



The Art of Survival

Dutch radio producer Arthur Olof (1954–2014) describes the twentieth-century music history of Russia in *The Art of Survival*. This was a period when artists were often greatly influenced by what Soviet authorities considered as Art. The leitmotif of the book is the work of Dmitri Shostakovich, whose coerced resourcefulness was of immense interest to the author.

This book stems from almost one hundred radio programmes that Olof made for the Concertzender (a Dutch

radio station) between 2009 and 2014. In addition to the text, the edition contains links with QR-codes to the broadcasts, so that one can listen to the music while reading.

In essence, this book is a unique music library of around 600 pieces by Russian composers from the twentieth century—from Shostakovich to Ustvolskaya, from Prokofiev to Gubaidulina, and from Stravinsky to Schnittke.

The Art of Survival is on sale from <https://olof.cz>, priced € 29.95.



The Art of Survival by Arthur Olof



Letters

The Butterfly Effect

An attempt to understand why I recorded the four viola solo sonatas by Mieczysław Weinberg¹

Not long ago I came across an entertaining little story. As it goes, Picasso was once challenged to define what makes for a true masterpiece—a *chef-d'œuvre*—and what separates it from a work of a skilled dilettante. To that, Picasso made some random scribble: “This could be a work of a skilled dilettante.” He then autographed it, adding, “And now it is a *chef-d'œuvre*.” This anecdote, true or not and amusing as it is, raises some not so amusing—indeed, rather uncomfortable—questions.

Can a true work of art stand on its own without any external backing? Can it defend itself through its own virtue? The first outcry from most of us believers is, “Of course it can!” Yet one cannot help but wonder how many genuine masterpieces fell into eternal oblivion because they lacked a Picasso signature.

How could it happen, for instance, that Schubert’s unquestionable genius was not so unquestionable to his

contemporaries at the time he was an obscure unknown composer? Or that Van Gogh sold but one painting in his entire life? And are we certain the world would have inherited Van Gogh’s legacy, were it not for his sister-in-law, who, after Van Gogh’s death and that of his brother, worked tenaciously for years to build his name, which in turn brought the recognition his work deserved?

And what about Kafka, who died in misery and unsure of his literary talents—after all, there was nobody but his best friend to find merit in his work. Would we not lose one of the most original literary contributions of the twentieth century, were it not for the fact that his friend, instead of burning Kafka’s work as stipulated in his will, took the opposite tack and published it instead? Let us not forget—doing so took years of arduous effort as well. The opposite can happen too. Telemann, far and away the most revered composer

in his lifetime—even by Bach and Handel—was thrown into a virtual nonexistence that lasted two centuries, arguably by way of one acerbic, influential critical comment.

Mieczysław Weinberg, as we know, came to experience the best and the worst of all worlds. He did see a time when his music was embraced by the most prolific interpreters of the day—Oistrakh, Kogan, Rostropovich, Gilels, Richter, Barshai, the Borodin String Quartet, occasionally with Weinberg himself on the piano. Those were years he would later fondly refer to as his “starry years.” Weinberg also saw his music abandoned by both the Soviet musical establishment and the newer generation of performers, to be eventually forgotten. Today, unexpectedly resurrected and at the height of his popularity, what lies behind this meteoric comeback? Is it the inherent force of Weinberg’s music? Is it the chaotic and aleatory undercurrents that seem to seep into



the natural selection of the fine art history? Is it perhaps the several highly devoted Weinberg enthusiasts who quietly, behind the scenes, persevered in bringing about this extraordinary revival? Or perhaps it is the catalysing effect of Weinberg's rising glory that is now propelling his music further and further?

Along those lines went my conversation with an accomplished violist, who chose to abstain from getting to know Weinberg's viola solo sonatas, dismissing the entire growing "Weinberg craze" as a trend. "Pages and pages of obscure complex music—can be done, but... WHY!?" Clearly, the music itself had no say in the decision making. But that aside, I had to acknowledge there was a point. Indeed, WHY? If nothing else, this is a major time investment that does little to the advancement of the human species—it does not contribute to world peace, it does not feed nor provide shelter. Learning those "pages and pages of obscure complex music" appears to be, in fact, devoid of any down-to-earth measurable value or purpose whatsoever.

Oh, that dreaded "WHY", which so many in the artistic field will struggle to answer! The whole nihilistic doctrine seems embedded into it, plain for all to see. Even Shostakovich, when asked to shed light on his enigmatic quotations of Rossini's *William Tell* and Wagner's *Ring* in the Fifteenth Symphony, found nothing better to say than "I don't myself quite know why the quotations are there, but I could *not*, could not *not* include them." He then proceeded to contemplate the enigma of the creative process, on how it lives by its own rules, not always explicable through logic.

As with Shostakovich, Weinberg never actively concerned himself with such rhetorical nonsense—and perhaps less so in the later period of his life when the viola sonatas were written. It was a period plagued with health problems; his circle of lifetime friends and distinguished colleagues was rapidly shrinking;



Mieczysław Weinberg and Shostakovich,
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the Commission of the Ministry of Culture had stopped purchasing his scores—an important source of income—and, with avant-garde fashions taking over, there was no one left to perform his music. (As Mikhail Tolpygo, the dedicatee of the Third and Fourth Viola Sonatas recalls, "When the sonatas were written, it was not an out-of-ordinary event for me. I played them in a concert and just moved on to the next piece in line.") Towards the end of his life, Weinberg retreated more and more into the solitude of... just composing. In his own words, "So long as I am

writing, the work interests me. When the piece is finished, it doesn't exist anymore. Its fate (whether ostracisation by the Philharmonic Societies, lack of performances, silence in the press, scorn from the music critics) is all the same to me." All the same or not, Weinberg, the USSR State Prize laureate, must have surely noticed that his 75th anniversary, which by tradition ought to have been honoured with a ceremonial concert, went by completely ignored and unnoticed. Without a shadow of a doubt, Weinberg died in full conviction that his music was dying with him.



Mieczysław Weinberg, © Tommy Persson

And so, returning to our initial question: Can a true work of art—here, a piece of music—rely on its own merits to find its place? For as much as we wish it might be otherwise, the answer seems to be “No, it cannot. Not until the work in question is experienced by others”, and even the Picasso signature—here, Weinberg’s blooming recognition—is helpless for as long as the score is lying on the shelf. And that is the *raison d’être* of the present recording. There is a good chance, dear reader, that you are unfamiliar with the music presented here. I invite you, I encourage you, I dare you to embrace this opportunity, unique and fragile, to open your ears and your heart to this new exotic world. I dare you to listen without prejudice, comparisons, and other mundane noise. This music does not require a prepared listener but, yes, an attentive one, and if you allow yourself to dive into it with your head, I know you will experience that little bit of Weinberg’s universe, a universe

of lights and shadows and conflicts and sensations. It is a very honest and very human universe, which is perhaps what pulled me into it in the first place. All the same, already in the early stages of my becoming acquainted with these sonatas, I knew I could *not*, could not *not* share them eventually, through this recording.

Some reviews:

Each bar of Viacheslav Dinerchtein’s masterful interpretation is filled with unquestionable dedication to a genius we should all recognize. What loftier goal can a performer have than to serve the music and not use it for self-promotion? Listening to these virtually untouched challenging works, played with full commitment, one becomes even more motivated to delve deeper into the scores of the great Weinberg.
- Gidon Kremer

The still practically unknown Viola Sonatas belong to the category of Weinberg at his finest. This outstanding

recording, marking the composer’s 100th birthday, will unquestionably reach far beyond the context of the jubilee, and help to bring the sonatas their well-deserved recognition.
- Thomas Sanderling

The Viola Solo Sonatas by Weinberg invite a great deal of freedom and fantasy, with room to bring one’s own personality into the music. I very much enjoyed Slava’s clear interpretation, enhanced by his meticulous technique. How exciting that the violists of today and the next generation are being offered yet more colorful facets of music and music making.
- Nobuko Imai

- V. Dinerchtein

Notes:

1 Mieczysław Weinberg—Complete Sonatas for Solo Viola. Viacheslav Dinerchtein, viola. 2CD centenary edition; Solo Musica, Sony Music (SM310)

