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SPECIAL NOTES on ERNEST BLOCH'S SUITES for SOLO CELLO

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Bloch's three suites for solo cello were all written in 1956-7. In my opinion they are all works that deserve to be known much more, though that it not to say that they are not in the repertoire of a number of important cellists.

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The first two Suites were composed at his home in Agate Beach, Oregon, in a burst of wonderful creative activity during the spring of 1956: the manuscript of the first suite is dated 5th March-5th April 1956, while the second is dated 8th April-28th April 1956. The third Suite followed on a few months later, completed on 21st January 1957, although there a story there to reveal later!. They owe their existence to the cellist Zara Nelsova (1918-2002), who was born in Canada of Russian parents before settling in London. It was Colin Hampton, cellist of the Griller Quartet, who suggested that she should meet Bloch, telling her that *'I know he'll love your playing'*. So Nelsova went to study with Bloch - and specifically the composer's already existing cello works - in Oregon in February 1948 and again in March 1949. Luckily, in 2000, Nelsova (by then an elderly lady) recalled these visits in an interview with Tim Janof for the Internet Cello Society and I quote:

"[Bloch] and his wife made me feel so welcome. They put me in a guest flat that they had built over their garage. Downstairs was the equipment that Bloch used for his agate polishing hobby, using agates that he collected from the beach. He used to stand in the garage and polish agates while listening to me practise upstairs. Very often I would hear the tramp of feet coming up the steps and he would suddenly appear wearing his hip rubber boots and his little beret, saying: 'No, no, no, not like this, like this!' And then he would sit down at the piano ... and we would start to work together. We worked on Schelomo, Voice in the Wilderness, and Three Pieces from Jewish Life."

Armed with this expertise it should not be surprising that Bloch and Nelsova subsequently recorded Schelomo with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Three Pieces from Jewish Life (with Bloch himself at the piano) in October 1949. From then on they worked together regularly and became firm friends. Nelsova visited Bloch and his wife for several days in November 1954, and again in September 1955. On one of these occasions she asked Bloch if he had ever thought of composing for solo cello. As she told Tim Janof:

“Once I asked him if he would write an unaccompanied cello sonata. ‘Oh’, he said, ‘I don’t know ... how would I do that? Play me something.’ So I sat down and played him a little of the Kodály solo sonata. ‘No, no, that’s not my style.’ Then I played some of the Reger second suite. ‘No, no, that’s not my style.’ Nothing would please him. Soon after ... I received a letter from him saying that he was at work on an unaccompanied suite.”

Bloch quickly got to work, in his style, and dedicated the first two suites to Zara Nelsova. However, he suffered a heart attack in September 1956, and spent several weeks in hospital, only returning back to Agate Beach in November. His first activity on getting back ‘into gear’ was revising the first two Suites, before the idea of embarking on the the third. Nelsova gave the premiere of the first Suite on 28th May 1957, in a broadcast for the BBC Third Programme, and followed this on 30th October with the premiere of the second Suite, again for the BBC.

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But then misfortune struck. The third Suite was also sent by Bloch to Nelsova, but it was delayed in the post. As Nelsova recalled:

‘The third [suite] ... he sent it to me in Europe to edit and I didn’t get it in time. He didn’t hear from me so he assumed that I didn’t like it.’

The result was a brief hiccup in their friendship due to this misunderstanding, but in December 1957, Nelsova was again in Agate Beach to play the second Suite for the composer, who by now was starting to suffer from the effects of his final illness. The following year, he completed two solo violin suites for Yehudi Menuhin, but he stopped composing altogether in September 1958, weakened by cancer. Bloch died on 15th July 1959, at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Portland, Oregon. His daughter Suzanne wrote that:

‘His death was simple, as simple as the end of slow movements of his quartets, each thing falling into place, in the ultimate peace so much desired.’

Bloch's Suite No. 1

The first Suite is the shortest and simplest of the three, described by William Klenz in his review of the published score (Notes, December 1957, p. 151) as:

'A triumph of unrestrained ingenuity applied to simple materials in the service of a vital expressive intention. The fruit of experience and observation is everywhere visible as well as the creative, and above all urgently communicative spirit.'

Anchored on C (the work begins on an open C—the cello's lowest note—and ends with a C major chord), it makes the most of the instrument's natural resonance. The figurations of the Prelude have a clear debt to Bach, not so much by using neoclassical pastiche but through entering the same kind of intimate expressive world—and using some of the same techniques—as Bach's cello suites. The Allegro is vigorous and exciting, using more of the cello's upper register, while the Canzona is a song-like movement of touching simplicity and quiet eloquence. The dance-like final Allegro is in 6/8, with some of the attractive modal harmonies familiar from Bloch's earlier works, in the manner of a Bachian Gigue.

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Bloch's Suite No 2

The opening *Prelude* to Suite No.2 is homogenous in its texture of running 16th notes, building tension in waves of melodic and harmonic sequences that seek ever higher ground.

The dances that follow are in binary form: The *Allemande* begins assertively, and provides a boisterous start to the dance set. The *Courante* is rather faster, really a type of *moto perpetuo* of almost constant motion, making this a breathless movement to the listener. The *Sarabande* is the darkest movement and is set in the lowest register of the cello. The *Minuets I & II* form a matched pair of musical contrasts: the first in D minor has many double/triple-stoppings etc. but is still dancelike, whilst the second in the major key is more austere, set out in a single note line of melody. The concluding *Gigue* is taken from the celtic *jig*, with wild leaps, repetitive rhythms but with melodies that constantly change direction.

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Bloch's Suite No 3

Bloch's Suite No 3 is in five short movements, but they flow from one to another. The first movement is a vigorous 'Allegro deciso' with plenty of propulsion. There follows an Andante with a poignant slow melody. Then once again we take off on an Allegro, mostly in compound time, before a second Andante, somewhat similar in mood to the first, prepares for the finale, which is marked Allegro giocoso. The final movement has some discreet references to a Jewish scale with flattened seconds, which rests on a Bb descending to A minor.



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