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Gustav Mahler and Ernest Bloch – two Jewish musicians

Mahler and Bloch can both be considered as innovators whilst much of the music they composed is instantly recognizable. Another key similarity was their Jewishness. Ernest Bloch could be self-contradictory about the impact of being Jewish on his compositions sometimes suggesting that being Jewish influenced all his compositions whilst generally accepting the appellation 'Jewish cycle' applied to certain of his works. To attain the pinnacle of director of the Vienna Opera, Mahler had formally to become a Christian but it seems doubtful that this made much difference to his self-identification – "I am three times homeless: as a native of Bohemia in Austria, as an Austrian amongst Germans and as a Jew throughout the world".

Mahler's early death meant that any contact between these two great Jewish composers was limited. However, on 15 June 1903 Bloch heard Mahler conduct his second symphony.



Gustav Mahler, musical director of the New York Philharmonic, on the streets of Manhattan in 1910.
Alfred Roller

Its impact was profound and later that year Bloch wrote enthusiastically to Mahler whose warm reply appears in vol. 1 of the monumental Bloch biography by Lewinski and Dijon and is here freely translated by the editor of this newsletter:

"Your letter has brought joy to my heart. Do not think I am insensitive to somebody expressing such warm enthusiasm.... I live in the world as a stranger. It is very rare for somebody who thinks like me to be brought to my attention.... If you think it good and useful to state publicly or publish your views on myself and my work, you would have my complete approval".

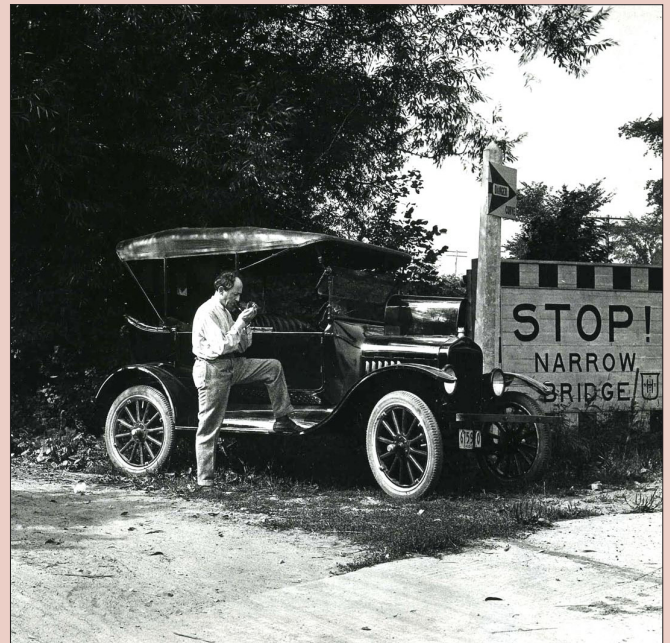
Bloch did just that and the following year he published an article in *Le Courrier Musicale* (translated and reprinted in vol. 2 of Henry de la Grange's equally monumental Mahler biography):

"Mahler could not care less about astounding the experts or scandalising respectable people.... his armoury is none the poorer for that! He is familiar with every modern resource... From the first notes, its (the symphony's) tragic grandeur seizes us: it is as though we were face to face with the great problems of life or death.... I will not forget the demeanour of the audience (which) had just lived life itself."

Perhaps this might have been prelude to a long-lasting friendship, but Mahler died in 1911 having spent his last years in America whilst Bloch was still in Europe.

Stanley Henig

Bloch's driving ambition



At about the time that Bloch was composing his *Baal Shem Suite* for violin and piano (1923), he bought his first car - a Ford. On learning of the manufacturer's openly antisemitic sentiments, he reacted by giving his Ford the pet-name *Mezinka*, after a Yiddish popular song (*Di mezhinke oysgegeybn* - "the youngest daughter married off") by Mark Warshavsky (1848-1907), whose opening motifs he had incorporated into "Simchas Torah", the finale of the Suite.

[Source: Suzanne Bloch and Irene Heskes, *Ernest Bloch - Creative Spirit*, Jewish Music Council of the National Jewish Welfare Board, New York, 1976, p. 61]

A note from the past:- Bloch by Bernstein *Saturday Review* 25 March 1961

The anonymous writer of this was, without doubt, a Bloch enthusiast even if some of the judgements in the context of reviewing a new recording of *Sacred Service* conducted by Leonard Bernstein with Robert Merrill as cantor may on occasion seem rather controversial. Add it unheard to the shopping list "with the assurance that its values transcend time as well as the sectarian credos that motivated it".

Daring to compare, "beside

it, Bloch's own version (recorded in 1950) is but a sample of the values it (the work) really contains".

Merrill is praised for the strength and richness of his singing whilst the reviewer is almost ecstatic about Bernstein whose performances first in the concert hall and now on record had shed light "on one of the greatest works of a composer whose ample measure of recognition nevertheless did not fully honour his accomplishments".

CD reviews

Bloch: America, Concert Grosso No 1; Patricia Michaelian, piano; Seattle Symphony Orchestra and Chorale c. Gerard Schwarz; *Naxos* 8.572743

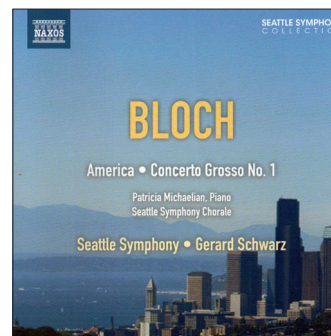
America, which won the *Musical America* prize in 1927, is a remarkable instance of a work that crosses boundaries: complex symphony and a naïve historical pageant, a fusion of European techniques and American sources, high and popular musics, organic romanticism and confrontational modernism. That there are few recordings available seems no surprise, due both to its stylistic as also orchestral-technical demands, and Gerard Schwarz rises to the challenge with flair and energy, eliciting thrilling effects. His finely judged architectural pacing takes us through the colourful tapestry of allusions, leading to the thrilling hymn 'America' as a logical climax, through ingenious glimpses of its theme in each movement that finally flower in the very final, choral bars. Recently released, this

recording dates back to 1992, which makes Dalia Atlas's 2001 version with the Slovak Radio SO (*Naxos* 8.557151) more recent. If both versions radiate Bloch's large scale imagination to the full, Schwarz takes a much faster tempo overall, the hymn arriving after a mere forty minutes in comparison with Atlas's fifty! To Schwarz's credit his racy pacing both highlights orchestral virtuosity and also encourages a lightness and zest, as in the jazz and Charleston-inspired quotations of the third movement. Yet, at the same time, several passages of monumental sequential intensifications receive more grandeur in Atlas' broader speeds.

Particularly compelling in Schwarz's account are the sparkling sonorities and Mahlerian influences, as in the evocative start of the first movement, where a falling

fourth fanfare motif (which eventually forms the opening of the 'hymn') and sustained high pedal point in violins recalls the Viennese master's first symphony. And whilst the work sets out to be 'American' (Bloch having just been appointed Director of the San Francisco Conservatory in 1925), there are also intriguing echoes of Vaughan Williams's early symphonies. As a whole, Schwarz gives due characterization to the range of historic allusions, and projects the symphonic narrative with dramatic conviction and power.

The coupling is Bloch's *Concerto Grosso no.1, for string orchestra with piano obbligato*. Again, there is evidence of a European-American synthesis: ostensibly its neo-classical influences are Stravinskian, whilst the breadth and



richness of harmony are more 'new world' in tone, as especially evident in the third movement, 'Pastorale and Rustic Dances', where stylish strings and Patricia Michaelian's delicate piano textures radiate that folkish lilt that also inhabits the second movement of *America*. Schwarz and Michaelian deliver a thrusting account of the outer movements, the majestically chordal 'Prelude', and stirring neo-Baroque Fugue, whilst in the 'Dirge' they project an impressionistic effect: a radiant interpretation of one of Bloch's best known works.

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Bloch; Voice in the Wilderness, Schelomo. From Jewish Life, [+Bruch Kol Nidrei];

Natalie Clein, BBCSO c. Ilan Volkov ; *Hyperion Records* CDA67910



There are numerous notable recordings of *Schelomo*, ranging from Zara Nelsova under the composer's baton with the LPO, Rostropovich under Bernstein, and, closer to the present, Isserlis. This latest by Natalie Clein will surely rank amongst the finest. Clein's interpretation – a true artistic partnership with Ilan Volkov and the BBCSO – is unique in its affinity for the mind-set and emotional world of Bloch's 1916 biblical concertante-tone poem subtitled *Rhapsodie*

Hebraïque, yet conveyed with a freshness and verve that makes it come alive for 21st century audiences. Indeed those qualities infuse the approach to all three Bloch works on this exciting new CD.

Clein's tone control, power and eloquence are evident in the opening soliloquy of *Schelomo*, imbued with that cantorial, rhapsodic character so endemic to Bloch's string writing. Where Nelsova dwells on individual notes, and Rostropovich produces glistening tenutos, Clein varies her colour and shading of motifs and builds them into larger phrases, utterances that speak from within and achieve a vocal, 'singing-speech' quality that flickers and fluctuates with expression. Excellent sound engineering results in Clein's cellistic qualities emerging through interactions with the orchestra, details

of which come alive in Ilan Volkov's Mahlerian approach to texture. Volkov drives Bloch's famous climaxes potently, notably the two big thematic outbursts that frame the more tormented central tutti. Clarity and impetus produce gripping intensity in galvanic cascades of whole-tone harmonies, shofar-like woodwind-brass gestures and orientalist ornamentation. Nevertheless, it is the poetic, introspective vulnerability, the edgy passion and meditative murmurs that command our attention, which Clein communicates through her audibly febrile and flexible bowing technique, and innate empathy for what Alex Knapp describes in his erudite and highly readable sleeve notes as Bloch's fusion of the "sensual and spiritual".

Natalie Clein is equally engaging in Bloch's later

works, the three contrasted miniatures in *From Jewish Life* (1924), here rendered in a delicate harp-strings orchestration by Christopher Palmer, and the no less impressive *Voice in the Wilderness* (1935-6). Recalling the earlier *Jewish Cycle*, Bloch's style is more refined in harmony and texture, the orchestra's translucent shading enhancing Clein's sweetness of tone in the high registers in the 3rd and 4th movements and plenty of rhythmic vigour. This outstanding recording, which also features Bruch's famous 'Jewish work' as complement, offers a profoundly involving overview of Bloch's stylistic development, yet also of the unifying aesthetic combining Jewish inspiration and universal appeal that underpins his works for cello and orchestra.

Malcolm Miller © 2013

**Jewish Spirits:
Oswaldo Golijov/
Ernest Bloch; Saphir
LVC1175**



The French based Saphir Productions specializes in beautifully produced CD albums often of lesser known musical works. This CD brings together compositions by Ernest Bloch and Oswaldo Golijov who was born in 1960 just one year after Bloch's death. The Bloch works are *Jewish Life* and *Abodah* originally composed for cello and piano and violin and piano respectively. The less usual feature is that these instruments are here replaced by the clarinet of Michel Lethiec. The mellowness of those string instruments is thus replaced by a somewhat starker kind of sound, not inappropriate for Bloch and offering an obvious link to the work by Golijov: *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* was composed for the clarinet and string quartet. The mix on this CD of one composer schooled in the musical norms of the late nineteenth century and another operating in a much different milieu works well. The lavishly illustrated 16pp booklet which accompanies it is a fine bonus. Unusual but warmly recommended.

SH

A reminder once again to readers that full details of every Bloch recording can be found on Claude Torres' website: <http://claudetorres1.perso.sfr.fr/index.html>

This invaluable resource is kept continuously up to date.

Ernest Bloch and the Griller String Quartet

In the second part of his article Tully Potter describes the final phase of the Griller's association with Ernest Bloch



Ernest Bloch with The Griller Quartet in 1947

By 1947 the Grillers were Bloch's friends and favourite interpreters. He assisted them in preparing his quartets and supervised recordings they made for Decca, beginning in June 1947 with a 78rpm set of the Second Quartet and *Night*. He finally completed the second of the *Deux Morceaux* in October 1950 and the two were dedicated to the Grillers, being published as *Deux Pièces*. The vigorous Third Quartet of 1952 was also inscribed to the Grillers, who unveiled it in New York on 4 January the following year, at the Town Hall. Olin Downes wrote in *The New York Times* that the ensemble "must be ranked as one of the finest string quartets now performing. It has no peer in point of musicianship, sensitivity and finished balance of tone-quality today".

Later in 1953 the Grillers brought the Third Quartet to London for their silver jubilee concert at the new Royal Festival Hall on 21 June. In June and July 1954 Bloch was in London to supervise recordings of his four quartets made at Decca's West Hampstead Studios – the Fourth, written in 1953, was taped on the two days following its première at Wigmore Hall on 18 July. The first US performance was given at the Berkshire Festival in Lenox, Massachusetts, on 29 July 1954.

The Fifth Quartet, completed in 1956, had its première in Duisburg, during the Grillers' autumn 1956 German tour, and its first British performance in Belfast on 9 November 1956, the first American performance following at the YMHA in New York on 30 January 1957. The Grillers often performed the Piano Quintet and on at least two occasions the great English pianist Solomon was their guest. A second Piano Quintet was specially commissioned by the University of California at Berkeley for the festival marking the dedication of the Alfred Hertz Memorial Hall of Music, and it was premièred in the new hall on 15 April 1958, the Grillers being joined by the pianist Marjorie Petray. The quartet members also played in the orchestra for the dedication festival. Bloch had been terminally ill for several years and on 15 July 1959 he died. Memorial concerts were given at the University on 18 and 19 November, the Grillers playing the Third Quartet and Sidney Griller conducting the *Sacred Service*.

The Griller recordings of the first four Bloch quartets are priceless, despite the monophonic sound. Both versions of the Second Quartet are superb, the 1947 78rpm set perhaps being slightly fresher in outlook. Sadly

the group stopped working for Decca before recordings of the Fifth Quartet or First Piano Quintet could be mooted; and we must hope that tapes of live performances of these works, as well as the Second Quintet, have survived. The heroic Griller interpretation of the First Quartet is among the great string quartet recordings – showing none of the over-restraint once noted by Noel Straus – and the Second is not far behind. But if one had to choose a single excerpt to show off the players' fine technical control and immersion in Bloch's ethos, it might be the beautiful *Adagio non troppo* of the Third or the *Andante* of the concise Fourth. This latter work may be more modest than the first three but it is quite dramatic in places, with touches of atonality and 12-tone writing.

In all the Griller readings, tempo relationships are exemplary, with each movement given its distinct character. The ensemble was a very modern one, in that – despite Sidney Griller's dominant personality – it was particularly well balanced, with the players equally matched in skill and all four parts fully in the sound picture. This approach served Bloch superbly.

THIRD CONCERT, ÆOLIAN HALL, JANUARY 27th, 1938

SUITE FOR VIOLA AND PIANOFORTE (Programme Note, Page 15)

Leeds—*Allegro*
Adagio sostenuto
 Leeds
 Middlesex

MAX ROSTAL and SOLOMON

"NIGHT" (Programme Note, Page 16)
 "NORTH"
 "TONGATAPOO" } from "Three Landscapes," for String Quartet.

THE GRILLER STRING QUARTET

INTERVAL

"NIRVANA" (Programme Note, Page 16)
 "AT SEA" (from "Poems of the Sea") (Programme Note, Page 16)

SOLOMON

STRING QUARTET (Programme Note, Page 9)
Andante moderato—Poco più animato
Allegro Moderato—Molto moderato
Andante molto moderato (Ferdinand)
 France

THE GRILLER STRING QUARTET
 SIDNEY GRILLER JACK GIBBEN
 PHILIP BERTON GORDON HAMPTON

AN EXHIBITION OF THE WORKS OF ERNEST BLOCH WILL BE ARRANGED AT THE HALLS ON THE NIGHT OF EACH CONCERT.

SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR MEMBERSHIP CAN BE RECEIVED AT THE BOX OFFICE.

STREWSONY PIANOFORTE.

In accordance with the regulations of the London County Council—
 (1) The Public Health Act of 1936 and the provisions contained therein shall be taken to apply to the premises, buildings, and contents of the premises, and the persons occupying the same, as if they were the premises, buildings, and contents of the premises, and the persons occupying the same, as if they were the premises, buildings, and contents of the premises, and the persons occupying the same, as if they were the premises, buildings, and contents of the premises, and the persons occupying the same.

1938 appearance in London of The Griller Quartet with a concert of Bloch's music

Ernest Bloch 100 years ago

On 31 March 1913, Bloch's elderly father Maurice died. Here is the letter that Ernest wrote the same day to his close friend and librettist Edmond Fleg:

My Friend, It's over. He died peacefully at 4 o'clock this morning - no suffering. Last night he said, in a state of anxiety, "My head is all confused". Now he is at rest, calm, his face serene. It appears to me that my good papa is sleeping, and that he will awaken... Released! But what sadness. Your friend Bloch.

Quoted in Joseph Lewinsky and Emmanuelle Dijon, *Ernest Bloch: Sa vie et sa pensée, Tome 1*, Editions Slatkine, Geneva, 1998, p.594; translated from the French by Alexander Knapp.



Above: Ernest Bloch on Agate Beach, California.



Right: Bloch and his three children.
Left to right- Suzanne, Ivan, EB, Lucienne

Editorial notes

This is the third issue of the IEBS newsletter for which I have been responsible and I hope you will be happy with the range of material offered.

Once again we are including one of Bloch's letters from one hundred years ago and there is more about the first interpreters of some of his great works.

Do other readers own the fine 1989 CD set of Bloch's Complete Music for Violin and Piano performed by The Weilerstein Duo? Interestingly, the Duo has more recently become the Trio with the addition of cellist Alisa Weilerstein. Her CD of concertos by Dvořák and Elliot Carter conducted by Daniel Barenboim has recently gained enthusiastic reviews. The contemporary music world is extraordinarily lucky in the number of outstanding cellists. I wonder if Alisa will follow the examples of IEBS President Steven Isserlis and Natalie Clein and turn her attention to Bloch's music for cello.

Also there is a two page spread in the January 2013

issue of *Jewish Renaissance* entitled 'Natalie Clein celebrates Bloch'.

Thirteen year old Anoushka Sharp whose cello playing was featured in the last issue of this newsletter also draws cartoons - her 'take' on Ernest Bloch and the three Presidents of our Society is featured below.

Finally looking ahead to our next issue we hope to include an article on the violinist Joseph Szigeti who was the first to play Bloch's Violin concerto; an excerpt from Aron Marko Rothmüller's book *Music of the Jews*; and a first-hand account of the planned performance of Bloch's *Macbeth* By Long Beach Opera. Details of the casting for this first fully staged professional performance in the USA arrived just as this issue was going to press. The role of *Macbeth* will be sung by Nmon Ford who has undertaken major baritone roles in Germany, Italy and the USA; Suzan Hanson a Long Beach regular will be *Lady Macbeth*. Andreas Mitisek will conduct and produce.

Stanley Henig

Important notices from the International Ernest Bloch Society

Can you help?

We really do need more members to assist in our work of promoting the music of Ernest Bloch.

If you have not already done so, please join and pay the modest subscription.

Our website - www.ernestblochsociety.org

- is currently undergoing substantial revision and much new material will be added

over the course of the next few months. I am told that to ensure access to new material you may need to 'update your browser'. I was not sure what this meant, but by accessing the site itself I achieved the update by pressing the f5 button on the keyboard!

Entries are still possible for the 2013 Ernest Bloch Music Competition. Details are available at www.israelimusiccompetition.org

From Pipedream to Blockbuster with four bright sparks



A look at the IEBS by Anoushka Sharp - three Presidents and the composer