



CD Review by [David DeBoor Canfield](#)

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)

Despite the popularity among violists of the works for their instrument by Swiss-American composer Ernest Bloch, not many of them have undertaken an integral recording of this portion of his *oeuvre*. I regrettably no longer have access to my database of 250,000 classical recordings because of changes made by my hosting company (and something that would cost me more to have fixed than it is worth to me), so I am unable to cite previous integral recordings of these works. All I can recall is a 10-inch LP of some of them recorded by Milton Preves on a semi-private label. So when the present CD from our esteemed editor appeared in my mailbox, I was happy to receive it, especially when I saw the two important performers who present these works. The recording actually dates all the way back to 2001, but after it was completed, somehow the digital recordings were lost for quite some time. When they finally resurfaced, the performers were delighted to find they were salvageable and arranged to have them issued. The booklet contains these comments by the artists, dated February 2018, and here I am listening to the CD to review it the following month.

The Suite for Viola and Piano was awarded first prize in the Berkshire Chamber Music Festival Competition in 1919, beating out Rebecca Clarke's well-known Sonata. Bloch's half-hour work begins with a couple dramatic flourishes whipped off in spectacular fashion by Juilliard piano faculty member Margo Garrett. In between these, violist Paul Neubauer plays a melody, replete with Bloch's trademark pathos and Jewish soul, and brought to full flower by his warm and rich tone. The piece was supposedly inspired by a vision its composer had of the Far East (Java, Sumatra, and Borneo), and the dramatic opening is supposed to mimic the savage cry of some fierce bird of prey. For my ears, though, the piece is a testament to Bloch's Hebraic heritage—every bit as much, in fact, as his *Suite Hébraïque*. The power that resides in the suite with piano is extracted ounce for

ounce by these two gifted performers, and I cannot imagine a better performance of this work, or the others that accompany it on the disc.

The Suite for Viola Solo was inspired, as were the other solo suites Bloch wrote for violin and cello, by Bach's suites for those instruments. Regrettably, this work was in progress at the time Bloch suffered and died from his final illness, and thus remains incomplete. The opening *Andante*'s wandering line takes the performer over the entire range of his instrument, and while the piece is tonally quite free, seems to be more-or-less centered on, perhaps, C Minor—it's really difficult to pick out a key center, although the vigorous chord-infused ending of the work is more firmly in that key. The sudden breaking off of the piece during the last of its four interconnected movements is a sobering reminder that death waits for no one. The *Suite Hébraïque* and *Meditation and Processional* were both composed in 1951 during the time Bloch was in Chicago to attend a festival of his music sponsored in part by the Chicago Covenant Club. I believe it was, in fact, this very organization that produced the LP that I referred to above. Originally, the two works were just one that bore the title *Five Jewish Pieces*, but when Bloch had them published, he split the work into two separate ones. The *Suite* opens with "Rhapsodie," containing rather improvisatory portions that comingle the major and minor modes with traditional Jewish modalities, and continues with "Processional," which is driven along with block quarter-note chords in the piano over which the violist paints in bold strokes. The final movement, "Affirmation," looks to a brighter future for the much-oppressed Jewish people. Throughout the work, typical intervals of Jewish music—the augmented second, minor third (enharmonically the same intervals, but contextually very different) and minor sixth—are frequently employed.

Meditation and Processional begins with a pensive melody augmented by contrapuntal lines in the piano, and its noble and elegant second movement brings the work—and the recital—to a satisfying close. Neubauer and Garrett play brilliantly throughout the disc, and the recording does a splendid job in portraying the beautiful tone of both instruments. This will be a contender for my next Want List, although I generally reserve my selections for that for first recordings. However, this disc is a Bloch-buster, so who knows? In any case, you should definitely purchase it.

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