

PASSAZHIERKA
(The Passenger)

Opera in two acts in Russian, German, English, French and Yiddish
Libretto to Alexander Medvedev, based on a radio play,
The Passenger from Cabin 45 (1959), and the novel *The Passenger* (1962),
both by Zofia Posmysz

Premiered December 25, 2006,
in concert at Svetlanov Hall, House of Composers, Moscow
World stage premiere July 21, 2010, Bregenz Festival (Austria)

THE CHARACTERS

(in order of vocal appearance, cast subject to change)

- Walter** (Cast),
German diplomat, 50 years old, and Lisa's husband.....Tenor
- Lisa/a.k.a. Anneliese Franz** (Cast),
Overseer at Auschwitz, 37 years old at curtain, 22 in Auschwitz.....Mezzo-Soprano
- Ship's Steward** (Cast)
English.....Speaking Role
- Chief Women's Overseer at Auschwitz** (Cast).....Speaking Role
- First SS Man** (Cast).....Bass
- Second SS Man** (Cast).....Bass
- Third SS Man** (Cast).....Tenor
- Marta** (Cast)
Polish prisoner at Auschwitz, 34 years old on the ship, 19 in Auschwitz.....Soprano
- Old Woman** (Cast)
German prisoner.....Alto
- Yvette** (Cast)
French prisoner, 15 years old.....Soprano
- Vlasta** (Cast)
Czech prisoner, 20 years old.....Mezzo-Soprano

- Krystina** (Cast)
Polish prisoner, 28 years old.....Mezzo-Soprano
- Bronka** (Cast)
Russian prisoner, 50 years old.....Alto
- Hannah** (Cast)
Greek Jewish prisoner, 18 years old.....Alto
- Katya** (Cast)
Russian partisan, prisoner, 21 years old.....Soprano
- Kapo** (Cast)
German prisoner leading a work-Kommando.....Speaking Role
- Tadeusz** (Cast)
Polish prisoner, Marta's fiancé, 25 years old.....Baritone
- Ship's Captain** (Cast).....Pantomime Role
- Older Passenger** (Cast).....Bass
- Kommandant of Auschwitz** (Cast).....Pantomime Role

Male and female prisoners and SS Men at Auschwitz, Passengers and Ship's Crew

Time: Early 1960s on the ship, mid-40s at Auschwitz

Place: Ocean liner *Hamburg*, sailing for Brazil, with flashbacks to Auschwitz concentration camp, Poland

Act I

- Scene 1**.....On the ship (daytime)
Scene 2.....Roll-call, Auschwitz (early morning)
Scene 3.....Women's barracks, Auschwitz (evening)

Act II

- Scene 1**.....Storeroom for confiscated goods, Auschwitz (morning)
Scene 2.....Workshop in men's barracks, Auschwitz (daytime)
Scene 3.....Women's barracks, Auschwitz (evening)
Scene 4.....On the ship (daytime)
Scene 5.....A room used for concerts in the Auschwitz bath house
Scene 6 (Epilogue).....The banks of a great river (morning)

THE STORY

ACT I

SCENE 1, “Ship.” German diplomat Walter Kretschmer and his wife of fifteen years, Lisa, are sailing to Brazil for a three-year posting. In high spirits, they bid Germany and Europe farewell (Dialogue: **Das Ufer in der Ferne**). A steward approaches with refreshments, and announces that dancing has begun in the ship’s salon. The couple reminisces about their happy meeting: Walter still loves his wife like a besotted schoolboy (Arioso: **Mein kleines Lieschen!**). He regrets the passing of years, and curses the World War that has “crippled our souls.” Lisa proposes that they enjoy the trip as their second honeymoon. Walter’s mood lightens: he recalls her youth during the war years, and states that Brazil will do her great good (Dialogue: **Doch sieh nur**). Lisa turns ashen at the appearance of a new passenger, at whom she stares in growing consternation. She falls into a trancelike state, flashing back to her wartime experience: a chief female overseer in SS-uniform appears on a lower level of the set that represents Auschwitz, and orders subordinate Lisa to regain her composure (Dialogue: **Was ist los mit Ihnen, Aufseherin Franz?**). Lisa mumbles “Zu Befehl” (As you order), and Walter fears that she may be seasick. She retreats to their cabin and sits before the mirror, wondering whether the stranger can really be Marta. She remarks her own pallor and sudden fear, and calls herself by her “war name,” Anna-Liese Franz. She tries to talk herself out of this shocking recognition: Marta must have died years ago with others at the “Black Wall” (a place of execution for political prisoners at Auschwitz). The unseen chorus adds subterranean resonance to the memory of this ghastly place (Chorus: **Chornaya st’yena**). Lisa summons the steward and bribes him to look into her fellow-passenger’s identity (Dialogue: **Can you help me?**). Walter joins Lisa and asks whether she’s ready for dancing (Dialogue: **Wie geht’s? Was macht dein Kopf?**). As they are about to leave, the strange woman walks down their corridor. Lisa drags Walter back into their cabin and loses self-control. Walter demands to know the woman’s identity, and threatens to approach the stranger himself. Lisa breaks down and confesses her connection as an SS overseer at Auschwitz to Marta (Scene and Duet: **Was verbirgst du?**). Walter explodes with anxiety at this nightmare, this “wicked joke” that he is hearing for the first time. He is now “an honorable German with an SS wife” and a doomed diplomatic career. Lisa defends her wartime activity: she very young, it was her patriotic duty, and she feared that Walter would abandon her had he known. She felt drawn to this Polish girl Marta, whose pride and contempt she had determined to break, but without taking part in any physical punishment (Aria: **Die Angst hat mir Nachts die Kehle zugeschnürt**). The steward returns: the passenger in Cabin 45 is British and traveling alone to Brazil. Lisa exults, and Walter offers his wife absolution in the form of an excuse: as Germans they wallow in sentimentality, and need to put these ghosts of the past behind them. They return to the deck and, to jazzy dance rhythms, Lisa swears that she has confessed everything. The hidden chorus urges that there is much more to reveal.

SCENE 2, “Roll Call.” While Walter relaxes in a deck chair, Lisa descends in space and time back to the assembly square at Auschwitz. A group of SS officers watches as the female prisoners assemble in rows between barracks surrounded by barbed wire. The men complain of boredom, and the difficulty of disposing of twenty thousand corpses each day. One crows that the number is far too small, that they should aim for a million per day. His fellow-executioners exult that their Führer will supply them the means to do so; but exterminating humans must remain an orderly science (Trio: **Wie langweilig ist’s hier, Hans!**). Lisa appears in her SS uniform, and Marta in her characteristic striped pajamas. The SS men regret that the military outfit does Lisa’s beauty an injustice. Roll call continues with prisoners’ numbers bellowed out (including Zofia Posmysz’, 7566). The chorus laments that they remain hidden from the world, as the gates of Auschwitz only open inward (Scene and Chorus: **Fräulein Franz, wir warten auf Sie!**). The officers leave, and the Chief Overseer advises Lisa to get a prisoner to lead her squad (Kommando). Lisa already has her eye on one: Marta (Dialogue: **Du hast gut gelernt, mein Kindchen**). Off the two women go to other work, leaving Marta alone to comment on Lisa’s seeming politeness, wondering what she could want from her (Arioso: **Ana sliedit za mnoi tak nieatryvna**).

SCENE 3, “Barracks.” Older prisoners return from work to find arrivals from a fresh transport. These latest are terrified by a deranged old woman, who raves that they are all about to go up the chimney as smoke. Marta and Krzystina try to calm everyone, especially Vlasta, Yvette, Katja and Hannah, who bemoan the loss of their homelands (Scene and Chorus: **Neulinge, Ha, ha, ha!**). The women crawl into their bunks. When Marta declares that they must all hold onto their humanity, old Bronka declares, “How hard it is to be human.” Together the women affirm their will to survive, as this hellish dark night cannot last forever. Bronka prays to God for strength and protection for her family (Prayer: **Sviati Bozhe**). Krzystina rails that God has forgotten them all, which Bronka and Yvette find blasphemous, and the room quiets (Dialogue: **Oh! Kto eta?..Bog tebya nie zabudit!**) The door crashes open, and Russian partisan Katja is thrown in. Lisa watches as Marta calls for water and a candle, and orders the door to be shut (Scene and Ensemble: **Skareja vadi!**). A Kapo, or prisoner/guard, has in the meantime stolen into the barracks and found a note in Polish that Katja brought in, but which neither the Kapo nor Lisa can read. Lisa admires Marta’s control over her fellow inmates and, knowing her to be a Pole, orders her to read the note (Act One Finale: **Weg, weg, weg da!**) Lisa recognizes it as an already-sent coded message between members of the Resistance, but reads it as an “intercepted” love note, substituting the name of her own sweetheart Tadek (Tadeusz). Lisa threatens Katja with the punishment block (solitary confinement without food or water) and dismisses everyone. With the exception of Marta, Katja and Lisa, the other women disperse. Katja thanks Marta for saving her life, and asks the identity of this “Tadek.” Marta obliges, and Katja comments on the beauty of her name, which to her evokes springtime and hope. As the women fall asleep, the chorus chants of the futility of hope in a place like Oswiecim (the camp’s Polish name). In a brief flash forward to the ship, Lisa marvels to Walter that she later learned that Marta had lied to her, and “how they hated us.” As the curtain falls, Walter remains silent.

ACT II

SCENE 1, “Store Room.” To a tawdry waltz tune with which we will become much more familiar, Lisa watches older prisoners sort items confiscated from prisoners: suitcases, pieces of furniture, musical instruments, children’s toys, clothing, shoes. An SS man asks Lisa to choose the best violin she can find. It seems that the camp Kommandant is a great connoisseur of music. The officer has identified a famous violinist in his group, who must play the Kommandant’s favorite waltz “before he goes up in smoke” (Dialogue: **Heil! Du kennst dich mit Geigen aus**). Lisa produces a supposedly priceless instrument, and the SS man states that he will send the prisoner/musician to collect it. The room clears. Tadeusz appears and stands mute before Lisa. Marta rises from behind a pile of suitcases and holds her hands in front of her face to suppress her shock. Tadeusz is likewise shaken, and stares at Marta in silence, and Lisa realizes that this can only be Marta’s not-so-secret lover. She points him to the violin, leaves the room, and Marta and Tadeusz fall into each other’s arms. They express mutual astonishment and joy that they’re both alive. Marta laments that the camp has made her ugly and worn, which Tadeusz denies with appropriate vehemence: “They’ve robbed us of everything, but they cannot take our love away” (Duet: **Ti zhiv?**). They reminisce about a time when they met in an empty church and fantasized their wedding, with Tadeusz providing the music. After repeated embraces, kisses and endearments, they freeze when Lisa returns, and begins her “seduction” to control Marta. Tadeusz confesses that they were a couple, “in that world that still knows of engagements.” Lisa insinuates that she will break all the camp’s rules for them, and tears up the earlier “love note” (Dialogue and Arioso: **Ach, ihr kennt euch!**). Katja warns the lovers that Lisa is still lurking nearby, and repeats that Marta saved her life by misrepresenting the note which Tadeusz had given her in the first act (Dialogue: **Beregitis! Zdyes nadziretyelnitsa Franz!**). A loudspeaker blares horrid music that Tadeusz identifies as the Kommandant’s favorite waltz.

SCENE 2, “Workshop.” In a carpentry and engraving space in the men’s barracks, Tadeusz reads a note from an underground connection. His previous message was successfully received, and Kiev has been liberated from the Nazis. As Lisa enters, he hides the note and examines the carving on some woodblocks. Lisa asks him about his violin playing and some study sketches in the shop. She scrutinizes a medallion: the portrait on it is of Marta, without hair. Tadeusz admits as much, because that is how she appears here in the camp. This gives Lisa her opening: Marta’s hair can always grow back, and she tempts Tadeusz with possible ways to see his beloved (Dialogue and Duet: **Yesli zdies...Ich hab’ gehört**). Despite all these blandishments, Tadeusz refuses any action that would put Marta in danger. We fade forward again to the ship, with Lisa’s incomprehension that a prisoner would refuse such generosity, and with such a level of hatred.

SCENE 3, “Barracks.” Marta, carrying a bouquet of roses, is surrounded by her friends, who offer congratulations on her twentieth birthday, and wishes that she will soon be living in freedom (Ensemble: **Pazdravlyayu!..Spasibo, druzya!**). Marta sings of how she would choose if God gave her the chance of how and when she would die: in peace, silence and humility, with a songbird celebrating her release, and her lover’s kiss on her lips (Aria: **Yesli bi vasvalka mnye gaspod**). The women give her what gifts they can manage: a carrot and onion from Yvette, a scarf from Vlasta, adding to the roses that Tadeusz has sent (Dialogue: **Du vest leb’n**). Someone

shouts “The Overseer!” from the doorway, and the women scatter. Lisa enters and offers to facilitate a visit from Tadeusz tomorrow. Lisa tells her that Tadeusz refused her offer of a meeting, and Marta responds, “He had his reasons.” Lisa characterizes such rationales as cowardly, but Marta stands firm. Lisa threatens reprisals and stalks out, to similar defiance from the unseen chorus (Dialogue and Duet: **Hör mal, Marta...Ich bot ihm an, zu kommen**). Sitting on their bunks, Yvette attempts to give Bronka a French lesson that will make visiting Yvette’s home town of Dijon more pleasant after the war. They begin with the conjugation of a word that most concerns them, “to be.” All the women sing of their longing to return home (Duet and Ensemble: **Bon, après moi répète...Co s’namî bude**). Katja sings her grandmother’s song about a Russian valley cold and bare in December (Aria: **Ti, dalinushna, dalina**). A voice from the loudspeaker barks out numbers of prisoners for the evening’s “selection,” to Yvette’s high-pitched wails. A Kapo, overseers—Lisa among them—and SS men with machine guns appear in the doorway, and drive the prisoners, including Yvette and Katja, toward the door. Bronka tries to hold Yvette back, but she is pushed away. Katja urges her friends to never forget the dying or forgive the Germans (Ensemble: **N’ye zabuvaitye nas!**). Marta confronts Lisa, who observes coldly, “No, you aren’t up yet. No hurry, you’ll get there.” She says that she’s written her report, with the decision to send Marta to the punishment block, but only after the concert at which Tadeusz will play. Kyzystina asks Bronka to pray for them.

SCENE 4, “Ship.” In a sunnier mood, Lisa rejoins Walter. The Steward appears with amended information: the passenger in Cabin 45 is a British citizen, but is not English. She may be Polish, since she reads Polish books (Dialogue: **Es ist hier so schön**). Lisa and Walter rush back to their cabin. She resents his continued suspicions and accusations, and accuses him of thinking only of his diplomatic career. She defends her service at Auschwitz: she was an honorable German, never a criminal (Dialogue: **Walter, du denkst nur voll Sorge**). Walter forgives her with assurances of trust, and they head off to the salon, where a small orchestra occupies the stage. Lisa dances with the Captain, about which an elderly passenger teases Walter (Scene: **Your good health, Sir**). From one table, the passenger from Cabin 45 rises and requests a tune from the orchestra leader. When the tune they begin to play is the “Kommandant’s Favorite Waltz,” Lisa and Walter are thrown into consternation (Duet: **Was ist los, Lisa?**). Lisa wants to confront the passenger directly, “to hear gratitude from her own lips.” The orchestra falls silent, Lisa approaches, Marta moves toward her, and forces her down into their joint past, Auschwitz.

SCENE 5, “Concert.” The SS officer orders Tadeusz to play the waltz as though before God himself: “You’ll be seeing him soon” (Dialogue: **Spiel tüchtig auf, Geiger!**). Tadeusz faces the orchestra and plays Bach’s *Chaconne* in calm defiance. The officers grow agitated. The Kommandant issues an order. Another SS man rushes to Tadeusz, seizes the violin and smashes it. The unseen chorus sings of the “black wall of death...the tolling bell.”

EPILOGUE, “At the River.” Marta sits beside the water, singing of peace and the hearts and laughter of her murdered friends. “If one day your voices should fall silent, then we are all extinguished.” She swears to never forget her dear ones, especially Tadeusz (Aria: **Kakaya tishina!**).

Thomas Holliday

Horror and Grace

by Thomas Holliday

Horror was rooted in sympathy, after all, in understanding what it would be like to suffer the worst.

Joe Hill, *Heart-Shaped Box*

When we consider the shocking subject matter, what exactly *is* the appropriate music of horror? Weinberg had Auschwitz survivor Zofia Posmysz' words in mind (he and Medvedev spent time with her before completing their libretto and score) when she described what the struggle to stay alive involved: "To reproduce the reality of Auschwitz, one would have to describe...how one makes it through fifteen minutes." She believed that there were no words to convey the horror of what she beheld there, nor could painting; only music might approach that awful threshold. She describes listening to the radio now: "There's a piece of music that was played in Auschwitz—and I'm there immediately. Something always reminds me of it. I never leave it."

The overall impact of the musical and dramatic depiction of the characters' anxiety is unsettling, to say the least. Lisa's and Walter's angst-ridden conversations, as well as the camp scenes when members of the SS are present, are singularly unpleasant. Weinberg allows us, *forces* us to hear and understand the text. In the rare moments when the prisoners are left alone with each other, his lush palette unfurls like a spring blossom, particularly in the romantic encounters between Marta and Tadeusz. Weinberg's true gift was what we may call polytonal lyricism, embracing shattering climaxes, desolate, poignant melody, and parodic quotations (the German tavern song *Ach, du lieber Augustin*, Schubert's *Marche Militaire*, and disguised references to Berg's *Wozzeck* and Britten's *War Requiem*, the last having excited the Shostakovich circle's admiration). It becomes almost a gaming challenge to discover the composer's puzzles and variants, inversions and other leitmotivic permutations, which he clearly enjoyed, from the violent tattoo that opens the opera, as well as Tadeusz' concert before the SS in Act Two. Weinberg gives us the extreme contrasts of jazzy dance music, and the somber utterances of the chorus, amplifying or commenting on the action as in ancient Greek theatre.

To characterize *The Passenger* as a "difficult" opera, at times positively painful to hear and see, is an outrageous understatement. Yet Weinberg's music is almost as strongly and positively understated, and plays with exquisite crystalline clarity. Soft predominates over loud, low over high, all perfectly vocal. It rarely makes for easy listening, but is exactly what it needs to be.

Weinberg's musical style, control, and restraint reflect more than his intense friendship with Shostakovich, although his sound world and techniques are often indistinguishable from his great champion and mentor. Especially in *The Passenger*, Weinberg combines elements he admired in the more adventurous scores of Britten, and twelve-tone techniques perfected by Alban Berg. His economy of classical development and recapitulation of melodic and harmonic "modules" reminds us that Weinberg was above all a great symphonist.

That being said, it is Berg's characteristic lyricism that most informs *The Passenger*. Weinberg writes for a hefty twentieth-century pit orchestra of strings and heavy wind, brass and percussion components: three each of flutes (one doubling on piccolo), oboes (one on English Horn), clarinets, bassoons (one on contrabassoon), and alto saxophone; six horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba; and a percussion battery that includes timpani, snare and bass drums, celesta, harp, piano and guitar. For the ship's dance music, there is a stage band of accordion, guitar, piano, jazz drums and double bass.

Miraculously, with the collaboration of a sensitive conductor, this orchestration and specified dynamic levels manage never to drown out the voices. Already in Minsk, Weinberg had learned well his lessons in orchestration from Zolotaryov, the pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov, master puppeteer of both instruments and atmospheric composition. Weinberg's writing for the voices tends for the most part to be syllabic, which makes the text much easier to project. His expansions into melismatic runs suggest emotional instability, as in the mad ravings of the Old Prisoner in Act One's barracks scene. Others occur at moments like Walter's evocation in the opening scene, of what the war has done to their souls (*Seelen*), or Lisa's first mention of her own surname, Franz, both in Scene 1. In alternately vapid and hysterical neurotic attempts, quite unconscious, she yearns to recapture "the good old days," echoed in sentimental waltzes.

With the exception of the Act One trio for the SS men, singular for its brittle dryness, most scenes for the executioners and female overseers are rendered in dialogue. Quite appropriately, Weinberg denies those involved with the day to day functioning of Auschwitz their expression in music, or at least *meaningful* music.

Another wonderful effect early in Act One is Marta's first appearance, where Weinberg's supremely tasteful use of contrasting eerie high and ominous low textures draws Lisa back into KZ-World (KZ = *Konzentrationslager*, concentration camp).

Even when Weinberg's intervals are wide and disjunct, the overall range and median pitch level (*tessitura*) of each character remains reasonable and singable for performers schooled in Mozart, Bellini, or Donizetti. One notable exception is the distress of the newly arrived French prisoner Yvette, whose repeated high notes are graphic reflections of her fright. Yet the overall accessibility of Weinberg's settings is rare and grateful for performer and audience alike, no matter the ambient dissonance of a given moment.

The Bolshoi initially accepted the opera for production soon after its completion in 1968; but Soviet cultural czars worked to direct the world's attention away from its own Gulag history. Posmysz' ringing indictment of the wartime sufferings and annihilation of mostly non-Russians further reinforced their perception of Weinberg as an outsider.

Then, after the fall of the Soviet state in Weinberg's final decades, the emerging generation of Russian composers like Alfred Schnittke, Sofia Gubaidulina, Giya Kancheli and Valentin Silvestrov were promoted and embraced, ironically, as less tied to Russia's hated past than the refugee Weinberg, and his embrace by an "establishment" figure like Shostakovich.

Despite its Auschwitz setting, and the composer's family's slaughter, the opera features only one relatively minor Jewish character. This is Hannah, the 18 year-old from Salonika, Greece, who sings in Yiddish (in David Pountney's adaptation—see below). While Weinberg does not cause her to stand out at the expense of other prisoners, he invested a generous portion of love in Hannah. Her music in the Act One barracks scene has a folklike, Eastern quality, as

she sings of her hometown, and then the inevitability of her death: “I am a Jew, I have to die.” Marta engages her to hold onto her humanity, to win by surviving; she must reach a time when no one frightens her, a time to live out her normal span with laughter and love. It is almost certain that Weinberg would have liked to convert his family to this outlook before he left Poland in 1939. By the Act Two barracks scene, it is Hannah who predicts *Marta’s* survival and freedom, making it thus doubly painful that Hannah is among the group of women called for “selection” (gassing) at the end of that scene.

Medvedev’s all-Russian libretto underwent significant changes by the time it reached Bregenz in 2010, and subsequently Teatr Wielki, Warsaw; English National Opera, London; Teatro Real, Madrid; and now, Lyric. (It will be performed by Houston Grand Opera in January 2014, and that production will be reprised at the Lincoln Center Festival in New York.) Bregenz’ stage director, David Pountney, convinced Weinberg’s publisher, Peermusic, that more intense dramatic points could be scored by translating some of Medvedev’s lines into the characters’ languages. Thus in both score and production, Marta, Tadeusz and Krystina sing to each other in Polish, Yvette in French, Lisa, Walter and the SS men in German, Katja in Russian, Vlasta in Czech, and so forth.

Far from sowing confusion or disorientation, at least after the first few exchanges in different tongues, we are swept even more deeply into KZ-World, a kind of Babel in which communication between these viciously abused human beings transcends national boundaries.

Weinberg and Medvedev issue their singers potent dramatic challenges. The levels of nightmarish fear and agitation, alternating with silly escapism, that Lisa and Walter are asked to convey, paired with her harshness and seductive deviousness as a servant of the Reich in the flashback scenes, are simply exhausting. On the other hand, the Auschwitz prisoners don’t have it easy either: their demands include the opposites of fear approaching madness, to warm support of each other, to stoicism and dignity in the face of death.

The SS personnel are one-dimensional, having only to project evil’s banal face.

It is Marta and Tadeusz, Weinberg’s Everyman and –Woman who carry the drama’s burden, as the most human figures in sight and earshot. Tadeusz, his virile baritone the opera’s only memorable low male voice, has art in his hands and soul, with metalwork and the violin. He and Marta communicate the most passionate emotional states; yet they are the center, the calm at the storm’s eye. Their fear is for each other, never themselves.

At times we may be tempted to doubt that “the passenger in Cabin 45” is in fact Marta; but there can be little doubt that she recognizes Lisa from their first silent encounter on the ship. Yet Marta transcends Auschwitz by her acts of remembrance; Lisa has never left.

Inevitably, just when we begin to fear that the subject, action and music are more than we can take, Weinberg eases the nightmare with scenes of ineffable joy, warmth and peace, like Bronka’s prayer in the Act One barracks scene, or Marta’s radiant aria about death in the workshop scene of Act Two. Marta’s melodic approach offers her best defense against the horrors of camp life, reflecting intrinsic strength, composure and balance, qualities that make her remarkable, attractive and *necessary* to fellow prisoners and overseer Lisa alike. It is in her great moments that Weinberg’s affinity with Berg becomes most marked, again, landing us on an island of relative calm amid turbulent horror.

It is so typical of Weinberg's restraint and tender modesty that he structures the opera to make Tadeusz' playing of the Bach *Chaconne* the dramatic climax of the entire work. One critic (Dariusz Czaja, in his perceptive comments on the Warsaw production, <http://www.biweekly.pl/article/1581-a-black-wall.html>) has described this throwing-back of humanism and high culture into the faces of the brutes, "like punching a hole in a tight dead end."

The Passenger is a righteously unsettling opera, an artistic reflection of the greatest institutionalized mass murder, torture and genocide in mankind's history. One will leave it in a frame of mind conjured by no other work in the operatic repertoire: shaken, humbled, thoughtful, grateful. Marta's epilogue at the river begins with a soft, slow variant of Marta's principal leitmotif, reminding us, as T.S. Eliot wrote, that we may arrive at the place at which we began, and know it for the first time.

It will be a rare audience member whose eyes remain dry, or whose throat lacks a lump during this final valediction. Medvedev gave Marta a paraphrase from the French Surrealist poet Paul Éluard: "If the echo of their voices should fade, we shall perish." With the passing of years and discovery of new facts, we have learned that those Holocaust voices may have totaled between 17 and 26 million in concentration and forced labor camps: Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, the physically and mentally handicapped, prisoners of politics and war.

In recent months (*New York Times*, March 2, 2013), we have learned that Auschwitz was one of about 42,500 internment facilities of different sizes and brutalities. Yet the two musical and dramatic highlights of *The Passenger* are of astonishing understatement and delicacy: the Bach *Chaconne* that precedes Tadeusz' execution and Marta's final song to the river. A Holocaust opera without music of rage and outrage would be useless; but Weinberg chooses his battles, and focuses at critical points on moments of clarity and awareness. Never forgiveness, but eternal remembrance and our shared humanity with the doomed. His answers to horror thus comprise a testament of grace, a warning and bequest of heart-rending truth and beauty.

Mieczyslaw Weinberg

b. Warsaw, Poland, December 8, 1919

d. Moscow, Russia, February 26, 1996

by Thomas Holliday

Weinberg's blood brimmed with music and theatre; it was assaulted by enduring anti-Semitic persecutions and poor health. His father Shmil was conductor, composer and violinist at the Yiddish *Scala* Theatre in Warsaw; his mother Sonia acted in Yiddish companies in Warsaw and Lodz. From the age of 10, their son began working as his father's adjunct, as pianist, musical director and, eventually, composer, all from innate musicality rather than formal training, except what he picked up from Shmuil and other colleagues. Around the age of 12, he began taking piano lessons from Józef Turczynski at Warsaw Conservatory, and became a brilliant solo performer, accompanist and chamber player.

The story of Weinberg's escape from Poland to Russia in September 1939, on foot, at times minutes ahead of the Nazi invaders, is a thriller unique in the annals of classical musicians.

His parents and sister remained behind. After the transports of Warsaw Jews to concentration camps on Polish soil in 1942-43, all three were murdered at Trawniki.

Settling first in Minsk, Byelorussia, Weinberg enrolled at that city's Conservatory, taking his first formal composition lessons from Vassily Zolotaryov, a student of Rimsky-Korsakov. When the Germans broke their nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union in June 1941, Weinberg once more stayed a step ahead of death by scrambling onto a train to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan (Central Asia), well beyond the Germans' reach.

Thanks to its geographical situation, Tashkent was at the heart of an agricultural breadbasket: food was relatively plentiful, and the climate mild. Weinberg's health had always been fragile. He suffered from painful spinal tuberculosis, which gave him an increasingly obvious hunchback; and in later years, from Crohn's Disease.

Not surprisingly, the city became a wartime haven for artists, and Weinberg soon began collaborating on musical theatre pieces of a propagandistic nature. Though he never joined the Communist Party, his gratitude and commitment to his adoptive country never waned. He had already composed string quartets, piano sonatas, song cycles, a violin sonata, and works for full orchestra. Soon he gravitated to the Uzbek Opera and Ballet Theatre, whose Artistic Director was the great Yiddish actor Solomon Mikhoels. Weinberg began coaching singers, and met, wooed and wed his boss' daughter, Natalia.

In early 1943, either Mikhoels or a composer friend took the score of Weinberg's 1942 *Symphony No. 1* to the great Dmitri Shostakovich in Moscow. The elder composer was sufficiently impressed to work through channels to get permission for Weinberg to move to Moscow at the height of the war. The two men became great friends, often playing and critiquing each other's latest composition. Though Shostakovich stated that Weinberg never studied with him, theirs was a kind of spiritual bonding that both found stimulating and mutually supportive. The synchronicity of their concentrations on symphonies and string quartets suggests a kind of good-natured competition.

It is thus doubly ironic that one of the roadblocks to worldwide recognition of so much of Weinberg's immense output had to do with *Russian* anti-Semitism. In 1948, Josef Stalin and his henchmen launched a concerted attack on "formalism" (code name for musical abstraction and dissonance) in the arts. On Stalin's personal order, Weinberg's father-in-law Solomon Mikhoels, widely regarded (and officially denounced) as the "Chief Jew of the Soviet Union," was assassinated in Minsk that January. Even Shostakovich lost his teaching post at Moscow Conservatory. In 1952-1953, Weinberg was implicated by family relationship in Stalin's fantasized "Doctors' Plot." "Rootless cosmopolitan" and "bourgeois nationalist" (code names for Jewish) doctors, including Natalia's uncle Miron Semyonovich Vovsi, had supposedly murdered high state officials with their treatments.

Weinberg fell further onto the state's wrong side: five years later, the investigation into his Vovsi connections continued, and the Weinbergs were kept under surveillance. In February 1953, their home was invaded and ransacked. Agents arrested Weinberg and took him to the dreaded Lubyanka Prison, further endangering his health. Someone or some committee had accused him of the absurd act of wanting to set up an independent Jewish state in the Crimea. He was marked for execution by Stalin, who however had the good sense to die that March. Shostakovich intervened with a petition to the head of the secret police, Lavrentii Beria, and Weinberg returned home a month and a half later. Yet for the rest of his life, he somehow never

outgrew the contagion of establishment suspicion. Despite his growing reputation as a composer of the rank of Prokofiev and Shostakovich, and his continued friendship with and mentoring by the latter, Weinberg grew increasingly marginalized, in and out of Russia.

He next turned with predictable passion to opera. Shostakovich read *The Passenger*, a novel by the Polish writer Zofia Posmysz, and turned it over to his friend Dimitri Medvedev, who gave it in turn to Weinberg. The tale of persecution and internment resonated, and it became Weinberg's first full-length opera, on which he worked in 1967-1968, to Medvedev's libretto. Weinberg and Shostakovich both considered it the former's masterpiece, yet it was never staged in the composer's lifetime. Shostakovich arranged a private hearing at the Composer's Union, and a production was scheduled then canceled by the Bolshoi Theatre, after which *The Passenger* was consigned to oblivion for four decades. Undeterred—he often testified to his obligation to work after his life had been spared so many times—Weinberg went on to write seventeen of his twenty-six symphonies, six of his seventeen string quartets, two of his six concertos, eight of his thirty song cycles, and six of his seven operas. His catalogue numbered one hundred and fifty-four works (there were reams of others unnumbered, lost or destroyed), including ballets, cantatas, sonatas, and scores for films, plays and circus performances.

The *Passenger* Libretto

by Thomas Holliday

The Source

Zofia Posmysz

b. August 23, 1923, Krakow, Poland

This extraordinary Polish author, screen and radio writer and journalist has the distinction of having survived the horrors of the Holocaust. A devout Catholic, at age 18 she was arrested in April 1942 for distributing flyers for the Polish underground school organization *Union for Armed Struggle*, and spent the next three years as a political prisoner in five different detention facilities, including Auschwitz. Many of *The Passenger's* plot details and characters are based on her personal experiences, including work in the camp storeroom, receiving a medallion made for her by a fellow-prisoner named Tadeusz, and working as bookkeeper for the female overseer Anneliese Franz (if alive, still at large).

After the war, she began writing for print and radio journalism about the SS at Auschwitz. In Paris in 1959, she heard a voice in a group of German tourists that she at first believed was Franz', which prompted Posmysz' radio play, *The Passenger in Cabin 45*, the first version of what became Weinberg's opera. After collaborating on the script for director Andrzej Munk's unfinished film version, in 1962 she expanded her play into a novel.

Posmysz served as consultant on the world stage premiere of *The Passenger* at Bregenz in 2010.

The Text
Alexander Medvedev
b. 1927, Moscow, Soviet Union
d. Moscow, July 26, 2010

Best known as a musicologist and librettist, Medvedev, a member of Shostakovich's inner circle, studied music history and theory at Moscow's Gnessin Institute. After earning a doctorate at the Institute for Theatre, Music and Cinematography in Leningrad, he became principal editor of the journal *Soviet Music*, and dramaturg at the Bolshoi Theatre.

Shostakovich recognized Posmysz' novel as a magnificent libretto subject for Weinberg when it appeared in translation in the journal *Foreign Literature*, and suggested it to Medvedev, who in turn passed it on to their mutual friend. Medvedev gained Posmysz' approval, even visiting Auschwitz with her, and set to work at once on the Russian text. (He subsequently wrote the libretto for three of Weinberg's next six operas, *The Madonna and the Soldier* (1970-71), *The Portrait* (1980), and *The Idiot* (1986).

Years after the planned Bolshoi Theatre premiere in 1968 fell victim to politics, Medvedev promised Weinberg to listen for both of them when the work reached a stage. The librettist was too ill to attend the 2010 Bregenz premiere, and died just five days later.

Posmysz had to listen for all three.

Thomas Holliday is an opera stage director, librettist, translator, author, and lecturer, with a performance background in instrumental and vocal music. His work includes productions of over 50 operas for companies in Europe and America, seven original scripts and opera libretti, 25 English performing translations, projected titles for 14 operas, program notes, articles for numerous journals, and both fiction and poetry. His authorized biography of America's greatest opera composer, *Falling Up: The Days and Nights of Carlisle Floyd*, was published in 2013 by Syracuse University Press. He is currently writing the first novel – *Mozart and the Lost Tomb* – in an historical thriller series to be called *The Counterfactual Mozart*.