

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

### One hundred years later

The letter on the right pre-dates most of Bloch's musical *oeuvre*. A major pre-1914 composition had been his one completed opera: *Macbeth* with a text by Edmond Fleg. The British musical critic Andrew Porter reviewed the work as produced by the Julliard American Opera Centre in New York in early 1973. He saw three performances and each time "found it more impressive and interesting". and was surprised that following "so masterful a start, Bloch wrote no more operas". The progress of *Macbeth* onto the stages of the world's opera houses has certainly been slow, but this September it will reach Chicago where it will be performed at the Harris Theater.

If opera was the loser, instrumental music was the gainer! Here in London the International Ernest Bloch Society (IEBS) has arranged two major events involving world renowned instrumentalists. Around the date of publication of this 9<sup>th</sup> issue of our newsletter, Steven Isserlis, our President, will be giving a special concert recital for IEBS members and friends. On 2<sup>nd</sup> November we are hosting a major event at the Royal College of Music: Natalie Clein (cello), Rivka Golani (viola) and Raphael Wallfisch (cello) will talk about their first encounters with Bloch's music and will play various pieces.

And a final editorial note. Credits in our last issue for photos of Ernest Bloch should have gone to Old Stage Studios (Gualala, California). Sincere thanks are due for on-going support as evinced by further photos in this current issue.

Stanley Henig, editor



Photo made available by courtesy of Old Stage Studios

When war broke out Bloch was living in Switzerland and keen to sign up for the army

### Extracts from letter sent by Ernest Bloch to Edmond Fleg, Satigny, 11 August 1914.

On 28 July 1914, World War I was declared. Two weeks later, Bloch shared his ambivalent feelings with his close friend and librettist Edmond Fleg:

*Fleg, my old friend, This morning, I received your letter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> [August]. Your mother had informed us that you intended to sign up [for the French army]. We were all delighted . . . During this period I was [trying to] do the same thing here [in Geneva], sadly without success. My situation is the same as yours. They have too many men at the moment . . . I can't live here any more. I'm champing at the bit. Life has abandoned this place ... You don't see the countryside any more. Everything has the leaden hue that you notice during a solar eclipse. You don't dare to compare your own troubles, and those of your own dear ones, with other people's anguish... It's the ruin of us all... What a time this is! You come face to face with the worst . . . I think that, if Switzerland doesn't want me, so I'll enlist in France, if she needs men. I owe something to that country which I love, and which is fighting for its life and for the cause of civilisation and honour. My own dear ones are well, as well as one can be at the moment. We have enough to eat and to manage on for two or three months. Afterwards? Afterwards? Who knows what will be afterwards, and who knows when, and if, we'll see each other again. Goodbye, dear old Fleg. With affectionate greetings to you and yours, Your E.B.*

Translated by Alexander Knapp

### ❖ TRAWLING THE ARCHIVES ❖

❖ The IEBS is not the first organization devoted to perpetuating the legacy of Ernest Bloch. An immediate predecessor was the California-based Ernest Bloch Society, established in the late 1960s, when there were still many who had known the composer at first-hand. The Bloch family played a major role in

establishing the Society and contributed significantly to its annual Bulletin.

The 1970 issue of the Bulletin has a fascinating piece by the composer's elder daughter Suzanne entitled *The Turning Point in Bloch's Life*. In 1916 at a time of 'utter discouragement' he received a phone call from an old friend,

Alfred Pochon, telling him of interest in his work in the USA, adding that there was an opening for a conductor to tour America with the famous dancer, Maud Allan. It was indeed the turning point and would lead Bloch to settle in America and in due course to become an American citizen. **SH**

**Ernest Bloch: Schelomo & Voice in the Wilderness.****Andre Caplet: Epiphanie. Maurice Ravel: Kaddisch.**

Raphael Wallfisch, cello, Benjamin Wallfisch conductor, BBC National Orchestra of Wales

*Nimbus Records in association with BBC Radio 3 (NI 5913)*

Striving energy and questing passion, a balance of brooding darkness and joyous humanity; these are qualities in the vivid and moving interpretations by the outstanding father and son, soloist-conductor team of Raphael and Benjamin Wallfisch, of two of Bloch's masterpieces for cello and orchestra, performed with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. The coupling with Ravel's *Kaddisch* is apt since the recording is dedicated to the memory of family members who perished in the Holocaust. The less familiar *Epiphanie* by Caplet (1878-1925), also offers an illuminating context for Bloch, highlighting shared interest in exotic expressionism.

In *Schelomo* the unique father son teamwork certainly makes for exciting chemistry. It radiates a profound sense of character with the architectural drive towards

climaxes keenly handled and many magical moments highlighted along the way, both in the translucent orchestra and in the cello's fervent sound. Clear, rich and resonant, with supple shading, Raphael Wallfisch's cello playing has a wonderful quality of zooming in and out of individual notes. His glistening tone and pliant bowing creates the emotional soundscape to suit the work: in the higher tessitura there is desolation without sentimentality; in the lower registers, a philosophical sense of brooding. One is drawn into every gesture, especially where, towards the end, the cello subdues, like a cantor in frail supplication, the neo-Wagnerian richness of the orchestral drama. Benjamin Wallfisch steers the orchestra with finely honed lucidity; he prefers vigour over menace, galvanic climaxes radiating a cascading, kaleidoscopic refraction. Especially translucent are the woodwind *shofar* motifs in the middle section (here tracked separately as one of three tracks) with eloquent clarinet, bassoon and cor anglais. At times one traces echoes of Rimsky Korsakovian splendour

or the melodic vigour of Vaughan Williams, with cor anglais and bass clarinet evoking moods of resignation and loneliness echoed in the solo cello's low registers or the nostalgic yearning of high-flying climaxes.

If *Schelomo*, composed in 1916 just prior to the composer's first journey to the USA, narrates a heroic tale drawn from Biblical sources, in the 'Jewish style' that was to permeate Bloch's later music, *Voice in the Wilderness*, originally conceived as a piano solo (in which form it was eventually published in 1936 as *Visions and Prophecies*), also tells a tale, each movement presenting an orchestral prelude leading to a fervent cello commentary. Stemming from the pre-WWII years (1935-6) in Haute-Savoie in the French Alps, soon after Bloch had completed the *Sacred Service*, the work echoes Bloch's earlier American period in its expansive pastoralism, fiery splendour in the opulent outbursts (3<sup>rd</sup> and 6th movements), lyrical reflection and intense yearning as in the cello's gripping fifth movement cadenza. Throughout, Wallfisch's tone is searingly focused, forthright and poetic in turn, the BBC

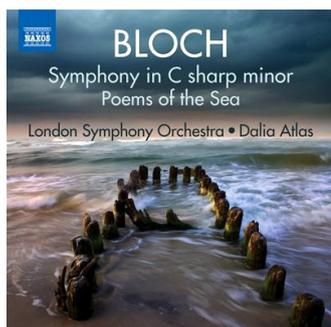
National Orchestra of Wales producing a scintillating range of colour as in the opening movement's counterpoints and the brass-laden tutti of the fast movements.

*Kaddisch* is one of Ravel's *Deux Mélodies Hébraïques* (1914; orchestrated 1919-20), it is memorably rendered. Just as the Hebrew memorial prayer concerns promise of the Divine, so is Wallfisch's interpretation both inward and ecstatic, the cello's near-vocal tone supported by a delicate drone in Benjamin Wallfisch's nuance-laden orchestral balancing. Caplet's musical tone poem on the topic of the Christian Epiphany, like Bloch and Ravel, displays a fusion of the exotic non-western modes and rhythmic and timbral influences with a European late romantic and early modern soundscape. The central cadenza movement is remarkable, Wallfisch shaping each gesture and silence, over a hardly audible drum beat which is Ethiopian in origin, a non-Western element that continues in the asymmetrical metres of the nearly jazzy dance-finale. The programme as a whole represents a superb achievement.

Malcolm Miller

**Bloch: Symphony in C sharp minor; Poems of the Sea.**

London Symphony Orchestra / Dalia Atlas

*Naxos 8.573241 (68 mins)*

*Poems of the Sea*, inspired by the poetry of Walt Whitman and written by Ernest Bloch in

1922 in versions for piano and (as here) for large orchestra, is an absolutely superb little triptych, lasting 13:35 in this performance. The first movement is entitled 'Waves'; and as soon as the waves are set in motion, you feel in safe hands. The LSO is in good form and Dalia Atlas, to whom all Bloch enthusiasts owe a tremendous debt, conducts with flair. 'Chanty' is one of those slow sea shanties,

Bloch's own invention, and the writing for woodwinds is particularly fine. 'At Sea' begins with a pleasing jig rhythm and concludes one of Bloch's most accomplished and approachable works.

The C sharp minor Symphony dates from the turn of the century, when Bloch was 22. It is a shame that he did not revise it, as it is full of good Late Romantic music but also more commonplace passages.

The opening movement, in particular, has many repeated phrases which, I suspect, the mature Bloch would have pruned ruthlessly. It begins quietly and atmospherically with a substantial Lento introduction, which builds to an impressive climax before subsiding into quietness again; the Allegro breaks in suddenly and there is a slower section before more Allegro.

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The competition was held at the Royal College of Music's Britten Theatre in the heart of London, opposite the Royal Albert Hall. In the shadow of one of the world's greatest cultural monuments were heard some of the best performances by an international cast of talented young musicians. These very same musicians may well be performing there on that adjacent stage in the not too distant future.

The format of the evening saw the Ernest Bloch Competition alternating with the Israeli Music Competition; and it was evident by the level of excellence from all candidates that the judges already had to make a hard choice whittling down the final six competitors from the original 155 applicants. I had the honour of introducing an astounding set of performances.

The first of the Bloch presentations came from the Cavatina String Quartet, playing two movements ('Dusk' and 'Rustic Dance') from *In the Mountains*. The first movement was delivered with sensitivity, soulful and introspective, before moving to a more striking attack and lively pace, capturing the very spirit of the second movement and bringing the imagery to life. Almost as soon as the final pizzicato, the theatre erupted into applause and it was clear that from the outset a high standard had been set.

The second recital in the Bloch competition's auditions came from French-Bulgarian violinist Yoana Ducros, playing one of the composer's best known Jewish pieces - *Nigun*. Here, the interplay between the delicate accompaniment of the piano against the searing intensity of Yoana's violin was highly emotive. The greatest challenge for any violinist in this competition when choosing such an oft-recorded piece is that immediately there can be a comparison with



The Cavatina String Quartet, winners of the 2013 Bloch competition



Winner of the second prize, flautist Daniel Shao

Joshua Bell, Leonid Kogan and other great performers. This may be a daunting prospect as it is a challenging piece for any soloist.

The third and final Bloch work was played by flautist, Daniel Shao. With a reputation preceding him as the youngest featured soloist at the British Flute society Convention and winner of the national competition, expectations were high. No one was disappointed as Shao's delivery of Bloch's *Suite Modale* was delicate, sensitive and exact. Flowing through the first movement, he moved to the second and third movements with a thoughtful, reflective tone before delivering the last movement with its dancing pace, bringing in the earlier themes - and the

competition - to a close.

After what must have been an agonizing wait for the finalists, the panel of esteemed judges of both competitions came to the stage, and Professor Malcolm Troup and Sagi Hartov announced the results. The Cavatina String Quartet won the first prize of £1000 plus a concert sponsored by JMI. The second prize of £500 was given to Daniel Shao. Such competitions are a chance to see the cream of international talent and although there must always be winners and losers, it was also clear evident that Yoana Ducros is a world-class violinist from whom we can only look forward to hearing more in the future.

Gil Karpas

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The movement ends with a well sustained quiet episode. Professor Atlas holds it all together pretty well but at 22 minutes it is too long. The brooding Andante is strongly coloured by horn sonority at first; and features quite a lot of brass, especially at its climax. It develops into a march, which will return in the finale, before ending quietly. Up to now, one can note the influences of Debussy and Wagner. The scherzo, *Vivace*, starts with a trumpet call and is very Brucknerian, with a pastoral Trio. In the finale Bloch shows off his contrapuntal skills, opening with a fugue before the march theme from the Andante asserts itself. The symphony ends tranquilly in D flat. I cannot imagine it being better played or conducted; and the recordings of both works, produced by James Mallinson in Studio 1 at Abbey Road and engineered by Arne Akselberg, are first-rate.

Tully Potter

BLOCH IN PRINT

The life and work of Ernest Bloch have been well covered in printed materials. Two particularly outstanding books are the four-volume *Ernest Bloch: sa vie et sa pensée* by Dr Joseph Lewinski and Emmanuelle Dijon and *The Ernest Bloch Companion* by David Kushner. Hopefully they will soon be joined on the bookshelves by *Ernest Bloch Studies* edited by Alexander Knapp and Norman Solomon, both founder members of the International Ernest Bloch Society. The book which comprises a variety of chapters by international scholars will examine *inter alia*:

- ✿ the impact of Bloch's life and background on his music;
- ✿ the concept of 'Jewish music' and the extent to which Bloch could or should be categorized as a 'Jewish composer';
- ✿ the evolution of Bloch's career as a composer through different periods of his life;
- ✿ Bloch's place in the history of musical composition and the different genres for which he composed.

## From the Concert Hall to the Synagogue

The following article is contributed by the Swiss Association Bloch. Originally written by Walter Labhart, it was condensed and translated by Oliver Margulies

In no other oeuvre of 20th century composers do Jewish elements crystallise more clearly than in the music of Ernest Bloch. He had little opportunity to live and reveal his creative activity in Switzerland. After completing the Hebrew Rhapsody *Schelomo* in 1916 (a key work of modern Jewish music), the Geneva-born composer emigrated to the USA. As a Jewish musician in Switzerland he could not have dared to imagine a career so successful in his newly chosen home country, where he first held a professorship for music at the David Mannes School in New York, then to become the Cleveland Institute of Music's director in 1920.

### Visionary for Film Music

Despite creating numerous masterworks of absolute music, Bloch's merits are more significant in Jewish music touching on religious themes. He was the first to create a 'Jewish Cycle' of instrumental and vocal works. Whilst the Psalms 22, 114 and 137 (begun 1912) may be seen as precursors, the orchestral work *Trois Poèmes Juifs* (1915) was the first of the 'Cycle' to be completed. Interestingly, 'Danse'- the first movement - with its oriental soundscape, anticipates what later can be found in Hollywood film music. Simultaneously, this visionary musician heralds a main trend within European Jewish music of the 1920s: quasi-oriental scales with augmented intervals (soon to become a cliché) create an atmosphere triggering associations with landscapes and also the Old Testament.

Bloch's characteristic orchestral sound contributed substantially to typically American film music, which Aaron Copland and immigrants such as Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Ernst Toch



Bloch in Switzerland in 1929, the year that he composed *Helvetia*

developed later. Due to its mixture of sumptuousness and epic expanse, *Schelomo* for cello and orchestra has an influence that lasts until today.

### Hebrew speech rhythm

Besides the imitation of the shrill sound of the shofar and the archaism of fifths evoking biblical scenes, the music's rhapsodic narrative and rhythm appear as an innovating element. Bloch attempted the imitation of speech rhythm, specifically the

*Bloch's characteristic orchestral sound contributed substantially to typically American film music, which Aaron Copland and immigrants such as Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Ernst Toch developed later*

accentuation of the Hebrew language. Refining his music with impressionistic elements, the composer integrated the accentuation of the second-to-last or last syllable typical for Hebrew. This applies especially to passages for solo instruments. This principal of composition, based on historical facts, could have become the point of departure for future generations. Various composers of western and central Europe strove to write distinctly Jewish music by drawing upon traditional

folk songs. Juliusz Wolfsohn's *Paraphrasen über alt-jüdische Volksweisen* (1921) for piano and Darius Milhaud's *6 Chants populaires hébraïques* (1925) for voice and piano are equally good examples of this neo-folkloristic trend. Bloch however offered his individual and autonomous approach, contrasting with trends oriented towards sources handed down by tradition.

In 1917 he stated vigorously: "It is the Jewish soul that interests me, the complex, glowing, agitated soul, that I feel vibrating throughout the Bible: the freshness and naiveté of the Patriarchs; the violence that is evident in the Prophetic Books; the Jew's savage love of justice; the despair of the Preacher in Jerusalem; the sorrow and the immensity of the Book of Job; the sensuality of the

Song of Songs." He listened only "to an inner voice", to become inspired and stirred by his Jewish heritage. Even when writing his principal religious composition, *Avodath Hakodesh* for baritone, choir and orchestra (1930-1933), Bloch drew upon and processed traditional themes. Of his instrumental works, *Baal Shem* - 'Three Pictures of Chassidic Life' (1923) for violin and piano and the *Suite hébraïque* (1951) for viola and piano assume a comparable position.

## HELVETIA 1929

Early in 1929 Bloch completed work on *Helvetia*, although the first drafts date from 1900. It was the last of a trio of orchestral works - *Israel* and *America* being the other two - which define Bloch's origins and allegiances. Although by that time an American citizen, Bloch visited Helvetia (Switzerland) - the land of his birth - later in 1929, when we can assume the adjacent photograph would have been taken. Whilst *Helvetia* shared a prize given by Victor Records, the company does not seem to have recorded it at the time or subsequently.

It was first performed in Chicago in February 1932, followed shortly thereafter by a performance in Geneva with the Swiss Romande Orchestra conducted by Ernest Ansermet. The work itself is sub-titled "The Land of Mountains and its People" and is divided into five sections with a story line. Initially the mountain is a mystery; it and the men awoken to find the country is in danger; a battle rages and the mountain is freed.

There are very few extant recordings - Claude Torres, the indefatigable Bloch discographer has only traced four, of which the most recent was recorded in Geneva in September 2002 with Lior Shambadal conducting the Swiss Romande. It was issued on Cascavelle RSR6170 coupled with *The Suite for Viola and Orchestra* dating from 1919/20 and the much later 1951 *Suite Hébraïque for Viola and Orchestra*.

