

Ernest Bloch: Schelomo
Hebraic Rhapsody for Violoncello Solo and Full Orchestra
By Jeffrey Solow

Its basic pitch centered above most instruments, the violin soars over the orchestra; the piano projects sheer sonic power. Possessing neither of these characteristics, the cello poses compositional challenges as a solo instrument. Yet when a composer having a special affinity with its singular character is seized by the perfect inspiration, the result is magical. Perhaps it was the cello's tone—ranging from a rich bass to a radiant treble and among all instruments often characterized as being most like the human voice—or the fact that the cello soloist faces the audience and so communicates with a direct immediacy, who knows the reason, but for two composers the cello became the ideal vehicle for what are arguably the most vivid instrumental personifications in the history of music. For Richard Strauss, the cello was Don Quixote; Ernest Bloch embraced it as the voice of King Solomon.

Ernest Bloch (1880-1959), universally acknowledged as the greatest consciously Jewish composer, was born in Geneva, Switzerland. He studied violin and composition in Switzerland, Belgium and Germany then returned to Geneva where he entered the family's clock business, taught, composed, and tried to establish a conducting career. Bloch visited the United States in 1916 through a conducting engagement and ultimately remained here, becoming a citizen in 1924. Although he spent several additional years in Switzerland, in America, Bloch established and maintained an important career as an educator with posts that included the Mannes School in NY, first Director of the Cleveland Institute, Director of the San Francisco Conservatory, and professor at the University of California at Berkeley. He spent the final years of his life in Agate Beach, Oregon in a house overlooking the Pacific Ocean, which he loved.

In this remarkable work, Bloch's idiomatic and passionate writing for the cello supported by rich, imaginative, and colorful orchestration that reaches climaxes of almost unbearable intensity, makes Schelomo one of the most moving and powerful compositions for cello and orchestra. Originally conceived for voice, Bloch recast Schelomo for cello after meeting the Russian cellist Alexander Barjansky (1883-1961). The composer's daughter, Suzanne Bloch, related the story of its genesis:

“Ernest Bloch was in his thirty-fifth year when he began to compose Schelomo. The work had been in his mind long before, germinating slowly in sketches, all inspired by the dark and pessimistic passages of

the "Book of the Ecclesiastes." "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit ... Vanity of Vanities, all is Vanity."

In the Fall of 1915, these words meant much to the composer, for he had just experienced a great defeat in his career -- the position he so wanted and needed, that of conductor of the orchestra of Lausanne, had not been given to him but to a former pupil of his, Ernest Ansermet. It had been a bitter blow, for he was in serious financial straits, with the only source of income being the family business in which he worked (besides teaching and lecturing) -- a store in Geneva that was facing bankruptcy, due to the world war which was raging then.

One day in the Autumn of 1915, Alexander Barjansky, the great Russian cellist, arrived in Geneva with his wife. They were a quaint couple, he lanky, long-haired and long-faced, his wife diminutive. They specialized in miniature wax sculptures, and owned portraits of most of the famed figures of Europe. Barjansky in those days was at the peak of his playing career. He had an immensely rich, stirring tone and tremendous emotional power.

The two men at once felt a kinship. Bloch played his music for him and when he heard Barjansky play the cello he found a solution at last to this problem which so far had held him back in this work on Ecclesiastes. As he wrote later, "I could not hear the fervor of the text or its accents in the French language ... nor in German or English ... and since I didn't know Hebrew, the sketches had mounted while the work lay dormant." Now he knew what to do! "Why instead of a human voice, limited by a text and language, should not my 'Ecclesiastes' utilize the soaring unfettered voice of the cello?"

He plunged into his sketches and worked enthusiastically day after day. He forgot his defeats, his financial problems -- all his miseries. In six weeks the work was finished."

Although written for Barjansky, the premiere was given in New York in 1916 by the Dutch/American cellist, Hans Kindler (1892-1949), who at the time was principal cellist of the Philadelphia Orchestra and for whom Bloch later wrote the three sketches, "From Jewish Life." Barjansky finally performed Schelomo with Bloch conducting in 1933. (Temple University's distinguished professor of cello, Orlando Cole, attended a concert given by Barjansky much

later in his career. "I heard Alexander Barjansky give a recital: he was a kind of scary person on the stage, glaring, and not a very good cellist. He left a rather curious impression. Barjansky must have played better in the days when Bloch dedicated Schelomo to him.")

Much later Bloch said about the work:

"I had no descriptive intention. I was saturated by the Biblical text and conscious of the woes of mankind to which I have been acutely sensitive. "If one likes, one may imagine that the voice of the solo cello is the voice of the King Schelomo. The complex voice of the orchestra is the voice of his age ... his world ... his experience. There are times when the orchestra seems to reflect his thoughts just as the solo cello voices his words: 'Vanity, Vanity -- all is Vanity.'

He continues:

"Even the darkest of my works end with hope. This work alone concludes in a complete negation, but the subject demands it! The only passage of light falls in a fragment which I found the meaning of fifteen years later when I used it in the *Sacred Service*. The words are words of hope and ardent prayer, that one day men will know their Brotherhood and live in harmony and peace."