

PRESIDENT: STEVEN ISSERLIS CBE ❖ CHAIRMAN: MALCOLM TROUP ❖ SECRETARY: J. AUDREY ELLISON

Young talent and the Maestro

The world famous cellist Steven Isserlis is a renowned Bloch interpreter and honoured us by agreeing to become President of the IEBS in succession to the late Charles Mackerras. Emunah Young Musician of the Year Anoushka Sharpe recently performed Bloch's Prayer and Jewish Song at a Holocaust memorial event in the presence of Anita Walfisch. Here are some excerpts from her account of a day shadowing Steven Isserlis.



Talented young cellist Anoushka Sharp meets Steven Isserlis

"(He) put me at ease with his kind and chatty manner. Steven grew up in a musical household.... he disapproves of music competitions which involved children, believing they are exploitative.

"We left Costa coffee shop with our cellos – his Stadvivarius and my unknown probably English cello and headed for the rehearsal in Hampstead Town Hall - with the Orchestra of the Age of the Enlightenment, part of a series called *Look! No conductor*.

"The Haydn Symphony no. 104 in D major 'London' was led by Steven facing the orchestra playing his cello on a podium. He resembled a larger-than-life leader of a gigantic chamber ensemble. He lent and gestured in the direction of the instruments coming in, and most striking of all was his enjoyment of the music.

"It really was true that an orchestra can play without a conductor. A model where everyone was equal – well almost - Steven Isserlis was a little deferential to his big sister, Annette in the viola section! The day couldn't pass without my drawing a few cartoons: one of Steven Isserlis and some orchestra members playing the Haydn. There seemed to be appreciation all round, with Steven Isserlis taking home my cartoons and me taking home the memory of an inspirational day."

To all the ends of the earth? Or not quite!

Chairman of the International Ernest Bloch Society Malcolm Troup is a regular visitor to Chile and on a recent visit to Chile he "decided to initiate our nation into the musical legacy of Ernest Bloch": to quote the words of the music critic of Santiago's *El Mercurio*. More specifically, the work in question was the Concerto

Grosso No1 for string orchestra and piano obligato with the Orquesta de Camara de Chile conducted by Alejandro Reyes and Malcolm Troup as pianist performed in front of "an enthusiastic public".

As we went to press came news that Dalia Atlas, an Israeli champion of Bloch's music has been conducting his music in St Petersburg.

The Ernest Bloch Music Competition 12 July 2012



Tobias Schiessler, Professor of Trombone at the Hannover Hochschule, winner of this year's competition.

The 4th Ernest Bloch Music Competition held at the Britten Theatre of the Royal College of Music in London on 12 July 2012 was again organized by Sagi Hartov and generously sponsored by Norman Solomon of the IEBS. Overall artistic standards were impressively high.

The works offered a selection remarkable for variety of genre as of style, reflecting the composer's breadth and diversity. To begin was Bloch's *Suite Modale* (1956) to which the Dutch recorder player Cornelis van Dis, both a performer and doctoral student in early music, brought an enchanting sense of period music purity. Attention to details, clarity of phrasing and subtlety of dynamics, expressively varied within the constraints of the recorder's potential, were evinced in the flowing first and second movements, dance like buoyancy of the third and more

orientalised expressiveness of the finale with its changes of tempi. The choice of recorder instead of flute, for which it was composed, tapped into an intrinsic quality of the music. The recorder conveyed a most attractive, if delicate tone, which Van Dis handled with agility, adding in vibrato and attack and partnered with sensitivity by his accompanist, whose name want not in the programme. Overall an excellent reading!

Variety of genre and style

It was fascinating to contrast the refined vision of Bloch's late neo-classical period with the more vigorous passion of his youthful 'Jewish' works, as exemplified in 'Nigun' from the *Baal Shem Suite* of 1923 performed with flair and intensity by the young Israeli-trained violinist David Strongin, currently studying at Hannover Hochschule.

continued overleaf ↗

Partnered with robust richness by Stephen Gutman, official competition accompanist, Strongin's impassioned account began in suitably rich rhapsodic style, maintaining a sense of exciting forward drive to the very eloquent final section. There was a tendency to sustain the same forte level for too long, with little nuance, and similarly Strongin could have responded a little more to the music's inwardly reflective aspects. Nonetheless his intensity was fully immersed in the Blochian 'Jewish style',



Israeli trained violinist David Strongin won second prize.

allowing rhythmic tension to relax in the final section, with its poignantly repeated gestures.

Bloch's *Symphony for Trombone and Orchestra*, a remarkable work composed in 1954, was performed with aplomb by Tobias Schiessler,

Professor of Trombone at Hannover Hochschule. This outstanding performance of Bloch's seldom-played and rather unique score projected its dissonantly chromatic yet lyrical aspects with formidable tonal control. Bloch responds to the stereotypical brass character of the trombone, its fanfares and vivid attacks, yet ingeniously transforming the connotations into a lyrical, poetic medium. Accompanied boldly by Stephen Gutman, Schiessler produced a wide range of evocative phrasings and varied dynamic gradations, with an especially sweet, mellow tone in the demanding high register passages. One of the highpoints was the concertoesque cadenza featuring a trombone rhapsody over a sustained piano/orchestral tremolo. The faster, more chromatic development led to an eloquent pianissimo solo passage, before the lyrical conclusion. Here one sensed the command of a professional soloist with great tonal qualities and a sense of involvement and communication.

The recently formed Palomino Quartet, all former members of the Southbank Sinfonia, gave a stirring account of Bloch's *Deux Pièces* for String Quartet. Sketched in 1938 around the same time as the *Sacred Service*, and completed, in 1950, the piece spans two contrasting periods

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in Bloch's style development. While structurally similar to late works such as the *Symphony for Trombone*, it displays an intensity and expressivity closer to youthful works including the 'Jewish Cycle'. In the first piece the Palomino projected, with potent emphasis, the initial arresting dissonant chord, a referential sonority to which Bloch returns repeatedly. Throughout the performance an impressive sense of purpose and unanimity of articulation was evident, as in the frequent homophonic passages, the angular melodic writing and more impressionistic textures. In the second piece some of the faster, marcato textures sometimes seemed ragged and rough, requiring more coordination, yet as a whole the performance was engagingly managed.

First prize went to Tobias Schiessler and second to David Strongin, both connected to

Hannover Hochschule. The event as a whole raised issues of equivalence which require improvement for future years.

No entry restrictions

Unlike many similar international competitions, the Bloch has no entry restrictions and suggested syllabuses provide no measure of level or equivalence. A seasoned professional may compete side by side with a fresh undergraduate, and a dazzling virtuoso work can be performed alongside one with far less technical demands. The demands on the Jury in such a context are, perhaps, considerable, and whilst not disagreeing with the final result, the lack of equivalences certainly raised questions. For that reason the event succeeded more as a platform for young artists than as a competition, the performances as a whole rewarding and complementary in qualities.

Prize winners received cash awards and the chance to perform in recitals or with orchestra (details to be announced in due course) and one looks forward to more performances of Bloch by all the competitors in the near future.

Malcolm Miller © 2012

Editor's note – a fuller version of this article including a review of the Israeli Music Competition will appear on the shortly to be revamped IEBS website.

CD review

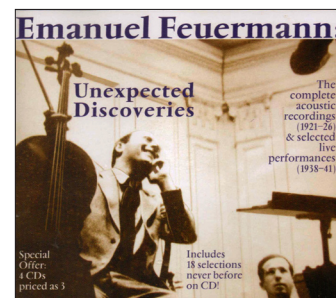
Feuermann: Unexpected Discoveries WHRA 6042 (4CDs)

Emanuel Feuerman was one of the truly great cellists, his life and career tragically cut short in his 40th year. Bloch's Schelomo regularly featured in his concerts although Feuerman often claimed not particularly to like the work. For his part the composer had mixed feelings about the studio recording featuring Feuermann with Stokowski as conductor. Interestingly, Zara Nelsova who would much later record Shelomo with Bloch

himself conducting claimed that Feuermann had been her inspiration.

There are relatively few studio recordings of Feuermann but as the years have gone by more and more live recordings have emerged: this beautifully produced boxed set of four CDs includes a live performance of *Shelomo* with Leon Barzin conducting. I suspect this was recorded at one of Feuerman's very last concerts in November

1941 (albeit that the lavishly illustrated booklet gives a date exactly one year earlier). Contemporary reviews were ecstatic:- according to Howard Taubman in the New York Times Feuermann's performance was "magnificently nuanced". His biographer, Annette Moreau, speaks of "a tautness and excitement" which distinguishes this performance from the studio recording. Excellently transferred to



CD, one can only echo this sentiment!

Of course the set contains very much more. It may be appropriate to single out the studio performance of Bruch's *Kol Nidrei*: this is surely unsurpassed. **SH**

Ernest Bloch and the Griller String Quartet

In the first part of this article, Tully Potter describes the first phase of the Grillers association with Ernest Bloch (to be continued)

The Griller Quartet was brought together and trained at the Royal Academy of Music by violist Lionel Tertis, who settled on 16-year-old violinist Sidney Griller – like himself, a Jewish boy from the slums of London's East End – 18-year-old South African violinist Jack O'Brien, 20-year-old violist Philip Burton and 16-year-old cellist Colin Hampton. In November 1928 the 'Grillers' made their London debut and subsequently became the RAM's first professional quartet.

First meeting

The Grillers first encountered Bloch's music via the Piano Quintet, which they played with one of their mentors, Harry Isaacs, at Wigmore Hall, London, on 14 February 1933. They should have met Bloch in April 1934, when he came to London to conduct the LPO in his orchestral music and take part in a programme of his chamber music at Wigmore Hall. The Grillers were announced for the Wigmore concert but when it took place, the English Ensemble joined Kathleen Long in the Quintet – one suspects illness or injury, as there is an ominous gap in the Grillers' schedule at this point. They finally met Bloch when asked to perform the String Quartet over the BBC

network and at the inaugural concerts of The International Ernest Bloch Society, at Aeolian Hall on 10 December 1937. The Grillers gave two performances of the Quartet and were joined by Louis Kentner in the Piano Quintet. The connection between ensemble and composer had been made by one of Sidney Griller's mentors, Alex Cohen, former leader of the City of Birmingham Orchestra, honorary chairman of the new Bloch Society.

Early in 1939 the Grillers visited the United States for the first time and the following season they returned, despite the outbreak of war: on 13 January they played Bloch's Quartet at Town Hall, New York. "Quite remarkable was the purity of tone maintained in every measure of the four movements, the unswerving fidelity to pitch and the suppleness of phrase everywhere present, even in the most complicated passages," Noel Straus wrote in *The New York Times*, although he felt the performance too restrained. Back in Britain, the Grillers were taken into the RAF as an ensemble and frequently appeared at Myra Hess's National Gallery Concerts, airing Bloch's Quartet several times in 1941 and 1942 and performing most of the great piano quintets with Myra Hess. On 17 May 1943



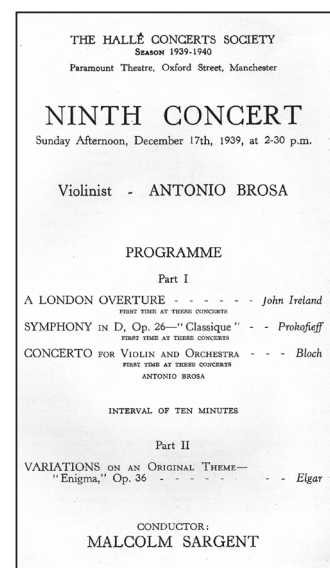
they performed the Bloch Quintet at Wigmore Hall and there were further wartime performances, at the Wigmore and at the National Gallery. Although Colin Hampton's memoirs *A Cellist's Life* (2000) are suspect as to chronology, it rings true that, late in 1938, Bloch sent the Grillers a manuscript headed *Deux Morceaux* but containing only one piece. It was followed by a frantic cable asking them not to play this *Andante moderato*, but they did in fact perform it a number of times during the war with other short Bloch pieces.

Second Quartet

In summer 1946 Bloch sent the Grillers the manuscript of his new (second) quartet dedicated to Alex Cohen. After an unofficial outing on 13 September in a Midland Music Club concert at Queen's College Chambers, Birmingham, it was premiered on 9 October at a Boosey and Hawkes concert in Wigmore Hall. Colin Mason wrote in *Tempo* that it was "played with great conviction and rare imaginative insight" and "may prove to be the finest [work] of the composer's career to date". Later that year the Grillers revisited America and were coached on the Second Quartet by Bloch in San Francisco, giving the US premiere on 7 February 1947 at the University of California at Berkeley, and the first New York performance on 26 February at Town Hall. They also played it in Washington, DC. After the final rehearsal in California, Bloch told them: "it is a composer's dream come true to hear his work played as you have played it."

Bloch's violin concerto – the Manchester premiere

Your editor recently found a programme for the first Manchester performance of Bloch's violin concerto – 17th December 1939, the Halle orchestra conducted by Malcolm Sargent with Antonio Brosa as soloist. Inside was a cutting containing a review by Neville Cardus – surely the only critic coupling expert knowledge of music and cricket. Almost all the review is devoted to the concerto whilst Prokofieff's symphony is simply dismissed with the phrase "mildly entertaining"!



Halle Orchestra Concert 1939 featuring Bloch's violin concerto

Brosa's performance clearly pleased Cardus – "he improved on other performances I have heard" (evidently outside Manchester). Particularly interesting are his comments on the nature of the concerto and its relationship to the complex issue of what constitutes Jewish music: "In spite of his (Bloch's) assertion that there are no Jewish motives behind the concerto, the violin writing certainly echoes the style of innovation and improvisation practised by the cantors of the synagogue". He adds that "the racial characteristics may have got into the work instinctively as the composer has suggested. None the less they are there, suggestive and evocative." SH



The Griller Quartet with Hephzibah Menuhin in 1953

Ernest Bloch 100 years ago



Edmond Fleg in France, his adopted home.

Ernest Bloch on Agate Beach, California.

Excerpts from a letter written by Bloch to Edmond Fleg from Satigny on 11 June 1912

... I'll be professor of composition (i.e. counterpoint, fugue, form, etc.) - if I have any pupils - at an annual salary of 600 Francs for two hours a week. If I have lots of students, I'll give five, ten, fifteen, twenty hours of lessons, and I'll earn enough to feed my ravenous kids!

It's not brilliant, but it's better than nothing; and it'll make my daily life a little easier. Besides, I was delighted with this "leg up", as our good Director Held would say ... Recently, I've

been going through quite a dull period, which I'm going to call my "photographic phase". It's always a symptom of depression when I go back to photography... Music is dormant. It's been asleep for a long time. Despite this, I'm not too worried. Am I too optimistic? Or would it be better to "go with the flow"? My course too has absorbed a lot of my time; and seeing how much this hour's lecturing every week has torn me away from the rest of my life, I have some misgivings about this commitment. But I have no choice, and I'm very glad, deep down, to have something solid to fall back on. Besides, my course has boosted my morale;

I've heard many expressions of support, and I was in need of it in this frosty town ...

Godet [celebrated music critic - and Bloch's confidant from 1903 till 1913] has discovered, in a run-down bar, an orchestra of real Gypsies, whose cimbalom player is one of the greatest artists I've ever heard; in any case, I don't know a single professional virtuoso, in any field whatever, who has such a sense of rhythm and such an impressively playful creative impulse ...

Extract from the 76th Annual Report of the Geneva Conservatoire, published in the Journal de Genève on 6 July 1912

... The event of the year has been the Course in Musical Aesthetics given by Mr. Ernest Bloch. Seventy enrolled students, and a large number of other people auditing the course, have been following his presentations with growing interest; for Mr. Bloch - a highly distinctive personality in Geneva - has rapidly won over his audience by the clarity of his expression, by the prodigious nature of his erudition stripped of all pedantry, as well as by the richness of his musical examples and the originality of his observations. No-one knows better than Bloch

how to analyze an early or a modern work and prove that both derive from the same musical elements. One realizes, when listening to him, that there is nothing new under the sun, and that music which, because of its strangeness, is painful on first hearing, will perhaps receive the stamp of classical respectability tomorrow. And this is reassuring to those who, having been poorly or insufficiently initiated into an understanding of the musical forms of today, cannot understand them, and - feeling an overall sense of unpleasantness - are seriously worried about the future of music. And with what panache Bloch, aided by voice and gesture, seats himself at the piano to illustrate his insights! You will also be glad to learn that it has been agreed that these lectures will be scheduled again next year, and that our newly appointed professor will even give a course especially devoted to J.S.Bach and his music. . . Bloch has created a new composition class directed particularly toward those people who wish to advance their studies rapidly in this field. This will be of real benefit to those who are dedicated to composition and who want to obtain the conductor's diploma ...

A new production of Macbeth

The most recent production in the United States of Bloch's only opera *Macbeth* was back in 1973 at the Julliard American Opera Centre. At the time Andrew Porter was resident critic for the New Yorker. His enthusiasm was such that he attended all three performances and found the opera ever more impressive and interesting. He ended his review with some reservations about the staging and performance but concluded

- "If Bloch's *Macbeth* did not come at us with full force, we could easily deduce what that full force might be".

Perhaps its time in the United States has now arrived with the baton literally moving from coast to coast. In June 2013 Long Beach Opera will give three performances of the opera. These will be the first fully professional productions of *Macbeth* in the USA and as with previous performances will be in English. **Further details in our next newsletter.**

Support The International Ernest Bloch Society

Our mission is to promote the music of Ernest Bloch. We encourage and are occasionally able to help performance of his music - live concerts and recordings. To encourage wider interest we distribute this newsletter and we have a website. YOU can help - in the first instance by joining and paying a subscription. A form is included with the printed version of newsletter. Those receiving the online version

can download the form from our website. **Please help us in our work.**

The next issue of our newsletter will include part 2 of Tully Potter's article on the Grillers; a profile of Joseph Szigeti who was the first to play Bloch's violin concerto; an extensive section of reviews of recent CDs; Marko Rothmuller writing about Bloch; and more in relation to the forthcoming performances of *Macbeth* at the Long Beach Opera.