

Jaromir Weinberger



Jaromir Weinberger photo

“At the conservatory I have a very talented pupil from Prague: Bohemian – but also hereditarily predisposed with the Bohemians’ terrific sense of tone color. I gladly put up with such hereditary predisposition!”

_(Max Reger about Jaromir Weinberger in a letter, dated 22 December 1915, to Adolf Wach, one of Felix Mendelssohn’s son-in-laws)

Whoever wants to understand Jaromir Weinberger’s overwhelming success at the end of the 1920s only has to reach for a CD with the *Polka and Fugue from Schwanda the Bagpiper*, for example, in the interpretation by Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra: the melodies and rhythms of the pupil of a pupil of Dvorak, Bohemian, innately musical, catchy. That’s the one thing. On the other hand, one hears an intellectually elaborated and yet spontaneously effective technique of orchestral writing that is reminiscent of his teacher Max Reger’s *Mozart Variations*. Some ten years after the opera from which these two orchestral pieces are taken, he composed, already in French exile, the orchestral variations on *Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree*, which were then premiered in the USA and that, on the one hand, seem obliged to the same model and also to Johannes Brahms, but, on the other hand, also to the tonal horizon of the large city, the revue, and the sound film. Like the other variations, the seemingly “academic” fugato finale is also joined here to the previous movement by an unusual piano solo, as if a pensive bar pianist were improvising in between. With none of his later stage works was Weinberger able to repeat the huge success of *Švanda dudák*, the strikingly folksy and yet anything but old-fashioned opera that makes enormous demands on the performers. It is not a “comic opera” for light voices and a mere municipal theater orchestra. The great conductors of the time, such as Erich Kleiber and Clemens Krauss, stood on the rostrum. It is significant that Weinberger was particularly acclaimed by the German public of the Weimar Republic, that is to say, in a heady phase between the stiff imperial era and the culturally narrow-minded, dull “Third Reich.” That is why he was also to write the operetta *Frühlingsstürme* (“Spring Storms”) for Berlin’s Admiralspalast, as the *Lehár* of a new era, so to speak, an era that was to begin a few days after the premiere in January 1933, albeit in an entirely different manner, and that was initially to drive Weinberger out of Germany, then out of Austria and Czechoslovakia, and ultimately out of Europe. Beside the retrospective melancholy – for example, in the grand romance “Du wärst für mich die Frau gewesen” (“You would have been the woman for me”) for Richard Tauber as the Japanese officer and abjuring lover – one also hears in the music of *Frühlingsstürme* the snappy asphalt rhythms of the buffo couple, “Nimm mich

nach China mit, ins Reiche der Mitte” (“Take me with you to China, to the Middle Kingdom”), where there were allegedly none of all those things that were so disturbing at that time in Germany. The libretto, written by Gustav Beer, was namely quite “political.”

In 1937 Weinberger finished his last stage work, the opera *Wallenstein*, which was premiered in Vienna in the German translation by Max Brod. The original Czech libretto, like that of *Švanda dudák*, was written by Miloš Karel, only this time the subject was not a fairytale-like legend, but a multi-part historical play, a classic by Schiller that was unwieldy for musical theater and anything but obvious as an opera plot. Nevertheless, Weinberger succeeded in composing a fanciful score and vocal roles with audience appeal; with ease he wrote melodies that under other political circumstances would surely have established the story of the Bohemian commander on the opera stage. But Austrian chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg, to whom the opera is dedicated, already had no chance against the National Socialist pressure from Berlin.

Just after his arrival in the USA, Weinberger described himself in an article for *Musical America* (10 February 1939) as “a composer of the past ... the time in which we are living, has nothing to say to me.” And yet, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, one can perhaps recognize the Europe of Weinberger’s time more clearly in his works, as recent performances of *Wallenstein* prove, than in those of many of his contemporaries.

© Christoph Schwandt, 2011 (translation: Howard Weiner)