



Dvořák: Cello Concerto & Klid - Bloch: Schelomo

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New recordings of Dvořák's B-Minor Cello Concerto continue apace, but it has been quite a while since a new recording of Bloch's "Hebraic Rhapsody," Schelomo, has come my way. The piece doesn't seem to be as popular as it once was. In a not too distant review of Marc Coppey performing cellos concertos by Haydn and C. P. E. Bach (39:6), I suggested that the cellist's manner of address might be better suited to repertoire of the Romantic period which he has recorded before, namely works by Grieg, Richard Strauss, Maurice Emmanuel, and Théodore Dubois. And as if right on cue, here Coppey is in two mainstream masterpieces of the Romantic cello literature.

I may have been a bit unkind to Bloch's Schelomo in a performance by Truls Mørk in 28:6, when I referred to the "Ben-Hur, Hollywood kitsch" aspects of the score. It's true—and the composer admitted as much—that the "Jewish character of the work was not achieved using ancient melodies." Bloch was, however, deeply moved and inspired by the book of Ecclesiastes, authorship of which is attributed to the aged King Solomon, who, as an old and despairing man, had seen the follies of life and concluded, in pessimism and sorrow, that "All is vanity."

According to Bloch, the idea for Schelomo actually had its beginnings in 1915 in sketches for a large choral-orchestral setting of the Ecclesiastes text. But he wasn't fluent in Hebrew and the translations into German, French, and English just didn't seem to work. It wasn't until Bloch met the cellist Alexander Barjansky that his path forward became clear. Solomon would speak not in words but in a language more immediate, direct, and understandable by audiences of diverse languages and dialects. Schelomo would be a portrait of the ancient king—represented by the solo cello—recalling and commenting on the swirl of events and experiences—represented by the orchestra—that shaped his life and led him to his profound loss of faith in humanity.

As booklet note author Habakuk Traber points out, "Schelomo is the only piece in Bloch's oeuvre to have a dark ending." But Traber didn't need to tell us that; Bloch tells us that himself: "Even the darkest of my works end with hope. This work alone concludes in a complete negation, but the subject demands it!" And no wonder. The work was completed in 1916 while the composer and his family were still in Geneva during some of the darkest days of World War I. By the following year, Bloch had emigrated to the U.S., and Schelomo received its first performance on May 3, 1917 in Carnegie Hall. The soloist was Hans Kindler, principal cellist of the Philadelphia Orchestra under Stokowski, and the concert was conducted by Artur Bodanzky.

Dvořák's B-Minor Cello Concerto is so familiar on record and on concert stages across the globe that it needs no introduction. The album note does observe, however, that in at least one way Dvořák's concerto is a mirror image of Bloch's Schelomo. Where Bloch's work was composed in Europe but premiered in the U.S., Dvořák's score was composed mainly in New York during the composer's time in America, but its ending was revised slightly when Dvořák returned home to Prague, and the work was premiered in London. Why that particular polarity of place of composition vs. place of first performance makes Bloch's Schelomo and Dvořák's concerto birds of a feather I'm not sure, but they do make satisfying discmates.

Unfortunately, I wish satisfying was a word I could use to describe the performances or say that they merit the excellent program note and recording afforded them, but compared to the many outstanding contenders in both works, these hardly rise above the mediocre. In much of the technically difficult passagework, cellist Marc Coppey sounds labored, and even in relaxed moments of lyrical calm his tone, which is a bit on the grainy side to begin with, is not the loveliest I've heard. But Coppey's technical and tonal shortcomings are minor beside Kirill Karabits's lackadaisical conducting and the German Symphony Orchestra Berlin's lapses in good behavior. The orchestra's horns, it seems, have a problem sustaining notes of any significant duration without wavering, and their intonation in places is suspect as well. On top of that, there's some lack of coordination both between and within sections of the orchestra in all-out ensemble passages, as towards the end of the first movement of the Dvořák. It makes for a somewhat muddy-sounding melee, which I attribute to Karabits's inattention to detail and discipline. These are not works that play themselves without strong leadership from the podium. Previous reviews of Karabits in these pages have been generally quite positive, but I notice that they are all with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, the ensemble he has led as principal conductor since 2009. This, as far as I know, is his first and only recording with the Berlin-based German Symphony Orchestra, so maybe this was a case of conductor and musicians getting to know each other.

Someone once quipped about lawyers that there are so many of them if you laid them out end to end it would be a good thing. I don't know that it would necessarily be a good thing if you laid out all the recordings of Dvořák's B-Minor Cello Concerto end to end, but I do know there are so many of them it would make for a fairly long walk to get to the front of the line. And who would you find when you got there? Well, that's debatable, but I'm pretty sure it wouldn't be Coppey and Karabits.

As for Schelomo, the line isn't nearly as long, so it's a bit easier to pick a leader among the pack. Apart from Zara Nelsova's classic efforts with Abravanel and Ansermet, I very much liked Truls Mørk's performance when I reviewed it in 28:6. I felt that he gave us a portrait of an older and wiser Solomon than the one who had a youthful dalliance with the Queen of Sheba. But I also still find the version by Steven Isserlis with Richard Hickox and the London Symphony Orchestra compelling. I don't think this effort by Marc Coppey and Kirill Karabits earns a place at the head of the line for either the Bloch or the Dvořák.