

# International Ernest Bloch Society



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## Newsletter No 10 – Spring 2023

Editor Walter Simmons

Guest Editor for this issue: Geraldine Auerbach MBE



## When Sheku met *Schelomo*

### Bloch for a wider and younger audience

**Editor's Note:** Alex Knapp and Geraldine Auerbach have had the opportunity to attend some of Sheku Kanneh-Mason's recent performances of Bloch's *Schelomo* (including the new reduced orchestration) a pleasure that I, on the other side of the pond, have not had the opportunity to enjoy. I have accepted Geraldine's offer to present Newsletter #10 in which she compiles articles and reviews of Sheku's recent performances.

## A young cellist performs *Schelomo* for the first time



The 23-year-old British cello virtuoso, **Sheku Kanneh-Mason**, has included **Bloch's *Schelomo*** in his programming this year.

He first played the work with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, four times, in early February 2023. Andris Nelsons was the conductor. Then he performed it with the Philharmonia on Sunday afternoon 26 February at London's Royal Festival Hall. The conductor was Jukka-Pekka Saraste.

The day before, they performed it together in Cardiff, and the day after, in Canterbury.

## Sheku Kanneh-Mason

Though Sheku has achieved enormous celebrity status since winning the **BBC Young Musician title in 2016**, it is above all his playing as well as his engaging personality that attracts the audiences. And it is noticeable that the people who come to hear him include many who are young and also who come from diverse backgrounds. His playing and championing of Bloch may well introduce the composer to many new listeners.

By 2018, Sheku had been invited to perform at the British Film and Television Awards in front of The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. He had played at 10 Downing Street as part of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Black History Month and made his **BBC Proms debut** as a soloist with Chineke, Europe's first majority black and minority ethnic orchestra, with the video of his performance going viral. In this time he signed to Decca Classics and produced his first CD 'Inspirations'. And to top it all he was invited to play at that Royal Wedding at Windsor Castle, seen by a couple of billion people! He managed to do all this whilst completing his A-Levels, finishing school in Nottingham, and starting his studies with Hannah Roberts at the **Royal Academy of Music** in London.

Four years later in 2022, and hardly out of his undergraduate and advanced Diploma Courses, Sheku was appointed as the Academy's first **Menuhin Visiting Professor of Performance Mentoring**. The Head of Strings, Jo Cole, points out 'Sheku's ingenuity, open-hearted communication and experience as a young artist on the international stage will make him an inspirational and energetic guide.'

Sheku in saying how the Academy had been the place that has shaped his musical career from a small boy, being a student at the Primary and Junior Academy to his professional studies, also said what a massive honour it was to have this position named after one of his greatest inspirations, Yehudi Menuhin. He said 'I have always admired not only his incredible expressive violin playing, but also his openness, interest in and dedication to a wide range of music, arts, education and social issues.

Such is the calibre of this young artist that he is now widely sought after. This year he will make his debut or perform again with, not only the Boston Symphony Orchestra, but also with the orchestras of Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Toronto and Sao Paulo to name but a few. At home, he is the Philharmonia's featured artist this year and will tour with the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and of course make his now annual appearance at the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall.

## Reducing the orchestral forces

To get *Schelomo* 'under his fingers' as it were, Sheku performed this work outside of London, prior to these great orchestral performances with two of his favourite ensembles. They are the outstanding young Fantasia Orchestra under Tom Fetherstonhaugh (27 January in Norwich) and the renowned London Mozart Players, conductor Jonathan Bloxham, who gave two performances this work – at the Cambridge Music Festival on 3 February and at the Fairfield Halls in Croydon on 4 February.

As these are both smaller ensembles, they jointly commissioned a reduced orchestral version from Sheffield based, composer and arranger George Morton. The International

Ernest Bloch Society was approached by Fantasia's conductor Tom Fetherstonhaugh about the project and asked to support this reduction.

There was some discomfort amongst our aficionados as to what reducing the rich and sonorous orchestration for *Schelomo* might mean. Raphael Wallfisch (cellist who has performed and recorded the work) Malcolm Singer (conductor and composer – former Musical Director at the Yehudi Menuhin School) and Alexander Knapp (composer and pianist also a scholar who is the expert on Ernest Bloch) met to discuss it and to see how they could help. They felt sure that George would bear in mind, that this is not a regular cello concerto – with the cellist accompanied by an orchestra. The orchestra is as important in the work as the soloist. And from a solo cellist's point of view, the feeling of being enveloped in a rich velvet cloak of strings is one of the things that is so special about the work. Steven Isserlis, the International Ernest Bloch Society President, added his pennyworth to us saying: 'I hope the re-orchestration works – there's never been a re-orchestration of a work for cello and orchestra that achieved true popularity; but there's always got to be a first! And it's true that *Schelomo* can be problematic for balance; I have heard – or rather, seen – performances in which the cello has been pretty much inaudible. All I'd say about re-orchestrating it is that it'll be hard to recreate the richness which is an integral part of the work's substance; but at least a version for strings with some winds (essential!) will allow the cello to cut through the textures.'

Our experts all realised that having this work available for a smaller band would mean that more cellists and orchestras could play it in smaller venues. Therefore, more people could hear it and the work would become even better known. They also had complete confidence that George would do a wonderful job.

## The Reduction process:

On 31 October 2022, Tom wrote: Dear Geraldine,

I'm getting in touch to let you know about some updates to the Fantasia Orchestra *Schelomo* project in January 2023. George Morton is well underway with the arrangement and has sent me a draft of the opening couple of minutes of the piece, which is looking great. .... On 25 January Tom wrote again:

'We had our first *Schelomo* rehearsal on Sunday (without Sheku first of all, as he was the other side of the pond). It went really well, and George has done an absolutely stellar job. He has kept all the colour, vibrancy, storytelling and wit of the original version, whilst making the piece work for a chamber orchestra. I couldn't be happier with what he has done. It was no easy brief/task, and he has really done exceptionally well - a true expert. We are all looking forward to Friday very much and I will send an update after the performance for circulation in the newsletter/elsewhere. There will also be a photographer there to capture the evening and we'll send over some photos to you of course.'

## Reducing *Schelomo*

**George Morton himself wrote on 18 January:** 'In the past I have made orchestral reductions of many large-scale pieces, such as the Planets, Enigma Variations, Strauss tone poems, and Tchaikovsky Symphonies, but none quite so colourful, evocative, and rich in texture as Bloch's gargantuan *Schelomo*. The work, a masterpiece for solo cello, is originally



written for huge orchestral forces: triple woodwinds, full brass section, full battery of percussion, celeste, 2 harps and a mammoth string section. My job was to reduce these accompanying forces without losing any of the detail or colour in Bloch's writing, a challenge that I greatly enjoyed.

'When approaching an arrangement like this my first job is to work out what instruments can realistically be taken out and what is absolutely vital to retain— early on in the process, I decided it was critical to keep a harp, both for its unique timbre and to use as a support for the smaller string sections. Having decided what to write for (in this case individual wind players, 2 horns, a trumpet and trombone, one harp, a percussionist and strings), I set about working through the score, bar-by-bar, adapting, moving and removing material to make an arrangement that works both as a sum of the whole and coherently for each instrument; a big challenge is to make sure that each instrumental part works, and isn't a random collection of pitches stolen from instruments that have been taken away!



'Having worked with Sheku Kanneh-Mason, Fantasia Orchestra and London Mozart Players on various, similar projects in the past, I knew the new reduction would be in safe hands and collectively we'd present something that was sympathetic to Bloch's wonderful writing and gave opportunity for new audiences to hear this magnificent piece.' **George Morton**

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**Fantasia Orchestra presents the world premiere of 'Chamber' *Schelomo* Norwich 27 January 2023**

**Tom Fetherstonhaugh**, Conductor and founder of the Orchestra in 2016 (pictured by Paul Hurst, left with Sheku) writes:

Sheku Kanneh-Mason and Fantasia Orchestra have a long-standing collaborative relationship; together we have performed concertos including Dvorak, Shostakovich no. 2, and Haydn C major. When Sheku asked if we could play Bloch's mighty *Schelomo*, I was very excited: it is a piece I love.

The orchestral forces of *Schelomo* are big and would not have worked with our available resources. Determined to make the performance happen, we looked at

commissioning an orchestral reduction. George Morton, who has made extensive arrangements from across the repertoire, sprang to mind as a perfect fit.

The task was to keep the stunning and wide-ranging colour palette of Bloch's original composition, whilst reducing the instrumentation so that the concert was physically (and economically) possible.

With generous financial support and guidance from the team at the International Ernest Bloch Society, Fantasia Orchestra and London Mozart players jointly commissioned George to make the arrangement.

The Morton reduction is a work of highly-skilled craft and superb attention to detail. He stays true to Bloch's big timbral range: the delicate solo sections are brimming with detail and depth, and the orchestral tutti still pack a powerful punch.

Fantasia Orchestra was thrilled to give the world premiere of this groundbreaking reduction. The piece is deeply intense, and the atmosphere during the performance — from audience, soloist, and orchestra like — was focussed and powerful. It felt particularly poignant that the concert was on 27th January, Holocaust Memorial Day.

Sheku and I could not have been happier with the arrangement, and are very grateful not only to George himself, but to the IEBS for their support of the project. **Tom.**

Tom Fetherstonhaugh is now also the Assistant Conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. He has been a member of The Grange Festival's music staff for the past two years. At the invitation of the Kanneh-Mason family, Tom jumped in to conduct the Antigua and Barbuda Youth Symphony Orchestra in 2022, and is delighted to be working with the orchestra on an ongoing basis. He studied conducting with Sian Edwards at the Royal Academy of Music and graduated in 2021 with Distinction, winning a DipRAM prize for an outstanding final performance.

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## ***A Tale of Two Schelomos***



**Alexander Knapp, Chairman of the International Ernest Bloch Society** writes a personal report about his experience of *Schelomo* with both the reduced and larger orchestra:

'In the run-up to the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Bloch's birth, to be celebrated in 2030, there is gathering momentum in the level of attention being shown to Bloch's music, both familiar and unfamiliar.

'However, many of his orchestral compositions demand vast forces and resources; and these are, consequently, expensive to mount, whether for concert, broadcast or recording purposes. In order to make the programming of these large-scale works more practicable, the idea of transforming the orchestra from the huge 'Wagner' or 'Mahler' band that Bloch requires into a more 'Classical' or 'Mozartean' ensemble has recently emerged – to the delight of some, and the consternation of others!

'Bloch had, himself, made arrangements of many of his own orchestral pieces throughout his lifetime, often as piano reductions. He did, in fact, have his own version of *Schelomo* for cello and piano published by G. Schirmer in New York in 1918 - the same year as the original orchestral score, composed two years earlier. But as far as I know, he never wrote a version of his cello rhapsody for *reduced orchestra*.

'How, we might speculate, would Bloch feel about an intimate re-interpretation of his spectacularly theatrical score that a reduction would necessarily entail? How, for example, would the massive climaxes that conclude each of the three main sections of the work, retain their white-hot energy? And who would be willing to take responsibility for this gargantuan task?

'In any case, it was with an open mind that I made my way to Croydon, South London, on the evening of Saturday 4 February to attend Sheku's performance with the London Mozart Players, conducted by Jonathan Bloxham. The concert also included two works by Mendelssohn (excerpts from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Italian Symphony*) and Bloch's *Prayer* (arranged by Christopher Palmer). A reduction of this kind would necessitate the assessment of so many factors: for example, the size and acoustics of the hall, the size of the audience, the character of the orchestra and conductor respectively, and the musical relationship between them and the soloist.

'Any doubts that may have lingered in my mind were soon dispelled. In my opinion, the experience was magical. The intensity was gripping, the audience mesmerized. Admittedly, every aspect of the music had been scaled down; but everything seemed to be entirely in proportion, including the all-important balance between cello and orchestra. Especially moving for me was Sheku's sensitivity, and his deep emotional response, not only to the soaring melodic lines of the solo instrument, but also to the passionate orchestral utterances during which he was silent. And George Morton had, I felt, achieved his objective impeccably.

'Fast-forward three weeks to the afternoon of Sunday 26 February, when Sheku again ascended the podium, this time in the Royal Festival Hall in Central London, to play *Schelomo* with the Philharmonia, under the baton of Jukka-Pekka Saraste. (Also included in the programme were excerpts from Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*, and Symphony No. 1 by Sibelius.) Many Bloch *aficionados* were to be seen around a full house...

Nick Kimberley's review in the *Evening Standard*, published the following day (and reprised below in this Newsletter) admirably captures the atmosphere that enveloped Sheku's compelling performance - this time maybe a little more extrovert, as the larger dimensions of venue, audience and orchestral forces would determine.

Bloch composed *Schelomo* in 1916, the fifth of his six completed works of the 'Jewish Cycle' (1911-16): *Trois Poèmes Juifs*, Psalms 137 and 114, Psalm 22, *Israel Symphony*, and String Quartet No. 1. All the orchestral works of the Cycle are enormous in terms of instrumentation, even if not in length. This factor may well have influenced Bloch's mindset at the time he wrote *Schelomo*. I feel that his desire for the deepest, widest and richest sound available to him at the time should be respected as definitive. However, I also think there is a legitimate place for a different *Schelomo*, one that seems to reveal a gentler side to the composer's temperament. Sheku has brought us both.



It is to be hoped that cellists throughout the world will explore Bloch's entire cello repertoire: three solo unaccompanied Suites; *From Jewish Life* and *Méditation Hébraïque* with piano; *Voice in the Wilderness* and *Symphony for cello* (or trombone), each with orchestra or piano. In addition, there are long-established cello arrangements of the *Viola Suite* of 1919, and *Nigun* (from the *Baal Shem Suite*). And the manuscript of *Sonate pour piano et violoncelle* (1897) is extant. **Alex Knapp.**

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## A performance of calm maturity ...

is how Nick Kimberley described Sheku Kanneh-Mason playing Bloch at the Royal Festival Hall on 26 February in his review in the *Evening Standard* on 27 February.

### Nick Kimberley said:

'Kanneh-Mason has become a global celebrity, but while public profile helps, it's his playing that brings in the audiences.

'When he played at Harry and Meghan's wedding in 2018, he became a global celebrity in a way that classical musicians rarely achieve. He comes from a talented musical family: there were no fewer than seven Kanneh-Mason siblings on their recording of Saint-Saëns' *The Carnival of the Animals*.



'Sheku remains the most prominent family member, the brand leader if you like; he's even become a model for designer Paul Smith's menswear. Public profile helps, of course, but **it's his playing that brings in the audiences.**

He is the Philharmonia Orchestra's artist-in-residence for the 2022/23 season, and this was one of several performances they're giving of Ernest Bloch's *Schelomo* (the title is the Hebrew word for "Solomon").

The cello's natural temperament sits somewhere between rapture and melancholy, which seems to match Kanneh-Mason's predisposition. No surprise, then, that he should add Bloch's big-boned "Hebraic rhapsody" to his repertoire. His tone is naturally sweet but when Bloch's long, singing lines demanded it, he wasn't afraid to let his cello growl and moan, whether in ecstasy or agony.

There were moments when he seemed to want to lose himself in his instrument, others where he cocked his head to hear what the orchestra was saying. Finnish conductor Jukka-Pekka Saraste followed him every step of the way, reining in his players when necessary, giving them their due in the moments of ecstatic grandiloquence.

That balance between control and abandon suits Kanneh-Mason; at 23, he's still a young musician, but this was a performance of calm maturity. It was greeted with a few seconds of absolute silence before the applause broke out, punctuated by whoops of enthusiasm that suggested a younger audience than a classical concert usually attracts. **Nick Kimberley**

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## **Sheku himself tweeted on 28 February:**

'The work I'm currently playing with [@philharmonia](#), Bloch's *Schelomo*, feels like I've discovered a long-lost friend. Thanks to all who came to my performances in Cardiff, London and Canterbury. I really hope you love it too?

And somebody responded: 'What a perfect Sunday afternoon'.

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**In Cardiff**, Paul Corfield Godfrey wrote on 27 February:

## **'Sheku Kanneh-Mason gives *Schelomo* a new life!**

You have to hand it to Sheku Kanneh-Mason: the man is a workaholic. Right after this performance of Bloch's *Schelomo* in Cardiff, he was heading back to London for no fewer than four events in one day with the Philharmonia in London, before yet another repeat performance in Canterbury the day after. While not quite the 'tour' that the Philharmonia had seemed to announce, it was still a formidable workload, especially with a piece that is, if anything, more strenuous for the soloist than your average cello concerto.

At the time of Ernest Bloch's death in 1959, his reputation as a pioneering beacon of modern music stood high. But despite the release in recent years of excellent recordings of his output, his star seems to have steadily waned ever since.

Today, *Schelomo* is almost the sole representation of his oeuvre performed with any regularity. It is hard to see precisely why this has happened. Maybe the critical opinion that his music was too redolent of Hollywood film epics rankled (although most of his early romantic output so condemned was written well before that style had even become



established). It is a mystery why such parallels should be still the subject of suspicion – in an age which has welcomed the work of his contemporaries such as Korngold back onto the concert platform. Maybe there is a hard core of modernism in his music which militates against popularity; even the opening chords of *Schelomo* clash with each other in a manner which in any other hands would sound abrasive in the extreme, rather than as here lushly luxurious.



Or maybe cellists simply find the extensive and demanding writing too much like hard work. This *Hebraic Rhapsody* does not exclusively showcase them, but allows the massive orchestra its full head in places. **Be that as it may, we are unlikely ever to encounter a more emotional and heartfelt response to the music than in a performance like this.** Kanneh-Mason is not afraid to allow the music to soar romantically and to groan in abjection, and even to marginally bend the pitch in the closing bars to achieve a sense of oriental mysticism. His glorious tone never gets drowned even by Bloch's most strenuous passages of orchestration, and Jukka-Pekka Saraste did not pull any punches.

***Paul Corfield Godfrey, Cardiff February 2023***

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**In Boston USA**, this is what Julie Ingelfinger said about Sheku playing *Schelomo* with the Boston Symphony Orchestra on February 11, 2023:

'The ascendant cellist Kanneh-Mason entranced the audience with his interpretation of Bloch's 1915-1916 *Schelomo*, in which the composer casts the cello as King Solomon, depicting texts from Ecclesiastes, in this pessimistic, intense, yet spellbinding work. *Schelomo* starts and ends with a low note, and overall, underscores the multifaceted

challenges faced. Kanneh-Mason seemed entranced; he dug into the score with intensity and in turn, entranced the hall. His dynamic range, deep tone and expressive demeanor, roused the hall. In response, the cellist played his own interpretation of the Welsh song, “Myfanwy,” which he has arranged (and recorded) for solo cello.’ Currently you can watch the video at; <https://www.bso.org/media/2022-23-bso-streaming-events>



*A Comment after the review:*

□ Omg! It was amazing 😄 Sheku Kanneh-Mason will forever be burned into my memory. What a legend! An extraordinary person. The Gen X women sitting next to me saw him on NPR’s tiny desk and came to see him for their Valentine’s celebration. My husband and I are millennials. We came for Beethoven, but feel so lucky [as the Bloch] was way more magical than the Beethoven we already know so well. Bravo 🙌🙌❤️❤️

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## Sheku and Bloch?

**I was curious to know more about Sheku and his relationship with the music of Ernest Bloch.**

*Schelomo* is not Sheku’s first encounter with Bloch. I trawled the internet and found that on his debut album for Decca, *Inspiration* released in 2018 when he was still a teenager of 19, he does not include Bloch. However, he opens it with his own arrangement of the Israeli song, *Erev Shel Shoshanim* that they call *Evening of Roses*, and closes it with Leonard Cohen’s *Hallelujah*.

In 2018 Sheku was invited to give a special performance in New York as part of a major charity gala. He made his Carnegie Hall debut in ‘The Children’s Monologues’ – a one-night-only theatrical event directed by Oscar-winning Danny Boyle, appearing alongside Hollywood A-listers including Catherine Zeta-Jones, James McAvoy, Charlize Theron, Ewan McGregor, Sienna Miller, Andrew Garfield, Trevor Noah, Lena Dunham and Susan Sarandon, plus many more. **Sheku performed Bloch’s *Abodah* as part of that show.**

You can see and hear Sheku play **Abodah** by Bloch (written by Bloch for the young Yehudi Menuhin) in a performance that was uploaded in 2018 here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMT053bfQhM>

**On his second Album ‘Elgar’,** in which Sheku plays the Elgar Cello Concerto with the London Symphony Orchestra under Sir Simon Rattle, he chose music written at about the same time to go with it. **Richard Bratby** remarks in Gramophone Magazine in January 2020

that ‘the most intriguing of all are the two pieces by that most unfashionable of 20th-century masters, Bloch: the *Prélude* for string quartet, and ‘Prayer’ (the first movement of *From Jewish Life*). With an older player you might attribute such choices to nostalgia. Kanneh-Mason, however, has simply been digging deep into his instrument’s heritage, and has discovered that this music genuinely speaks to him.’

**Sheku Kanneh-Mason himself** said: ‘I wanted to record pieces that are similar to the Elgar in a certain way. I mean, the Klengel was written just a year after the Elgar Concerto. Lots of the other pieces I chose because I was inspired by recordings that were made around the early 1920s. I was listening to the Bloch *Prélude* in a recording by the London String Quartet – I think it dates from the late 1920s or early 1930s. And it’s just really, really special playing on that recording, and I fell in love with the piece because of that. It works nicely with the Elgar Concerto, because that’s exactly the kind of playing that Elgar would have been hearing when he wrote the piece. You can learn a lot from different recordings, and particularly from historical recordings.

‘The most important thing is that you’re communicating and saying something, and how you do that is going to be different for each player. Just playing beautifully is kind of boring. I want to play with as much character as possible. Often, by just playing beautifully, you are missing the actual music. But as long as there is a clear and strong message with your playing ...’

**Bratby in Gramophone Magazine** says, ‘To these ears, anyway, the two Bloch performances really stand out – really possess that quality of speaking volumes in a few eloquent minutes. It’s surely no coincidence that they’re not purely solo items. Kanneh-Mason is merely the cellist in the quartet that plays the *Prélude*; meanwhile ‘Prayer’ is his own arrangement for violin and cello – performed here with his older brother Braimah, [who was at the time] a fellow student at the Royal Academy of Music. Sheku has already spoken about his collaboration with Rattle, and his own fascination with what lies beneath the solo line in a concerto. He’s starting to sound very like one of nature’s chamber musicians – and in fact, when I meet him, his piano trio, with Braimah on the violin and their sister Isata on the piano, is due to perform at London’s Wigmore Hall the following month. Collaboration, it turns out, is how he first made music in the family home in Mapperley Park, Nottingham; and it’s what motivates him most strongly even now.’

**Reviewer Keith Bruce** in the *Scottish Herald* also picks out the Bloch from the ‘other’ music on the Elgar album saying: ‘The two works by Ernest Bloch with Sheku’s violinist brother Braimah and joined by their regular quartet partners, may, in fact, be the highlights of the whole disc — and the ones to choose to download.’

You can hear Sheku play *Prayer* from ‘From Jewish life’ with his violinist brother in their arrangement for cello and violin here [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c\\_NSFBxMclK](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_NSFBxMclK)

On 11 June 2022, Sheku marked his debut live performance with the London Symphony Orchestra, playing both Max Bruch’s *Kol Nidrei* and Ernest Bloch’s *Prayer from Jewish Life* in Trafalgar Square. That is also available to listen to here. <https://lso.co.uk/whats-on/icalrepeat.detail/2022/06/11/2339/-/bmw-classics-2022.html>



## Sheku's first public performance of Bloch?

### The first International Ernest Bloch Competition of July 2009

While looking for Sheku's previous encounters with Bloch, there was a special spine-tingling moment when I came across something about Sheku from our very own International Ernest Bloch Society Newsletter. In issue no 3 of Spring 2010, thirteen years ago, there was a report by Sagi Hartov on the first **International Ernest Bloch Competition** that had taken place at the Royal College of Music in July 2009. Sagi, himself a cellist and the director of the competition (which was run in conjunction with and supported by the International Ernest Bloch Society) reported:

'When the application deadline arrived, we were amazed by the number of musicians from all over the world who wished to compete and play the music of Bloch. Twenty applicants were chosen to play before the distinguished panel of judges, with three advancing to the final. The first winner of the International Bloch Competition was Irish violinist Róisín Walters who performed **Nigun** from the Baal Shem Suite.



There were many candidates who stood out, among them a **ten-year-old cellist from Nottinghamshire, Sheku Kanneh-Mason** the youngest candidate to apply for the competition (left). He had completed his Grade 8 examination at the age of nine. Invited to perform in the final concert, he was awarded the '**Promising Young Talent**' award.

The members of the jury were amazed to see how the complicated music of Bloch, when played in a simple way, was equally touching, if not more so, than a perhaps over-complicated performance from an older candidate.'

Many of the Ernest Bloch Society committee, including I myself, had been present in the audience at the Royal

College of Music at that final performance. It was a eureka moment to suddenly realise that in fact we had witnessed, and possibly even spurred on, the star in the making, and that this may have been one of his first serious encounters with the music of Ernest Bloch. You can read the 2010 Newsletter here: <http://ernestblochsociety.org/data/uploads/spring2010.pdf>

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## Ernest Bloch and *Schelomo*

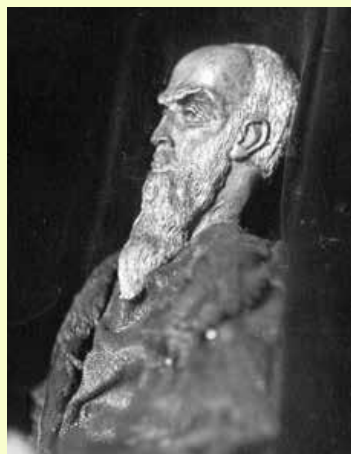


The Bosc Symphony Orchestra Brochure included an article both about Ernest Bloch and also about *Schelomo* written by Klara Moricz, in their season's programme book – some of which we reproduce below. International Ernest Bloch Society committee member Eric B Johnson who, together with Bloch's great granddaughter, Lucienne Allen, carries the portfolio for Ernest Bloch's photography, was able to supply them with several images taken by Ernest Bloch himself, in Geneva in 1916. They were printed by Eric in 1974, and were reproduced in the programme 'courtesy of the Ernest Bloch Society'. We feature them again here with the permission of Lucienne and Eric.

Above: *Ernest Bloch self-portrait, taken in Geneva, 1916.*

The programme article by Klara Moricz, includes a reference to the music critic of the Boston Post who met Bloch soon after he arrived in America. Bloch certainly made a big impact to on him:

One afternoon in 1916 **Olin Downes**, at the time **music critic of *The Boston Post***, visited the Swiss composer Ernest Bloch in New York. Bloch, who had recently arrived from Europe to try his luck in the United States. Bloch made a great impression on Downes who described him as **'a maniac with blazing eyes, jet-black hair and a face lined with suffering and will and vision'**. The composer 'sat at the piano, beating it as a madman his drum, and, bawling, singing, shouting, released a torrent of music which poured out of him like lava from a volcano.' The work Bloch played for the astonished critic was *Schelomo*, a Hebrew rhapsody for solo cello and grand orchestra, in Downes's words 'a torrent of music, bitter, passionate, exalted, and all purple and gold.'



*Russian cellist Alexandre Barjansky (1883-1946) above left, who inspired Bloch's Schelomo and his sculptor wife Katya Barjansky above right with her sculpture of King Solomon.*

The direct inspiration for *Schelomo* came from Bloch's meeting with the Russian Jewish cellist Alexandre Barjansky and his sculptor wife Katia Barjansky at the end of 1915. Bloch was so taken by the extraordinary intensity and ardour of Barjansky's playing that he immediately began to compose a 'poem' for the cellist. Moved by Bloch's Jewish inspired music, Katia thanked the composer with a wax sculpture of King Solomon that combined Orientalist splendour with spiritual intensity.

Even before Katia's present, Bloch thought to set texts from *Ecclesiastes*, the collection of pessimistic thoughts attributed to King Solomon. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.... For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow," says *Ecclesiastes*. Prone to despair, Bloch found wisdom in this bitter message, accepting that since life has no meaning, one has to go through it without hope. Bloch captures this pessimistic tone in *Schelomo* by the frequent use of descending, chromatic melodic lines that evoke intense lamentation. In his ex post facto program notes, written for a performance in Rome in 1933 when Bloch could finally hear his work with Barjansky as the soloist, he casts the cello as King Solomon and the orchestra as the world that tempts and distracts the tragic figure with lavish colours, barbaric force, and lascivious melodic lines representing the king's wives and concubines. *Schelomo*'s subtitle 'rhapsody' refers not only to the genre associated with a free musical form, but also to the role of the ancient Greek singer of epic tales, the rhapsodist, played here by the solo cello. Like Strauss in *Don Quixote*, Bloch assigns expressive soliloquies to the cello, while making the orchestra reflect the hero's ideas.

Ernest Bloch was born July 24, 1880, in Geneva, Switzerland, and died July 15, 1959, in Portland, Oregon. He wrote *Schelomo* in 1915-16 after meeting the cellist Alexandre Barjansky, but, the composer having meanwhile moved to the United States, the premiere was given by cellist Hans Kindler with the New York City-based Society of the Friends of Music at Carnegie Hall on May 3, 1917.

The Score of *Schelomo* calls for 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (3 players: cymbals, tam-tam, tambourine, snare drum, bass drum), 2 harps, celesta, and strings (first and second violins, violas, cellos, and double basses).

Bloch composed *Schelomo* shortly before he came to the United States, as the last of his 'Jewish Cycle', a group of works in which he tried to express what in interviews he described as 'the soul of the Jewish people'. Growing up in Geneva, Switzerland, Bloch developed little sense of national belonging. In Geneva he studied with Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, in Brussels with Eugene Ysaye, in Frankfurt with Iwan Knorr, finishing his training in composition in Munich with Ludwig Thuille and Max von Schillings. He admired Debussy and Mahler and wrote music his teachers thought lacked specific national identity.

By the time he reached New York, Bloch was ready to present himself as a quintessentially Jewish composer—and this is how American audiences first encountered him. In the United States, Bloch also became an influential teacher of composition, giving classes in the Mannes School of Music, the Cleveland Institute of Music, the San Francisco Conservatory, ending his teaching career on the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley. His musical style went through several transformations, although it always remained passionate, romantically inspired, and accessible even when critics accused him of modernist harshness.

The contrast Bloch posits in *Schelomo* between solo and orchestra is not simply a division of roles but also a conflict between the physical and the spiritual, the Oriental opulence of the external world and the inward, tortured voice of the solo instrument. In his agonizingly torn condition, the protagonist of *Schelomo* can offer only bitter resignation. However forceful his occasional attempts to tear himself away from the alluring dances, he remains trapped in his sensuous surroundings. Bloch sets up the conceptual contrast in the cello's two themes in



the introduction: a rhythmically free, descending theme of lamentation and a rhythmically more regular passage, the sinuous melodic line and undulating rhythm of which evoke a languid, exotic dance. The first theme descends three octaves; the second lingers unhurriedly around the same notes. Yet even these two seemingly contrasting themes share important characteristics, indicating that they express two sides of a single personality, one yielding to desperation, the other lost in worldly pleasures.

Even the cadenza that Bloch identified most closely with the personal voice of the cello and its resistance to its surrounding is saturated with Orientalist features. The forceful melodic gestures suggest a desperate effort to fend off temptation. The cello climbs three octaves with immense effort, only to fall back again to the low note from which it began. In the course of the work the cadenza interrupts the flow of the music three times. But, as the work's concluding pages testify, its final message is not denial but resignation. In the cadenza's final iteration, the cello's ascending lines turn downward, supported by the orchestra. Instead of its purported separation from the orchestral material, the cello's concluding gestures underscore the protagonist's unbreakable bond with his ostensibly rejected milieu.

The relationship between the solo instrument and the orchestra is not always peaceful. A serious conflict breaks out when in the middle section the cello resists picking up a new melody presented forcefully by the orchestra. The cello yields only after the orchestra hammers out the theme in barbarous fifths in counterpoint to the cello's cadenza. The orchestral theme first rejected and then accepted by the cello is a melody that Bloch claimed to have heard his father reciting in the mornings. This melody is the only traditional Jewish theme in *Schelomo*, identified by Alexander Knapp as related to two cantorial extracts, 'Blessed are You' and 'For You are God.' Both the quotation and its first refutation by the cello remained unexplained in Bloch's program.

*Schelomo*, uniquely in Bloch's oeuvre, ends on a pessimistic note. The only glimmer of hope in the work is a theme played by the violins above shimmering tremolos in the harps, celesta, flute, and bassoon. This is the only theme of *Schelomo* that Bloch neither repeats, nor combines with other themes nor subjects to motivic transformation. Years later in the pages of his *Sacred Service* (1930-1933) the same theme stands for Bloch's longing for universal brotherhood, delivered to humanity by the Jews. In *Schelomo* this positive message remains a fleeting illusion that highlights rather than neutralizes the otherwise heavy Orientalist colors of the music.

Because of *Schelomo*'s heavily Orientalist musical language, Jews again became marked for Bloch's audience as stereotyped Orientals, alternately sensuous, barbarous, and miserable. While the exotic, Orientalist colors that connoted Jewish character to the audience distanced the Jews geographically by placing them in the East, the primitive, barbarous ostinatos that govern the music locate the Jews in the historically distant past of the ancient Hebrews. Bloch's combination of the Biblical and the Oriental, as Downes later wrote, lent his music 'the warmth, the melancholy, the sensuality, the prophetic fervor of Hebraic literature.' At *Schelomo*'s premiere on May 3, 1917, in Carnegie Hall, the audience greeted Bloch's Orientalist fantasy with great enthusiasm. Opinions differed on how seriously one should take Bloch's repeated claims about the instinctive Jewish spirit of his music. But nobody denied his originality, technical prowess, and, as the critic of the *New York Times* wrote, "the intense sincerity and the frequently profound and stirring expressiveness" of Bloch's work. Whether the hero of *Schelomo* is the Biblical king, some mysterious Jewish essence, or simply Bloch himself remains a puzzle unnecessary to solve to enjoy the music. Klara Moricz [professor of music at Amherst College](#)

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## The 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Bloch's birth in 2030.

2030 will mark the 150th anniversary of Bloch's birth. Musicians and organisations world-wide, professional, and amateur, are gearing up to perform Bloch's music, especially the lesser-known works. Many will be putting on performances and creating mini-festivals along the way – in 'Building Blochs' up to the anniversary. Let us know if you are participating in any Bloch activities.

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## How to keep in touch:

**Ernest Bloch Society Mailing List:** There is an interactive mailing list of people who are interested in or involved with the music of Ernest Bloch. Please join this list (which is free of charge) to be informed about activity, post questions and announce your Bloch programmes. To join this mailing list, send an email to [listserv@jiscmail.ac.uk](mailto:listserv@jiscmail.ac.uk). Leave the 'subject' line BLANK and in the 'Message' say: SUBSCRIBE ERNESTBLOCHSOCIETY followed by your First name and your Last name only (please delete any automatic signatures). (Or you can contact [info@ernestblochsociety.org](mailto:info@ernestblochsociety.org) for assistance)

**Ernest Bloch Society Facebook Group** <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2810320052621256>

For those who like Facebook we have a new Facebook group for the Ernest Bloch Society. You may like to join to see what is going on and post your own ideas.

**Ernest Bloch Society YouTube Channel** [Bloch Playlist](#) stores the study session presentations.

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## Bloch Newsletter #10, Spring 2023

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