

SACD REVIEW by Jerry Dubins

WEINBERG Clarinet Sonata, op. 28 (version for viola). **Sonata for Solo Viola. Sonatas for Solo Viola: No. 1**, op. 107; **No. 2**, op. 123; **No. 3**, op. 135; **No. 4**, op. 136. **DRUZHININ** Sonata for Solo Viola • Julia Rebekka Adler (va); Jascha Nemtsov (pn) • NEOS 1108/09 (2 CDs: 131:05)

Julia Rebekka Adler has been playing viola since she was barely big enough to manage an instrument of its size. Born in Heidelberg, Germany, in 1978, she studied with Kim Kashkashian, Johannes Lüthy, and Wolfram Christ at the Musikhochschule Freiburg, went on to take master classes with Walter Levin and Yuri Bashmet, and completed her training with Hartmut Rohde at the Universität der Künste Berlin. Having won numerous prizes, Adler is today counted among the top viola players on the scene, holding posts in the Munich Philharmonic, the Viardot Piano Quartet, and Berlin's Solistenoktett. Her recordings thus far are few, and, but with one exception, a Hoffmeister concerto, devoted to 20th-century composers.



As the first of the two above headnotes would suggest, Adler has taken a special interest in Mieczysław Weinberg (1919–1996), whose name may also be found in alternate spellings as Moisey Vainberg and Moisey Samuilovich Vaynberg. Of Polish-Jewish origin, Weinberg, who lost most of his family in the Holocaust, escaped to the Soviet Union/Russia in 1939, remaining there until his death. He is considered by some to be the third great Soviet composer after Prokofiev and Shostakovich, but others have criticized his work as derivative and damaging, not only to his own reputation but to that of Shostakovich, of whose music Weinberg's can be uncomfortably imitative. Alexander Ivashkin, cellist and Chair of Performance Studies and Director of the Centre for Russian Music and London's Goldsmiths University, slammed Weinberg, charging that "his works only served to kill off Shostakovich's music, to cover it over with a scab of numerous and bad copies." And Thure Adler, Julia's husband and unofficial manager, in referring to Weinberg's viola sonatas, admitted that they "do not qualify as easy listening." But others, including Hartmut Rohde, called Julia's recordings "a once-in-a-hundred-year's event for the world of the viola;" and Andreas Reiner, professor of violin and first chair of the Rosamunde Quartet called the recordings "a musical mighty deed." In the end, with whichever side one chooses to make camp, the large body of Weinberg's work, which includes 22 symphonies and 17 string quartets, cannot be ignored; and indeed it hasn't been by a number of companies that have recorded many of his works. If you are a regular visitor to archivemusic.com, you will find Weinberg listed under Vainberg.

The 1945 Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, played here in transcription for viola, is a fairly early work by the 26-year-old composer, and is, of the works recorded on these discs, the most clearly imitative of Shostakovich, as well as the most easily assimilated by the ear on a first hearing. As many years as the composer had been alive in 1945 would pass before he wrote his first sonata for viola solo in 1971. The three additional solo sonatas would follow in 1978, 1982 and 1983, and are among his later to late works.

As with all such compositions for solo string instruments—from Biber and Bach to Reger and Ysaÿe — Weinberg's scores present thorny technical challenges to the player in terms of double-stopping, awkward fingerings and bowings, and tricky string crossings. To the listener, they can present challenges as the ear tries to sort out melodic strands and harmonic implications. On both counts, I found Weinberg's essays for solo viola no more or less daunting than Reger's Suites for Solo Viola or Ysaÿe's Sonatas for Solo Violin. To be sure, Weinberg's harmonic palette relies heavily on sharply clashing minor seconds, major sevenths, and other dissonant constructs, such that after repeated exposure the ear comes to accept them as being consonantly stable, thereby allowing phrases and, in some cases movements, to end on cadences that would ordinarily be considered unresolved in traditional tonal harmony—the phrase ending on a minor seventh double-stop, E-D, in measure 19 of the first sonata's first movement being one example.

It would be a stretch, however, to pin Weinberg with the label avant-garde. His music may be freely tonal, but it is not in the atonal style of Schoenberg, nor does it fall into any readily classifiable mid- to later 20th-century "ism." Much about it is Russian in the way that Shostakovich is Russian—dark, brooding, and at times bitter, ironic, and mocking. If I had to put Weinberg into historical context, I'd say that he and Galina Ustvolskaya (also b. 1919) were in the first flank of post-Shostakovich Soviet modernist composers that gave rise to the likes of Boris Tchaikovsky (1925–1996), Denisov (1929–1996), Gubaidulina (b. 1931), Schnittke (1934–1998), Kancheli (b. 1935), Silvestrov (b. 1937), and Tischenko (b. 1939). Fyodor Druzhinin (1932–2007), whose name may not be as familiar as some of those cited

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KEEPSAKE OF MODERN AGE • Julia Rebekka Adler (va); Thomas Ruge (vc) • NEOS 10805 (SACD: 70: 14)

SIEGL Duo-Sonate, op. 139. **R. CLARKE** Lullaby and Grotesque. **HINDEMITH** Duett. **G. RAPHAEL** Duo for Viola and Cello, op. 47. **LUTOSŁAWSKI** Bukoliki. **MILHAUD** Sonatine for Viola and Cello, op. 378. **SCHUL** 2 Chassidic Dances, op. 15

above, may nonetheless be included among them. His primary career pursuit, however, was that of violist who replaced Vadim Vasilyevich Borisovsky as a member of the Beethoven Quartet in 1964. It was Druzhinin for whom Weinberg wrote his Sonata for Viola Solo No. 1, and it was Druzhinin who edited and published the score and recorded it for LP. His own Sonata for Viola Solo heard here is much in the same vein as Weinberg’s solo sonatas.

Julia Adler’s viola is not identified, but on its C and G strings it produces a tone of such amplitude and fullness that one might be fooled into thinking it was a cello, while even in the highest reaches of its A string there is never the slightest hint of that pinched, nasal quality that can blanch the instrument’s sound. But the viola doesn’t play itself, and for these truly astonishing and magnificent performances, Adler must be given her due.

I would have to agree with the above-quoted Andreas Reiner called Adler’s performances “a musical mighty deed.”

The second headnoted album, titled “Keepsake of Modern Age,” is all over the musical map, and may possibly appeal to more catholic tastes. Despite the disc’s title, and the fact that all of the pieces on it do indeed date from the 20th-century, not all are “modern” in the sense that is usually attributed to that label. For example, the CD opens with a Duo-Sonate for viola and cello by Otto Siegl (1896–1978). It’s a five-movement “neo-Baroquish” suite-like affair that contains some very lovely and expressive Romantic writing. The composer is even quoted as having said, “My music is not actually ‘modern’ as such, and will be just as valid in years to come.” Like the mute swan that only upon death “sang once and thus he sang no more,” Siegl seems not to have been heard from again.



Very little is known of him, other than the fact that he was born in Graz, Austria, and served as the town orchestra’s concert-master before he moved to Cologne where he taught at the conservatory and conducted the orchestra there from 1942 until the end of the war. I wasn’t able to find much information on Siegl beyond that which Christoph Schlüren’s booklet note offers. But what I did discover on my own was that Siegl wrote an opera, several oratorios, three symphonies, two concertos, one for piano and one for violin, several miscellaneous orchestral works, five string quartets, and a number of songs. Yet nothing of his output other than this duo for viola and cello is listed. Artists and record company execs, are you paying attention? Here is fertile soil for tilling.

The other two unfamiliar composers here are Günter Raphael (1903–1960) and Siegmund Schul (1916–1944). Raphael had a bit more of a run. His first symphony was premiered by Furtwängler in Leipzig in 1926, and one of his star pupils was Kurt Hessenberg. But being declared a half-Jew in Nazi Germany didn’t help his career. Nonetheless, Raphael managed to compose five symphonies, concertos for violin and organ, half-a-dozen string quartets, and a considerable volume of chamber music for various combinations of instruments. A handful of his works have been recorded.

Schul was not so lucky. Born in the Saxon town of Chemnitz, he moved to Prague, where he befriended composers Alois Haba and Viktor Ullmann. Schul’s output, however, is small; for in 1941 he was deported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp, where he died three years later at the age of 28.

The remaining composers on the disc are of a familiarity that their bios needn’t be elaborated. Nor are any of the pieces chosen here—not even Bukoliki by Lutosławski, a composer usually associated with the Polish avant-garde—of an uncompromisingly modernistic bent. Some, in fact, like Rebecca Clarke’s Lullaby and moments from Raphael’s Duo are infused with a great deal of Romantic passion, while Milhaud’s Sonatine and Schul’s Chassidic Dances are thoroughly charming and delightful. Once again, Julia Adler rises to the occasion, turning out some of the most gorgeous viola playing to be had on disc, and every bit her match is cellist Thomas Ruge. Also deserving of honorable mention is pianist Jascha Nemtsov who accompanies Adler on the Weinberg album in the transcription of the clarinet sonata for viola and piano. The Neos CDs are beautifully recorded, presenting the players in exceptionally crisp, clean sound. Admittedly, the Weinberg works will take a little effort to come to terms with, but are bound to be worth it in the end. Both of these releases receive strong recommendations.

Jerry Dubins