

## SCHELOMO BY ERNEST BLOCH (1880-1959), THE ARTIST AND HIS ROOTS

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This paper is a summary on the presentation about the style and inspiration of the composer Ernest Bloch through his *Schelomo* (*Rhapsodie hebraïque pour violoncelle et grand orchestre*). It attempts to place the general output of Bloch in the early twentieth century in regard to better known and more widely discussed composers of the time.

The Jewish inspirational sources of Bloch are presented in relation of the Jewish Emancipation cycle in the pre-World War I Europe. The composer himself did not claimed to use in textual form any Jewish liturgical or popular melody. Yet the overall 'sound' is so evocative of Middle-Eastern and Semitic origins, especially in *Schelomo*. Even though the melodies are not literal transcriptions the scales, modes, harmonies used give the work an unmistakable middle-eastern flavor. I attempted to draw lines of similitude between the principal themes used in *Schelomo* and traditional Hebrew songs.

Unconditional fans of Ernest Bloch put him as the fourth 'B', after Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. It is absolutely true that Bloch did not had any followers, he did not created a 'stream', a new musical language, nor a revolutionary style. But did J.S. Bach had any followers? Not even in his own descendants. He was rather the end of a style and certainly not the starter of a new one. Did the 'second B', Beethoven, initiated the romantic style which followed him? Even though some authors may have claimed that, it is impossible to point anything in his opus hundreds that may prefigure Schubert, Chopin, Weber not even Brahms.

Johannes Brahms, the 'third B', was most quoted by Arnold Schoenberg in his Treatise of Harmony. It is interesting to note that Schoenberg quoted more of Brahms than of Wagner. Yet the so-called 'conservative' Brahms did not have any followers neither. Musical language embarked on radically different ways shortly after Brahm's dead in 1897.

The point of those great composers who did not had any followers was pointed out by Joseph Schillinger in his Mathematical Basis of the Arts . Citing the case of J. S. Bach, Schillinger says the Cantor of Leipzig is the 'crystallization', the culmination and the end of all previous researches and achievements in the language of music. The same line of thought can be easily applied to Beethoven and Brahms. Each of them is the end and the summit of an era, baroque (polyphonic), classical and romantic. Therefore all three famous B's of the history of music are not the starters of anything new but rather the closers of everything preceding them.

Returning to the point of Ernest Bloch as the fourth 'B' of the music history, whether this is exaggerated or not is aquestion of second importance but it is clear that to be a great composer it is not absolutely necessary to be a 'revolutionary' nor to create anything 'new'. Bloch was not a nationalistic composer. He expressed in several occasions his attitude about using 'authentic' ethnic material in his music.

"In my work termed "Jewish", my Psalms; Schelomo; Israel; Three Jewish Poems; Baal Shem; pieces for the cello; The Sacred Service; The Voice in the Wilderness I have not approached the problem from without – by employing melodies more or less authentic( frequently borrowed from or under theinfluence of other nations) or 'Oriental' formulae, rhythms or intervals, more or

less sacred! No! I have but listened to an inner voice, deep, secret, insistent, ardent, an instinct much more than cold and dry reason, a voice which seemed to come from far beyond myself, far beyond my parents...a voice which surged up in me on reading certain passages in the Bible, Job, Ecclesiastes, the Psalms, the Prophets. . . It was this entire Jewish heritage that moved me deeply, and was reborn in my music. To what extent it is Jewish, to what extent it is just Ernest Bloch, of that I know nothing. The future alone will decide" (Henrichs 1958:174). A description of the composing style of Ernest Bloch can be summarized in three main branches: Middle-Eastern Musical Traditions, late German romanticism and French impressionism. The use of the augmented second intervals and some exotic scales, occasional quarter-tones and the free alternancy of minor-major modes are the Middle-Eastern influences. His background of the late German Romanticism and influences by Richard Strauss and Richard Wagner are reflected in intensely chromatic polyphonies often leading to far-fetched key centers and the frequent use of leitmotives. Claude Debussy and French impressionism is also an important factor, present in unresolved dissonances and identically constructed chords (major, minor, fourths and fifths) moving in parallel motion.

All this compositional luggage is served by a first-class orchestration; brilliant, imaginative and clear; and a superb musical writing delegated by the great teachers he had and honed by years of practice. Although it has no strong similitude with any known Jewish melodies in *Schelomo* many melodic shapes share semitic characteristics like augmented seconds, minor-major intervals in alternation, melismatic cantorial extensions. Specially the major-minor thirds, major-minor seconds alternations are typical.

The general declamatory and melismatic Cantorial styles (*Hazzan*) are notated with extreme care. Parallel chords of the same construct, i.e. 4/6's are one typical influence of Claude Debussy.

One of the most important themes, which will serve as the basis of the first climax and will often return in the third section (movement), first shimmered by the bassoon and then completely announced by the oboe in the *Allegro moderato*, may be considered the closest thing to a genuine Jewish melody used in the *Rhapsody*. But it has also many other interesting aspects. It is based on a South German Jewish chant, *Kodosh Attoh* (Holy art Thou) that Bloch remembers being sung to him by his father when he was young. However this theme also represents a very important feature: it has an unmistakable similitude with traditional Shofar blowing.

Besides being the traditional 'sound' heard on the Jewish New Year (Rosh Ashana) many deep annotations and meanings are attached to Shofar blowing. There are two types of Shofar sound mentioned in the Bible: *teki'ah* and *teru'ah*. They are generally the bass and treble sounds. The *teki'ah* is mentioned as a plain deep sound ending abruptly and the *teru'ah* is a trill (or repeated notes) between *wo teki'ahs*. These three sounds in total, make for a 'bar of music' and then rendered three times.

There are various issues and regional differences on the number of repetitions of the whole Shofar pattern and even on the number of patterns themselves. The point is that this alternating long and short blows are repeated many times and form a very special, very characteristic sound. It can be seen in the score that this melody which constitutes that main theme is clearly connected to the Shofar.

The composer relates:

“This is the story of *Schelomo*. Towards the end of 1915 I was in Geneva. For years I had been sketching a musical setting of the Book of Ecclesiastes, but neither French, German, nor English suited my purpose and I did not know enough Hebrew. Consequently the sketches accumulated- and slept. One day I met the cellist Alexander Barjansky and his wife. I heard Barjansky play and immediately became his friend. I played him my manuscript works -the Jewish Poems, the Israel Symphony, and the Psalms – all of which were then unpublished and had failed to arouse anyone’s interest. The Barjanskys were profoundly moved. While I played, Mme. Barjansky, who had borrowed a pencil and a piece of paper, sketched a little statue – her “sculptural thanks,” as she put it. At last, in my terrible loneliness, I had found true, warm friends. My



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hopes revived and I began to think about writing a work for that marvelous cellist. Why not use my Ecclesiastes material, but instead of a human voice, limited by a text, employ an infinitely grander and more profound voice: that could speak all languages: that of his violoncello? I took up my sketches, and without plan or program, almost without knowing where I was headed, I worked for days on my rhapsody. As each section was completed, I copied the solo part and Barjansky studied it. At the same time Mme. Barjansky worked on the statuette intended as a gift for me. She had first thought of sculpting a Christ, but later decided on a King Solomon. We both finished at about the same time. In a few weeks my Ecclesiastes was completed, and since the legend attributes this book to King Solomon, I gave it the title *Schelomo*. As will be seen, I had no descriptive intentions. I was saturated with the Biblical text and, above all, with the misery of the world, for which I have always had so much compassion” (Bloch 1955-56).

*Schelomo* does not follow a defined ‘program’, but the composer stated in the same concert program notes: “the violoncello is the voice of Solomon, the rhapsodist of Ecclesiastes, proclaiming the usefulness in all things, while the orchestra ‘represents’ the world surrounding him and his experiences of life. Simultaneously the orchestra seems to reflect Solomon’s inward thought while the solo cello is giving voice to his words” (Bloch 1955-56)

Even though the composer states that he worked on *Schelomo* ‘without plan or program’ the above testimony makes it clear that the piece is highly symbolic in the sense that each theme is associated with a precise meaning and their dramatization by the way of succession, juxtaposition and variations during the course of the piece, follows what may be called an ‘hidden libretto.’

The solo cello as the voice of Solomon, the (large) orchestra as the overwhelming surrounding world heading towards the first world war and themes which are carefully crafted

and harmonized like leitmotives are plotted for maximum dramatic impact.

Ernest Bloch fully realized a most challenging attempt for any artist: he composed a truly sincere music with genuine inspiration without concessions to the easiness of 'being modern' for the sake of it, neither for a 'cheap' and easy neo-classicism nor a sterile 'nationalism'. He was a composer with an incredibly rich and comprehensive musical background, a clear and 'timeless' view on humanity, history and the arts, he dismissed all fashionable currents of its time for being honest with himself.

Our view of Bloch's place in the history of music is somewhat overshadowed by the twisted way we are 'programmed' to adopt when looking back in time. When we look back at a composer's work, much too often we are to consider almost exclusively the question "what is new with him?" This line of thought may well be traced back at times when Brahms was viewed as a 'boring reactionary'. It may be now the time for us to consider our judgmental values on music and esthetics when everything so called 'new' is already well behind us. The 'music' of silence or the 'music' of a crashing piano dropped on the curb from a high building is now ancient history. During a period of intense intellectual research and elaborated musical construction, in the late fifties and sixties, the musical writing was considered an exceedingly intricate art of its own. The craft has been raised to its summit by composers like Boulez, Stockhausen, Berio and others. That needed long studies and was quite time-consuming.

New musical trends like the endless repetitions of a single small motif and its phase shifts, i.e. Minimalism; or the so-called spectral analysis and reconstruction of (non-structural) harmonies i.e. Spectralism; are so much easier ways to make 'modern music'. Those currents had in common one strong 'selling point:' the absence of any compositional refinement and the ease of usage. Similarly a number of 'neo's appeared. Neo-romanticism, neo-tonality and many others.

I believe we have much to learn from Ernest Bloch. He was not a 'neo' something, 'modern' nor a revolutionary. He was a master composer with a fantastic music writing technique and 'virtuosity' and a fully master orchestrator. He composed the most sincere music by pulling his inspiration not from more or less fashionable currents but from eternal sources like the nature, the ocean and the Bible.

### References Cited

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