



Dvořák: Cello Concerto & Klid - Bloch: Schelomo

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Cellists come in three general varieties, I often think: lugubrious, slithery, or chaste. Lugubrious cellists wrestle their instruments with bear claws, heave about in bardic misery and adjust the weight of the world with pregnant pauses. Rostropovich comes to mind, and du Pré. Slithery cellists, on the other hand, are fleet and scrape-less, all about elision and dazzling uplift on glycerin-coated wings—think Heinrich Schiff or Christian Poltéra. Then we have the chaste: cellists pure-of-tone, reserved, smooth, aristocratic. János Starker comes to mind, and now the simply gorgeous playing of Strasbourg-born Marc Coppey, worthy successor to his teacher, who brings us the most enjoyable, quietly artful version of Schelomo I know.

It's hard to recall Ernest Bloch was once a popular Swiss/American Jewish composer. Bloch held grandiose convictions about his talents and what we'd call his DNA, and thought himself the inner source of a future Hebraic musical style for Palestine. Later becoming an American immigrant, Bloch was convinced he could replace the U.S. national anthem with his rhapsody America. He failed to do either. But he did certainly anticipate Cecil B. DeMille.

These days we're lucky to hear Baal Shem or run into a chamber orchestra performing one of the two concerti grossi. But listen with care to Schelomo, written in 1916, and you encounter influences others picked up from him, a sure sign of how seriously Bloch was once taken. In fact, ask me quickly what Schelomo sounds like, and I'm tempted to say "Jewish Respighi." There's an ostinato melody for two bassoons which Bloch uses as contrast in the middle of the piece. It's a Jewish childhood tune his mother used to sing. Start humming and you can imagine how easily it might evoke a few years later the pulsating grandeur of catacombs in Respighi's The Pines of Rome. There are several massive climaxes in Schelomo. One of them winds down in a manner suggestive of the first movement of the Shostakovich Fifth Symphony, written decades later. So everyone was certainly paying attention, it would seem.

And well they should, here. This is the first fully hysteria-free interpretation I've heard. Schelomo, the cello's voice, represents biblical King Solomon, and Bloch's music portrays the crashing of Solomon's world through vanity. Bloch witnessed the same thing happening to the Europe he knew, then busy slaughtering itself in World War I—message enough. But ever since World War II, you get the impression that Schelomo must have been about the Holocaust (which it could not have anticipated), and it's usually played for fingernail-edged intensity and

glass-shattering anxiety. Munch and Piatigorsky nearly burn a hole in the stage with their classic 1950s rendition. Not here: This performance is so refined and beautiful, it could nearly be Fauré. Kirill Karabits and Marc Coppey are very much on the same page, with little agogic rubato and everything smoothly dovetailed. For the first time, I really like Schelomo as music, not message.

Coppey and Karabits's refined approach leads to a different sort of Dvořák Cello Concerto than we often hear, of course, a touch understated. An interesting comparison is to be had with a CD released by the Deutsches SO three years ago for BIS, with cellist Christian Poltéra and Thomas Dausgaard conducting. Dausgaard is an original, intuitive musician who has a remarkable way of bouncing forward and finding flecks of light in inner voices. And Poltéra is an impassioned cellist who "slithers." The Deutsches Symphony plays beautifully for both conductors, but you can guess I find Dausgaard more exciting. Nonetheless, Coppey keeps growing on me here. And Karabits achieves a kind of temperamental perfection. We have quite a wonderful release before us, when all is said and done, and the lyrical, gentle Silent Woods is just the right sort of complement from Dvořák's pen to Marc Coppey's more chaste instincts. Audite's sound is as good as BIS's, but with the cello presented slightly more forward. It amuses me to note what must be the principal French horn in both performances play his big first movement solo with very un-German vibrato, but with no harm done. Be sure to hear this.