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Mieczysław Weinberg and the Category of Borderland

Abstract

Polish musicologist and author Danuta Gwizdalanka titled her publication *Mieczysław Wajnberg: kompozytor z trzech światów [Mieczysław Weinberg: Composer from Three Worlds]* (Poznań, 2013). Weinberg (1919–1996) was a Polish composer with Jewish roots who spent most of his life in the USSR. Without any doubt, he can be called ‘a composer from the borderland’ due to his ‘hybrid identity’, which was one of the most important reasons that affected the appreciation of Weinberg’s output both during his lifetime and after death. The main ideas of this paper centre on the category of ‘borderland’ and its representations in Weinberg’s biography and oeuvre. According to the typology proposed by Krzysztof Zajas, Weinberg’s life and works can be considered in terms of the following types of borderland: interdisciplinary, spatial, psychological, existential, sociological, and mythological. Through the prism of the category of ‘borderland’, Weinberg’s creative work manifests itself as a highly individual and invaluable testimony of his times, far from eclectic and epigonic in

relation to the music of Dmitri Shostakovich, his oeuvre is unique in the world's music literature.

Keywords

Mieczysław Weinberg,¹ borderland, identity, Krzysztof Zajas

Mieczysław Wajnberg: kompozytor z trzech światów [*Mieczysław Weinberg: Composer from Three Worlds*] is how Danuta Gwizdalanka² titled the only biography of the composer available in Polish musicological literature so far. A Polish artist of Jewish descent, he lived and worked in the USSR for over five decades... That the task of defining Weinberg's cultural identity presents some difficulties is evident even from such a brief description. Intuition suggests that the term 'borderland composer' may prove appropriate. It was the composer's 'hybrid identity' that constituted the main obstacle to appreciating his artistic work, both in his lifetime and after death. The closeness of the three cultural circles undoubtedly had a significant impact on the artistic choices that Weinberg made. How does the category of borderland fit into the composer's biography and works? Is it possible to interpret Weinberg's musical legacy through this prism, and if so, how can it be interpreted? In this paper, I will make an attempt to answer these questions.

The word 'borderland' invariably refers us to the concept of the border. In his article 'Pogranicza bez granic' ['Borderlands without Borders'] Włodzimierz Próchnicki points out, however, that a border is a line, while a borderland is an area. Though inextricably connected with the border, that area cannot be fully defined, and remains, in a sense, open.³ Borderlands are always heterogeneous; their character-

¹ The composer's name and surname have been spelled variously as Mieczysław Wajnberg (the Polish-language version also preferred by the composer himself, who signed his scores in this way), Mieczysław Weinberg (the spelling found in most English-language publications and music releases), Moisey or Moïshe Vainberg (Vaynberg). In the English-language version of this paper, I will consistently refer to the artist as Mieczysław Weinberg (the internationally preferred spelling of his surname), so as to facilitate tagging and searching the text.

² D. Gwizdalanka, *Mieczysław Wajnberg: kompozytor z trzech światów* (2013).

³ W. Próchnicki, 'Pogranicza bez granic', in J. Fazan, K. Zajas, eds, *Na pograniczach literatury*, 21 (2012), 35.

istic features are 'separateness' and 'interpenetration',⁴ which generates tense oppositions, sometimes involving a value judgment, such as 'us' versus 'them' or 'strangers'.⁵

As Próchnicki points out, the border need not exist geographically. It manifests itself in the form of linguistic and cultural differences both between neighbouring societies and those separated by a considerable geographical distance.⁶ True boundaries are therefore not an obstacle to the emergence of differences. This entails differences in the ways of artistic thinking, as well as a veritable fusion of mutual influences. Weinberg's oeuvre turns out to be an excellent example of this phenomenon.

Scholarly literature in the humanities offers numerous typologies of borderland. The fact that 'borderland' is still a dynamically developing category is evident e.g. from a paper by Grzegorz Babiński, which suggests, among others, a division into new and old borderlands.⁷ The

⁴ W. Panas, 'O pograniczu etnicznym w badaniach literackich', in T. Michałowska, Z. Goliński, Z. Jarosiński, eds, *Wiedza o kulturze i edukacja. Księga referatów Zjazdu Polonistów* (1996).

⁵ W. Próchnicki, 'Pogranicza...', 36–37. Due to their evaluative aspect, borderlands are frequently the subject of postcolonial research. Examples of interesting publications on this subject, include: J. Kieniewicz, *Ekspansja, kolonializm, cywilizacja* (2008); H. Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and men. The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fullist/special/crimefiction/homi_bhabha_-_of_mimicry_and_man.pdf, accessed 28 Mar. 2021; H. Bhabha, *The location of culture* (2010); Ch. Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000).

⁶ W. Próchnicki, 'Pogranicza...', 37

⁷ G. Babiński, 'Przemiany pograniczy narodowych i kulturowych – propozycje typologii', in R. Stemplowski, A. Żelazo, eds. *Polskie pogranicza a polityka zagraniczna u progu XXI wieku* (2002), 18. The old borderlands include: a) territorial; b) historical; c) those demonstrating a significant degree cultural interpenetration, and therefore of similarity between the communities living there; d) more frequently transitional than bordering on each other; e) those lacking sharp divisions and boundaries between communities; f) economically and socially diversified, which does not lead to sharp divisions (since there is an observable continuity and completeness in their social stratification); g) those existing between 'social wholes'; h) those evolving from the acceptance of subordinate cultures to cultural equality, but essentially preserving vertical intercultural and identity relations, with a significant role played by religious diversity (though it is not constitutive to social divisions). Under the heading of new borderlands, Babiński lists: a) slightly territorial ones (with an indefinite or only symbolic territory); b) 'ahistorical' ones; c) those demonstrating significant cultural diversity and civilizational distances; d) bordering on each other in both territorial and cultural terms; e) those

most universal typology, however, seems to be the general one proposed by Krzysztof Zajas, who distinguishes between the following borderlands: interdisciplinary, spatial, psychological and existential, sociological, and mythological.⁸ The author conceives of the interdisciplinary borderland as the interpenetration of scientific discourses and the application of research tools derived from diverse disciplines.⁹ When undertaking research on the work of a composer such as Mieczysław Weinberg, scholars must be aware of the need to extend their knowledge so as to include the thematic fields of history, sociology, religious studies, literature, and anthropology, that is, disciplines necessary to present the fullest possible interpretation of the artist's output.

Spatial borderland is a specific territory or space. It comprises local homelands, which create the conditions for the co-existence of many cultures and determine the emergence of works characterised by a specific form or language. In the case of Weinberg, spatial borderland and its influence on the composer's work seems to be one of the key manifestations of Zajas's category. Weinberg came from a family of Moldavian Jews who managed to escape a pogrom in Chişinău.¹⁰ Born in 1919 in Warsaw,¹¹ he was brought up as a Polonized Jew. Weinberg himself, although he drew abundantly on the Jewish tradition in his

in which boundaries between groups are clear but often only symbolic and identity-related; f) demonstrating various social and economic differences (both very large and minimal – no complete social stratification has been formed); g) those between communities selected as a result of migration processes; h) those exhibiting distinctly horizontal ways of perceiving intercultural relations (especially on the part of the minorities); i) those in which religious diversity plays a highly significant role.

⁸ K. Zajas, 'Widnokresy literatury', in J. Fazan, K. Zajas, eds, *Na pograniczach literatury*, 21, (2012), 5–10.

⁹ K. Zajas, 'Widnokresy literatury', 5–10.

¹⁰ With regard to biographical information, I draw on two monographs dedicated to this artist: David Fanning's *Mieczysław Weinberg: In Search of Freedom* (2010) and the aforementioned work by Danuta Gwizdalanka. The former publication offers the first comprehensive overview of the composer's life and work. The book became the point of departure for other studies, including *Mieczysław Wajnberg: kompozytor z trzech światów*. All the biographical data come from these two books, unless stated otherwise.

¹¹ This date, although it appears in official biographical sources, was verified by Danuta Gwizdalanka. It turns out that the composer's birth centenary in 2019 should rather have been celebrated a year earlier, because he was most likely born in 1918; cf. D. Gwizdalanka, 'Nieznane fakty z biografii Mieczysława Wajnberga', <https://>

output, always felt more Polish, which he emphasised until the end of his life. He did not know Hebrew, nor did he speak Yiddish.¹² In 1939, he managed to escape from occupied Warsaw to Minsk, where he studied at the local conservatory in the class of Vasily Zolotarev. The artistic legacy of the Romantic national schools was still alive in that centre, which influenced Weinberg's musical output, among others in the form of references to folk melodies and his late-Romantic orchestration (one of the examples is *Rhapsody on Moldavian Themes*, Op. 47, written long after leaving Belarus). Fate, however, forced Weinberg to make another escape, necessitated by Nazi Germany's invasion of its recent Soviet ally in 1941. The composer reached Tashkent, from which, thanks to the protection of Dmitri Shostakovich, he managed to move to Moscow in 1943. He resided in the latter city until his death in 1996. It is impossible not to notice that as a consequence of changes in territorial divisions and the resulting (forcible or life-saving) mass migrations, twentieth-century Europe became a continent of intermingling influences, of which the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics seems to be the most distinctive example. What emerged from Weinberg's wanderings was a musical language which (though undergoing some transformations over the years) incorporated elements of both his native (Moldavian, Jewish and Polish) traditions and the achievements of Romantic national schools. It also made allowances for the communist party's thematic requirements, and demonstrated many stylistic parallels to the output of Dmitri Shostakovich. Despite the political thaw and the easing of restrictions on citizens of Jewish origin after the death of Joseph Stalin, Weinberg never left Moscow, probably owing to his friendship with Shostakovich.¹³ This fact relates to another set of categories in Zajas's typology, namely, the psychological and existential borderlands, related to the difficulty of classifying one's identity and

culture.pl/pl/artykul/nieznane-fakty-z-biografii-mieczyslawa-wajnberga, accessed 3 Aug. 2019.

¹² Testimony of Victoria Bishops, the composer's daughter, now living in Toronto, contacted online during the International Conference 'Weinberg: Between East and West', organised by David Fanning and Michelle Assay at the Martin Harris Centre for Music and Drama, University of Manchester, which I attended on 24–27 January 2019. The meeting with Victoria Bishops was entitled 'Letters from My Father'. Publishing work on the conference proceedings is currently underway; they will be published by The British Academy.

¹³ Testimony of Victoria Bishops, International Conference 'Weinberg...'

true affiliation. Zajas describes this as ‘the sense of identity being upset by the presence of the Other, settled within the same space; as a way of living, it is the existence of a nomad who seeks to communicate with Others’.¹⁴ In Weinberg’s case, this phenomenon can best be described within the framework of Zajas’s third proposed type, that of the sociological borderland, which refers to group identification on the level of language, national identity and national minorities. It is a problem that arises as a result of neighbouring groups delineating the boundaries of their existence within one and the same territory.

As already mentioned, the misconceived ‘need’ to identify Weinberg as a Jewish and / or Polish and / or Soviet composer possibly constituted the greatest obstacle to promoting his work. Starting in the 1960s, which David Fanning sees as the golden years of the composer’s artistic activity, Weinberg’s music failed to attract any major interest in either publishers or the public. Victoria Bishops recalls her father’s words: ‘he had more luck in his life for the quality than for the number of [his music’s] performers’.¹⁵ In the USSR, Weinberg was regarded as a Jewish composer, whereas in Poland – as a Soviet one, which effectively blocked his way to the concert stages. The Polish Ministry of Culture became interested in the person of Weinberg only as late as 1994, and the first CD recordings of the composer’s works were released after his death thanks to the great commitment of Tommy Persson, an admirer of Weinberg’s talent.¹⁶ Due to his Jewish origin, Weinberg and his relatives repeatedly encountered unpleasant remarks or prejudice, and his life also came under serious threat. He suffered slights even from his friends, fellow-composers. Georgy Sviridov, also a close friend of Shostakovich, apparently officially expressed the view that Weinberg, although writing similarly to Shostakovich, would never be able to match the latter composer’s talent because of his Jewish roots.¹⁷ Through his first wife, Natalia, whom he had met

¹⁴ K. Zajas, ‘Widnokresy literatury...’, 8.

¹⁵ Testimony of Victoria Bishops. Weinberg’s works were performed by artists of such calibre as Mstislav Rostropovich, Sviatoslav Richter, and David Oistrakh.

¹⁶ Tommy Persson, *Weinberg’s Last Years*, speech delivered during the International Conference ‘Weinberg...’, unpublished.

¹⁷ Daniel Elphick’s unpublished statement at the International Conference ‘Weinberg...’. Daniel Elphick is the author of an excellent doctoral dissertation dedicated to Weinberg’s quartets. His statement confirms the assumption of Grzegorz Babiński that internal divisions exist even within the ‘borderland’ and that it is

in Tashkent, Weinberg became the son-in-law of Solomon (Shloyme) Vovsi-Mikhoels. Mikhoels was not only a respected actor and director in Jewish theatres, but also a committed activist and chairman of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Anti-Semitic policies intensified in the USSR in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, leading to many arrests and political assassinations. As a result of anti-Semitic campaigns, Mikhoels was murdered by the NKVD in a mock car accident in 1948, and all his family came under close surveillance by the authorities.¹⁸ Weinberg was accused of 'bourgeois formalism' and imprisoned at Lubyanka in 1953, but he was released after the death of Joseph Stalin. Additionally, Shostakovich wrote a letter to Lavrentiy Beria requesting a pardon for Weinberg.

The composer's fullest contact with the 'Other', in the positive sense of this word, was that with Dmitri Shostakovich, who became not only his faithful friend, but also an artistic authority. The composer never tried to conceal the decisive impact that Shostakovich's music had on him. This profound private relationship found its natural reflection in Weinberg's musical language, which is frequently brought up as one of the main objections to his work and the reason for dismissing him as Shostakovich's 'epigone'. Alexander Ivashkin is extremely critical of Weinberg in this regard:

The influence of Shostakovich's music on Russian composers manifested itself on many levels. In the 1960s, many artists took over his style, while to a large extent compromising its value. Among its imitators were Moysey Weinberg, Yuri Levitin, German Galynin, and the most talented of them, Boris Tishchenko. However, Shostakovich appreciated their works because he heard in them many elements characteristic of his [own] musical language. Probably, like many composers, he was under the illusion that this was the direction that

itself hierarchical (G. Babiński, 'Przemiany pograniczy...', 15). In his book *Music behind the Iron Curtain: Mieczysław Weinberg and his Polish Contemporaries*, Elphick adds that Weinberg dedicated his *Symphony No. 6* to Sviridov and that despite the latter's anti-Semitic views, they remained in close contact. The diaries published after Sviridov's death present him as a staunch anti-Semite. On this basis, it can be concluded that his views did not stop him from making friends with Weinberg, which seems quite controversial. Cf. D. Elphick, *Music behind the Iron Curtain. Mieczysław Weinberg and his Polish Contemporaries* (2019), 180.

¹⁸ In the event of the Weinbergs' death, the Shostakovich family were prepared to take care of their daughter, Victoria.

future music was to take. Today, however, it is known that these works were destructive to Shostakovich's music, as it got lost among a multitude of poor copies.¹⁹

In reality, the composers mutually influenced and inspired each other. Jewish themes probably appeared in Szostakowicz's works thanks to his friendship with the Polish artist.

Weinberg's nomadic biography resulted in a kind of musical 'trilingualism', which was a combination of native elements, the Zolotarev school, and a style close to the music of Dmitri Shostakovich. Each of these languages was meant to help the composer establish communication with the 'Other' in the new reality that he faced, and the first of them – also to emphasise his roots. Native elements are represented, among others, by the idioms of Jewish music, frequently 'vulgar' and imitating a klezmer band. In this way, Weinberg alludes to his childhood (his father wrote revue and theatre music). References to Fryderyk Chopin's oeuvre play a significant role, especially in the form of quotations in *Symphony No. 8 'Polish Flowers' Op. 83* and *Symphony No. 21 'Kaddish' Op. 152*.²⁰ Chopin was not only one of Weinberg's favourite composers. As an émigré, Weinberg had a sense of shared experience and fate with the Polish Romantic. Additionally, Chopin's music evoked memories of his studies at Warsaw Conservatory. Weinberg was considered as one of the most talented students of Józef

¹⁹ A. Ivashkin, 'Shostakovich and Schnittke: the Erosion of Symphonic Syntax', in: D. Fanning, ed., *Shostakovich. Studies* (1995), 254-255. Shostakovich himself valued Weinberg's music highly: 'He always appreciated and liked Weinberg's music. He dedicated his *String Quartet No. 10* to this composer. In 1975 he also wrote a sketch for the program of Weinberg's opera *Мадонна и солдат (The Madonna and the Soldier)*.' Shostakovich, in his turn, 'talked with joy about Moysey Weinberg's new opera *Пассажи́рка (The Passenger)*. "It is an amazing work" he used to repeat, "just extraordinary."' Cf. K. Meyer, *Dymitr Szostakowicz i jego czasy* (1999), 327, 340. On the other hand, Weinberg saw no danger in imitating Shostakovich's musical style, which is evident in his defence of his friend's *Symphony No. 10*: 'He opposed the thesis that Shostakovich's music exists just for its own sake. He added that, in his view, the composer had tens of thousands of admirers in the Soviet Union alone. He also confessed that he did not see anything wrong in the fact that the young composers' generation was within the sphere of influence of the author of *Symphony No. 10*' (K. Meyer, *Dymitr Szostakowicz...*, 240-241).

²⁰ In *Polish Flowers*, the composer quotes Chopin's *Sonata in B-Flat Minor*, Op. 35 (Movement Three: *Marche funèbre: Lento*), while in *Kaddish – Ballade in G Minor*, Op. 23.

Turczyński, teacher of the Chopin Competition third-prize winner Witold Małcużyński. Weinberg himself was seen as the would-be winner of the event's next edition. After playing in front of Józef Hoffman, he received an offer of studies in Philadelphia. The journey, however, never took place since Weinberg's Jewish origin prevented him from obtaining a visa. The composer's 'rooting' was enhanced by the profoundly autobiographical character of his output. Weinberg considered giving testimony to the tragic history of his nation as his artistic creed. He thus spoke on behalf of all the victims of European totalitarian regimes. His belief in the profound meaning of humanism meant that in his art he responded to the need of upholding the memory of the horrors of World War II, so that such atrocities would never take place again. As the composer himself commented:

Many of my works are related to the war. But it was not I who chose this topic. It was dictated by my fate, and by the tragic fate of my relatives. I consider it my moral duty to write about the war, about the terrible fate that has befallen humankind in our century.²¹

If I consider myself distinguished because my life has been saved, this fact gives me a conviction that it is impossible to pay off the debt, that even hard creative work for twenty-four hours a day, four days a week would not bring me even an inch closer to this repayment.²²

Another, mythographic type of borderland concerns the space of 'special cultural significance, as for example, in the concept of *Kresy* [the historical eastern borderlands of Poland – translator's note].²³ I assume that 'mythographic borderland' also refers to a space of special significance to the author of the given text, on which he or she bestows a symbolic, almost legendary meaning. To Weinberg, Warsaw seems to have been such a place until the turning point which came in 1966. There is no doubt that the Warsaw of his childhood and youth stayed in the composer's imagination as a carefree time of family happiness and security, as well as his first artistic successes. In 1966, for the first and only time since his escape, he had the opportunity to visit Poland

²¹ D. Gwizdalanka, *Mieczysław Wajnberg...*, 60.

²² H. Milewska, 'Mieczysław Weinberg – muzyczne dziękczynienie', *HFiM*, 2 (2011), <https://hi-fi.com.pl/sylwetki-muzyczne-lista/740-mieczys%C5%82aw-weinberg-muzyczne-dzi%C4%99kczynienie.html>, accessed 3 Aug. 2019.

²³ K. Zajas, *Widnokresy literatury...*, 8.

as a Soviet delegate to the 'Warsaw Autumn' International Festival of Contemporary Music. That return to his 'paradise lost' is known to have proved a great disappointment for Weinberg, as his second daughter Anna recalls:

Father's trip to Poland was very sad for him. He met almost nobody of his youth friends [...] He was sad because Warsaw was absolutely reconstructed and many friends were gone.²⁴

Krzysztof Meyer comments on the situation in more detail:

I knew his [Weinberg's] name because while reading *Soviet Music* regularly I kept coming across information about his works. Moreover, I had several Soviet CDs with recordings of his music at home. I liked it very much, for example his second *Sinfonietta*. I thus developed an interest in Weinberg and we had something to talk about from the start. Other Polish composers shunned him. This was due to the negative attitude to Russian cultural policies, as the works of the composers sent to the Festival were, almost without exception, conventional and traditional. What we expected from the 'Warsaw Autumn' was not merely good craftsmanship. We thus preferred Edison Denisov and Alfred Schnittke. Weinberg did not fit into the Warsaw Autumn landscape, either. The only Pole who sought contact with him was Zbigniew Turski because they had studied together before the war and it was Weinberg who had played his piano concerto at that time. Such a reception must have been a bitter experience for Weinberg. After all, Poland was his lost motherland, and Polish – the mother tongue. He still spoke flawless Polish, without any colloquialisms, articulating the words as if they had been printed. He spoke the Polish of the pre-war intelligentsia, cultivated and elegant-sounding. He did not seem it to consider it a great tragedy that most of our colleagues kept a distance from him... His greatest disappointment was that the city, which he remembered from the past, had ceased to exist.²⁵

The category of the borderland, in all the manifestations and senses of this term, clearly demonstrates that an attempt to 'assign' one identity to an artist is doomed to failure. This intuition is confirmed

²⁴ D. Elphick, *Music behind the Iron Curtain...*, 193.

²⁵ K. Meyer, 'Im Schatten Schostakowitschs', *Opernwelt*, 6 (2010), 42–43, quoted in: D. Gwizdalanka, *Mieczysław Wajenberg...*, 40.

by the reflection of Daniel Elphick, who calls for a reconsideration of Weinberg's musical legacy, free of cultural value judgments. He believes that the only right way is to take his music as

an intersectional weaving of Jewish, Soviet-Russian, and Polish influences and experiences. In this manner, we understand his music as the expression of a full and rounded human being, and not the simple culmination of any national tradition.²⁶

Viewed from this perspective, the musical output of Mieczysław Weinberg as a 'composer from the borderland' takes on eminently individual qualities, becoming at the same time an extremely valuable testimony of the times in which he lived. It is a legacy unique in the history of the world's music literature.

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