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ARC, Peering Into the Shadows

In 1941, a Polish musical genius fled his country for the hills of Uzbekistan. There in Tashkent, Mieczyslaw (or Moisey) Weinberg began churning out the first of his 22 symphonies and 17 string quartets. Given that Weinberg never fared well with the Stalinists, few pieces received significant premieres. “What was performed,” he would later say of his music, “was performed due to a performer’s express desire.”

Twelve years after the composer’s death, Weinberg’s music still relies on advocates like the ARC Ensemble. On Tuesday night at the Kennedy Center, Pro Musica Hebraica presented the ARC, an impressive group of musicians who teach at the Royal Conservatory and Glenn Gould School in Toronto. Though the program of Jewish-themed works also included brief pieces by Szymon Laks, Sándor Vándor and Prokofiev, this was Weinberg’s night.

Well acquainted with Shostakovich and influenced by Bartók, Weinberg wrote complex neoclassical works interwoven with folk themes. Clarinetist Joaquin Valdepeñas and pianist Dianne Werner tackled the Clarinet Sonata, a piece that evokes klezmer without ever sounding kitsch. Valdepeñas maintained consistent tone while vastly varying his expression, from the tuneful first movement to the more torrid and mournful music that followed.

Weinberg’s Piano Quintet, both epic and episodic, kept listeners in suspense. There’s a bizarre Gypsy waltz in the third movement, a poignant piano solo in the fourth and a delightful folk dance for two violins in the finale. Weinberg wrote the quintet in 1944, while his relatives were dying in Poland. As this powerful performance conveyed, Weinberg’s music is equal parts grief and nostalgia.

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