

# Die Passagierin, Bregenz Festival, Austria

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Published: July 27 2010 23:27 | Last updated: July 27 2010 23:27

A forgotten opera about the Holocaust, penned by protagonists who experienced its horrors, is the astonishing find of this year's Bregenz Festival.

Mieczyslaw Weinberg (1919-96), a Polish Jew who fled to Russia during the second world war, was effectively exiled twice: once when the Nazis forced him from his homeland, and again when the Soviet establishment rejected his music as conservative. *Die Passagierin*, Weinberg's shattering intense 1968 opera, receives its first ever staging this summer in Bregenz.

Its story, the largely autobiographical narrative of survivor Zofia Posmysz, is grim and complex. Told largely from the perspective of perpetrator Lisa, an SS officer at Auschwitz, it is a tale of guilt and denial, of victim and oppressor, lies and truth, of fear, courage and love. Weinberg's opera is superbly crafted. In style, his music recalls Shostakovich, though the reverse could also be true – the two composers were mutual admirers. Weinberg quotes effortlessly from Russian and Polish sacred music, jazz, Johann Strauss and Bach, borrowing descriptive elements to serve a story told with awful clarity.

Stage director David Pountney spent extensive time with Posmysz while devising a production that treads carefully between the literal and the figurative. As the production shifts from past to present, Johan Engels' set moves us between the white upper deck of the cruise ship on which Lisa re-encounters former prisoner Martha to the grey horrors of Auschwitz below. They are images we know, but Pountney and his team steer just clear of pathos, helped by Weinberg's ineluctable music and a superb cast. On the podium, Teodor Currentzis is a force of nature, emanating both wild energy and ferocious organisational skill. He can drive and structure, but he also gives the poignant moments room to breathe.

That *Die Passagierin* had to wait so long to see the light of day is tragic. Two days before his death, Weinberg told librettist Alexander Medwedew that he regretted never having heard his opera. To comfort him, Medwedew promised to listen twice as hard to the premiere – once for himself, once for the composer.

Medwedew was too ill to attend last weekend's premiere. He died on Monday. The onus is on us to listen now for both of them.