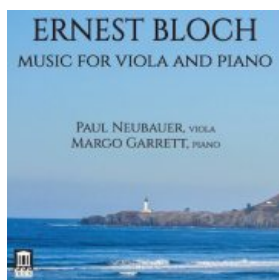




## BLOCH: Music for Viola and Piano – Paul Neubauer, viola/ Margo Garrett, piano – Delos

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*Virile, robust performances of Bloch's viola compositions make this collection a must for those who cherish the instrument at its best.*

**BLOCH: Suite for Viola and Piano; Suite for Viola Solo; Suite Hebraique; Meditation and Processional – Paul Neubauer, viola/ Margo Garrett, piano – Delos DE 3498, 56:27 (2/16/18) [Distr. by Naxos] \*\*\*\*:**

Cultural historians may recall that the music of Swiss composer Ernest Bloch (1880-1959) indirectly led to aspects of the Harlem Renaissance: in 1925, Paul Robeson and Lawrence Brown, while passing by Carnegie Hall, read the program notes that accompanied an all-Bloch recital: “In my music, I have tried to capture the spirit of my people.” What Bloch could accomplish for “Jewish” music, thought Robeson, he and Brown could provide for Negro music in America. The 1919 *Suite for Viola and Piano* by Bloch does not, strictly speaking, belong to his Jewish works but to a vision of the Far East of Java, Borneo, Sumatra, perhaps in the “visual” manner of Gauguin and Henri Rousseau. Bloch called the opening motif “a kind of savage cry, like that of a fierce bird of prey.” The secondary theme, *misterioso*, proceeds as a meditation. The music moves into a virile *Allegro*, much in a manner that suggests Bartok, especially in the folk-like piano colors. Neubauer then has new material that enjoys its own development, rising to a potent climax and decrescendo that concludes the *Allegro*, but the first theme recurs, *Largamente*, once more in hues suggestive of primal Nature.

Again, like Bartok, Bloch conceived his second movement, *Allegro ironico* as a throaty “grotesque,” akin to Bartok’s Op. 5 *Two Portraits*. Bloch’s comments on the characters who pass by in shadows suggest something of Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. A rondo in structure, the movement advances in alternating, brief fragments. The secondary section casts a grim, mysterious glow, relishing Neubauer’s dark, rasping tones and double stops, which sometimes sink into the cello’s high range. The piano’s bell tones somberly move the viola to a whip-like last note. The *Lento* wishes to convey the allure of tropical nights. Dreamy chords accompanied by dark tones may resonate with Bloch’s mental conception of Java, maybe a page from Joseph Conrad or youthful Herman Melville. A mood of haunted reminiscence—sometimes close to *Baal Shem*—permeates this movement. The final movement, *Molto vivo*, in ternary form, Bloch called “the most cheerful thing I ever wrote.” Cyclical in design, the music brings up motifs from prior movements, after first instigating a lively pentatonic scale. The *Presto* section leads to a reiteration of the *Largamente* theme, where the first movement’s meditation and triumphs return. Critic Oscar Sonneck once remarked that in this piece “Bloch has given us the greatest work for viola in musical literature. . .one of the most significant and powerful works of our time.”



The unfinished *Suite for Viola Solo* (1958) had occupied Bloch—working at Agate Beach, Oregon—just prior to his death. Inspired by the violin solo sonatas of Bach and Bartok, Bloch creates a work that involves vertical harmony and counterpoint. Comprised of four movements: *Andante – Moderato – Andante – Allego deciso*—the eight-minute work moves *attacca* in inter-connected figurations. The richness of the writing provides Neubauer—who credits his mentor Paul Doktor for much of his own musical insight—with a sterling vehicle for his resonant instrument (rec. 16-18 March 2001). The last movement, especially, projects a vigor and fiery passion that must, perforce, break off, due to the composer's sudden demise.

The year 1950 marked Bloch's seventieth birthday, and Chicago wished to honor the composer. Bloch composed a group of five pieces for viola and piano—his *Five Jewish Pieces*—in 1951, but then reconfigured their arrangement as three pieces, the *Suite Hebraique* and two pieces, *Meditation and Processional*. The *Suite* opens with a full-blooded *Rhapsodie*, quite improvisatory, both declamation and lyrical outpouring in major and minor modes. Once more, echoes of the early *Baal Shem* music ring through. The ensuing *Processional* proceeds as a resolute march that gains power and momentum as it assumes a Jewish sense of doxology. The *Affirmation* opens with bright chords in the keyboard, leading to a tender song or martial hymn. The *Meditation and Processional* extend the dominant moods of deep, soulful contemplation and noble resolve. Bloch employs strict counterpoint to increase the sobriety of the opening movement. Even so, the lyricism in the composer's soul reflects a vital optimism that belies the stormy times of its composition. Paul Neubauer and Margo Garrett explain the discrepancy of the date of recordings (2001) and the present release (2018) by informing us that for many years the original, digital tapes had been lost.

—Gary Lemco