Suite Hébraïque

Ernest Bloch (1880-1959)

i. Rapsodie
ii. Processional
iii. Affirmation

When Ernest Chapman (Tempo, 1955) posed the question – what kind of music should be written by a composer of Eastern ancestry born in Switzerland and living in the United States? – he appeared to have hit the most pertinent and poignant issue regarding the works, and indeed the life, of Ernest Bloch (b. Geneva 24th July 1880 – d. Oregon 15th July 1959). Even the most cursory glance at his repertory indicates a deep and fundamentally human preoccupation with his Jewish heritage, and the Suite Hébraïque for Viola (or Violin) and Orchestra (or Piano) is no exception.

The Suite, constructed in triptych form of the evocatively entitled movements Rapsodie, Processional and Affirmation, was composed in March 1951 at Agate Beach, Oregon for the Covenant Club of Illinois, a Jewish Society which had hosted a celebratory festival for Bloch’s 70th birthday. It resides amongst a sizeable body of other works by Bloch for the viola, most notably the Viola Suite of 1919, which was awarded the Coolidge Prize in that year. The Suite Hébraïque was received warmly at its premiere in January 1953 in Chicago by Milton Preves with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Rafael Kubelik. While it is placed chronologically in Bloch’s most mature phase of work, long after his famed ‘Jewish Cycle’ of the 1910s, a close affinity can be found with the earlier Baal Shem Suite (1923) for Violin and Piano (or, since 1939, Orchestra), with whose Vidui, Nigun and Simchas Torah movements the Suite Hébraïque shares many rhapsodic and melodic nuances.

This composition is, as the title indicates, an exposition of Jewish themes. Alexander Knapp (PRMA, 1970) notes that, in its creation, Bloch made extensive use of notations of Hasidic and folk subject material, systematically collected from The Jewish Encyclopaedia during an earlier search for potential leitmotifs for the unfinished opera Jezebel. Handwritten sketches intimate the application of several ta’amei ha-mikra, or cantillation idioms, traditionally used by cantors in the vocalisation of passages of the Bible, introduced to the Temple c. 500 BC. Fragments of the Ne’ilah prayer can be heard in the first movement; Ahot Ketannah can be found in the second. More systematic, and clearly identifiable, is the employment of augmented seconds at key points of profusion, and the melodic use of augmented fourths and fifths, which mimic the sound of the shofar, or ram’s horn, blown annually on Yom Kippur, the most solemn High Holy Day; so too is the free-flowing rhapsodism of the more lyrical passages, meandering around frequent metre and tempo changes common to the quasi-improvisatory Hazzanic customs.

What is most interesting about the works of Bloch, and especially such an overt exploration of Jewish sentiment as the Suite Hébraïque, is the nature of Bloch’s preoccupation with his Jewish ancestry. His Genevan family home was inescapably infused with Hebrew verse; his father, Maurice, despite becoming a clockmaker, had originally intended to become a Rabbi. From an early age, Chapman notes, Bloch was exposed to bouts of anti-Semitism which created a sense of alienation from his home
town; consequently, he argues, little of the quintessentially ‘Swiss’ can be found in Bloch’s works, which appear to oscillate between the German romanticism of Wagner and Strauss, and the French impressionism of Debussy and Ravel. Significantly, in 1901, Bloch formed a life-long friendship with Parisian-Jewish writer Edmond Fleg, whose sincere devotion to Judaism was a source of great admiration. In a 1906 correspondence, Bloch expressed: My dear friend, I have read the Bible... and an immense sense of pride surged in me... I would find myself a Jew, raise my head proudly as a Jew.

But why impose so much of this upon his composition? Even works which, unlike the Suite Hébraïque, have no consciously ‘Jewish’ programme are indelibly imbued with the weightiness of thousands of years of ancient Jewish history. It appears that, for Bloch, racial consciousness was essential to the maintenance of artistic integrity. As he expounded in Saleski (1927), A man does not have to label a composition ‘American’ or ‘German’ or ‘Italian’, but he has to be American, German, or Italian, or even Jewish, at the bottom of his heart if he expects to produce any real music... He was concerned not with the production of reconstructed Jewish themes per se, but rather of music that was in its essence sincere to his own character, to his own being: I am no archaeologist. I believe that the most important thing is to write good and sincere music – my own music. It is rather the Hebrew spirit that interests me... this is in me, and is the better part of me. This it is which I seek to... translate in my music – the sacred race-emotion that lies dormant in our souls (Guido Gatti, MQ, 1921).

In this sense, Bloch's heritage is inseparable from his composition; his repertory, as he himself noted (MQ, 1933), remains... an ‘ideal graphology’, bringing his innermost sentiments inevitably to the fore. Of course, a vision of the Suite Hébraïque or any of Bloch's works as purely motivated by the exploration of his Jewish roots is a somewhat limited one. The pathos of his music arguably transcends the cultural to a universal plane. Nonetheless, it is no wonder, as Dika Newlin (MQ, 1947) points out, that the cover of all Schirmer editions of his works illustrate his initials within a bold Star of David – the composer and the Jew should be seen as one.