

IEBS Newsletter

The International Ernest Bloch Society

Yehudi Menuhin and the 'Jewish' Performance Style of Bloch's 'Nigun'

by Joshua S. Walden

Joshua S. Walden is a Junior Research Fellow at Merton College, University of Oxford. This essay addresses Ernest Bloch's decades-long friendship with Yehudi Menuhin, and the ways critics heard the violinist's performances of 'Nigun', from *Baal Shem Suite*, as 'Jewish'.

The violinist Yehudi Menuhin characterized Ernest Bloch, whom he met as a child growing up in San Francisco, as 'the musician as Old Testament prophet, whose speech was thunder and whose glance lightning, whose very presence proclaimed the divine fire by which, on occasion, a bystander might feel himself scorched'.¹

Elsewhere Menuhin concludes, 'Bloch is essentially a Jewish composer, in his deep and guttural feeling for the Jewish cry of despair'.² Bloch conceived of race as an innate quality in people, and considered traditional music to provide a useful source for composers whose aim it was to represent their identities authentically. While this understanding of race has by now been largely recognized as an outmoded concept with a troubling history, it was commonly held by musicians of the early twentieth century who sought to derive inspiration from their cultural and ethnic heritage. During Menuhin's childhood, Bloch treated him as a protégé, and taught him about his conception of the relationship between his Jewish identity and his music. The young Menuhin frequently performed 'Nigun', the second movement of Bloch's *Baal Shem Suite*, a work based on Eastern European Hasidic ritual. He sought in his interpretations to represent the sounds of Hasidic music-making as he imagined them, yet Bloch and many critics considered Menuhin's performances to express an authentic Jewish sentiment.

Menuhin was raised in a secular, liberal family for which Jewish culture was nevertheless a dominant feature

and Hasidism played an important, idiosyncratic role. His father's roots could be traced to a Hasidic *rebbe*, and his mother was a descendent of the Schneerson dynasty of Lubavitch leaders.³ Menuhin wrote that when he was a child, his father sang Hasidic songs on road trips through California: 'The motion of the automobile, California's landscape, and my father's singing curiously blended into one sensation that has left a lasting impression on me.'⁴ Hasidic music was tied in Menuhin's imagination to California's golden hills, not the Eastern European Jewish towns where it originated.

Menuhin performed 'Nigun' at nine years old in his 1926 New York debut. He met Bloch in 1928, shortly before he was to perform 'Nigun' in San Francisco, and gave the composer a private recital of the work. Ecstatic about Menuhin's playing, Bloch immediately composed *Abodah* for him.⁵ Menuhin programmed *Baal Shem* during his subsequent European tour. This required bravery in cities where anti-Semitism was widespread: in Munich, for example, a concert promoter urged him not to perform 'Nigun', but Menuhin later reported that he had insisted, 'If we give in to this sort of hysteria, the next thing we know, they'll be asking me to change my name. I shall play 'Nigun' and I dare them to throw anything at me.'⁶ The promoter's fears proved unjustified: Menuhin received an ovation that persisted until he agreed to play an encore of the work.

The press, eager to ascribe authentic, self-affirming racial feeling to music by Jewish artists, frequently

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Menuhin and 'Nigun' (cont.)



This striking photo of Yehudi Menuhin with Ernest Bloch was taken in 1928 by Lucienne Bloch while she and her father were visiting the Menuhin family at their home. (Courtesy Old Stage Studios, www.LucienneBloch.com)

identified a particularly Jewish character in Menuhin's performances of 'Nigun'. Reviewing his San Francisco recital, Alexander Fried wrote, 'From the violin came singing eloquence that wove a spell. The aged cantor of the synagogue knows no fuller feeling of his creed than Yehudi showed them. He is well named.'⁷ 'Nigun', in Bloch's score and Menuhin's performance, was a unique product of the Jewish Diaspora, a representation of Eastern European Hasidic culture by Jewish musicians whose knowledge of this tradition was attenuated, yet whose interest in perpetuating Jewish culture was strongly felt.

In 'Nigun', Bloch evokes the improvisatory nature of Hasidic prayer by composing prolonged cadenzas, as well as runs and trills printed with small note-heads indicating that the violinist should interpret them freely. Menuhin, in his 1929 recording, takes advantage of this liberty, playing many gestures not prescribed by the score. He produces wide vibrato, slides between notes, and manipulates rhythms and phrases. His runs often begin slowly and then rapidly accelerate in a slur of pitches. But Menuhin's imitation of the Hasidic musician, achieved through

this quasi-improvisational style, is a contrivance that conveys more about the conception of Eastern European Jewish musical culture shared by many in the American Diaspora than about actual Hasidic tradition. Later in life, Menuhin articulated a romantic notion of the origins of violin technique in European Jewish and Romany folk music: 'The strolling fiddlers of yesteryear, the wandering musicians, these heralds of people's musical language, are the ancestors of violinists. I love to see them depicted in Chagall's canvases: there they are, roaming the highways and byways, moving from village to hamlet, creating joy, and at least temporarily overcoming human prejudices.'⁸ He argues that, because of the suffering of the Jewish and Romany Diasporas, music was their most immediate expressive mode, and that violinists should retain their connection with this tradition by integrating the sounds of improvisation into their performances. He characterizes the essence of violin playing as 'the making of sound at the very instant – that is, improvisation'.⁹

In a letter to Menuhin, Bloch, four years before his death, writes affectionately of a 'Menuhin festival' he staged at home on his new hi-fi, and explains that he still considers race a decisive factor in musical style, 'Despite the assertions of Franz Boaz, I believe that *race*, that races, exist . . . What are the profound reasons that have differentiated languages, musical or otherwise, of the different people on this small planet?'¹⁰ Bloch continued late in life to articulate to Menuhin his conceptions of the relations between race and music. For Bloch it was Jewish race, and for Menuhin it was the history of Jewish and Romany violin performance, that they believed connected them to European Jewry, filling the geographic and temporal distance across the Jewish Diaspora.

1 Humphrey Burton, *Yehudi Menuhin: A Life* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 47.

2 David Dubal, *Conversations with Menuhin: A Celebration on His 75th Birthday* (London: Heinemann, 1991), 34.

3 Burton, 5.

4 Robert Magidoff, *Yehudi Menuhin: The Story of the Man and the Musician* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1955), 25.

5 Yehudi Menuhin and Catherine Meyer, *The Violin* (Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1996), 207.

6 Burton, 104.

7 Burton, 81.

8 Menuhin and Meyer, 100.

9 Menuhin and Meyer, 283.

10 Letter from Agate Beach, 22 March 1955. Ernest Bloch collection, ARCHIVES BLOCH 1, Music Library, University of California, Berkeley, Box 14, Folder 4. "Malgré les assertions de Franz Boaz, je crois que la *Race*, les Races, existent... Quelles sont les raisons profondes qui ont différencié les langages – musicaux ou autres des différents peuples sur cette petite planète?"

Ernest Bloch in Israel

Contributed by the Ernest Bloch Society in Israel

During the first half of the 20th century, Bloch's music in the Jewish style was performed relatively frequently in Israel, making a great impact on musicians and music lovers.

Although in Israel at that time the trend was to search for, and establish, an original Israeli Mediterranean style, based on the styles of the various Jewish communities, the authentic and pronounced Jewish style of Bloch influenced many Israeli composers.

One only has to recall Bloch's phenomenal ability to visualize Israel in music – and through his reading of the Bible alone. Alongside the European Jewish tradition, he created his own unique Jewish style. In fact, some of his melodies, written at the beginning of the 20th century – as in the *Trois poèmes juifs* or the 'Israel' Symphony – foreshadow, with an amazingly prophetic power, several Israeli melodies and styles from the 1960s.

Bloch wished to be invited to visit Israel, and had an extensive correspondence with several personalities there, but unfortunately the visit never materialized. Nevertheless, a measure of national acknowledgement has been accorded by Israel to Bloch over the years. For example, a postage stamp bearing Bloch's portrait was issued, while in Haifa there is a walkway between Disraeli and Sinai Streets named after the composer, hidden behind the green leaves of a beautiful tree. Coincidence or destiny? – without her realizing it, this walkway was directly opposite the house where Dalia Atlas lived for 30 years...

From 1996, the Israeli conductor Prof. Dalia Atlas started to take an interest in rediscovering the neglected music of Ernest Bloch, in order to record it for the ASV label. With the guidance and encouragement of the Bloch expert Dr Alexander Knapp, the composer's elder daughter Suzanne – lutenist, educator and composer – and the composer's grandson Ernest Bloch II, she systematically researched Bloch's oeuvre, making an in-depth analysis of his various styles and conducting many of the neglected works with major orchestras internationally, in concerts and festivals as well as recordings for radio stations and the ASV and Naxos

labels. To date she has recorded thirty neglected as well as more familiar works by Bloch.

The year 1996 ended with Dalia Atlas and her orchestra, the Atlas Camerata, performing a special all-Bloch concert at the Municipality Hall in Haifa on 2 December, at the invitation of the Mayor of Haifa Municipality, Amram Mitzna.

In November of the following year, the radio music programme producer Haiuta Dvir (a future founder member of the Bloch Society in Israel) invited the same performers to perform more Bloch in a concert in her weekly series 'Etnachta' at the Henry Crown Auditorium in Jerusalem.

In 2001, a significant event took place: a week-long National Bloch Festival, held at the Churchill Auditorium in the Technion in Haifa. Many prominent Israeli artists participated, together with the Atlas Camerata Orchestra, the Technion Symphony Orchestra and Choir, and the Philharmonic Choir, under the direction of Dalia Atlas. Music lovers came from all over the country to hear the repertoire, which included extracts from Bloch's opera *Macbeth*. A lecture was given by Avi Hannani, head of the National Israel Radio music department (and a future founder member of the Bloch Society in Israel). Some of the concerts were recorded for ASV and Naxos at the festival.

In the following year, Dalia Atlas and her Atlas Camerata performed Bloch programmes throughout Israel, including another live concert in the 'Etnachta' series, which was broadcast by Kol-Israel Radio. Although these many Bloch concerts and CD recordings received great acclaim from audiences and critics, unfortunately the Atlas Camerata Orchestra had to cease its operations shortly afterwards due to the lack of finances after that expensive project.

However, interest in Bloch remained very much alive, and in 2005 a new play about the composer was staged in Jerusalem, written and performed by Zecharia Plavin of the Jerusalem Academy of Music.

A hugely important event took place in Tel Aviv in November 2007, with the founding of the Ernest

Ernest Bloch in Israel (cont.)

Bloch Society in Israel by Dalia Atlas. Its aim is to promote the complete repertoire of Bloch's neglected compositions – effectively some 85% of his entire output. The founding committee comprises 12 distinguished personalities in Israel, and it meets annually to discuss, in particular, ways to encourage musicians to perform Ernest Bloch's neglected works.

As part of this promotional activity, Dalia Atlas, as President of the Society, has approached numerous music academies and conservatoires throughout Israel, as well as teachers and educators, opera companies and orchestras, including the Israel Philharmonic, encouraging them to programme the works of Bloch, in particular the unknown music. She has also promoted the same subject in conferences as well as concerts and festivals worldwide.

As a result, the music of Bloch has been slowly spreading through the concert halls of Israel. The peak came in the 2008–09 season when, on three separate occasions, the Israel Philharmonic performed different works by Bloch. In the same season, Israel hosted a Bulgarian choir in a performance of Bloch's *Sacred Service*, with the participation of Sita Milchev, singer and granddaughter of Ernest Bloch.

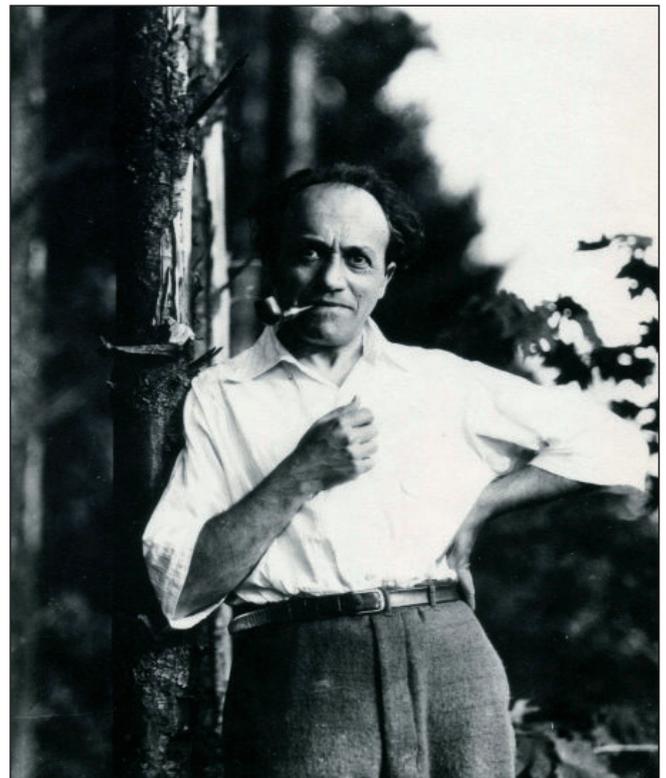
Another notable Bloch-inspired musical event was a new sonata for cello and piano entitled *Homage to Bloch*, written by one of Israel's most distinguished composers, Prof. Tzvi Avni, himself a member of the Israel Bloch Society. Commissioned by Dalia Atlas, the sonata has now been published by the Israel Music Institute. It was given its world premiere, to great acclaim, at the gala concert of Bloch works that concluded a one-day Bloch symposium at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in August 2009, as part of the International Jewish Congress.

The symposium was followed, just a few months later, by a Colloquium on Bloch, held at the Bar-Ilan University music department on 1 December 2009, at the invitation of Prof. Bathia Churgin, another member of the Israel Bloch Society. At the Colloquium, Dalia Atlas gave a presentation on the different styles to be found in Bloch's music, illustrated by musical excerpts.

Between these two events, Bloch's music could be heard frequently in a number of radio broadcasts

in Israel. For a whole week in September 2009, for example, the Israel Broadcasting Service dedicated one hour every day, between 1 and 2 pm, to the neglected works of Ernest Bloch, conducted by Dalia Atlas and presented by Avi Hannani. In November 2009 another Israeli radio station, Galley Zahal, the Army's radio station, broadcast Bloch's 'America' Symphony, again conducted by Dalia Atlas, and this time presented by Yaakov Mishori, also a member of the Israel Bloch Society. The 'America' Symphony was to be heard again in February 2010, once more conducted by Maestro Atlas, concluding a radio programme of American music.

For more information about the activities of the Ernest Bloch Society in Israel, please contact: www.Dalia-Atlas.com or e-mail: dalia_atlas@yahoo.com.



Ernest Bloch in 1921 (possibly a self-portrait)