

Ernest Bloch

- * Violin Concerto (1938)
- * Baal Shem (3 Pictures of Chassidic Life) (1923)
- * Suite Hebraique (1952)

Zina Schiff (violin), Royal Scottish National Orchestra/Jose Serebrier.
Naxos 8.557757 Total time: 66:01

Summary for the Busy Executive: Three neglected masterworks.

Since World War II, Bloch has fallen from major Modern master to just below B-level, at least as far as performances and recognition goes. If anyone has heard a work, it's usually Schelomo, a fine score but not alone, by any means. I've always wondered why, if you like one work, you wouldn't seek out another by the same composer, but that's apparently the case here. It's like a miner who, after finding a nugget, leaves the claim. There's a mountain of wonderful stuff: in addition to Schelomo, another work for cello and orchestra, Voice in the Wilderness, two violin sonatas, two suites for solo violin, a fantastic Shakespearean opera on Macbeth, five string quartets (which Roger Sessions thought among the best of the century), a piano concerto and a piano-and-orchestra Konzertstueck, and a host of other works. I can't deny there's some pyrite among the gold (America comes to mind), but on the whole Bloch seems to me a major figure, even though, like Vaughan Williams, he had few significant artistic progeny.

Bloch's music takes huge artistic risks. He's not really interested in doing the easy thing. Mahler made a strong early impression on him (although his music sounds nothing like Mahler's), especially the artistic ambition for each work. When Bloch fails, it's not because he's dogged it, but because his reach has exceeded his grasp. It doesn't happen that often, which is why it surprises me so much when it does.

Probably because of Schelomo, most listeners think of Bloch as a "Jewish composer" -- that is, one who tries to express the Jewish "soul." In truth, Bloch's Jewish works comprise only a small part of his output. Inspiration comes from many places, including the American Indians and, most notably, a Bali that seems to have lain only in the composer's imagination (like Wallace Stevens's Paris), as well as Beethoven, Mussorgsky, Debussy, and Palestrina. Of the three works here, only the two short ones can lay claim to Judaic inspiration. In her liner notes, violinist Zina Schiff tries to make a case for the violin concerto as another Jewish work, despite the composer's comments to the contrary, and to turn the work into a Schelomo for violinists. Any similarity to Schelomo to me comes down to the fact that the same composer wrote both.

But there's more to Bloch than Judaism alone; it's just one element in a very rich mix.

Of all Bloch's concerted works, the violin concerto strikes me as the most magnificent -- indeed, one of the very best for the instrument, both musically and as a vehicle for a virtuoso. I can't understand why violinists aren't elbowing each other out of the way to perform it, but as far as I know, only two star performers have recorded it: Szigeti, who premiered it and to whom it is dedicated, and Menuhin. Bloch, a violinist himself good enough to have studied with Ysa=FFE, played through the part as he composed, so that he could get a better feel for the music under the fingers. It took him a few years, but he completed the work in 1938.

In three large movements, the concerto doesn't follow conventional lines. Bloch mastered both Baroque and classical forms but usually doesn't follow them. He prefers cyclic form, which he and so many others got from Franck. I'm usually allergic to Franck's music. However, Bloch avoids the clunky aspects of Franck's cyclic practice, even as he follows Franck's basic procedure. Bloch's cyclical elements recur naturally, rather than (as in Franck) mechanically, as elements in a complex, organic musical argument. But beyond this evidence of tremendous craft, the listener takes away primarily passion. Noble fanfares, wild cries, great yearning, an inexorable march -- shades of Mahler! -- constitute the meat of the long first movement. The movement may run as long as some entire concertos, but you feel no sense of drag, so sure is Bloch's capacity for drama. Even more impressive, out of about four or five ideas, Bloch builds the entire concerto. The second movement, for example, sings tenderly on a fanfare and a lament gesture from the first movement. The counterpoint is both beautiful and subtle. A piercing, grotesque distortion of the first-movement fanfare opens the third movement, but the violin calms the waters with a restatement of the fanfare in its original form. The third movement riffs mainly on that fanfare, with recalls of earlier themes, moving among nobility to dance-like rejoicing to anguish. The movement builds in excitement until the violin calms everything down with a quiet version of the fanfare, up to the very end, when the orchestra cries out one last time. Yet the work doesn't seem to end on despair, but on an idea of heroic struggle. This concerto, one of the few of the Modern period, deals with spiritual anxiety and comes up with an adult, positive viewpoint. Bloch skates to the edge of sentimentality, but unlike, say Berg, never goes over. It doesn't seek easy refuge in God, the Folk, Beauty, Despair, or Tradition. The only Modern concertante works I can think of off-hand (other than Bloch's) that arrive in roughly the same neighborhood are the Schoenberg piano concerto and the Shostakovich string concerti. The idioms, of course, differ, but the spiritual aims strike me as largely

the same.

The remaining works on the CD, especially compared to the concerto, fall into the category of inspired miniatures. Both are in three movements. Bloch wrote Baal Shem in the Twenties for violin and piano and orchestrated it in 1939. The Suite Hebraique comes from the Fifties.

Baal Shem refers to the founder of the Chassidic movement, Rabbi Israel ben Eliazer, known as "Baal Shem Tov" (master of the good name). The Chassids began in Eastern Europe as a subgroup of traditional Judaism, emphasizing mysticism and wonder-working through charismatic leadership. They continue to the present day, splintered even further as each sliver follows its own particular rabbi. Bloch used at least one traditional tune (a wedding dance in the final movement), and in others kept to the outlines of traditional chant. Yet whether he thought up the tunes matters less than his treatment of them. You can tell Bloch's innovations simply by comparing this piece to something like Max Bruch's Kol Nidrei. Bruch never leaves nineteenth-century exoticism, while Bloch forges a whole new idiom, which the listening ear, for some reason, accepts as Jewish.

Bloch's horror over World War II and the fate of European Jewry forced him into a creative silence of roughly five years. After the war, his music in general became more abstract, beginning with his magnificent second string quartet. The Suite Hebraique stands as an exception to the rule. Bloch wrote it in response to a patron, Samuel Laderman (composer Ezra's uncle), and to a request from his publisher, perhaps hoping for another Schelomo, to "go Jewish" one more time, since those were Bloch's more popular works. However, the suite is itself an abstraction of Bloch's "Jewish cycle." It's leaner and meaner than those lush earlier works -- Schelomo, of course, but also the series of psalms for tenor and orchestra, the "Israel" Symphony, Trois poemes juifs, Baal Shem, Voice in the Wilderness, Visions and Prophecies, and the magnificent Avodath Hakodesh. Nevertheless, Bloch hasn't lost his punch. The first movement wouldn't have been out of place as part of a larger work, like the violin concerto. Also, he can still come up with a great tune, as shown by the theme of the first-movement march, as powerful as the "vanity of vanities" in Schelomo, and the purposeful trio of the second-movement procession. The finale pulls off the trick of an affirmative ending without seeming facile. All three of these movements come off with a strength that belies their length. You get the impression of a great man working in miniature, like Mantegna.

I'm so grateful to have these things back in the recorded repertoire, it would be churlish of me to complain. Not that I have any real complaints. These are fine performances, especially of the violin

concerto, as good as or better than Menuhin and Kletzki and in much better sound. This is the first time I've heard the complete Baal Shem in its orchestral robes. I will say that Schiff's sound, though beautiful and true, strikes me as small, and that the interpretation of the two shorter works runs much cooler than, say, Stern and Zakin in the Baal Shem or Hyman Bress and Jindrich Rohan in the Suite Hebraique. Both soloists really dig into their strings, but it's still a valid interpretation and one startlingly close to Bloch's own performances. Serebrier shapes a sensitive accompaniment. Naxos has been releasing what amounts to an unofficial Bloch series. They should only keep going.

Steve Schwartz