

IEBS Newsletter

The International Ernest Bloch Society
President: Sir Charles Mackerras CH CBE AC

Ernest Bloch and his Supporters in Birmingham

Bloch's connections with the city of Birmingham are explored by pianist, teacher, lecturer and writer, Michael Jones.

It is uncertain how many times Ernest Bloch visited the UK, but one of the most important occasions was in 1937, when he came here for the inauguration of the Ernest Bloch Society. I wonder if the background to this visit originated in the Midlands, and in particular Birmingham, where Bloch appears to have had a number of supporters and champions? These are the people examined in this article.

The Honorary Chairman of the new society was Alex Cohen MA, a great friend of Bloch. He had been the first leader of the City of Birmingham Orchestra (CBO), which in 1920 gave its opening concert in Birmingham Town Hall on 10 November – when Sir Edward Elgar conducted a programme of his own music, including one of the very first performances of the Cello Concerto (with Felix Salmond as soloist). Such innovative programming of new works would become an important part of the orchestra's history, particularly during the 1930s when their conductor was Leslie Heward (1897–1943). Heward was exceptionally brilliant, and in normal circumstances would have enjoyed a meteoric career, but his life was plagued by constant ill-health, resulting in his death from tuberculosis at the age of only 45.

Born in 1897 – the same year as Erich Wolfgang Korngold, but in more humble circumstances in Yorkshire – Leslie Heward had something of the same prodigy element about him, playing the organ for Handel's *Messiah* at eight years old, and at 18 completing and orchestrating the first act of his opera *Hamlet*, a work of such power and imagination that it stands comparison with Korngold's opera *Violanta*, with which it is contemporary. Heward would go on to compose some very original works that deserve

further attention, but for our purposes it is his conducting career that commands our attention.

Heward studied conducting at the Royal College of Music with Dr Adrian Boult, and after conducting in Cape Town from 1924 to 1927 and several seasons with the British National Opera Company, Heward succeeded Boult as Principal Conductor of the CBO in 1930. In 1934, however, the Orchestra and Heward also lived a double life as the BBC Midland Orchestra, broadcasting from the BBC studios in Broad Street in the centre of the city. It is known that these live studio broadcasts travelled over the airwaves far and wide, for on one occasion Ernest Bloch listened in from his home in France when the orchestra played his *Hiver-Printemps* tone poems. So impressed was he by the performance that he decided to invite Heward and the orchestra to premiere his new work-in-progress: *Evocations*. He wrote to Heward in 1936:

'My wife and I were extremely moved by the very beautiful performance [of *Hiver-Printemps*]. It is very rare for me to hear one of my works interpreted as I intended it to be, not only the music itself but what lies behind the notes. We felt that you loved it and that you could impart your love and understanding to your musicians.'

The net result of these discussions, according to the CBO prospectus for 1936–37, was the announcement that Ernest Bloch was to be the 'guest conductor' for the 'first performance' of a 'new work' at the CBO concert on Thursday 18 March 1937. The note stated that: 'Bloch is one of the outstanding figures in contemporary music, and Birmingham is greatly privileged that its orchestra should be conducted by

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Bloch and Birmingham (cont.)

him on the occasion of the first performance of one of his works.'

That is the official story, but in actual fact Bloch was unable to complete *Evocations* in time, owing to illness and other delays, and so for the 18 March concert Heward conducted *Hiver-Printemps* in its place. But he must have been annoyed later to learn that *Evocations* had received two premiere performances in the United States by the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Pierre Monteux, on 11 and 12 February 1938. But that is not the end of the story, for on 10 March 1938, Heward and the CBO gave the European premiere of *Evocations* – billed, incidentally as the 'first public performance'; so could this mean that the two San Francisco performances were studio broadcasts and not public performances? Further information on this would be welcome. Incidentally, shortly afterwards, on 26 March 1938, the City of Birmingham Choir and the CBO, conducted by G. D. Cunningham and with Roy Henderson as soloist, gave the British premiere of Bloch's *Sacred Service* in Birmingham Town Hall.

To return to Alex Cohen. Even by the time he had relinquished the leadership of the Birmingham Orchestra to Paul Beard in the early 1920s he was already well-known in Birmingham's musical life as a chamber music player. Two pianists with whom he played were Jessie Warren (c.1878–early 1960s) and Edna Iles (1905–2003), both of whom have an important connection with Bloch's Piano Sonata. It is believed that the first public performance in Britain may have been given by Harriet Cohen. Unfortunately, I have been unable to trace this performance, which I suspect may have taken place in London – if any readers have further information about the occasion, or were even present, I would be delighted to hear from them. However, at a similar time, what I believe was the second performance of the Sonata was given in Birmingham by the pianist Jessie Warren. Locally very renowned as a piano teacher, Jessie was also a formidable pianist. Her daughter, Constance Warren, who was one of my piano teachers from 1981 until her death in 1984, was able to add more detail to this story. Jessie had been advised by Bloch himself to 'play the work to Alex Cohen, who really understands my music', which she duly did and I now have both Jessie Warren's and Edna Iles's working copies of the Sonata.

But the story goes further. Constance and Jessie Warren both knew the British pianist Edna Iles as a near neighbour of theirs in Moseley and their names appear together as committee members of the Max Mossel Club – a chamber music society in Birmingham founded in 1935. Edna Iles was born in 1905 and at 16 had made a brilliant debut at the Wigmore Hall with the Liszt Sonata and Schumann's *Etudes symphoniques*. At 17 she gave the British premiere of Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto with the Birmingham Orchestra and Appelby Matthews conducting. She would later become famous for her championing of the music of Nicolas Medtner (1880–1951). In 1930 she had given the British premiere of Medtner's First Piano Concerto with the Birmingham Orchestra, conducted by Dr Adrian Boult. Later that year she met the composer for the first time and would go on to study many of Medtner's

works with the composer, featuring his music regularly in her recital programmes until the Medtner Centenary year in 1980.

It was during the 1980s that I studied Medtner interpretation in detail with Miss Iles personally, and in the process found out that Medtner was not the only composer in whom she had an interest – another was Medtner's exact contemporary, Ernest Bloch, whose music she programmed after the Second World War, including the Piano Sonata, of which she made a private recording which is now kept at the National Sound Archive in London. In addition to her solo and concerto playing, Miss Iles occasionally partnered the violinist Antonio Brosa in programmes dating back to the 1930s which included the First and Second Violin Sonatas of Medtner – a private recording exists of the latter which received a broadcast from Moscow in 1959 at Anna Medtner's request. But we also know that Brosa and Iles performed Bloch's First Violin Sonata, because Miss Iles's collection of recordings also contains a private rehearsal recording of this work – made during the late 1950s at her London home in Muswell Hill, prior to a concert at Wigmore Hall, a favourite venue for them both.

By the 1950s Edna Iles had prepared Bloch's *Concerto symphonique* and wished to perform it with orchestra. In 1955 she made a private recording of the piano solo part, with the second piano (orchestral) part ingeniously interwoven, which she sent to the composer in America. Bloch wrote a long letter back, dated September 20 1955, from Agate Beach, Oregon (a letter published in facsimile in the journal *Recorded Sound* in April–July 1978) in which he writes:

'...I was profoundly shaken by your extraordinary comprehension and realization, as a musician and as a great pianist! My heart goes to you in full gratitude. I had not been thinking, nor looking, at this work since [many] years – being sad and disappointed to see it buried, with so many other works of mine... But, on hearing it again, by you, revived, as I lived it in my imagination, I realize that it is a great work, one of my greatest! You re-gave me confidence!'

... 'Now, I know that there is one, you, who can reveal this enormous rhapsody 1917–1949! Provided you can find a real, a real man-conductor – as great as you are.'

... 'I cannot speak now of details. Here and there, there was a slight discrepancy with my own interpretation, but it was always so musical, so logical, so instinctively felt – what cannot be taught! – that you must have the liberty to feel as you wish.'

... 'I am too much moved to write more..You must feel how I feel.'

We now know that Miss Iles was able to find a 'real man-conductor' in Sir Charles Groves when the opportunity came to perform the Concerto with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in London at the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts in 1956 at the Royal Albert Hall. It is not known whether a BBC recording exists of this performance, but the Concerto was recorded privately off-air on acetate discs. Unfortunately these no longer survive, but were at one time rather crudely transferred to a tape which by 2003 was already falling apart, but most of the material has been saved. Nevertheless I feel that

these recordings are remarkable in capturing Miss Iles's clarity and understanding of her intentions regarding the Concerto.

What has survived intact is a 1958 broadcast from London, in which Bloch's poem *In the Night* forms part of a programme which also featured two Rachmaninov Preludes from Op. 32, and Medtner's *Sonata-Ballade* Op. 27. I was so taken with her passionate performance of *In the Night* that I learnt it myself from her own copy and played it for the Edna Iles Memorial Concert, given in Birmingham in May 2003. This had taken place a few weeks after her death (aged 97) and her obituary received top billing in 'The Register' of *The Times* on 1 February 2003. But her dedication to the work of Ernest Bloch still remains unrecognized, which is why copies of these recordings have been presented to the National Sound Archive in London in 2003, and a selection of her recorded

oeuvre was presented to the International Piano Archives at Maryland, USA in 2007.

With this article I have attempted to convey only an impression of the support that Ernest Bloch received from some important musicians in Birmingham – Britain's second city. I think it is safe to assume that Bloch felt grateful to musicians of the calibre of Edna Iles, Jessie Warren, Alex Cohen and Leslie Heward, who not only understood Bloch's music, but more importantly, were prepared to champion it.

Bibliography

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- Beresford King-Smith: *Crescendo: 75 Years of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra*. Methuen, 1995, pp. 63–64
- National Sound Archive, London: *The Collected Recordings of Edna Iles (1905–2003)*, with particular reference to: *Recorded Sound*, No. 70–71, April–July 1978, pp. 791–805

2nd International Ernest Bloch Music Competition: 15 July 2010

This year we are celebrating the 130th anniversary of the birth of Ernest Bloch. Who could imagine that it would take so long to establish a competition in honour of one of the most talented Jewish composers, admired by many musicians and loved by audiences all around the world?

In London two years ago, Sagi Hartov, chairman and founder of the International Israeli Music Competition, met with expert on Bloch, Prof. Alexander Knapp. They discussed commemorating the 50th anniversary of Bloch's death, and this led to the establishment of the International Ernest Bloch Music Competition, which took place at the Royal College of Music in July 2009. When the application deadline arrived, they were amazed by the number of musicians 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 (pictured below left) who performed Nigun from the *Baal Shem* suite.

When asked about the music of Ernest Bloch, Róisín Walters said, 'The music of Bloch has very strong roots in Jewish music and the movement that I chose to play is often used in documentaries about the holocaust so I was eager to be authentic in my performance. In order to do this, I studied the piece with my teacher who taught me the nuances of Jewish music. I also listened to many recordings of Jewish violinists playing Nigun and this helped me to understand the music more clearly.'

There were many candidates who stood out for Sagi Hartov, among them a ten-year-old cellist from Nottinghamshire, Sheku Kanneh-Mason (pictured right), the youngest candidate to apply for last year's competition. He 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 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.

Once again, this year the competition has received applications from all over the world. These include from Israel, India, South Korea, Japan, Australia, the USA, Venezuela, France, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Spain, the Netherlands and the UK. In the past year the competition has progressed impressively, having welcomed new members to the jury and established a new website, www.blochmusiccompetition.org. The competition has also welcomed many new patrons, including Ernest Bloch II and Jonathan Freeman-Atwood (Principal of the Royal Academy of Music in London), as well as an honorary president, MK Limor Livnat, the Israeli Minister of Culture and Sport.

Chairman Sagi Hartov would like to thank the Jewish Music Institute as well as the International Ernest Bloch Society and the Spiro Ark for their great and continued support during this year's competition.

'I am very honoured to be able to realize this ambition of mine and host this competition on such a special night, as we mark the the 130th anniversary of Bloch's birth on the day that he passed away – 15 July. I hope everyone enjoys this celebration of his music.' **Sagi Hartov**

Bloch award winners: Róisín Walters (left) and Sheku Kanneh-Mason (right)



Bloch Around the World: January to July 2010

JANUARY

Fri 22: Suite hébraïque (1951)
Marcus Rose vln, Texarkana Symphony Orchestra, Marc-André Dalbavie, cond.
Perot Theatre, Texarkana, USA

Sat 24: Suite hébraïque (1951)
Karen Elaine, vln, Prometheus Symphony Orchestra, Eric Hansen, cond.
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Oakland, USA

Wed 27: Three Nocturnes (1924)
Tempest Trio. Cultural Center, Chicago, USA

Fri 29: Baal Shem (1923)
Jack Liebeck, vln, Stephen de Pledge, pno
Adrian Boulton Hall, Birmingham Conservatoire, Birmingham, UK

Sun 31: Baal Shem (1923)
Miriam Kramer, vln, Nicholas Durcan, pno
Kings Place, London, UK

FEBRUARY

Sat 6: Concerto Grosso No. 1 (1925)
Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra, Maria Corley, pno, Jeri Lynne Johnson, cond. Independence Seaport Museum, Philadelphia, USA

Wed 17: Concerto Grosso No. 1 (1925)
Spokane Youth Symphony Orchestra, Natasha Black pno, Carol Pederson, cond.
Spokane, USA

Sun 21: Suite hébraïque (1951)
Warren Davidson, vln, Nanette Kaplan Solomon, pno
Swope Music Hall, Slippery Rock, USA

Sat 27: Waves (Poems of the Sea, orchestral version, 1922)
San Diego Symphony, Philip Mann, cond.
Copley Symphony Hall, San Diego, USA

Sun 28: Suite No. 1 for Cello solo (1956)
Pieter Wispelwey, cello
City Halls, Glasgow, UK

MARCH

Mon 1 & Tue 2: Schelomo (1916)
Jérôme Pernoo, cello, Bayerisches Staatsorchester, Marc Minkowski, cond.
Nationaltheater, Munich, Germany

Tue 9: Suite hébraïque (1951)
Preston Bradley, vln, Del Whitman, cond.
Lincoln East High School, Lincoln, USA

Wed 10: Nigun (Baal Shem, 1923)
Yuval Waldman, vln, Efrem Garcia i Salinas, pno
Centro Cultural Nicolás Salmerón, Madrid, Spain

Thu 11: Piano Quintet No. 1 (1923)
Isabel Neligan, vln, Mari Parz, vln, Ursula Sarnthein, vln, Anita Leuzinger, cello, Marian Rosenfeld, pno
Tonhalle, Zürich, Switzerland

Sat 13: Baal Shem (1923)
Leonid Keylin, vln, Mina Miller, pno
Music of Remembrance Festival, Good Shepherd Center, Seattle, USA

Sun 14: Sacred Service (1933)
Chorus Pro Musica, Betsy Burleigh, cond.
John Hancock Hall, Boston, USA
with pre-concert discussion with Ernest Bloch II and Joshua Jacobson

Tue 16: Sacred Service (1933: excerpts)
Arkansas Children's Choir
Walton Arts Centre, Fayetteville, USA

Thu 18: From Jewish Life (1924)
Paul Mitchell, cello, Richard Mapp, pno
St Andrew's on the Terrace Church, Wellington, New Zealand

Thu 18: Schelomo (1916)
Daniel Mumm, cello, Kunstuniversität-Orchester, Sae Hoon Choi, cond.
Stefaniensaal, Graz, Austria

Fri 19 & Sat 20: Schelomo (1916)
Claudio Bohórquez, cello, Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra, Jonathan Darlington, cond. Philharmonic Hall, Warsaw, Poland

Sun 28: Concerto Grosso No. 1 (1925)
Mansfield University String Chamber Orchestra, Gary Boerckel, pno, Kenneth Sarch, cond.
Steadman Theatre, Mansfield, USA

APRIL

Thu 8 & Fri 9: Schelomo (1916)
Jérôme Pernoo, cello, Orquesta Sinfónica de Castilla, Marc Minkowski, cond.
Centro Cultural Miguel Delibes, Valladolid, Spain

Sun 11: Suite for Viola and Orchestra (1919)
Woon Joo Park, vln, Indiana University Concert Orchestra, Kevin Noe, cond.
Musical Arts Center, Bloomington, USA

Mon 12: Violin Sonata No. 2 (1924)
Elmar Oliveira, vln, Bob Koenig, pno
Bates Recital Hall, University of Texas, Austin, USA

Mon 12–Wed 14: Ernest Bloch Conference
Central Conservatory of Music, Beijing, China
including an interview with Ernest Bloch II and talks by Dr Alexander Knapp

Wed 14: Suite for Viola and Piano (1919)
Paul Coletti, vln, Sachi Hirakouji, pno
Academy of Music Northwest, Interlake High School, Seattle, USA

Sun 25: Three Nocturnes (1924)
ATOS Trio
Comstock Concert Hall, University of Louisville, USA

MAY

Sat 1: Baal Shem (1923)
Jane Ng, vln, Fei Ren, pno
St Bartholomew's Church, Sydenham, London, UK

Sat 1: Suite modale (1956)
Carol Wincenc, flute, Westchester Chamber Orchestra, Barry Charles Hoffman, cond.
Christopher J. Murphy Auditorium, Iona College, New Rochelle, USA

Thu 6: Schelomo (1916)
Ernest Bloch Festival, Opole, Poland
Rafat Kwiatkowski, cello, Opole Philharmonic Orchestra, Bogustaw Dawidow, cond.

Sun 9: Suite for Viola solo (1958)
Karen Elaine, vln
San Diego Central Library, San Diego, USA

Sun 9: Suite for Viola and Orchestra (1919)
Talya Schenk, vln, UMBC Symphony Orchestra, E. Michael Richards, cond.
Fine Arts Recital Hall, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Baltimore, USA

Sun 9: Four Episodes (1926)
Portland Youth Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra, David Hattner, cond.
Maryswood Chapel, Lake Oswego, Oregon

Tue 11: 'Helvetia – Israel – America: Identity in Bloch's Life and Music'
Ernest Bloch Festival, Opole, Poland
Lecture by Dr Alexander Knapp

Fri 14: Symphony in C# minor (1902), Violin Concerto (1938)
Ernest Bloch Festival, Opole, Poland
Yair Kless, vln, Opole Philharmonic Orchestra, Dalia Atlas, cond.

Sat 22: Baal Shem (1923)
Brandon Garbot, vln, Portland Chamber Orchestra, Yaacov Berman, cond.
Kaul Auditorium, Portland, Oregon, USA

Mon 31: From Jewish Life (1924)
Hamilton Cheifetz, cello
Tianjin Concert Hall, Tianjin, China

JUNE

Sun 6: Sacred Service (1933)
Richard Zeller, baritone, PSU Symphony, Ken Selden, cond. St Mary's Academy, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, USA

Tue 15: Suite hébraïque (1951)
Georgia Youth Symphony, Michael Alexander, cond. Marietta, Georgia, USA

Thu 17: Poems of the Sea (1922)
Katya Grineva, pno
Hong Kong Cultural Centre Concert Hall, Hong Kong

JULY

Thu 8: Violin Sonata No. 2 (1924)
Midori, vln, Ozgur Aydin pno
Shandele Festival, Livingston Manor, USA

Sat 11: From Jewish Life (1924)
Robin Michael, cello, Festival Academy Strings, Neil Thomson, cond.
Pittville Pump Room, Cheltenham Music Festival, Cheltenham, UK

Thu 15: 2nd International Ernest Bloch Music Competition
Royal College of Music, London, UK

Sat 17: Violin Sonata No. 2 (1924)
Midori, vln, Ozgur Aydin pno
Rockport Chamber Music Festival, Shalin Liu Performance Centre, Rockport, USA