**Mieczysław Weinberg** (formerly mistakenly Moishe Vainberg) was born in Warsaw in 1919, the son of a composer and violinist at a Jewish theatre. When he was only ten he began his musical career there as a pianist and music director; two years later he started piano studies at the Warsaw Conservatory. After the German invasion of Poland in 1939 he was forced to flee the country and he went to the USSR, initially to Minsk. There he attended composition classes at the conservatory for two years, but when the Germans attacked the USSR in 1941 he had to flee again; he spent the next few years at the opera house in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. In the meantime his family had been murdered — burned alive — by the Germans.

In 1943 Weinberg sent the score of his newly completed *First Symphony* to Shostakovich, asking for an opinion of the work. Shostakovich arranged for him to receive an official invitation to Moscow — of especial value in the war years — and thus their close friendship was born. From the end of August 1943 until his death in 1996, Weinberg lived in Moscow, working as a freelance composer. From time to time he also made highly regarded appearances as a pianist — for instance, he performed alongside Galina Vishnevskaya, David Oistrakh and Mstislav Rostropovich at the première of Shostakovich’s *Alexander Blok Songs* and in his own now-famous *Piano Quintet* alongside the Borodins and with Oistrakh in his *Moldavian Rhapsody* for violin & piano (both: on ALC 1452).

Weinberg’s first wife belonged to a well-known Jewish family. Her father was the actor and director Salomon Mikhoels (his real name was Vovsi), the greatest Jewish actor in the Soviet Union, who was unforgettable as King Lear. Mikhoels was chairman of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC), which supported the work of a large writers’ collective. Under the leadership of Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, the latter organization prepared a ‘record of dishonour’ in which the atrocities committed by the Nazis against Jews in various countries were documented. The authors, however, had failed to predict that anti-Semitic persecution would reach terrifying levels in the Soviet Union as well. The respected Russian journalist Arkady Waxberg relates that publication of the ‘record of dishonour’ was forbidden; half of the contributors were arrested and either shot or sent to a gulag. A secret trial of the leaders of the JAC ended with the execution of 15 of its members on l2th August 1952. With this information, Waxberg also supplies a plausible explanation for the fate of Mikhoels, who was murdered by the secret police in Minsk on l3th January 1948. Weinberg, too, could have suffered a gruesome fate: towards the end of the Stalinist era, at 01.30am on 7th February 1953 (six months after the above-mentioned trial), he was imprisoned. It was with a sigh of relief that Shostakovich could write to his friend Isaac Glikman on 27th April 1953: ‘In the past few days M. S. Weinberg has returned home; he has informed me by telegraph.’ The date is significant (Stalin had died on 5th March and Weinberg’s release was probably a direct consequence), as is the fact that Shostakovich does not mention where Weinberg was returning from: such matters were not discussed openly. — So much for the hypocritical Communist legend of the equality of the peoples. A Jewish artist in the Soviet Union did not exactly enjoy an easy life.

Weinberg was an extremely productive composer with an output ranging from a *Requiem* to circus music. He had a (perhaps not entirely fashionable) inclination towards large-scale, epic music; in this respect Mahler and Prokofiev were important rôle models. His musical style was extremely varied, however, and his richly-coloured palette ranges from folk elements to dodecaphonic techniques. Folk-music elements were not only of Polish and Russian origin, but also Jewish and Moldavian (some of his ancestors had come from Moldova).

The first two works in Weinberg’s opus list were both written before he left Poland: *Lullaby* for piano (1935) and *String Quartet No.1* (1937). In an interview in 1994 the composer maintained that he had only turned to composition later on: ‘It was not until the outbreak of war that I began to devote myself seriously to composition, after the Germans had invaded Poland and I had fled to Minsk in the Soviet Union, where I began to study at the Minsk Conservatory. Until Hitler invaded the USSR, I studied there under Professor Vasily Andreyovich Zolotaryov, who was a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov. There I completed a course in counterpoint and music history.’

In an interview for *Sovietskaya Muzyka* in the late 1980s Weinberg was asked why exactly he had given his *Chamber Symphony No.1* such a title, given that he had already composed his *Second, Seventh* and *Tenth Symphonies* for smaller forces — indeed for strings. His answer went as follows: ‘*It’s true, I have gone slightly wrong. Of course the new symphony does not differ from the ones you mention in terms of the characteristics of its genre. You know, I had no desire to carry on with this series of high numbers. I recently also completed my Chamber Symphony No.2... I repeat: neither in duration nor in character do the new symphonies differ from the second, seventh or tenth*.’ The high numbers to which Weinberg mentioned naturally refer to the numbering of his ‘ordinary’ symphonies: he obviously wished to stop short of Myaskovsky’s total of no less than 27 ! (ALC 3141, 13 CDs). Even if we did not know of the composer’s pronouncement, the striking scale of the works recorded here would certainly reveal that the title ‘chamber symphony’ should perhaps not be taken literally.

Even though Weinberg sometimes - indeed, often - wrote for large orchestral forces, we should not forget that he regularly used the chamber music format with equal dexterity. Here, moreover, we find a similarity with Shostakovich, who also used both media alternately and with great skill. Several symphonic works by Weinberg also do without large orchestral apparatus and clearly demonstrate instrumental restraint. One of these is his ***Symphony No.2***, ***Op. 30, for string orchestra***. On account of its small orchestral forces, this symphony (along with several others) has sometimes been described in the (to put it mildly) limited biographical literature about Weinberg as a ‘chamber symphony’ — albeit before the composer began the series of works to which he himself assigned this nomenclature. The work was composed astonishingly quickly: Weinberg started work on the score on 30th December 1945 and completed it on l6th January 1946. Before the first performance, however, almost 19 years were to pass: the première did not take place until 11th December 1964 in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, and it was given by the USSR State Symphony Orchestra conducted by Kurt Sanderling, the German-born conductor who had worked in the Soviet Union since 1935. The symphony was also dedicated to Sanderling.

The *Second Symphony* is not programmatic - as far as we know, at least, there are no grounds for suggesting that it is. This point is worth making because many other symphonic works by Weinberg possess more or less detailed programmes. The overall style also tends more towards neoclassicism and is reminiscent of the music Weinberg had composed in the years immediately preceding the symphony, such as the *Piano Quintet* and the early string quartets. The neoclassical element comes to the fore straight away in the first movement, a sonata *Allegro*, the form of which follows the accustomed pattern exactly, whilst traditional harmonies - with only a few excursions into free tonality - provide the foundations for a melodic style which, with the exception of a few passages in the development, is almost entirely lyrical. The Russian musicologist Lyudmila Nikitina even compares it to ‘Schubert’s lyricism, with its melodic and rhythmic naturalness, its distinctive and unexpected harmonic transformations’.

The second of the work’s three movements is an *Adagio*, the epic main theme of which is worked out in a broad arch; the section that follows ranges from the utmost tenderness to raging passion and then back again, its theme distantly related to the ‘Dies irae’. The movement ends *pianissimo*. The tempo marking of the finale, *Allegretto*, suggests that the movement might depart from the normal (fast) finale pattern, and indeed it begins not as a rondo but rather reflectively. Then, admittedly, the form develops in an unexpected manner, resulting in a fascinating hybrid of scherzo, rondo and sonata form (the last-named contributing a skilfully constructed development section). Eventually the music returns to the lyricism that had been a hallmark of the entire symphony, with a sublime conclusion that is full of tenderness.

The *Chamber Symphony No.1*, Op.145 (ALC 1471) was completed in August 1986 and first performed, with great success, at the ‘Moscow Autumn’ Festival. Barely six months later, on 29th April 1987, Weinberg completed his ***Chamber Symphony No.2****, Op.147, for string orchestra and timpani* - the work mentioned in the quotation above. Unlike the four-movement *First Chamber Symphony*, this work has only three movements but, because the outer movements are extensive, the overall length of the *Second Chamber Symphony* is comparable with, say, that of a Viennese Classical symphony.

The rôle of the timpani in the first movement, a sonata-form *Allegro moderato*, is also comparable with the Viennese Classics: they emphatically hammer out the dominant and tonic, and their A-D leads the listener *in medias res*, to a main theme full of rhythmic vitality. The subsidiary theme offers a great contrast: first it is songful, then increasingly indecisive, finally becoming diffuse. After a development section with skilful counterpoint, a much shortened reprise ends the movement. *Pesante* (‘heavily’ or ‘powerfully’), the tempo marking for the second movement, seems at first to be somewhat exaggerated (a true *pesante*, however, appears when we reach the reprise), because the music has the character of a very slow scherzo, one might even say of a flowing minuet. The movement is almost exclusively in the minor, with a captivatingly beautiful, gentle melancholy. The finale is not, as might have been expected, a fast movement, but a long drawn *Andante sostenuto*, beginning with a recitative in unison that leads into the first main theme. After some two and a half minutes the second main theme appears, brighter and more comforting. The ensuing alternation between these themes could be regarded as a slow rondo, but in fact it would be more accurate to speak of a free sonata form in which (especially) the recapitulation is greatly altered. A coda, beginning *forte*, soon quietens down to *pianissimo*, and the chamber symphony ends as abruptly as it began, with a *fortissimo* stroke from the timpani. © **Per Skans 1998-99**

Violinist and conductor **Thord Svedlund** is a very experienced and versatile musician. He has studied in Sweden, USA and Holland, and has for many years worked as violinist in the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, the National Orchestra of Sweden. In 1991 he embarked on a conducting career that has earned him praise by critics and audiences alike. Thord Svedlund has conducted several of Sweden’s leading orchestras, including Gothenburg Symphony

Orchestra, Norrköping Symphony Orchestra, Gävle Symphony Orchestra, Swedish Chamber Orchestra and Umeå Symphony Orchestra. He has also worked as co-conductor with Neeme Järvi and Peter Eötvös. With the latter, he appeared in critically acclaimed performances of Charles Ives’ huge and demanding 4th Symphony in both Sweden and Germany. He has been to conduct in Shanghai, China. Thord Svedlund has recorded for radio and TV many times, and several CDs with music ranging from Bach and Haydn to contemporary Swedish composers.He has also conducted four of Weinberg´s solo concertos on CD for Chandos.

The **Umeå Symphony Orchestra** is a young orchestra, having only played under its current name since the 1991-92 season. Its history extends much further; the orchestra was originally founded as a military band in 1841. In 1974, when the band also began to play for the newly founded Northern Opera of Sweden / Norrland Opera Company, it had become a regional woodwind and percussion ensemble, supplemented when necessary by a string section borrowed from Stockholm. In 1976 the orchestra began hiring its own string players and in 1978 it made its début performance as the Umeå Sinfonietta**.** Today the orchestra has 50 full-time musicians and regularly performs at Umeå’s many music festivals, as well as touring all over central and northern Sweden. It is still the orchestra of the Northern Opera of Sweden / Norrland Opera.