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### GREAT BLOCH INTERPETERS

## Zara Nelsova

Few cellists have become as closely identified with a piece of music as Zara Nelsova with Bloch's *Schelomo*. This archetypally Jewish work seemed perfectly poised between a sort of archaic dignity and a vibrant, highly charged emotionalism when she played. Having studied and recorded it with the composer at a key stage in her career, she was always able to find more in the score. Nelsova was born in Winnipeg, Canada, on 23 December 1918 into an exceptionally musical family of Russian origin; her father Gregor Nelsov was a flautist and her grandfather an opera singer. Gregor encouraged his three daughters to learn different instruments so that they could perform together: Ida got the violin, Anna the piano and baby Zara a cello. The instrument's size defeated her, but using a viola strung like a cello she made rapid strides and found an excellent teacher in Dezső Mahalek, a Hungarian pupil of David Popper. Gregor Nelson (as

he was now known) adapted music for his daughters and within two years Zara was playing with her sisters as the Canadian Trio. In 1928 the family came to Britain, Zara studying with Herbert Walenn at his London Violoncello School and taking private lessons from John Barbirolli and Mischel Cherniavsky.

### Attracting attention

Following their Wigmore Hall recital in 1929 the Nelson girls were soon giving concerts and broadcasts. Zara played for Casals in March 1930, made her first appearance with orchestra at the Royal College of Music, and in 1932 played Lalo's *Concerto* with the LSO under Malcolm Sargent. She was rewarded with the gift of a Gagliano cello from Lady Parmoor, mother of Sir Stafford Cripps.

On the outbreak of war, she returned to Canada and adopted the original family name, calling herself Nelsova. She became principal with the Toronto Symphony and found



Above: Zara Nelsova  
Right: A 5CD set of her recordings issued by Decca would seem no longer to be available. This 5 CD set includes *From Jewish Life*, *Voices in the Wilderness* and *Schelomo*.



engagements with the Boston Pops under Arthur Fiedler and then with the Boston Symphony under Charles Munch. (In 1953 she took US citizenship.) She studied with Gregor Piatigorsky but perhaps even more important was the influence of Emanuel Feuermann, whose recordings she monitored minutely. Eventually she had lessons prior to his early death. 'Even today, there is not a performance when I do not feel Feuermann is close to me,' Nelsova said many years later. Piatigorsky helped prepare her New York recital debut in 1942, at Town Hall; and she also gave an unaccompanied programme

at the same hall, a rare occurrence in those days.

Nelsova spent time with Casals in 1948, an experience about which she always spoke with humility and exhilaration – she particularly credited Casals with helping her to vary her vibrato. 'He taught me to be myself.' A chance meeting with Colin Hampton, cellist of the Griller Quartet led her to travel to Oregon to study Bloch's cello music with the composer. In April 1949 she played *Voice in the*

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## At The Boston Symphony



Ernest Bloch with a group of players and others connected with the Boston Symphony Orchestra (1939).

By kind permission of The Bloch family

✿ This eighth issue of the IEBS newsletter may seem to be looking back – but happily to a golden age of interpretation and musical writing. We have a major article on the great Canadian cellist – Zara Nelsova. Her recorded legacy includes no less than three performances of *Schelomo* as well as other pieces by Bloch. Marko Rothmüller has previously been featured in our pages. A fine singer and teacher, Rothmüller also authored *The Music of the Jews*, from which we have drawn a section devoted to Bloch. Rothmüller's fame derives in considerable part from his performances in *Sacred Service*. But he was not its first interpreter in Britain. Its first performance was in 1938 and it was broadcast by the BBC. We include a contemporary review by that doyen of musical critics, Ernest Newman.

✿ We have unfortunately not been able to obtain a review of the most recent Bloch competition but can report that the first prize went to The Cavatina String Quartet, a group made up of graduates of musical conservatoires in



The Cavatina String Quartet, winners of the 2013 Bloch competition

Britain, and the second to the flautist Daniel Shao. Much further afield there has been the very first fully staged USA professional production of Bloch's *Macbeth*. Leading roles were taken by Nmon Ford and Suzan Hansen in three sold out performances by Long Beach opera. The opera was condensed and presented in a single act in a highly abstract production. Such was its success that the production moves to Chicago in autumn 2014 for the first performances in America's Mid-West.

✿ Finally, we are delighted to include an article about our sister organization in Switzerland, the Association BloCH. Hopefully this will be the beginning of a fruitful collaboration with musicians and scholars in Bloch's native land.

## Self portrait in Brussels 1898



Bloch's career might have evolved differently! In 1897 Bloch went to Brussels to study with the eminent violinist Eugène Ysaÿe.

By kind permission of The Bloch family

## Preparing New Ground for Bloch in Switzerland

### *A brief history of the Association BloCH*

The origins of the Association BloCH were in the 2008 international conference held in Cambridge initiated by the Jewish Music Institute devoted to Ernest Bloch. The conference, uniting leading scholars and descendants to reflect on Bloch's life and work, contributed impressively to his commemoration. It was decided to form associations dedicated to Ernest Bloch in countries with which he had been connected with the aim of organising cultural events in 2009/10 for the 50-year anniversary of his death. Initially the Association BloCH with Oliver Margulies as its active chairman, held two meetings a year in Bern to discuss how Ernest Bloch could become better known in Switzerland, given that his oeuvre could only on rare occasions be spotted on concert programs. The association was originally intended to last for one year but decided to continue its work thereafter. Dr Alex Knapp, a leading member of the IEBS joined the committee of the Association BloCH.

### Coordinating cultural events

The association acts as an initiator but also as a platform to coordinate and announce events, which include works of Ernest Bloch in Switzerland. During the 2009/2010 season, Association BloCH's members managed to initiate, promote and coordinate over 20 cultural events which included works by Ernest Bloch from chamber music recitals to symphonic concerts, presentations to exhibitions. These activities are documented on the Association's website, [www.ernestbloch.ch](http://www.ernestbloch.ch). Among its main achievements was a

concert uniting the Quatuor Terpsychordes and Swiss composer Daniel Weissberg with Ernest Bloch's 1<sup>st</sup> piano quintet (Cedric Pescia, piano), the 2<sup>nd</sup> string quartet and a newly commissioned work by Daniel Weissberg. The concert was held on December 11, 2011 in Zurich, within the framework of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the association "omanut", dedicated to Jewish culture in Switzerland.

### Collaboration with Galatea String Quartet

There has been a highly successful and ongoing collaboration with the Zurich based Galatea String Quartet has evolved. The Association BloCH contributed to the quartet's CD production *Landscapes* (Sony Japan), dedicated entirely to Ernest Bloch's music, including some of his unpublished works. This CD has received the Echo Deutscher Musikpreis in the category Chamber Music Recording for Strings, 20th/21st Century. One of the Association's goals is to further this collaboration in anticipation of a new integral recording of Ernest Bloch's string quartets and piano quintets.

The initiative and activities of the association have received generous support from Swiss cultural foundations, such as the Ernst Göhner Stiftung, the Paul und Renée Eisen-Piccard Foundation and the Alfred und Ilse Stammer-Mayer Foundation. The Association BloCH would like to thank the IEBS for creating a space of its own in the IEBS' newsletter. In coming issues, the Association BloCH will be contributing articles on Ernest Bloch with a focal point on his life and work in Switzerland.

Oliver Margulies

**Bloch: Violin Sonata No 1; Violin Sonata No 2, 'Poème mystique'; Nigun; Pärt: Fratres.**

Elsa Grether, violin; Ferenc Vizi, piano

*Fuga Libera FUG711*

French violinist and French-trained Romanian pianist combine in an outstanding recital mainly devoted to music by Bloch, who understood both

instruments well.

Elsa Grether's fine-boned playing is absolutely right for the *Poème mystique*, as Bloch dubbed his 1924 Second Violin Sonata. The music is in his most exotic, rhapsodic vein, following on from Debussy, drawing on similar sources of inspiration to those of Szymanowski and alluding to Bloch's Jewish style in places. It needs perfect intonation from the violinist and a command of colour from both players.

They respond with a beautiful performance.

The First Sonata of 1920 is a 'bigger' work, especially in its outer movements. Ferenc Vizi, who has previously recorded Beethoven's Op. 111 and Schumann's Fantasy, has no trouble in raising his game. For Elsa Grether, I sense that more effort is required, but she comes through heroically. She is completely at home with the calm central movement.

The sonatas are separated on

the disc by Bloch's most famous violin piece, *Nigun*, very well played. I would have liked to have its companions from *Three Pictures of Chassidic Life*, but I can understand that the artists wanted to include a more contemporary piece.

They have chosen Arvo Pärt's most popular work, *Fratres*, which they play to the manner born. The recordings are very well engineered in a Brussels studio.

Tully Potter

**Bloch: Schelomo; Bridge: Oration; Hough: The Loneliest Wilderness\*.**

Steven Isserlis, cello; Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin / Hugh Wolff;

\*Tapiola Sinfonietta / Gábor Takács-Nagy

*BIS BIS-1992 (SACD)*

Normally *Schelomo* is treated as a major panel in Bloch's series of Jewish works; but here cellist Steven Isserlis wants us to see it in its wider historical context as a piece written 'In the Shadow of War' – the title of his programme. I dare say the Great War had its effect on the profundity of *Schelomo* but I must confess that I hear this performance in much the same way that I hear

those by Feuermann, Nelsova, Starker and Rostropovich, the interpretations that have had most effect on me over the years.

Isserlis comes closest to Starker, in that he does not even attempt to make a big sound or overwhelm the listener with tone. His is the 'still small voice' that recreates King Solomon for us in a very 'inward' way, as if we are eavesdropping on the King's most intimate thoughts and anxieties. Not that the solo playing is in any way undramatic: it is just that Isserlis relies on his usual intensity, precision of attack, variations of dynamics and sense of timing to make the dramatic points. In the past some performances of

*Schelomo* have come across as somewhat overwrought. That does not happen here. The excellent orchestra has clearly been exhaustively rehearsed by Hugh Wolff and the climaxes are well handled in the famous acoustic of the Jesus-Christus-Kirche, Berlin. The two main works are 2012 co-productions with German Radio, whose engineers I presume are responsible for the vivid sound.

Isserlis has previously recorded both *Schelomo* and Frank Bridge's fine concerto *Oration*, written in 1930 as an evocation of the horrors of the Great War. I think these new versions trump the old ones convincingly; but I wish some more track numbers had been inserted. Isserlis's interesting

notes refer to numerous points in both works which could have been made instantly available for study. The 16-minute piece *The Loneliest Wilderness* by the pianist-composer Stephen Hough takes its title from the poem *My Company* by Herbert Read, who served with the Green Howards in France in the Great War. A most effective mini-concerto, it was recorded in the Tapiola Concert Hall, Finland, in 2009. It is as well played as the rest of the programme.

A footnote for Blochians: Steven Isserlis plays the 1726 Stradivari cello formerly owned by Zara Nelsova and used by her when she recorded *Schelomo* with the composer conducting.

Tully Potter

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✿ The latest addition to the impressive and growing list of recordings of Bloch's music on the Naxos label features Dalia Atlas conducting the London Symphony Orchestra in the *Symphony in C sharp minor* (cat. no. Naxos 8573241).

✿ Cambridge University Press will be publishing *Bloch Studies* probably in late 2014. The book

will be co-edited by Alexander Knapp and Norman Solomon and will include contributions by many Bloch scholars and specialists. This new volume will hopefully take its place alongside David Kushner's *The Ernest Bloch Companion* and the four volume French *Ernest Bloch: sa vie et sa pensée* by Joseph Lewinski and Emmanuelle Dijon as one of the key bibliographic sources.

## Bloch's Sacred Service

The *Sacred Service* was first performed in England on Saturday March 26<sup>th</sup> 1938 by the City of Birmingham Orchestra conducted by Gorge Cunningham with the fine baritone Roy Henderson as the cantor. The performance was simultaneously broadcast on the BBC and to the ire of Ernest Newman – at the time perhaps Britain's finest musical critic – “barbarously terminated by a fade-out some minutes before the end”.

Newman's contemporary review was reprinted in his collected *From the World of Music*. He described the work as Jewish at heart:- “Bloch may mourn the sufferings that the modern world has brought on itself by its blindness and cruelty, but he obviously suffers in the first place as Jew. His aspiration for a better world in which hatred and division shall have made way for human brotherhood is universal in its scope.”

In his lengthy and fascinating review, Newman suggests that on occasion the words and the music are saying different things and he reflects on the contrast with similar works by Christian composers containing an exaltation absent in Bloch's work and he concludes:- “All in all the *Sacred Service* is a remarkable creation, significant not only for the light is throws on Bloch as a musician but also for the light it throws on a grievously tried people. Now that the sympathy for the Jews has risen to such heights in this country, a large scale performance of the *Service* in London would be not merely a musical event of the first importance but a gesture of human fellowship.”

As a postscript it is perhaps worth nothing that after this British premier, the work was performed later in 1938 in Belfast and Bristol. It did not reach London until 1949.

Ernest Newman

## Aaron Marko Rothmüller, *The Music of the Jews*

In the fifth issue of this newsletter we profiled the great baritone Marko Rothmüller who sang the part of the cantor in the recording of *Sacred Service* conducted by Bloch himself. As his operatic and concert activities began to run down, Rothmüller launched his second career as Teacher of Voice at the University of Indiana. His academic intent had, however, already been indicated by the publication in 1954 of *The Music of the Jews*, the coverage of which extends from biblical times to the early history of the modern state of Israel. A section towards the end of the book is devoted to the work of Ernest Bloch and particularly the importance of the Jewish legacy to his musical composition:-

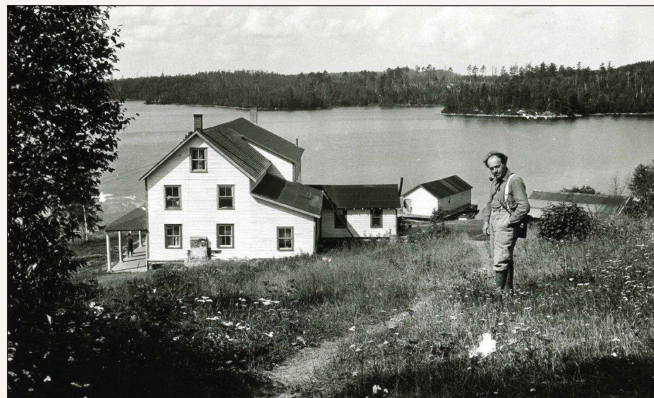
“He holds a unique position among the Jewish composers of the national trend. The

Jewish compositions written by Ernest Bloch have gained a wider and more enduring place in the international concert repertory than those of any other Jewish composer of the present century. He is accepted as one of the most interesting living composers and his works are played in Europe and America; this applies equally to those based on Jewish thematic material and despite their Jewish titles.... Bloch is a composer entirely in his own class, with a distinctive personality. As a man and a musician he has a remarkable understanding of both the general and the Jewish manner of thought, and his life is striking for its spiritual struggle to bring these two intellectual current into harmony with each other and with the surrounding world.

Stanley Henig

## Bloch in America

The editor of the IEBS is deeply grateful to the Bloch family for making available a great number of photos of Ernest Bloch – several are included in this newsletter and there will be more in subsequent issues



Ernest Bloch on holiday at The Ojibway Hotel Timagami, Ontario in 1924.  
By kind permission of The Bloch family



Ernest Bloch and his children on a visit to The Palisades in 1919.  
By kind permission of The Bloch family

### Zara Nelsova continued from page 1

Wilderness with piano at the Wigmore Hall, a performance later broadcast by the BBC, and that autumn Bloch chose her as soloist in *Schelomo* for a festival of his music in London. Composer, soloist and the LPO recorded the work for Decca soon afterwards with Bloch at the piano, Nelsova also set down *From Jewish Life*. Bloch sent her a picture inscribed ‘To Madame Schelomo’ and responded to her pleas for a solo work by writing three unaccompanied suites for her. She became a favourite interpreter: he once said: ‘Zara Nelsova is my music.’ In the mid-1950s she recorded *Schelomo* again, with Ernest Ansermet conducting (perhaps her best version, with *Voice in the Wilderness* as a coupling); and in the stereo era she taped her interpretation yet again, with Maurice Abravanel.

For these performances and recordings she used a small Peter Guarnerius; but in 1960 a superb 1726 Strad was left to the Royal Academy of Music on condition she had the lifelong use of it, and from then on she and the ‘Marquis de Corberon’ were inseparable (this cello has now reverted to the RAM). However, she was faithful to the Lamy bow she had been given as a 12-year-old.

Immaculately turned out, Nelsova had a colossal stage presence and I loved her playing. In the concert hall it was the full-throated power of her sound that impressed. Heard on record, with time to savour the subtleties in sound, it is clear that, although very much her own woman, she took after Feuermann – her vibrato had the same thrilling insistency that made the tone impossible to ignore.

Tully Potter