

NAXOS

WEINBERG

Cello Sonatas

Dmitry Yablonsky, Cello

Hsin-Ni Liu, Piano



Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996):

Cello Sonatas

There is something about the number three that exerts a powerful and subconscious influence on humanity. This figure is central to major religions like Buddhism and Christianity, but it also permeates daily life, appearing in such expressions as 'the three Rs' and 'three cheers'. In music, too, commentators have tended to list things in threes: 'the three Bs' (Bach, Beethoven, Brahms) or the three Viennese Classical masters Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.

When it comes to music in the Soviet Union, there is a similar temptation to group people in threes. The trouble here, however, is that things do not quite work out. In drawing up a trinity of great twentieth-century Russian composers, most musicians would not hesitate to allocate the first two places to Prokofiev and Shostakovich, though they might argue about the precise ranking. But which other luminary would they choose in order to arrive at the magic number three? Schnittke, Khachaturian, Myaskovsky... The list of contenders is lengthy, so one should be cautious of categorical statements like 'Mieczysław Weinberg was the third great Soviet composer'. Nevertheless, in his adoptive Russia, Weinberg was, as Shostakovich remarked, 'one of the most outstanding composers of the present day'.

Born in Warsaw on 8th December 1919, Mieczysław Weinberg grew up in a highly musical Jewish household, and at the age of twelve entered the Warsaw Conservatory, which was then directed by Karol Szymanowski. There he earned lasting fame for his formidable sight-reading ability, and by the time he completed the piano course in 1939 he was also showing promise as a talented young composer. He was then invited by Joseph Hofmann to continue his studies in the United States, but these plans went badly awry, for in the late summer the Nazis invaded Poland. Weinberg took refuge in the relative safety of the Soviet Union in a move that must have seemed depressingly familiar, for in the early years of the century several of

his relations had escaped to Poland after the Bessarabian pogroms of 1903 and 1905. No members of Weinberg's immediate family survived the German occupation of Poland. They all perished in the Trawniki concentration camp, most likely in the grotesquely-named 'Operation Harvest Festival'.

Weinberg took shelter in Minsk, the chief city of Belorussia, where Soviet officialdom required him to be known as Moisei Samuilovich Vainberg – complete with Russian-style patronymic. Henceforth he rarely used the Polish version of his name, even though that remained his preferred spelling. In Minsk he took lessons from Vassily Zolotaryov, a composition teacher who had studied with Balakirev, Lyadov and Rimsky-Korsakov, and whose wider interests included the folk-music of Turkmenistan.

Minsk did not remain safe for very long, because in 1941 Germany invaded the USSR. For the second time in two years Weinberg now migrated eastwards, this time to the historic city of Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, where he found work at the opera house. Within a year he had written an opera called *The Sword of Uzbekistan*, which suggests that Zolotaryov's interest in the music of the central Asian republics had made an impression on his young pupil. But the two most important events of his life in Tashkent were his marriage to Natalia Vovsi, daughter of the famous Jewish actor Solomon Mikhoels, and his meeting with Shostakovich, who was so impressed by Weinberg's *Symphony No. 1* that he urged his new friend to move to Moscow, which he did in 1943.

In 1948 the Party's Central Committee Secretary, Andrei Zhdanov, unleashed his ideological cultural doctrine (*zhdanovschina*), which attempted to make Soviet artists follow the Party line. Its result was wholly negative, but it took four years until the authorities admitted as much. While Shostakovich, Prokofiev and many others had their artistic freedoms seriously curtailed by *zhdanovschina*, Weinberg found himself in

the uncomfortable position of being praised by the wily Tikhon Khrennikov, head of the Composers' Union, for whom the phrase 'Teflon man' could have been specifically coined. This shrewd operator recognised talent when he saw it, so his endorsement of Weinberg was sincere, if disingenuous. Khrennikov must have been trying to drive a wedge between Weinberg and Shostakovich when he said that 'as a composer, Weinberg was strongly influenced by modernistic music which badly mangled his undoubted talent'. But he also said that Weinberg's recent *Sinfonietta No. 1* was 'a bright, optimistic work dedicated to the theme of the shining, free working life of the Jewish people in the land of Socialism'.

If Khrennikov was not a blatant anti-Semite, Stalin most definitely was. In 1948 he ordered the murder of Weinberg's father-in-law, Solomon Mikhoels, whose body was then run over to make his death appear to be a road accident. Then, in February 1953, Weinberg himself was charged with 'Jewish bourgeois nationalism'. Shostakovich interceded on Weinberg's behalf with the chief of the secret police, Lavrenti Beria, who for all his ruthlessness did not share Stalin's anti-Semitic prejudices. Weinberg's situation was eased when Stalin died in March. From then on he maintained very cordial relations with Shostakovich, and he composed prolifically in many genres. Among his best-loved scores are those for children's animations such as *Vinni Pukh*, a Soviet-era take on *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

Weinberg's *Cello Sonata No. 1*, which dates from 1945, undeniably inhabits a similar world to Shostakovich. This is perhaps not surprising, for the two composers were close neighbours and saw each other more or less every day. The work's sense of melancholy is evident in long-breathed musical lines like Shostakovich, but without the irony and sarcasm of the

older composer. The sonata is by turn calm and aggressive, and Weinberg reportedly said that it had influenced Shostakovich. This is a plausible claim, for at times it does remind one of Shostakovich's much later *Viola Sonata* of 1975.

After Weinberg's death in 1996, Mstislav Rostropovich recalled how he had first become acquainted with the composer through Shostakovich. He was at once taken by both Weinberg's modesty and his brilliant piano playing, which he observed at first hand when sudden illness forced Sviatoslav Richter to withdraw from a song recital with Galina Vishnevskaya. Weinberg stepped in at a few moments' notice and sight-read the entire programme, including some new music by Shostakovich. Not long afterwards, Rostropovich asked Weinberg to write him a cello piece. The result was the *Cello Sonata No. 2* of 1959, a splendid work that plays to the strengths of its dedicatee.

Weinberg's four sonatas for solo cello have been likened in importance to the suites of J.S. Bach, not least by Rostropovich, though one imagines that the composer's modesty might make him dissent from such a flattering comparison. They were composed between 1960 and 1985, the odd-numbered ones being dedicated to Rostropovich and the even-numbered ones to the long-standing cellist of the Borodin Quartet, Valentin Berlinsky. The *Solo Cello Sonata No. 1*, composed in 1960, is a comparatively compact work, but *No. 3*, dating from 1971, is a substantial tour de force. They both make a very significant contribution to the genre, and they invite us again to consider the possibility that Mieczyslaw Weinberg might be a strong contender, after all, for that elusive third place in the Soviet composer triumvirate.

Anthony Short

Dmitry Yablonsky



Photo: Lluís Costa

Dmitry Yablonsky was born in Moscow into a musical family. His mother is the distinguished pianist Oxana Yablonskaya, and his father Albert Zaionz has for thirty years been principal oboist in the Moscow Radio and Television Orchestra. Dmitry began playing the cello when he was five and was immediately accepted by the Central Music School for gifted children. When he was nine he made his orchestral debut as cellist and conductor with Haydn's *Cello Concerto in C major*. In Russia he studied with Stefan Kallianov, Rostropovich's assistant, and Isaak Buravsky, for many years solo cello of the Bolshoy Theatre Orchestra. Before immigrating to the United States he performed on many occasions in Moscow and many cities of the former Soviet Union. He was finally able, in 1977, to obtain a visa that allowed him and his mother to move to New York, where he became a pupil of Lorne Munroe at the Juilliard School of Music. In 1979, at the age of sixteen, he participated in the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont, the youngest to do so that summer. In 1980 he met Aldo Parisot, distinguished cellist and professor at Yale University, where he spent four years, at the same time furthering his interest in conducting. After graduating from Yale, he spent two years in the artist diploma programme at the Juilliard School with Zara Nelsova. Dmitry Yablonsky made his debut as a conductor in Italy at the age of 26, when he stepped in to replace another conductor at the last minute. As a cellist he has played in major concert halls throughout the world, and in chamber music has collaborated with distinguished colleagues. For four years he has been Principal Guest Conductor of the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra and has conducted many other

orchestras, collaborating with leading soloists. Dmitry Yablonsky has made more than seventy recordings, many of them prize-winning, as conductor and cellist for Naxos, Erato-Warner, Chandos, Belair Music, Sonora, and Connoisseur Society. Dmitry Yablonsky has been Music Advisor to the Russian Philharmonic Orchestra since 2003. He has organized international festivals, including the Wandering Stars Festival, which takes place in different countries each year. He is Co-Artistic Director of Qabala Music Festival in Azerbaijan. In 2009 he became an academician of the Independent Academy of Aesthetics and Liberal Arts in Moscow, and also professor of cello at the Baku Academy of Music.

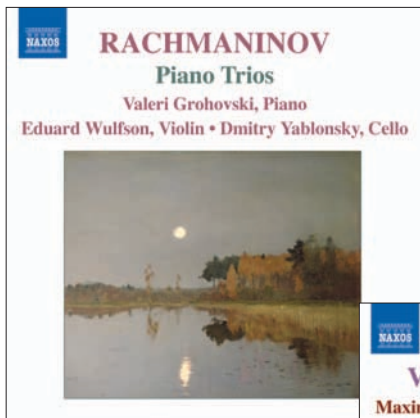
Hsin-Ni Liu



Photo: Devon Cass

Born in 1980 in Taipei, in Taiwan, Hsin-Ni Liu began studying the piano at the age of five and moved to the United States when she was sixteen to continue her music education at Interlochen Arts Academy. She has a Bachelor of Music Degree from the Cleveland Institute of Music, a Graduate Diploma in Performance from the Juillard School and a Master of Music Degree from Mannes College of Music in New York City. Her teachers have included Pi-Shan Chang, Kalman Drafi, Yuri Kim, Jerome Lowenthal, Vitoria Mushkatkol, Yoshikazu Nagai, Paul Schenly, In Wang and Oxana Yablonskaya. Hsin-Ni Liu has appeared in concert with the Wach Symphony Orchestra in Taiwan National Concert Hall, and with the Filharmónia Kelet-Magyarország Symphony Orchestra, Szeged, Hungary, and the Eger Symphony Orchestra, Hungary, as well as the Nizhny Novgorod Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra and the Solisty Symphony Orchestra in Russia. Other performances have included appearances with the Israel Chamber Orchestra and the Poland Capella Cracoviensis Chamber Orchestra, with guest artist performances at international music festivals including the Emilia-Romagna in Italy and the Bartók Festival in Miskolc, Hungary.

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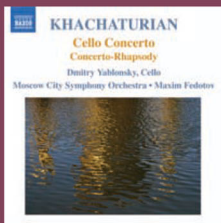
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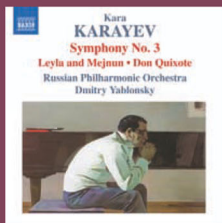
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Born in Warsaw but forced to flee to Minsk and then Tashkent before finally settling in Moscow, Mieczysław Weinberg was, as Shostakovich remarked, 'one of the most outstanding composers of the present day' and a close friend of the older composer. His *Cello Sonatas*, the second of which was composed for Rostropovich, make masterful use of the cello's expressive capabilities, while his sonatas for solo cello have been likened in importance to the suites of J.S. Bach. The first and third of these in particular, dedicated to Rostropovich, are significant contributions to the instrument's repertoire.

Mieczysław
WEINBERG
(1919-1996)
Cello Sonatas

**Cello Sonata No. 1,
Op. 21 (1945)**

- 1 **Lento ma non troppo** 7:21
2 **Un poco moderato** 9:46

**Cello Sonata No. 2,
Op. 63 (1959)**

- 3 **Moderato** 6:19
4 **Andante** 6:49
5 **Allegro** 6:46

**Solo Cello Sonata
No. 1, Op. 72 (1960)**

- 6 **Adagio** 5:47
7 **Allegretto** 2:34
8 **Allegro** 3:46

**Solo Cello Sonata
No. 3, Op. 106 (1971)**

- 9 **Allegro** 9:02
10 **Allegretto** 3:05
11 **Lento** 6:06
12 **Presto** 4:41

Dmitry Yablonsky, Cello • Hsin-Ni Liu, Piano

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