

'The Passenger' Gets Long Awaited Full Staging at Bregenz Festival



Karl Foster

A new production of the Holocaust drama “The Passenger,” by the Russian composer of Polish birth Mieczyslaw Weinberg, is included in the Bregenz Festival.

By GEORGE LOOMIS

BREGENZ, AUSTRIA — [Verdi](#)’s “Aida” has returned for its second season on the Bregenz Festival’s floating stage, one of Europe’s premiere [opera](#)-for-the-masses venues. But tucked away adjacent to the stadium-style seating is Bregenz’s festival house, a sleek modern theater of traditional size, where a quite different brand of operatic entertainment takes place.

Recent years have trained the spotlight on seldom heard works by 20th-century composers such as Ernst Krenek and Karol Szymanowski, a process that continues this summer with two operas by the Russian composer of Polish birth Mieczyslaw Weinberg, most notably his Holocaust drama “The Passenger.”

Weinberg, a close friend and protégé of [Shostakovich](#), lost close relatives in the Warsaw ghetto, yet, having fled to Russia, remained victimized by anti-Semitism. Stalin had him imprisoned, but he was released thanks to the intercession of Shostakovich, whom Weinberg revered as his teacher, though he never formally studied with him.

“The Passenger,” based on a novel by the Auschwitz survivor Zofia Posmysz, is set in the late 1950s aboard an ocean liner bound from Europe to Brazil, where Lisa and her husband, Walter, a West German diplomat, are headed so he can take a new post. But her composure is shattered when she fears she recognizes a woman who, like herself, has an Auschwitz past, albeit a very different one: Martha, “the passenger,” was an inmate, while Lisa was an SS overseer (unbeknownst to her husband, until now).

Despite the advocacy of Shostakovich, Weinberg, who finished “The Passenger” in 1968, could not find a theater to produce it. The issue of Jewish suffering during the war was a touchy one under the Soviets because they thought it detracted from the country’s enormous human loss. In any case, “The Passenger” failed the primary requirement of the artistic doctrine of Socialist Realism, which was to exalt Soviet life. Only in 2006 was it performed, in a semi-staged performance at Moscow’s Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Music Theater.

Bregenz’s full staging of the opera, a co-production with the Teatr Wielki, Warsaw; the English National Opera, London; and the Teatro Real, Madrid, is its first.

The core of the drama is Lisa’s step-by-step realization that the passenger is indeed Martha. At first Lisa learns from a steward that the passenger has a British passport, and the initial notes of “Rule Britannia,” sounded by the orchestra, suggest her temporary relief. But the audience quickly gains a sense of the correct identity from the many flashbacks to Auschwitz, which occupy well over half the opera. In appalling succession, we are led through details of camp life: the arrival of new prisoners, manifestations of the will to live, a birthday party, expressions of doubts about the existence of God, the guards’ boredom, and the grim moment when identification numbers are read out, announcing those about to die.

That moment is marked by a return of the music that opened the opera — a blistering eruption of timpani followed by snare drum in machine-gun style. But during the ocean-going scenes, a languid alto sax is often heard playing music in fox-trot rhythm. Moments of high intensity are underscored by music in an aggressive, Shostakovich-like vein, with screaming woodwinds and angry brass.

The musical and dramatic climax comes when Martha’s fiancé, Tadeusz, a violinist, is forced to play the commandant’s favorite waltz (a cheap but catchy tune) at a concert but instead breaks into Bach’s Chaconne in D minor. As angry officers lead Tadeusz to his death, Bach’s theme, transformed, leads to shattering music of despair.

Powerful though “The Passenger” is, one can’t help but wonder what Shostakovich himself might have done with this material. Much of the orchestral music consists of single melodic lines, sometimes over sustained bass notes. The scenes in the camp sometimes go on too long, whereas Shostakovich might have found a way to inject them with greater musical tension and otherwise given the opera a tighter musical profile.

In any case, the work was brilliantly served by David Pountney’s production. Johan Engels’s two-level set, with the ship above and the camp below — bleakly characterized by railroad tracks and wooden bunks — facilitated the shift in action from one to the other. Marie Jeanne Lecca’s realistic costumes, which dressed all those on board ship in white, heightened the contrast.

Elena Kelessidi’s radiant soprano communicated Martha’s reserves of psychological strength, and the mezzo Michelle Breedt excelled as the guilt-plagued Lisa. Strong performances also came from Roberto Saccà (Walter), Artur Rucinski (Tadeusz) and Svetlana Doneva (Katya, whose Russian folk song is a musical high point).

The conductor **Teodor Currentzis’s** broad gestures summoned up a cogent performance of powerful sweep, although he may have miscalculated by having the Chaconne played by a single violin (as Bach wrote it) rather than (as per Weinberg) all the orchestral violins. Effectively, Lisa, Walter and other Germans sang in a German translation of Alexander Medvedev’s Russian-language libretto.

In a sad coincidence, Mr. Medvedev died a few days after the premiere. With Weinberg having died in 1996, only Ms. Posmysz, 86, who served as a consultant for the production, is left. She received a standing ovation following the premiere.

The Passenger. Directed by Teodor Currentzis. *Bregenz Festival, Austria.*