

זון מיט א רעגן

“Zun mit a regn”

the Jewish element in the music of

Mieczyslaw Weinberg,

Veniamin Basner

& Dmitri Shostakovich

from folklore to subversive musical language

in the spirit of their friendship

Sovali

Boris Goldenblank or Grigory Sedukh

Alexander Oratovski

Sander Sittig or Paul Prenen

soprano

violin

cello

piano

PROGRAMME

Mieczyslaw Weinberg (Moisei Vainberg) (1919-1996)

Jewish Songs (Yitschok Leyb Peretz), Op. 13 (1943)
arrangement for voice and piano trio by Alexander Oratovski

Introduction

Breytele (Bread Roll)

Vigliid (Cradle Song)

Der jeger (The Hunter)

Oyfn grinem bergele (On the Green Mountain)

Der yesoymes brivele (The Orphan's Letter)

Coda

Sonata for cello solo, No.1, Op. 72 (1960)

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

From Piano Trio No. 2, Op. 67 (1944)

3. Largo

4. Allegretto

- intermission -

Mieczyslaw Weinberg

Jewish Songs (Samuel Galkin), Op. 17 (1944)
arrangement for voice and piano trio by Alexander Oratovski

Di muter (The Mother)

Tsum libn (To Love)

Tife griber, royte leym (Deep Graves, Red Earth)

Tsu di royte kriger (To the Red Soldier)

Veniamin Basner (1925-1996)

Poem, Op. 7 No.1 for violin and piano

Dmitri Shostakovich

Prelude and Fugue No. 8 in F-sharp minor for piano, Op. 87 (1950-51)

From Jewish Folk Poetry, Op. 79 (1948)
arrangement for voice and piano trio by Alexander Oratovski

Zun mit a regn (Sun and Rain)

Shlof mayn kind (Sleep My Child)

Her zhe, Khashe (Listen, Khashe)

Af dem boydem (On the Garret)

Programme notes

Zun mit a regn (Sun and Rain) is a metaphor for laughter and tears and part and parcel of Yiddish music. It is the opening line of Shostakovich's song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry* and a fitting motto for a programme dedicated to the three Russian composers and friends Mieczyslaw Weinberg (Moisei Vainberg) (1919-1996), Veniamin Basner (1925-1996) and Dimitri Shostakovich (1906-1975).

World War Two and the reign of terror in the Soviet Union had a deep impact on the composers. They expressed themselves in their music. The music of the persecuted Jewish people was their source of inspiration - an act of courage in a period when open pronouncements could have fatal consequences. It was often years before the works could be performed for the first time.

The background

The early twentieth century was marked by a renaissance of Jewish culture in Russia in music, literature and the arts. Jewish themes inspired artists like Marc Chagall and the young Jewish composers who founded the Petersburg *Society for Jewish Folk Music* (1908) including Joseph Achron, Mikhail Gnesin, Alexander Krein, Moses Milner, Solomon Rosowsky, Lazare Saminsky, Alexander Weprik and Leo Zeitlin.

The movement was dispersed by the Revolution in 1917. Paradoxically this increased its influence in the world, since some of the top artists emigrated and continued their work elsewhere. The ones who stayed behind were confronted with Soviet cultural policy. Although initially rather tolerant, it gradually grew increasingly antisemitic towards Jewish culture. 'Jewish' became a dirty word. For the Jewish composers the alternatives were to conform or to go underground and 'compose for the desk'. Works on Jewish subjects were no longer played in public.

The musicians of the Petersburg *Society* such as Mikhail Gnesin were nonetheless able to pass the torch on to subsequent generations. Young Shostakovich got to know Gnesin's Jewish music in the production of Gogol's *Revisor* at the Meyerhold Theatre (1926). Meyerhold's version of the play included an orchestra of Jewish musicians. The music they played was composed by Gnesin (*Jewish Orchestra at the City Mayor's Ball*, Op. 41). Shostakovich was the pianist at the performance. Gnesin and Shostakovich crossed paths again later and Gnesin's influence is clear in Shostakovich's 'Jewish' pieces.¹

Shostakovich (1906-1975) was long viewed as a puppet of the Stalin regime until his autobiography *Testimony* (ed. Solomon Volkov, 1979) revealed a completely different man: an inwardly torn artist with a great compassion for the persecuted and the victims of dictatorship. Shostakovich's friendship with Weinberg and Basner, both of Jewish descent, is an aspect of this other man.

Shostakovich was not Jewish himself but had many Jewish friends, such as the great actor Solomon Mikhoels, leader of the Jewish State Theatre in Moscow (Gosset) and later the father-in-law of Mieczyslaw Weinberg. Shostakovich soaked up Jewish culture, attended plays at the Jewish Theatre

and let the Chassidic dances sink in. He no doubt saw the art of Chagall, who designed the sets and costumes for Jewish State Theatre in the early 1920s. Shostakovich was attracted to the modal structure of Jewish folk music. His frequently used musical monogram DSCH (e-e flat-c-b) blended well with the Jewish scales. He felt an affinity with the multifacetedness of Jewish folk music, the tragi-comic quality. As he noted, "There is almost always laughter through tears. This quality of Jewish folk music is close to my idea of what music should be. There always should be two layers..."² The ambiguity of Jewish folk music is well suited to the expression of contradictory feelings. Irony and ambiguity are stylistic devices of early twentieth-century Russian Expressionism in the arts, theatre and music. They are also evident in the works of Shostakovich and Chagall.³

Shostakovich elevated the ambiguity of Jewish folk music into a humanitarian statement against the *Shoah* in the *Piano Trio* Op. 67 and expressed the tragedy using Jewish dance motifs. Solomon Volkov notes, It's just impossible to convey the horror and dread of the Holocaust in words...In the Trio's Finale he (Shostakovich) succeeded in creating a perfect musical symbol for it. He took a Jewish dance - and created a horrible Dance of Death.^{4 5}

Shostakovich's cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, Op.79 - some songs of which will be performed in the programme in the original Yiddish version⁶ - was a requiem for Solomon Mikhoels, who was murdered on Stalin's orders in 1948. The cycle is one of the masterpieces of the twentieth century.

Some of Shostakovich's *Preludes and Fugues* Op. 87 for piano solo (1950-51), are based on Jewish themes. Fugue No. 8 (in f-sharp minor) is based on a hazzanout melody sung at the Yom Kippur service.⁷ Shostakovich created a (now lost) version of for four hands of the *Preludes and Fugues* that he played with Weinberg.⁸

The music of **Mieczyslaw Weinberg**, a pianist and composer from Warsaw, was permeated with the Jewish tradition. Although rated as one of the great Soviet composers, he never got real recognition. In *Sovietskaya Musika*, a musicologist (quoted by Joachim Braun) notes, "[His fate was determined by] the contradiction between the high and deserved recognition of Weinberg's talent in professional musical circles and his relatively small popularity in wider circles of listeners."⁹

Weinberg grew up in the atmosphere of the Jewish Theatre in Warsaw, where his father was a violinist and conductor. He fled to the USSR after the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939. First to Minsk, where he studied composition at the Conservatory, and when the German army advanced in 1941, to Tashkent.

Shostakovich's music opened up a new world for him. After completing his First Symphony in 1943, he sent the manuscript to the master for appraisal. Shostakovich invited him to come to Moscow. An inspiring friendship developed. Weinberg was often the first to play Shostakovich's compositions. Shostakovich helped Weinberg, and his works were performed by the greatest Russian musicians - Kondrashin, Barshai, Rostropovich. (All this changed after Shostakovich's death.)

Weinberg was arrested in February 1953 during the persecution of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia in the last year of Stalin's regime, mainly because he was married to the daughter of Solomon Mikhoels. Shostakovich filed a

petition to Secret Police Chief Beria for Weinberg's release. Weinberg was saved by Stalin's death less than a month later and rehabilitated. Fearful of a new arrest, Weinberg left his archives for safekeeping with Basner, whom he trusted more than anyone else. Weinberg dedicated many of his works to Basner and Shostakovich, and Shostakovich dedicated his tenth string quartet to Weinberg.

Weinberg's family perished in Warsaw and his music was dominated by the *Shoah* and greatly influenced Shostakovich and Veniamin Basner and vice versa. His attitude towards the Jewish idiom was totally natural. For him the Jewish melos was a colloquial language.¹⁰ He did not "simply quote Chassidic or Jewish folk melodies; his thinking is tragic."¹¹ The multifaceted quality of Jewish music was attributed with dialectic quality.

In *Jewish Songs*, Op. 13 based on lyrics by the Polish Jewish poet Yitskhok Leyb Perets, Weinberg playfully depicted the uncomplicated world of children, but in the tragic *Orphan's Letter*, the children's world has been lost. In *Jewish Songs*, Op. 17 based on lyrics by Samuel Galkin about the war, tragedy and irony are combined in Weinberg interpretation of Galkin's text, simultaneously projecting different emotions.¹²

The *Sonata for Cello Solo*, No.1, Op. 72 (1960), dedicated to Mstislav Rostropovich, consists of three contrasting movements *Adagio – Allegretto – Allegro*, all based on the same germ cell motif.

Ambiguity is also evident in the Jewish-inspired works of violinist and composer Veniamin Basner (1925-1996). Basner was a great admirer of Shostakovich and wanted to attend his composition lessons but did not dare approach him. Shostakovich helped Basner along by asking him to light his cigarette. Shostakovich soon became Basner's teacher.

Basner's talents as a composer were in various musical categories ranging from serious to popular. "The love for music in the simple Jewish families of cobblers ... had a strong impact on the ... composer."¹³

He gained fame in Russia for his film scores and popular songs. Basner made a few brilliant arrangements of some of Weinberg's and Shostakovich's works (Weinberg's *Jewish Songs*, Op. 13 and Shostakovich' *Katherina Ismailova*). The charming violin piece *Poem*, Op. 7, No. 1 is an early work. Later in life Basner wrote a musical *Yevreiske Styastye* (*Jewish Luck*, 1994) based on David Friedman's story *Mendel Marants*. A film of the same title *Yiddish Glick* (1925) was made by the Jewish State Theatre featuring Solomon Mikhoels. But apart from the title there is no resemblance between the musical and the film, which is based on a story by Sholem Aleichem.

Sofie van Lier, Amsterdam, 23 September 2004

Footnotes

- 1) See Sheinberg, Esti, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2000 and Kravets, Nelly, Shostakovich's "From The Jewish Folk Poetry" and Weinberg's "Jewish Songs", in *Dmitri Shostakovitsch und das jüdische Erbe*, Studia Slavica Musicologica, No.18, VEK-Berlin, 2001, pp. 279-297.
- 2) Volkov, Solomon (ed.), *Testimony, the Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, Harper & Row, 1979.
- 3) Sheinberg, Esti, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich*, p. 316.

- 4) Volkov, Solomon, Dmitri Shostakovich's "Jewish Motive", A Creative Enigma (1985 and 1991), in: *Dmitri Schostakowitsch und das jüdische Erbe* (Schostakowitsch-Studien, Band 3), *Studia Slavica Musicologica* 18, Verlag Ernst Kuhn - Berlin, 2001, p.14.
- 5) The second theme of the Finale in Shostakovich's Second Piano Trio op. 67 was sung to Shostakovich by the artist Solomon Gerschov, a student of Chagall's from Vitebsk. See Sofia Khentova, *Udivitelnyi Shostakovich*, St. Petersburg 1993, p. 93, quoted in Nelly Kravets, *Shostakovich's "From the Jewish Folk Poetry" and Weinberg's "Jewish Songs"*.
- 6) Braun, Joachim, *Shostakovich's Jewish Songs 'From the Jewish Folk Poetry', Op.79: Introductory Essay with Original Yiddish Folk Text Underlay*. Tel Aviv: World Council for Yiddish and Jewish Culture and Ministry of Culture, 1989.
- 7) Braun, Joachim, The Double Meaning of Jewish Elements in Dimitri Shostakovich's Music, in *Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 1, 1985, p. 70.
- 8) J. Broido, *Jevreiski tema v tvortjestje M.S. Vainberga*, thesis N.A.Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory, St. Petersburg, 2001.
- 9) Braun, Joachim, Jews in Soviet Culture, in Miller, Jack (ed.), *Jews in Soviet Culture*, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, London, 1984, p. 92.
- 10) J. Broido, *Jevreiski tema v tvortjestje M.S. Vainberga*, thesis N.A.Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory, St. Petersburg, 2001.
- 11) Mikhoëls, N., quoted in Nelly Kravets, Shostakovich's "From the Jewish Folk Poetry" and Weinberg's "Jewish Songs", in *Dmitri Shostakovitsch und das jüdische Erbe*, *Studia Slavica Musicologica*, No.18, VEK-Berlin, p. 292.
- 12) Kravets, Nelly, Shostakovich's "From The Jewish Folk Poetry" and Weinberg's "Jewish Songs", in: *Dmitri Shostakovitsch und das jüdische Erbe*, *Studia Slavica Musicologica*, No.18, VEK-Berlin.
- 13) Braun, Joachim, *Jews in Soviet Music*, p.93.

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