

Program Notes by Charles Neidich

Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, op. 28 by Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996)

It is a tragedy of history, that the music of Mieczysław Weinberg, one of the great composers of the 20th century, and who at one time was called, together with Shostakovich and Prokofiev, one of the three greatest Soviet composers, remained until recently virtually unknown not only outside, but also inside his adopted homeland of Russia. I remain amazed that during the years I spent studying at the Moscow Conservatory, not once did I hear of his existence.

Born in 1919 in Warsaw into a Jewish musical family (his father was a violinist and composer) Weinberg exhibited his musical talent at an early age. He gave his debut as a pianist at the age of 10 and at 12 became a piano student in the Warsaw Academy of Music. He composed his opus 1, a lullaby for piano in 1935 and opus 2, a string quartet in 1937. He was headed toward a brilliant musical career when the Nazi invasion brutally cut short whatever future Weinberg would have had in Poland. In 1941 his family was burned alive by Hitler's troops and Weinberg fled first to Minsk and as the German army advanced into the Soviet Union, eastward to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. He worked there in the opera house and continued composing. In 1943, he sent the manuscript of his first symphony to Dmitri Shostakovich who immediately recognized Weinberg's genius and had an official invitation to come to Moscow sent to him. Weinberg spent the rest of his life in Moscow and became one of Shostakovich's closest friends as well as one of his most respected colleagues. They would play what they were composing for each other and would on occasion include quotations of each other's compositions in their own works. It is most likely that the Jewish influence one finds very often in Shostakovich came from Weinberg.

Having barely escaped the Nazi Holocaust, Weinberg found himself caught in the anti-Semitic terror of Stalin's last years. Just before Zhdanov's decree denouncing Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Miaskovsky, Shebalin and others as "formalists" Weinberg's father-in-law, the actor Solomon Mikhoels was murdered on the orders of Stalin. Then in 1953, Weinberg, himself, was arrested on the charge of Jewish bourgeois nationalism. Shostakovich sent a letter of protest to Lavrenti Beria, the director of the NKVD (the Soviet Secret Police, predecessor of the KGB) to no avail. Only the death of Stalin in March, 1953 and subsequent release of many political prisoners saved Weinberg from probable death in the gulag.

Although very close to Shostakovich, Weinberg's music shines with its own intense individuality. His music has great classical economy of form and thematic coherence. Also, the influence of Jewish and Polish folk music is woven deeply into the very core of his composition. The sonata for clarinet, op. 28, a masterpiece of great power, dates from 1945, the end of the Second World War. I see it as a painting of his life beginning in a romantic yet prosaically conventional way and suddenly transforming to music of sheer terror. The last movement is quite remarkable, moving through two statements of a Jewish lament for first the piano and then in a more tortured form for the clarinet to music which I can only describe as a universal prayer for humanity.

Rückblick (In Erinnerung an die Reichspogromnacht 9.Nov. 1938) Ursula Mamlok (1923-2016)

Review (In memory of the Reich's pogrom night November 9th, 1938)
Extracted from her biography at, <https://www.mamlokstiftung.com/ursula-mamlok/biographie/>
The site of the Dwight and Ursula Mamlok Foundation

Ursula Mamlok was born in Berlin on May 4, 1923. She began studying piano at a very young age and added composition from the age of 12. In 1938 the Nazis forbid all Jewish children from attending any school other than a trade school and Ursula was forced to abandon her studies at the prestigious Fürstin-Bismarck-Lyzeum to go to a trade school to study ironing and bed-making. Very soon after, she was forbidden from studying there as well which had the unintended effect of allowing her to devote her attention to the piano and composition. It was right after the devastation of Kristallnacht, called also the November pogrom, November 9th and 10th, that her parents decided the family had to emigrate. A relative living in

Ecuador was able to sponsor them and they were able to flee to Guayaquil, Ecuador. As Ursula mentioned, she insisted she could not leave without her piano and luckily the family was able to ship it to Guayaquil. The American Consul in Guayaquil helped Ursula petition conservatories in the U.S. and in 1940, she won acceptance with full scholarship to the Mannes School of Music. In 1941 her parents were able to join her. At Mannes she studied composition with George Szell who was very supportive. However, she was more interested in the new music which was surrounding her and found his teaching too conservative. In the summer of 1944 she received a 3 month scholarship at Black Mountain College where she learned about the 12 tone technique of Arnold Schoenberg attending masterclasses in composition with Roger Sessions and Ernst Krenek and studying piano with Eduard Steuermann.

In August 1947, Ursula met her future husband, Dwight Mamlok in San Francisco and in November of that year they were married. They remained in San Francisco until 1949 when they moved to New York and she was able to enroll at Manhattan School of Music where she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1957. In 1960 she began studying with Stefan Wolpe and in 1961 with Wolpe's student, Ralph Shapey, she began to develop her unique voice. Shapey was not only an inspiring teacher, but also an important advocate who helped get her performances of her works.

Ursula Mamlok taught theory and composition at New York University and Temple University and for 45 years, was on the faculty at Manhattan School of Music. She was a composer of great sensitivity and feeling for drama as well as a brilliant teacher. Although she wrote striking works for large ensembles such as her *Constellations* (1993) and Oboe concerto (2003), she is known especially for a very important body of chamber works. In that oeuvre, *Rückblick* occupies a special place. It is the only work she has written where she has directly confronted the horror of the Kristalnacht event that signaled the beginning of the Holocaust that she lived through, that prompted her parents luckily to flee Germany. She wrote *Rückblick* originally for alto saxophone and piano on commission of Temple University. It exists also in versions for clarinet and bass clarinet.

Violin Sonata in F Major (1838) by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) (trans. by Charles Neidich)

Felix Mendelssohn began writing his second Violin Sonata in F Major in 1838 (he had written his first in 1820 when he was 11 years old) at the same time as he started work on his Violin Concerto, op. 64. Mendelssohn took six years to complete his concerto to his satisfaction. The F Major Sonata, however, suffered a different fate. As was usual for the way he composed, Mendelssohn sketched out a preliminary draft quickly, completing it in June 1838. He was so dissatisfied, however, after coming back in 1839 to try his hand again on the first movement that it seems, despite correspondence mentioning the sonata to Ferdinand David asking for his opinion of the first movement, he gave up. He left the work unfinished, but luckily for the music world, he did not destroy it.

The next part of the sonata's saga moves to 1953 when the violinist Yehudi Menuhin found the manuscripts and set about to revise it and bring it before the public. Menuhin revised it extensively and the final version is as much Menuhin as it is Mendelssohn. Menuhin, in my opinion, turned Mendelssohn's sketches into a brilliant and wonderfully poignant work.

The F Major Sonata, however, is still not well known in the violin world so I thought I should adapt it and popularize it for the clarinet. I have hardly changed anything in my transcription, only recomposing some repeated eighth note accompanimental violin double stops into alternating 16th notes making for (at least in my mind) an even more brilliant accompaniment.

Ode for clarinet, piano and percussion (1968) by Edison Denisov (1929-1996)

Edison Denisov was one of the seminal figures of the Russian Avant-Garde during the time of the Soviet Union. Born in Tomsk, Siberia, he first studied mathematics at the university in Tomsk, but with the support of Dmitri Shostakovich, he chose to continue in music. From 1951-1956 he studied composition and piano at the Moscow Conservatory where he also spent time in the Kursk, Altai, and Tomsk regions of

Russia to study and record folk music. In 1959, he began teaching analysis and orchestration at the Moscow Conservatory. Denisov's work from 1964 for soprano and chamber ensemble *Le soleil des Incas*, dedicated to Pierre Boulez, brought him great international recognition. At that time, Stravinsky remarked about discovering Denisov's "remarkable talent." His continuing international success, however, led to harsh criticism in the Soviet Union and finally, in 1979, he was blacklisted at the 6th Congress of the Union of Soviet Composers by Tikhon Khrennikov, the union's president.

Denisov may have been an enemy of the Soviet musical establishment, but he was, perhaps, the most influential composer of the later Soviet era. His great personal connections with composers throughout Europe enabled him to be the conduit where young composers in Moscow learned about contemporary music from Stravinsky to Stockhausen. Being black listed by the Soviet Composer's Union also in no way affected his compositional activity. His compositional output was prolific and ranged from intimate chamber works to monumental works such as his opera *L'Ecume des jours*, his Requiem, and his *History of the Life and Death of our Lord Jesus Christ* which he completed in 1992.

Ode (with the later added subtitle: *for the memory of Che Guevara*) was written in 1968 and is an example of Denisov's music at its most starkly dramatic. Where his later music has a beautiful sense of control and philosophical understanding, *Ode* exudes unbridled intensity and passion culminating in a frenetic moment of improvisation. But, what is notable, like his later works, is its inner emotive beauty.

Beauty is one of the essential concepts of art. Nowadays many composers seem to seek for new beauty. And it is not only the question of the beauty of sound which has nothing to do with the beauty of appearance. I am talking about the beauty of thought as it is understood by a mathematician, for example, or as it was understood by Bach and Webern ...' From www.edisondenisov.com

Icarus Ascending (2023) by Charles Neidich (b. 1953)

Icarus Ascending is a reworking of a piece for solo clarinet which I had originally written in 2017. I have, for a long time, been exploring enlarging the total palette of the clarinet by incorporating microtones and multiphonics into pieces I have written. With this piece I have tried to go a step further, creating a work where the main expressive sense is made from microtones.

I had originally thought of a light hearted, study in quarter tones. As my composition progressed, however, I realized it was taking a very different turn. The title comes from the ancient Greek legend about the son of Daedalus, the great craftsman who King Minos of Crete ordered to construct the labyrinth to imprison the Minotaur, the monster with the head and tail of a bull and the body of a man. Imprisoned by King Minos after constructing the labyrinth, Daedalus fashioned wings from feathers and wax so he and his son, Icarus could escape. Ignoring the warning of his father not to fly too high, Icarus flew too close to the sun. The sun melted the wax, the feathers fell off from Icarus' arms and he fell into the sea and perished.

I have always felt, however, that while Daedalus represented the safety of moderation, it was Icarus who embodied the great passion for striving for the unknowable which represents the best of humanity. In my piece, Icarus strives to fly higher and higher, but after his fall, does not perish, but rises again.

Serenity (1972) by Julia Perry (1924-1979)

Julia Perry was a brilliant and prolific composer who in her relatively short life composed a large body of work including twelve symphonies and three operas. The fourth of 5 daughters, she was born into a musical family. Her father, a doctor by profession, was a skilled pianist and her mother, a teacher who encouraged all her daughters to study music. The Perry family moved from Lexington, Kentucky, to Akron Ohio when Julia was 10 years old. In Akron, she became deeply involved in music, studying violin, voice, and piano. At Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey, which she attended from 1943 to 1948, she began composing. She continued post graduate studies at The Juilliard School and Curtis Institute. In the summer of 1951 while at Tanglewood she began studies with the composer Luigi Dallapiccola. Perry completed her first major work, her *Stabat Mater* for soprano and string orchestra there which brought her

into prominence as a composer. Soon after Tanglewood, having received a Guggenheim fellowship, she moved to Florence, Italy, to continue her studies with Dallapiccola.

Julia Perry spent the next years mostly in Europe, studying with Nadia Boulanger in 1952 at the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau as well as continuing her composition and conducting studies in Florence and Siena. In 1957 she was sponsored by the U.S. Information Service for a series of concerts she conducted in various cities in Europe. Perry returned to the US in 1959. The 1960s saw a great blossoming of creativity and in her music an increasing concern with issues of racial and social justice.

In 1965, her *Short Piece for Orchestra* was performed by the New York Philharmonic, the first work by a woman of color to be performed by the orchestra as well as the third work by a woman of any color.

In 1970, tragically Perry suffered a stroke which left her right side paralyzed. To be able to continue composing, she taught herself to write with her left hand. A further series of strokes dashed her hope of recovery, but did not lessen her great desire to compose. She composed her final five symphonies after her hospitalization. *Serenity* is a tiny work Perry wrote originally for oboe, but then rewrote for clarinet. Penned in 1972, like most of the works she wrote after her stroke, it exists only as a frail manuscript. But in that manuscript, we see music of great beauty and emotion.

Julia Perry believed in the power of music to heal social wounds. In 1949, she wrote: "Music is an all-embracing, universal language. Music has a unifying effect on the peoples of the world because they all understand and love it. And when they find themselves, enjoying and loving the same music, they find themselves loving one another ... Music has a great role to play in establishing the brotherhood of man." * * * quoted from www.themarginalian.org/2021/11/21/julia-perry-music.

Sonata for Clarinet and Piano in E-flat, op. 120, no. 2 by Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

The two sonatas op. 120 nos. 1 and 2 are so well known and so important in the clarinet repertoire that they hardly need any introduction. They are the last of the four seminal works Brahms wrote, the others being the Trio op. 114 and the Quintet op. 115, for the brilliant clarinetist, Richard Mühlfeld. Inspired by Mühlfeld's great artistry, Brahms gained a new lease on life after announcing to the musical world that he was retiring from composition. In March 1891, he traveled to the town of Meiningen, the seat of his favorite orchestra where Mühlfeld was both the first clarinetist and an assistant conductor. He listened, entranced, to Mühlfeld for the time he was there and gained an intimate knowledge of the expressive possibilities of the clarinet. Jan Swafford, in his book, *Johannes Brahms, a Biography*, writes:

"Brahms befriended Mühlfeld and sat listening to him play for hour after hour. Maybe for the first time in his life he felt something more than pleasure in a fine musician. Now he experienced an epiphany of an instrument in itself ... Brahms recognized another incarnation of the kind of dark, soulful voice that always seduced him."

Brahms quickly completed both the Trio and Quintet in 1891 and returned to write the Sonatas in 1894. After completing the works he made an extensive tour with Mühlfeld, who had become perhaps his closest friend after Clara Schumann. After one of their performances, the Leipziger Musikalisches Wochenblatt on February 7, 1895 wrote that *"it seemed like two intimately communicating musical souls were spontaneously improvising"* (from Maren Goltz and Herta Müller, *Richard Mühlfeld, Brahms' Clarinetist*).

Brahms composed both sonatas at the same time and they both emerge from the opening 4 bars of the 1st sonata, op. 120, no. 1 in F minor. This 4 bar introduction is itself a paraphrase of the opening of the final chorale of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* the text of which begins (loosely translated): "If I must depart, do not depart from me." If anything, the E-flat Sonata develops the chorale motif in a more varied and complex way than the F minor. While the material is present in every phrase of the work, what is remarkable is that we never notice it. What we do notice is a work of supremely moving beauty and incredible organic coherence.

Together with the Trio op. 114 and Quintet op. 115, the sonatas formed the critical repertoire for the clarinet from the end of the 19th century and inspired a generation of composers to write for the instrument.