

Budapest Symphony Orchestra MÁV



The Budapest Symphony Orchestra MÁV (MÁV Szimfonikus Zenekar) was founded in 1945 by the Hungarian State Railways. The orchestra currently consists of ninety professional musicians. The MAVSO is ranked among the best professional orchestras in Hungary. In recent decades the orchestra has developed a wide-ranging repertoire from music of the Baroque era to works by contemporary composers. The orchestra has performed in every country of Europe as well as in Cyprus, Lebanon, Hong Kong, Japan, China, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Columbia, Ecuador, Peru and Oman. Performances have taken place at many of the most important and

respected concert halls, such as the Musikvereinssaal in Vienna, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Suntory Hall in Tokyo and Shanghai Oriental Art Center. The orchestra has also participated at several European festivals, in Lourdes, Vienna, Thessaloniki, Rome, and Assisi. In September 2012 Péter Csaba became the orchestra's new Artistic Director and Chief Conductor.

Mariusz Smolij



The conductor Mariusz Smolij has won high acclaim from the international press, and has led over a hundred orchestras on four continents, appearing in some of the most prestigious concert halls of the world. In North America, among many others, he has collaborated with the Houston Symphony (Resident Conductor 2000-2003), New Jersey Symphony, Orchestra of the Chicago Lyric Opera, Rochester Philharmonic NY, Indianapolis Symphony, Symphony Nova Scotia and Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra. He has appeared with leading orchestras in Germany, Italy, Switzerland, France, Israel, Holland, South Africa, Serbia, Bulgaria, Hungary, the Czech Republic and his native Poland. He has directed concerts at the Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Kimmel Center, Tonhalle Zurich, Paris Salle Gaveau, Concertgebouw Amsterdam and the Warsaw National Philharmonic. He is a founding member of the Penderecki String Quartet, former artistic director of the Lutosławski Wrocław Philharmonic and International Festival Wratislavia Cantans, Poland, and currently serves as Music Director of the Acadiana Symphony in Louisiana and Riverside Symphonia in New Jersey. His recordings for Naxos include releases of works by Andrzej Panufnik, Tadeusz Szeligowski, Miklós Rózsa and Eugene Zador. www.mariuszsmolii.com



BLOCH

Suite for Viola and Orchestra Baal Shem • Suite hébraïque

Hong-Mei Xiao, Viola Budapest Symphony Orchestra MÁV • Mariusz Smolij



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Ernest Bloch (1880-1959): Baal Shem · Suite for Viola and Orchestra · Suite hébraïque

For Ernest Bloch, Judaism was a cultural, not a religious. identity. In his earliest works the Geneva native struggled with various influences: his Symphony in C sharp minor (1901-1902) was fundamentally German; his opera Macbeth (1904-1909) was more French (and not just in its libretto). It was not until his so-called "Jewish Cycle", seven works composed between 1911 and 1916, that Bloch found his unique voice. His concept of Judaism was something he never found in the real world. It was, rather, something he created in his music. "I am not an archaeologist", he wrote. "It is the Jewish soul that interests me, the complex. glowing, agitated soul that I feel vibrating throughout the Bible." Publisher G. Schirmer cemented his reputation in Xiao. the public's mind as the "Jewish composer" by creating a logo incorporating the initials EB within a Star of David and displaying it prominently on the covers of his scores.

After composing his Israel Symphony in 1916, however, Bloch temporarily stopped writing works overtly connected to Judaism. His next "Jewish" work was Baal Shem, a three-movement suite for violin and piano. It was composed in 1923 while Bloch was director of the Cleveland Institute of Music. Written for André de Ribaupierre, an outstanding Swiss violinist whom Bloch had hired to teach at the Institute, Baal Shem was immensely successful, almost to the point of eclipsing some of Bloch's other outstanding chamber works from the same period (From Jewish Life, Three Nocturnes, Méditation hébraïque).

Whereas the works of the "Jewish Cycle" were based to varying degrees on scripture, Baal Shem evokes the eastern-European tradition of Hassidic Jews. The title, meaning "Master of the Name" and applied to one given power to work miracles, refers to Israel of Miedziboz, Poland (1700-1760), father of the Hassidic movement. Bloch dedicated the work to the memory of his mother.

In the first movement, *Vidui* (Contrition), the soloist intones a wide-ranging, expansive melodic line over simple, chordal accompaniment. The second movement, *Nigun* (Improvisation), is more complex. The opening and closing sections of the ABA form provide the soloist with fiery flights of temperament, requiring great technique but also invitting

passionate, soulful commitment. The contrasting B section is more in the nature of an intensely measured folk-dance. (This movement has become a staple of the violin repertoire and is often performed separately.) Simchas Torah (Rejoicing in the Holy Scriptures) alternates a playful Allegro motif with more sustained passages. Bloch confirms the work's Yiddish provenance by quoting a phrase from the wedding song Di mzinke oisgegeben (The Youngest Daughter Married) by the Russian composer and poet Mark Warshawsky (1848-1907). At the request of the publisher (Carl Fischer), Bloch orchestrated Baal Shem in 1939. This transcription for viola was prepared by the soloist Hong-Mei

After completing his "Jewish Cycle" Bloch moved to America in search of a new and perhaps more receptive audience. Initially working as a conductor, he experienced great success with performances of his First String Quartet and concerts of his orchestral work in New York and Boston. During 1918 he began work on his Suite for Viola and Piano, which he entered in a chamber music competition sponsored by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. Coolidge herself broke a tie for first place (with Rebecca Clarke's Sonata for Viola and Piano), awarding the prize to Bloch, Violist Louis Bailly and pianist Harold Bauer gave the première of the Suite at the Berkshire Festival of Chamber Music on 27th September, 1919, Bailly also gave the first performance of the orchestral version (which the composer had in mind from the inception of the work) on 5th November, 1920, with the National Symphony under Artur Bodanzky. The Suite was an immediate success; musicologist and writer Oscar Sonneck declared that "in either version Ernest Bloch has given us the greatest work for viola in musical literature, and what is more important, one of the most significant and powerful works of our time."

In his first work composed entirely in the New World, Bloch intentionally tried to move beyond his "Jewish Cycle" by evoking the Far East (which he had never visited but which had been vividly described to him by his one-time friend, Robert Godet). He initially gave the four movements descriptive titles: In the Jungle, Grotesques, Nocturne and

Land of the Sun. He quickly abandoned these ("I prefer to leave the imagination of the listener completely unfettered."), but the extensive programme notes he provided, quoted below, demonstrate the exotic nature of his musical vision.

The first movement "aims to give the impression of a very wild and primitive Nature". It begins with "a kind of savage cry, like that of a fierce bird of prey", followed by "the meditation of the viola". The ensuing Allegro "brings a motive of joyful and perhaps exotic character" (resembling, perhaps coincidentally, the medieval tune L'homme armé). A second melodic idea, described by the composer as "perhaps a little Jewish, in my sense", provides lyric contrast. After an extensive development of his motivic material, Bloch concludes with a brief climax where, "Like a sun rising out of clouds in the mystery of primitive Nature, one of the earlier viola motives arises in a broader shape."

The second movement – the "scherzo," if you will, of this four-movement work – encompasses numerous fragmented motives in what the composer described as "a curious mixture of grotesque and fantastic characters, of sardonic and mysterious moods". Bloch follows this quicksilver Allegro ironico with a nocturne, in which he evokes Godet's descriptions of his life in Java: "his travels during the night ... their arrival at small villages in the darkness ... the distant sounds of curious, soft, wooden instruments with strange rhythms ... dances, too". The first of three motives is "a dreamy melody in the solo viola, above dark clouds". There are also "far-away reminiscences" of motives from the opening movement.

Bloch described the last movement as "the most cheerful thing I ever wrote". Here, the oriental influences are at their most obvious, encompassing pentatonic, modal and octatonic scales. The B section of this ABA form further develops ideas from the first and third movements, and a Largamente for full orchestra triumphantly recalls a first movement theme before the viola "remembers the motive of the meditation" from the same movement and a "short and cheerful Allegro vivace concludes the work".

To celebrate Bloch's seventieth birthday in late 1950, the Chicago Federation of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and Samuel Laderman (uncle of composer Ezra Laderman) sponsored a six-day festival of the

composer's music, encompassing chamber music recitals and two concerts with the Chicago Symphony at Orchestra Hall. At one of these Rafael Kubelik conducted a performance of the Suite for Viola and Orchestra with Milton Preeves as soloist. Moved by the performances and the obvious affection of the Chicago music community, Bloch returned home to Oregon and wrote a group of five pieces for viola and piano (which he entitled Five Jewish Pieces: Rapsodie, Three Processionals and Meditation) as a token of his appreciation. G. Schirmer published two of them separately (as Meditation and Processionals, but the other three make up the Suite hébraïque (with the title of one of the processionals changed to Affirmation); Bloch later orchestrated the Suite and provided a transcription of the viola part for violin.

Although the work has much in common with Baal Shem, Bloch's style had matured in the intervening years, allowing the Jewish influences to be absorbed into a more personal blend of ethnic characteristics and traditional modalism. The opening Rapsodie displays an improvisatory quality, with the soloist, rarely silent, leading the orchestra through a constant stream of melody. In the next movement, Processional, pizzicato strings and harp echo a motive already introduced in the Rapsodie, two conjunct rising fourths outlining a minor seventh, while the soloist develops a forthright Phrygian melody in the first section of a three-part ABA structure. The concluding Affirmation is similarly in ABA form, contrasting a somewhat jaunty tune characterized by dotted rhythms with a more rhapsodic melody tinged with augmented seconds.

Four months after arriving in New York, Bloch told music critic Olin Downes, "A tree must have its roots deep down in its soil. A composer who says something is not only himself. He is his forefathers! He is his people! Then his message takes on a vitality and significance which nothing else can give it, and which is absolutely essential in great art." The works on this recording abundantly demonstrate that Ernest Bloch's roots were deep indeed and his music, whether overtly Jewish or not, touches something unfathomable in the human soul.

Frank K. DeWald

Hong-Mei Xiao



Hong-Mei Xiao won first prize at the 1987 Geneva International Music Competition. Her extraordinary artistry and brilliant virtuoso technique have gained accolades from reviewers across the globe. A recipient of the coveted Patek Philippe Grand Prize, she has made an international career as a soloist with performances in major concert halls and with orchestras of the greatest distinction throughout the world. She began her violin studies with her father, Xiao Heng, a well-known composer, and graduated with highest honours from Shanghai Conservatory, having studied viola with Shen Xi-Di. As a recipient of the Asian Cultural Council Award she completed her master's degree with John Graham at State University of New York at Stony Brook. She was honoured as a United States Artistic Ambassador and is also the featured soloist in the Naxos world première recording of the orginal and revised versions of Béla Bartók's Viola Concerto (8.554183), which has won considerable international critical acclaim since its release.





