Into the Light:

Mieczyslaw Weinberg’s Five Pieces for Flute and Piano

The author premiered this “new” work nearly 70 years after its composition by Mieczyslaw Weinberg, a prolific composer and Shostakovich protégé who survived both Soviet and Nazi persecution.

by Mimi Stillman

One of my very important artistic goals is to expand the flute repertoire through commissions. It was, however, a chance meeting rather than a commission that brought to my attention a superb work that I now offer to the flute community. In August 2011, I met with Bret Werb, the musicologist at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., to get his advice on a project I was planning on the music of the Holocaust. Toward the end of our conversation, Werb showed me a facsimile of a flute and piano work by Mieczyslaw Weinberg he had picked up in St. Petersburg, saying he could not find references to any public performances since shortly after it was written in 1947 and published by the Soviet Composers’ Union the following year.

Playing through it, I was instantly captivated by the beauty and depth of the piece. This fortuitous meeting resulted in a nearly four-year journey of exploration of Mieczyslaw Weinberg’s Five Pieces for Flute and Piano and his life and music. I had the privilege of giving the United States premiere of the work with my duo pianist Charles Abramovic on my Dolce Suono Ensemble series in Philadelphia in 2013, with subsequent performances including for the 2014 Annual National Flute Association Convention in Chicago and on concert tours.

The theme of freedom is apt in the case of Weinberg, a brilliant artist who suffered personal tragedy at the hands of both the Nazis and the Soviets. For Weinberg and his fellow artists working under the Soviet regime, artistic expression was fraught with the threat of censorship, suppression, imprisonment, and murder. He was well known through much of his career, but his music was never very familiar in the West and sank into obscurity towards the end of his life. In recent years, Weinberg’s music has enjoyed a revival internationally and new published editions by Peer International.

I was unfamiliar with Weinberg’s music when I first encountered Five Pieces, and I was filled with questions. Could the turmoil of Weinberg’s life and times be heard in the piece? Why did such a great piece languish in the archives of the State Conservatory? How do we understand Five Pieces in the context of Weinberg’s oeuvre as a whole? I turned to the life of the composer, as creator and as man, to shed light on the piece.

Dmitri Shostakovich, above, and Weinberg were friends throughout their lives.
Creativity and Survival
The two features that stand out the most in approaching Weinberg are creativity and survival. He was astoundingly prolific: 22 symphonies, seven operas, more than 40 film and animation scores, and numerous other orchestral, chamber, and solo works in addition to film scores and circus pieces that he did not include in his numbered catalogue. He composed constantly, almost compulsively, saying in one of his final interviews that "I believe that every moment in the life of a real artist consists in some sense of work...Work not only at the writing desk but also work in observation, in the absorption of sounds, colours, motion and the rhythms of reality into oneself. I am always working."

As for the element of survival, Weinberg’s life was marked by loss. His family was murdered in the Holocaust, and he suffered persecution as a Jew and as an artist under Stalin. Weinberg was born in Warsaw in 1919 into a Jewish family for whom music was an integral part of life. His father was a violinist, composer, and conductor for the Jewish theater, and Weinberg began playing piano and composing and even joining his father at work while still a child. Weinberg saw the panic in Warsaw after the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939. Men were ordered to evacuate, and he hastily set out on foot for the Eastern border. He was never to see his family again; more than 20 years later, he learned they had been murdered at the Trawniki concentration camp in Eastern Poland.

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Weinberg was admitted to Soviet territory as a refugee, settling first in Minsk, where he studied composition at the conservatory, then in Tashkent, when he again had to flee the Nazis upon their invasion of the Soviet Union. Despite the dislocation and tragedy, or perhaps because of it, Weinberg composed through all the upheaval. In his writings he suggests that music, and the very act of composition, gave meaning to his being the sole survivor in his family and therefore to his life itself.

Weinberg wrote Five Pieces for Flute and Piano at one of the most momentous periods in his life, both for the establishment of his career and for the danger he and his family experienced at the hands of Stalin. In 1943, Weinberg moved to Moscow at the invitation of Dmitri Shostakovich, who had been impressed with the younger composer’s music when he saw the score of his first symphony.
The two developed a friendship that would last until Shostakovich's death in 1975. Weinberg would later write, "I was not a pupil of Shostakovich but his school formed the basis of my creative work." Weinberg and Shostakovich regularly showed all their new pieces to each other, engaged in a friendly race to write the most string quartets, and played and recorded piano versions of their symphonic works. In Moscow, Weinberg had his concert works performed by the leading musicians of the day and wrote film scores as a large part of his income.

Storm clouds gathered in the years after World War II, despite the Soviet victory. Stalin's government issued constant propaganda extolling the achievements of Russian scientists and intellectuals and began suppressing "foreign" influences in Russian culture, namely the Jews. This was dangerous for Weinberg not only because he was a Jewish composer with a high profile, but because his father-in-law was one of the leading Jewish intellectuals in Russia, the writer and theater director Solomon Mikhoels, who served the state at the helm of the Jewish anti-Fascist committee during World War II.

"I Envy Him"

It is impossible to ascertain exactly why Five Pieces fell out of public view after its publication by the Soviet Composers' Union in 1948, but the disastrous events of that year may well have had something to do with it. In January 1948, Mikhoels was murdered on orders from Stalin. His daughter and Mieczyslaw Weinberg's first wife, Natalya Vovsi-Mikhoels, later recounted that she considered his days were numbered after he was no longer useful to Stalin as an anti-Fascist Jew during the war. The grieving Weinbergs received Shostakovich in their apartment, who

Further Reading


famously is quoted as saying about the murdered writer, "I envy him," a rare instance of the composer revealing the extent of the fear with which he and his fellow artists lived.4

Almost simultaneously, Stalin’s cultural deputy Andrei Zhdanov tightened censorship of artists and returned to a closely regulated, anti-Western, socialist agenda in the arts. He led an "anti-formalist" purge, in which Weinberg, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Khachaturian, and other composers were persecuted and their music suppressed.

Weinberg wrote about living in constant dread for five years after these events, until his own imprisonment in 1953. In yet another dramatic instance of Weinberg’s ability to survive, due to the death of Stalin and probably also because of a letter written by Shostakovich in his defense, he was one of the lucky few who was released from Stalin’s prisons rather than being sent to a gulag or being murdered.

In some of his works, Weinberg embedded messages about the struggle for personal or artistic freedom. Sometimes, his pieces met with censorship: his Children’s Songs, Op. 13, was originally titled “Jewish Songs” on Weinberg’s 1943 manuscript, but the title was changed when it was published in Moscow (in 1944 and 1945) because of official opposition to overt Jewish themes. Despite the ominous environment in which Weinberg composed his Five Pieces, this work cannot be explicitly tied to the political context in its interpretation. Throughout his life Weinberg dedicated pieces to his family members who had perished in the Holocaust; however, Five Pieces does not bear a dedication.

Five Pieces

Five Pieces for Flute and Piano (1947), about 17 minutes in duration, is a substantial work in the flute and piano repertoire. It is interesting to note its chronological proximity to Prokofiev’s great Sonata for Flute and Piano (1943). Both works precede by several decades major flute pieces by prominent Soviet composers such as Edison Denisov and Sofia Gubaidulina, their works dating from the 1960s–1970s at the earliest. Some of Weinberg’s other flute solo and chamber works include the Concerto for Flute and String Orchestra, Op. 75 (1961), Trio for Flute, Viola, and Harp, Op. 127 (1979), and Flute Concerto #2, Op. 148 (1987).

Five Pieces for Flute and Piano is a suite of contrasting character pieces. Each one bears a generic title, a compositional practice common to Weinberg and Shostakovich. Other than “Landscape,” the first piece, and “Melody,” the fourth piece, the remaining pieces are simply entitled “First Dance,” “Second Dance,” and “Third Dance.” One might expect the pieces to be all of comparable length, but the third piece is considerably longer than the others. All together, the emotional impact of the work is striking. Through performing and listening to the set as a whole, I have found it to be unexpectedly powerful, going well beyond the sum of its parts.

Three of the pieces grow out of works Weinberg wrote during World War II. “Second Dance” is a transcription of his Capriccio, Op. 11 (1943), and “Melody” is derived from Aria, Op. 9 (1942), both for string quartet. The “Third Dance” originated as Gigue, the final movement of his Suite, Op. 26 (1939–45) for chamber orchestra.

“Landscape” is a lyrical movement with copious rubato and silences between many of the phrases and between flute and piano lines, connoting a sense of spaciousness that can be interpreted as the natural panorama suggested by the title. This sparseness is characteristic of one mode in Weinberg’s writing, and one he shares with Shostakovich. The work opens with a solo flute melody quoting Debussy’s prelude La fille aux cheveux de lin. We have every reason to believe Weinberg was consciously evoking Debussy here; he quoted repertoire works in other compositions for solo instrument, such as in his Flute Concerto #2, in which he embedded Gluck’s Dance of the Blessed Spirits and Bach’s Badinerie. The thematic material of “Landscape” is clear, alternating between the cantabile, Debussy-esque material and an impish capriccioso e rubato motif introduced as the flute’s second theme.

The next two pieces are named “First Dance” and “Second Dance.” The first one is a brief Allegretto in duple meter, in which flute and piano play music that is sometimes elegant, sometimes
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ponderous. The piano sets the tone here, opening with incisive music that bears comparison with the pianistic writing of Prokofiev and Shostakovich. Also characteristic of this group of Russian composers’ style is a march-like beat. After establishing the 2/4 rhythm, Weinberg lets it spin out of control with chromatically winding flute passages and an interruption of the march with an incidence of 5/8 meter.

In the third piece, “Second Dance,” the Allegretto dance is in triple meter, with Weinberg calling for rubato in music that cycles through a variety of shifting styles, from a classical-sounding minuet to an off-kilter waltz, again with contrasting lightness and heaviness. In interpreting this piece, my duo pianist and I experimented with many different tempi in striving for the right character. The marking of Allegretto con grazia e rubato, with articulations and tempo indications shaping the phrases, pointed to a neo-Classicism in our approach: that we should play with a lightness and rhythmic profile reminiscent of Haydn. This approach bore fruit in bringing out the charm of the opening dance theme of the music and threw into relief the contrast with the Agitato and more forceful sections in 5/8.

The fourth piece, “Melody,” is the emotional core of the set, a soulful, at times anguished song. Could this be an echo of the threatening world that Weinberg inhabited and a foreshadowing of what was to come? It seems to create a world unto itself despite its brevity. Rich harmonies in the piano flesh out the flute’s spinning lines modulating away from the ultimate D minor sonority in this most Romantic style work in the set. The work closes with “Third Dance,” a presto that engages flute and piano in playful, jaunty dialogue. The toy-soldier crispness of the opening motif recurs throughout, with both members of the duo engaging in virtuosic passages culminating in a rousing close.

Monumental Artist
Weinberg wrote monumental works reflecting on the cataclysmic events into which he was swept, such as his powerful opera The Passenger (1968) on a Holocaust theme and Symphony #21, Op. 152 “Kaddish” (1991), and on a more intimate scale, pieces memorializing his murdered family members such as his Symphony #13, Op. 115 (1975), dedicated to the memory of his mother on the 35th anniversary of her death, and his String Quartet #16, Op. 130 (1981).

Though Weinberg does not explicitly reference the events of his time in Five Pieces for Flute and Piano, his life story provides a compelling context in which to understand the music. Weinberg’s unwavering determination to create works of beauty in the face of suppression and personal tragedy is a triumph of artistic freedom and the human spirit.

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Endnotes
3. Weinberg wrote another flute and piano work, Twelve Miniatures for Flute and Piano, Op. 29, around the same time, so it is possible that two flute and piano works simply were redundant in terms of the exposure they could receive, and that this contributed to Five Pieces falling out of public view.
4. Fanning, 60.