



Dvořák: Cello Concerto & Klid - Bloch: Schelomo

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The standard repertoire for cello and orchestra doesn't contain many French works, but the French performing style has a strong profile. I was reminded of this at the opening of Schelomo by the sweet, singing tone and refined phrasing of Strasbourg-born cellist Marc Coppey. Bloch's Rhapsodie hébraïque from 1915–16 was the culmination of his Jewish Cycle, and by far the best known portion of it. Originally conceived as a vocal work set to texts from the Book of Ecclesiastes, Schelomo took final form with the cello standing in for King Solomon. Besides the title, there's no Old Testament story to follow, and I tend to hear the music as a Romantic piece of Jewish musical nostalgia. (The work's success seems to have gone to the composer's head—Bloch came to see the music in psychoanalytic terms as an unconscious expression of the creative process.)

Because it borders on the fulsome, the music tempts cellists to overplay their part and sink into sentimentality or to sound rhetorically profound. Coppey avoids both pitfalls, finding genuine eloquence through a natural approach to the score's emotionality. Not recognizing the cellist's name, I looked online and found that Coppey was born in 1969, won a major Bach competition at 18, and soon found himself in the company of two luminaries, Yehudi Menuhin and Mstislav Rostropovich. His schooling took place in Strasbourg, Paris, and Bloomington. His biography mentions wider interests as a singer, pianist, and composer. Fanfare readers are most likely to associate Coppey's name with the Ysaÿe Quartet, where he was a member from 1995 to 2000.

Being ubiquitous, the Dvořák Cello Concerto has been the vehicle for a kaleidoscope of styles; my taste runs to the grand, passionate, and personal style of Rostropovich and du Pré. The fairly low-key conducting of Kirill Karabits in the first-movement introduction makes clear that this isn't his way, so Coppey's first entrance, which is more florid and simply loud (thanks to very close miking) isn't quite in sync. Using a focused and beautiful tone, especially in the upper register, the soloist grabs one's attention as the dominant force in the performance. Conductor and cellist agree that the lyrical second theme in the first movement should be delicate and gentle. I was also impressed at how even Coppey's tone is from top to bottom, and how good his intonation is. He doesn't dig in for a big sound in his low notes but prefers a supple, uniform timbre.

There's an impressive musicality about everything here. I was reminded of my most recent encounter with the Dvořák Concerto, from Christian Poltéra, Thomas Dausgaard, and the same Deutsches Symphony Berlin as on the present release

(reviewed in Fanfare 40:1). That was a very memorable reading, but Coppey and Karabits give nothing away to it for vigor, expression, and musicality. The Adagio gains added eloquence by being a little quieter than usual, as in the Bloch. The finale is lean, propulsive, and exciting. What more can we ask?

As a filler we get Klid, a meditative piece for piano duet that Dvořák later arranged for cello and piano before orchestrating it. Better known as Silent Woods, it is the slow movement of a four-part suite titled From the Bohemian Forest. The music was new to me, but its six minutes is based on a lovely, flowing theme, as you'd expect from one of music's great melodists. Coppey performs with rapt sensitivity.

Given so much to appreciate and nothing to criticize, this release deserves a warm welcome. I'm motivated to seek out everything this exceptional cellist has recorded previously, including the Bach suites from 2003.

