

A chorus straight from Auschwitz

As a lost major opera about Nazi death camps comes to London, Jessica Duchen welcomes its composer to the limelight at last

Friday, 16 September 2011



Transports: *The Passenger*

How can anyone put Auschwitz on stage? How can such a raw, terrible topic that arouses such overwhelming sensitivities ever be considered appropriate for operatic treatment? If any opera can succeed, it is *The Passenger* by Mieczyslaw Weinberg, which promises to be different to any attempt we've seen before. It has the ring of exceptional authenticity, for its creators were working from their own personal experiences. And its first-ever stage production is coming to English National Opera on Monday.

The composer lost his entire family in the Holocaust, narrowly escaping with his own life; Zofia Posmysz, the author of the autobiographical novel on which the opera is based, survived three years in Auschwitz. "These people have a right to write about it," says the production's director, David Pountney. "And they have proved this through the intelligence and subtlety with which they've described something that they knew first hand. It's quite different from someone deciding to write a new Auschwitz opera now, which would be questionable."

Composed in 1968 and set in the early 1960s, *The Passenger* concerns a German couple, Lisa and Walter, sailing to Brazil, where Walter is to take up a diplomatic post. On the ship, Lisa is shocked to recognise a woman she believed dead; this prompts her to admit to Walter for the first time that she was once an overseer in

Auschwitz. The stage is split horizontally; below, the Auschwitz memories of Lisa's strange relationship with Marta, the passenger, are pieced together; above, the couple on the boat grapple with the implications of Lisa's revelation. In the shattering climax, Marta's violinist fiancé is ordered to play a waltz to the Auschwitz guards, but launches instead into the Bach D minor Chaconne – symbolising the great German culture that the Nazis defiled. In fury, they haul him away to be shot.

The split-stage idea came directly from the opera's librettist, Alexander Medvedev. Pountney visited him when he was planning the production (sadly, Medvedev died soon after its premiere last year). "He described to me his idea of the boat floating above, with staircases that go down into the hell of Auschwitz," says Pountney. "Having two levels helps to give the Auschwitz side a little objectivity, because it does not try to be completely naturalistic.

"Medvedev also told me that he saw the chorus as being like us," he adds. "They are not portraying inmates at Auschwitz or people on the boat, but instead represent people looking back from a historical perspective and commenting. This serves as a middle layer between the boat and Auschwitz, keeping our objective sensibilities from plunging too deeply into something we can't really describe." That doesn't mean that Auschwitz is kept at a "safe distance". "There are parts when it certainly isn't safe," says conductor Richard Armstrong. "The intensity and focus with which every detail is composed means some of the gentler moments are utterly gut-wrenching."

Pountney does not mince his words when he describes *The Passenger* as "the most significant opera composed in the Russian language since Prokofiev's *War and Peace*". Sad to think, then, that its composer never saw it performed. Despite enthusiastic advocacy from Shostakovich, his friend and champion, the Soviet authorities considered that Weinberg was writing "abstract humanism" and theatres decided against tackling it. It lay unheard until a concert performance as recently as 2005.

Weinberg remains remarkably little-known in the West; Russian musicians and experts recognise his importance, but until now, his reach has been limited.

He was born in Warsaw in 1919, the son of an actress and a composer in the Jewish Theatre. His musical gifts were evident early on, but the Nazi invasion of Poland cut short his plans to study the piano in the US; instead he fled east, to Minsk. His parents and sister were interned in the Lodz ghetto and met their deaths in a concentration camp. When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union he went east again, to Tashkent; here he met his wife, Nataliya, daughter of a celebrated Jewish actor, Solomon Mikhoels.

Shostakovich invited Weinberg to Moscow in 1943; he stayed there for the rest of his life. But anti-Semitic censure continued to plague him. Having survived the mortal dangers of the Second World War, he was imprisoned in the early 1950s for "bourgeois Jewish nationalism". He escaped only thanks to Stalin's death.

No less emotive is the history of his friendship with Shostakovich. Martin Anderson, proprietor of Toccata Press (which has just published a biography of Weinberg by David Fanning), recounts what happened after Weinberg's father-in-law was murdered in an anti-Semitic attack ordered by Stalin in 1948. "When incidents like that took place, most people would keep their distance from the families, out of fear," he says, "but Shostakovich went straight round to see the Weinbergs." The musical

interchange between the two composers was crucial, too. Weinberg declared upfront his indebtedness: "I am a pupil of Shostakovich," he wrote. "Although I've never had lessons from him, I count myself as his pupil, as his flesh and blood."

Why haven't we heard more of Weinberg? Perhaps his idiom was close enough to Shostakovich's to have been simply overshadowed; and his quiet, modest personality may also have had something to do with it: "While Shostakovich lived his life in public, Weinberg didn't seem to think he needed a public persona," Anderson says. "He just kept his head down and got on with writing music."

And what a lot of music he wrote, dazzling in its scope: 22 symphonies, seven operas, 17 string quartets, huge numbers of instrumental sonatas, 40 scores for films and animations, including the Russian version of Winnie the Pooh – the list goes on and on. Quantity is matched by quality, according to Pountney: "He's an equal with Shostakovich and Prokofiev," he insists. "He's a kind of Third Man."

The Passenger could easily have stayed in the cold forever, but for Pountney's theatrical instinct and a stroke of good luck: "After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the state music publishing house was broken up and sold off," he says. "The publishers Peermusic acquired a portion of the Weinberg oeuvre and they sent out a little leaflet which said, 'Opera about Auschwitz by Weinberg, a friend of Shostakovich...' Mine was the one wastepaper basket in which it didn't end up."

"It's immensely powerful," continues Armstrong. "I admire the tautness of the writing and the pertinence of everything – Weinberg was a born theatre composer. It's astonishing, the gentleness of its message. The closing scene is left in the air in the most extraordinary way. Everything is pared down to the absolute minimum in the final reflections."

Pountney's production was unveiled last year at the Bregenz Festival; next it is being taken up by a number of opera houses around Europe, the US and Israel, putting Weinberg's name emphatically back on the musical map.

And there is one more element to bring The Passenger's voyage full circle: Zofia Posmysz herself, now 86, is travelling to London to see the opera of her book.

'The Passenger', ENO, London Coliseum, from 19 September (0871 911 0200, www.eno.org)