

Back into the Musical Spotlight

The Sovali Consort presents “Zun mit a regn” (Sun and Rain) featuring the Jewish songs and chamber music of Mieczyslaw Weinberg, Veniamin Basner en Dmitri Shostakovich.

Interview with Sovali by Sheila Gogol in *Levend Joods Geloof* (Living Jewish Faith), the magazine of the Reform Jewish Congregation in Amsterdam – 1 December 2004 (translated from the Dutch).

I am talking to Amsterdam singer, organiser, musicologist and nowadays more or less expert on Russian Jewish music Sofie van Lier (Sovali,) on how she came to compile a program on these three composers.

In St. Petersburg we were performing our Gnesin program in September 2003, when a concert organiser approached me and said he wanted to work with us. He suggested we come and perform at a festival featuring the music of Veniamin Basner (1925-1996), unknown to me.

I asked around and learned that Basner had been a friend of composer Mieczyslaw Weinberg (1919-1996). Weinberg's music I already knew a little, his Fourth Chamber Symphony is fantastic! And I knew he composed two Jewish Song Cycles, one of which I heard had been arranged by Basner.

I thought it would be a good idea to combine the two composers in a program. But then Shostakovich (1906-1975) should also be part of it because he and Weinberg were great friends and Basner had been a student and later a friend of Shostakovich. They were a threesome. That's how the idea for our program was born. The cooperation with the Russian organiser ended due to financial troubles. But we decided to organize the concerts ourselves in the Netherlands and continued researching the music.

At first Weinberg's Jewish Song Cycles and Basner's arrangement were impossible to find. Luckily I found Weinberg's biographer, Per Skans. He directed me to a musicologist in St. Petersburg, Julia Broido. She had written her final paper on the Jewish themes in Weinberg's music and had Weinberg's scores. The song cycles to Yiddish poems by Yitzchak Leyb Peretz and Shmuel Halkin, one about the children's world and the other about the war, turned out to be marvellous. With the Yiddish transcribed in the Cyrillic alphabet, the lyrics of Halkin were hard to decipher ... These songs are essential to the program. There is a connection with Shostakovich's cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry*. Weinberg is often seen as a Shostakovich adept and quite rightly so. He came from Warsaw. His father was a violinist at the Jewish theatre and young Weinberg played the piano. When the war broke out he fled to the east, to the Soviet Union, where he studied composition at the conservatory in Minsk. There he came into contact with Shostakovich's music and as he said himself, this changed his life.

When the Germans invaded Minsk on the evening of his graduation, he fled to Tashkent in Uzbekistan. He met Shlomo Mikhoels, the great actor and director of the Jewish Theatre who had also left his home, and married his daughter. Mikhoels really is silently present in our whole program. He was a central personality in the Jewish cultural life in the Soviet Union and not only Weinberg's father-in-law but also a great friend of Shostakovich. (Chagall made the decors for Mikhoels' stage productions.)

From Tashkent, Weinberg sent his first symphony for appraisal to Shostakovich, who invited him to come to Moscow. It was the beginning of an inspiring lifelong friendship. Weinberg was an excellent pianist and often the first to play Shostakovich's works. Together they played Shostakovich's compositions four-hand piano for the board of the Composers Union.

Weinberg also influenced Shostakovich, especially with his Jewish songs (1943-44) composed at least four years before Shostakovich's Jewish song cycle (1948)!

It was not easy to find information about Weinberg and Basner. Much more is known about Shostakovich because he is famous and controversial. There was a time when musicians did not want to play his works in the Netherlands because he was thought to be a pawn of the Soviet regime. Shostakovich's *Testimony*, recorded by Solomon Volkov and published in the West after Shostakovich's death, presents a totally different picture. It depicts an inwardly torn artist who empathized with the victims of the regime, though as a prominent Soviet composer he had to read official statements in public. Otherwise he would have been signing his own death sentence.

Shostakovich was not Jewish, but some say he was more Jewish than many Jews. He was interested in Jewish folk music and said 'I never tire of delighting in it; it is multifaceted, it can appear happy while it is tragic.' Much of his music deals with political situations and the performances had to wait until the times were more favourable.

Some authors feel the song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry, Opus 79* was meant as a requiem for Mikhoels, who was murdered in 1948. The lyrics are from a volume of Yiddish poetry Shostakovich found at a book stand in Moscow. The first song starts with the words *Zun mit a regn*, sun and rain, a metaphor for laughter and tears, which we took as our title. Alexander Oratovski arranged Weinberg's first song cycle and four of Shostakovich's songs for our ensemble – voice, piano, violin and cello.

Following the example of Bach, Shostakovich wrote *24 Preludes and Fugues*, a few of which have Jewish themes. Our pianist Paul Prenen plays *Prelude and Fugue No. 8 in F-sharp* in our program. With violist Boris Goldenblank he plays *Poem, Opus, 7, No. 1*, an early violin piece by Basner (1950), and Alexander Oratovski plays Weinberg's *Sonata for cello solo, no. 1, Opus 72* (1960).

Basner's widow gave us the score of Basner's musical *Jewish Luck* (1994) which has some delightful songs. Alexander Oratovski arranged three of them. The libretto by Boris Pantser is based on David Friedman's story *Mendel Marants*. A film *Yiddish Glick* (1925) was made by the Jewish State Theatre featuring Shlomo 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.

The music of many Jewish composers who were marginalized by political pressure still dwells in the shadows. It should be performed more. The music deserves it.

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