



## CD Review by James A. Altena

**BLOCH Suite for Viola and Piano. Suite for Viola Solo. Suite Hébraïque. Meditation and Processional** • Paul Neubauer (va); Margo Garrett (pn) • DELOS 3498 (56:27)

The booklet to this release opens with a brief note. These recordings were made in 2001; the digital tapes were then misplaced but recently resurfaced intact, and so this disc has been belatedly issued. My heart aches for lovers of viola music who passed from this vale of tears in the interim and were denied the chance to hear this release, for this is exquisite playing and musicianship of the highest order. Back in 37:2 I gave a tepid review to a Naxos release with violist Hong-Mei Xiao that featured the two larger works presented here, the Suite for Viola and Piano from 1919 and the *Suite Hébraïque* from 1951 in their subsequently orchestrated versions, as “simply too restrained, too polite, too immaculately groomed for its own good.” The contrast between that respectably tidy effort and this vastly more expressive one is immediately apparent in the *Largo* introduction to the opening movement of the duo Suite. Pianist Margo Garrett immediately arrests one’s attention by emphasizing the brittle dissonance of the initial arpeggiated opening chord, with Neubauer then stealing in with a uniquely shaded tonal color of positively spectral eeriness that raises the hackles on the back of the neck in unnerved anticipation, which is then entirely fulfilled.

This is merely one instance of a multitude of such moments I could cite from the entire disc; perhaps my favorite is the concluding *Molto vivo* from the same suite. Its rather obvious *chinoiserie* might be expected to give Xiao a home-court interpretive advantage; but whereas she executes her part with clean technique but merely dutiful dispatch, Neubauer makes the cascade of notes positively fly off the page with brilliant panache. That he is a multi-linguistic musical stylist is made equally evident in his thoroughly Iberian-flavored “Rapsodie” from the *Suite Hébraïque*, as well as plenty of heartfelt but never flamboyant lyricism in the other movements. In the Suite for Viola Solo—modeled on the Bach suites and partitas for solo violin and cello, and left incomplete at Bloch’s death from cancer in

1958—a suitably severe, even austere mood is struck, with the last movement ending abruptly at the terminus of the unfinished manuscript. The two movements of *Meditation and Processional* were originally part of a larger set called *Five Jewish Pieces*, with the other three being culled out to form the *Suite Hebraïque*, so it is a treat to have them reunited here.

On every page of each score, Neubauer evinces sovereign interpretive and technical majesty. A matching word of praise is also due to pianist Margo Garrett. This is truly a collaboration of two equals, not a primary soloist and subordinate accompanist, and I would gladly seek out the opportunity to hear her in a solo piano recital. Delos has captured the proceedings in beautifully clear, ungimmicky, well-balanced sound. This disc is an imperative not just for fans of Bloch's complete viola music, or of the viola in general, but for anyone and everyone who loves chamber music; five stars across the board!

**James A. Altena**

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