

VIOLIN WORKS OF ERNEST BLOCH | HYMAN BRESS



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PLAYED BY HYMAN BRESS

CHARLES REINER, PIANO

SONATA | ABODAH | YIDUI | SIMCHAS TORAH | FANTASIE | SOLO SUITE

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FM 3357

VIOLIN WORKS OF ERNEST BLOCH

Sonata For Violin & Piano
(Three Movements)

Abodah

Yidui (from Baal Shem Suite)

Simchas Torah (from Baal Shem Suite)

Fantasie for Violin and Piano

Suite for Unaccompanied Violin - No. 1

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PLAYED BY HYMAN BRESS

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FOLKWAYS FM 3357

The music for violin performed in this record spans Bloch's creative life from one of his earliest compositions written at the age of nine-teen and never before made known to the public, to one of his last two works completed before his death.

It is fitting that the first recording of various aspects of Bloch's music should be devoted to the violin; for this was the instrument on which he began to play at the age of ten, showing great talent. Several elderly musicians still living in Bloch's native town, Geneva, comment on his virtuosity and remarkable aptitude already at the age of thirteen. He could have made a fine career as a concert violinist, but by his eighteenth year had decided that his true vocation was composition.

Marguerite Bloch often said that her husband's violin playing had been extremely brilliant but cold. He was much more expressive when playing the piano for which he had no technique, but his touch was warm, alive and orchestral. He kept his violin with him until the end of his life, but rarely played it. His legacy, to violinists of many works is an important part of his creative output.

Fantasie for violin and piano - 1899

This manuscript left by Bloch in deposit at the Library of Congress with many other youthful compositions, was written in Brussels where he had been living for about two years, studying counterpoint and fugue with Rasse and violin with Ysaye.

From the accounts of his studies written to his sister in 1898, Bloch must have spent hours of practice to improve his already brilliant technique. He gave detailed and amusing descriptions of the show pieces by Wieniawsky and others he was learning, "pour se faire les doigts", which he did not consider true music. He also was playing in the orchestra led by Ysaye, attended regularly string quartet sessions, voraciously studied all the scores he could find, and solemnly announced one day in one of his long intense letters that his true god was Bach.

He had written many compositions at that time, songs, string Quartets, a violin concerto, a Symphonie Funebre at the age of 16, a Symphonie Orientale and several pieces for violin.

The Fantasie shows strong influence of the existing French School, that of Faure, d'Indy, Chausson and Franck. The works of Debussy, Strauss and Moussorgsky were rarely played in Brussels, and their strong impact on Bloch's style was yet to come.

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At this period, Bloch had been told by Prof. Rasse that he was progressing magnificently and felt very sure of himself. But a year later when he went to Frankfurt to study with Ivan Knorr, he despondently wrote to his family that he knew nothing and had to start all over again. He complained of his slowness, of how he had to struggle for days over a simple passage which he could not write properly. He was learning his "metier" and always gave Knorr credit for showing him the right road, the honest humble approach in mastering his craft with the help of the great masters of the past.

When he wrote the Fantasie, he was of course in blissful ignorance of what was to come, and with all the hopes, illusions and aspirations of his nineteen years, poured out everything he felt within himself.

This music containing nothing of the Bloch idiom to crystalize in the future, yet shows glimpses of what is to come; the vital drive of thematic material however unoriginal it was at the time, and its development, also the emotional content; all to be part of Bloch's music until the end.

Sonata for Violin and Piano - 1920

Twenty one years passed before Bloch wrote again for the violin. He had developed into a mature craftsman, was at the height of his powers, and bitterly aware of life's realities.

Unable to make a living as a musician in Switzerland, he had expatriated himself and gone to America where he, at once, found recognition and friends, and able to support his family. Battle-scarred, full of the fighting spirit that had carried him on, with a sardonic sense of life, he continued to write the music he knew would never be well received by the general public. Though his Suite for Viola won the 1918 Coolidge prize, it was violently attacked for its bitter, dissonant style.

The Violin Sonata that immediately followed was in the same vein. At that time he was living in New York teaching composition. Among his pupils were Roger Sessions, Quincy Porter, Herbert Elwell, Theodore Chanler, Bernard Rogers and Georges Antheil.

The work in three movements has been vividly described by Alex Cohen, an English musician who has written extensively about Bloch's music.

Yidui from Baal Shem Suite - 1923 Simchas Torah.

After Bloch finished his "Jewish Cycle" in 1916 with the Symphony, "Israel", the works that followed were composed with absolutely no attempt to express racial consciousness. Bloch had never the intention of specializing solely in one idiom; thus when people read in some of his more abstract works, a Hebraic strain, he strongly disagreed. But when deliberately set out to write music expressing his heritage, he let go, whole heartedly and with gusto, writing music such as the Baal Shem Suite.

In 1923, stimulated by the presence of Andre'de Ribaupierre, the magnificent violinist, a pupil of Ysaye, he had engaged to teach at the Cleveland Institute of Music of which he was then Director, he began to think of writing short, very violinistic virtuosos pieces for his good friend, "Ribau". These would be lighter, less serious works than the viola Suite or Violin Sonata. Thus came into being the Baal Shem Suite of which all his serious friends disapproved. They felt Bloch was slipping! Bloch, himself knew very well that this Suite was of another caliber than the violin Sonata. He enjoyed telling the story of his visit to Mr. Carl Fisher who was to be the publisher of the work. After Bloch and "Ribau" had played the Suite, Carl Fisher got up excitedly, slapped Bloch on the back exclaiming "Now Bloch, you are really improving and getting somewhere!"

The Suite was successful, eclipsing Bloch's other works for a time. He was unhappy about it but if anyone ever said a word of criticism about the Suite, he would bridle at once. They were his children!

Only two of the three pieces are recorded in the collection, the lesser played ones for which Bloch had a special fondness.

Yidui (Contrition), has a meditative quality is less theatrical than Nigun which is (better) known.

Simchas Torah (Rejoicing) shows Bloch in his most expansive mood, the Bloch who liked to tell a good Jewish story, liked a good meal. Remembering a tune heard in his early days he inserted it in this piece, a not too refined song, in which the word "Mezinka" re-occurs often. In 1921, Bloch having bought his first car, and feeling that the manufacturer was anti-semitic, named the car "Mezinka". This piece expresses a "Joie de vivre" which was so much a part of Bloch.

Abodah. This very simple piece was written for the very young Yehudi Menuhin whose playing had moved Bloch to tears. Besides the

miraculous talent of the child, he had also sensed the inner nobility of a great nature which he expressed in the music.

Suite for unaccompanied Violin - no. 1

During the last twenty years of his life, Bloch lived in Agate Beach, a small community on the Oregon Coast. The Second World War had affected him deeply, and he had practically written nothing between 1938 and 1945. Now the silence was broken by an uninterrupted flow of compositions marking a new evolution in his music.

Though he continued as ever to express his innermost feelings, the aspirations of man in his struggles and joys, his idiom became more detached, abstract and impersonal. The "elan vital" was always there, but with the last years came a sense of acceptance and resignation, a wisdom profound and all encompassing.

The last works of Bloch are still little known, but as they are discovered, the reaction has been of wonder at this renewal, so late, at the end of his life. Many have defined these last works as Bloch's greatest.

In 1958, Bloch was told that he had an incurable cancer and a major operation was suggested. He asked that the operation be postponed so that he would be able to complete an orchestral work. (Last two Poems). He returned to Agate Beach and finished the work - then he set out to compose the Suite for Unaccompanied Violin which Yehudi Menuhin had commissioned. He already had written three Suites for unaccompanied cello, and after the Violin Suite was completed, he wrote a second. He also was writing an unaccompanied Suite for Viola, when he was obliged to submit to the operation, survived it for ten months but never wrote another note of music.

These unaccompanied Suites are in a way the culmination of Bloch's musical expression. He ended his life work by writing for the simplest and yet most difficult and complex medium, music for a single instrument.

The Suite is played without interruption. Bloch was seventy eight years old, facing death. How different he was from the nineteen year old youth facing life - Yet, the miracle of the suite is the flow of youth through its pages, its never ending inspiration and vitality.

Suzanne Bloch