufnik (Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2016 and 2018). She is also co-editor of the “Polish Music Abroad” publication series initiated and published by the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Author of numerous scientific and popularizing articles on topics related to Polish 20th-century music, she also regularly participates in musicological conferences in the country and abroad. She is Chair of the Musicological Section and a member of the Main Board of the Polish Composers’ Union.