

SCHELOMO: THE MESSAGE OF KING SOLOMON

by Denis Brott

A figure of great grandeur in Jewish history, King Solomon also has the stature of a tragic hero. In and around 900 BCE his vast empire stretched far beyond the boundaries of present day Israel. He was undoubtedly one of the wealthiest men of his time. He had everything: power, material riches, many wives, wisdom, respect, children. He, and he alone, was responsible for the life and, at times, the death of his people - the population of an entire country.

It is King Solomon - Koheleth - who is addressing us in the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. The much tried and disillusioned Solomon makes his final summation of all that he has seen, heard, and experienced under heaven and he has come to the conclusion that all is vanity, and vanity of vanities.

And I Koheleth was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven:

This sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.

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

That which is crooked cannot be made straight:

And that which is wanting cannot be numbered.

(Ecclesiastes 1, 12-15)

How did this poetic message become a song without words, a biblical text transformed into the language of music? How did the Koheleth of Ecclesiastes come to life as Schelomo, a Hebraique rhapsody for cello and orchestra?

It is fascinating to discover what happened to Bloch that allowed him to emerge out of relative obscurity, in a Judaic sense, to become synonymous with that which is Jewish in 20th century music and, ultimately, to be accepted as one of the greatest composers of this century despite, or maybe because of, his Jewishness.

Was there much instrumental Jewish music before Bloch? The first national Jewish song was surely the song of victory sung when Moses crossed over the Red Sea. We know it as "Az Yashir Moshe" (Exodus Chapter 15). Interestingly enough, music held a very prominent role in temple life up until the destruction of the temple in 586 BCE. In fact, there were orchestras, not as we know them today, but musical bands with lyres, harps, trumpets, drums, maybe even some bowed gut-stringed instruments. Certainly as cantillation, music was prominent from the very beginning of Judaism. Influences of Middle-Eastern, Near-Eastern, Hellenistic and Greek cultures of the time surround the very roots of the Jewish religion. (In particular, Jews adopted the interval of the augmented second, which has become branded as "Jewish" by both Jewish and non-Jewish composers.)

But after the destruction of the temple there was almost nothing. This long dormancy of performed and/or composed Jewish music came to an abrupt end during the 19th century. There is even an example of awakening interest in Ludwig van Beethoven, who was asked to compose a cantata for the opening of the new Vienna temple in 1826! He ultimately did not write the work, but he did do research. One can easily see the influence and similarity to Kol Nidre in the 6th movement of the Opus 131 C# Minor Quartet.

Living in Beethoven's Vienna, though, was a unique personality who strove to bring about a compromise between the traditions of incantation of the past and the "requirements" of Western Music. His name was Salomon Sulzer. He was to the Gentiles the embodiment of the exotic Hebrew. After hearing him sing, Franz Liszt wrote:

"Once only we witnessed what real Judaic art could be if the Israelites would have poured out their suppressed passions and sentiments and revealed the glow of their fire in the art forms of their Asiatic genius, in its full pomp and fantasy and dreams - that hot fire which they kept so carefully hidden and covered with ashes that it should appear cold."

Curiously, the rebirth of Jewish music as a modern art in the twentieth century was launched along its way by a non-Jew. In 1880, at the instigation of Rimsky-Korsakov, a Jewish musical heritage movement began to emerge. Called the Society for Jewish Folk Music of St. Petersburg, it began when Korsakov's Jewish composition students introduced him to Hebraic incantation melodies. He found these so impressive that he encouraged his students to use as much of this material as possible in their compositions. They utilized their folk treasure with Rimsky-Korsakov's consistent endorsement and ultimately this spark caught fire and spread quickly through the western world.

So how did Bloch, a non-practicing Jew living in Geneva, Switzerland, catch the spirit? Two remarkable and almost magical things happened to him.

The first one occurred when the famous violinist Joseph Szegeti was touring Switzerland in 1910. His accompanist, Leo-Nesvizhski Abileah, a founding member of the Society for Jewish Folk Music of St. Petersburg, met Bloch in Geneva after one of their concerts. Abileah had convinced Szegeti to include on the program several works by his confreres from the St. Petersburg Society. Bloch heard this music and, of his own admission, it amounted to a cultural and spiritual rebirth.

The second event happened in 1915. Bloch was thirty-five. The idea of writing a Schelomo had been on his mind for several years, germinating, slowly, inspired by the dark and pessimistic passages in 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."

These words expressed very much how Bloch felt at this time, 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 been given to his former pupil, Ernest Ansermet. This was a bitter blow, for Bloch was in serious financial straits. His only source of income, the family store in which he worked, was facing bankruptcy. With the seemingly endless war raging in Europe, no tourists were coming to buy the Swiss objects his store specialized in: cuckoo clocks, music boxes, and jewelry.

Bloch had other reasons to be pessimistic as well. Twice already his hopes had been crushed. At the age of twenty-three when he conducted two movements of his first symphony, the Swiss and German press received the music, with vicious attacks, finding it too dissonant and intense. In 1910 his opera, MacBeth, had been taken off the schedule after only 13 performances at the Opera-Comique in Paris. Members of Bloch's family who had little faith in his abilities kept saying: "We told you so." Bloch, buried in obscurity in a town that had rejected him, had almost lost all hope. Yet, it was typical of him to be in the depths of depression and despair and then immediately to bounce back again with the stimulus of some artistic contact.

That contact came in the fall of 1915 when there arrived in Geneva a quaint couple, Alexander Barjansky, a lanky long-haired, long-faced Russian cellist, and his diminutive wife. Barjansky in those days was at the height of his playing. He had an immensely rich stirring tone and tremendous power. The two men felt a kinship at once. When Bloch heard Barjansky play, he knew he had found the elusive solution to his problem with the work on Ecclesiastes.

He said later, "I could not hear the fervor of the text or accents in the French language...or in German or English...and since I did not know Hebrew, the sketches mounted while the work lay dormant".

Now he knew what to do!

"Why, instead of the human voice limited by text and language, should not my Ecclesiastes utilize the soaring unfettered voice of the cello?"

He plunged into sketches and worked enthusiastically, day after day. He forgot his defeats, the financial problems of the store, all his miseries. In six weeks the work was finished. Bloch was reborn. (And so would he be reborn many times in his long life. When he created he was alive and nothing stopped him.)

How, then, does the Jewishness of Bloch's music express itself? This is what Bloch himself had to say about it: "I am a Jew. I aspire to write Jewish music because racial feeling is a quality of all great music which must be an essential expression of the people as well as the individual. Does anyone think he is only himself? Far from it. He is thousands of his ancestors. If he writes as he feels, no matter how exceptional his point of view, his expression will be basically that of his forefathers. In all those compositions of mine which have been termed "Jewish", I have not approached the problem from without, i.e. by employing more or less authentic melodies...or more or less sacred "Oriental" formulas, rhythms or intervals! No! I have harkened to an inner voice, deep, secret, insistent, burning, an instinct rather than a cold, dry reasoning process, a voice which seemed to come from far beyond, beyond myself and my parents, a voice which surged up in me on reading certain passages in the Bible.

It was this Jewish heritage as a whole which stirred me, and music was the result. To what extent such music is Jewish, to what extent it is just Ernest Bloch - of that I know nothing. The future alone will decide."

Bloch says further: "It is not my purpose, not my desire to attempt a reconstruction of Jewish music or to base my work on melodies more or less authentic. I am not an archaeologist. I hold it of first importance to write good genuine music. It is the Jewish soul that interests me: the complex, glowing, agitated soul that I feel vibrating throughout the Bible...the freshness and naiveté of the patriarchs; the violence of the prophetic books; the Jews savage love of justice; the sorrow and immensity of the book of Job; the sensuality of the Song of Songs and the despair of Ecclesiastes.

All this is in us,
All this is in me...
And it is the better part of me..."