

West Cork Chamber Music Festival 2021

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Bantry and Beyond

Festival Echoes

21. Poème Mystique

Filmed at Studio Boerne⁴⁵, Berlin

Nurit Stark [violin]

Cédric Pescia [piano]

Bloch

Violin Sonata No. 2 'Poème Mystique'

Zara Levina

Violin Sonata No.2

Beethoven

Violin Sonata in G major Op.96

Ernest Bloch [1880-1959]

Violin Sonata No.2 'Poeme mystique' [1924]

Andante moderato – Animato - L'istesso tempo – Animato

Ernest Bloch has multiple aliases. He was born in Geneva and quite rightly the Swiss consider him to be one of their (very few) major composers. He spent much of his life in the USA and indeed took out American citizenship in 1924, so the Americans consider him one of theirs. Finally much of his music explores his Jewish heritage leading to him being considered as primarily a Jewish composer. In his lifetime he was much feted as both composer, conductor and teacher. Since his death his name has mostly been associated with his major Jewish works, in particular his Rhapsody for cello and orchestra *Schelomo*. Despite this Bloch remained very much his own man, an independent, far from any school or system, whose sole concern was to be sincere and true.

From his youth he was a wanderer, his studies taking him to Geneva, Brussels, Frankfurt and eventually Paris. It was during his years in Paris that Bloch began to reflect on his own Jewish heritage and search for his sense of identity. Bloch, who was far from religious, began to explore and express his Jewish heritage through music. Having returned to Geneva, Bloch worked on his *Jewish Cycle* from 1912 to 1916, completing it in the States. His first visit to USA was as orchestral conductor for a dance troupe led by the notorious Maud Allen, who had scandalised Edwardian England with her scantily clad version of *Salomé*. Midway through the tour, the troupe went bankrupt and Bloch was stranded penniless. He survived some difficult years mostly through teaching as his music gradually gained a public.

The second of Bloch's violin sonatas was composed in part to balance his first turbulent sonata of 1920, which had left audiences confused and perplexed. For the Second Sonata, he sets out to write music that is both ecstatic and spiritual. It is a single-movement fantasy-like work, its four sections played without a break. It places extreme technical demands on the performers, calling for lyrical and soaring lines in high registers unfolding in a great, unbroken arc of melodic inspiration. The story goes that the composition of *Poeme Mystique* was triggered by a dream brought about by a mild overdose of Veronal – Bloch thus joining Coleridge in drug-inspired creativity.

The whispered heights of the opening *Andante* gradually melt into a torrent of inspired melody created out of the opening phrases. The *Animato* section further increases the temperature before the white heat of the third section that juxtaposes quotations from his own *Jewish Cycle* with quotations from the Gregorian chant *Kyrie Fons Bonitatis*, as if affirming the universal origin of mystical religion. The final *Animato* revisits the lyrical ecstasy of the earlier music as the circle is completed and intensified, soaring higher and higher before the climactic close.

Clodagh Whelan

Zara Levina [1906-1976]

Violin Sonata No.2 [1952]

1. *Allegretto*
2. *Andante*
3. *Allegro con brio*

Born in Crimea before making her career in Moscow, Levina's creative output was hampered slightly in the 20s and 30s by many of the conditions that her contemporary Soviet composers faced – the pressures of state censorship and the very real threats hovering over creatives who did not toe the party line. Levina lived through two world wars, the Russian Revolution and the formation of the Soviet state model that would govern her life and career, it is not surprising that this should take its toll on her health and creativity. But the compositions after this time, including the Violin Sonata No.2, show her ability to persevere under pressure.

Her influences tended towards the Romantic – Beethoven, Schumann, Scriabin and Rachmaninov. She was also a great admirer of Prokofiev, whose influence shows in the Sonata's pulsating third movements. The first movement is instantly engaging with a light-hearted, dancing theme in the violin. The sense of agitation builds in the violin as the movement progresses before ending quietly with harp-like rising arpeggios in the piano. The second movement opens in tragic manner, a sad, sorrowful theme over the piano's funereal tread. A long central section gradually grows in intensity, culminating in a cry of pain before subsiding back to the sad but gentler opening melody and a slow diminuendo. The third movement opens with a cheerful, dancing theme led by the violin relentlessly driven forward by the piano. A second idea tries to take over but rondo-like the dancing theme keeps returning leaving no space for other ideas.

Helen Dawson

Ludwig van Beethoven [1770-1827]

Violin Sonata No.10 in G major Op.96 [1812]

1. *Allegro moderato*
2. *Adagio espressivo - attacca*
3. *Scherzo - Allegro*
4. *Poco allegretto*

Beethoven's last and greatest violin sonata dates from 1812, the year of the famous *Immortal Beloved* letter and the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies. The previous year he had written his last piano trio, the matchless Archduke Trio Op.97. The third remarkable chamber work from this period is the F minor Quartet Op.95, nicknamed *Quartetto Serioso* on account of its difficulty, dating from October 1810. The three works were published together in 1816. The Sonata was not only dedicated to Rudolph but he also premiered it with the French violinist Pierre Rode. Beethoven probably began the Sonata as his unique way of dealing with the double onslaught of disappointment in love and financial crisis – the

Napoleonic Wars had led to a catastrophic devaluation of the Austrian currency reducing Beethoven's income to a fifth of its previous level. However the spur to finish the Sonata was undoubtedly the visit of the famous violinist to Vienna in December, just as Bridgetower's visit nine years earlier inspired the Kreutzer. Rode was noted for his pure, classical style of playing and Beethoven went to a lot of trouble to write a work to suit these qualities. It seems Rode did not like boisterous, virtuoso finales: *In our finales we like to have fairly noisy passages*, wrote the composer to his patron a few days before the premiere, *but R does not care for them – and so I have been rather hampered*.

The necessity of suiting the music to the performer may account for the Sonata's air of tranquil beauty, a world apart from the flamboyance of the Kreutzer. They are in many ways diametrical opposites and though the G major Sonata is undeniably the greater work, it remains something of an unknown masterpiece. It does however share with the Kreutzer an opening by the solo violin, but in the gentlest possible way with a soft, four-note figure adorned with a trill, immediately answered by the tenor register in the piano. Beethoven's genius for lending significance to the slightest phrase means this figure turns out to be the defining feature of the main theme and the most characteristic phrase of the whole movement. It quickly leads to an unusually tender and lyrical first subject. There is a tripping second subject, announced by the piano, which, right at the end of the exposition, blossoms into a particularly eloquent new theme. After the repeat, this irresistible idea is taken up in the development, which flows in a gentle unbroken line until a quiet exchange of trills beckons back the first subject. The coda also explores the opening trills before an abrupt final cadence clears the air for the profound meditation of the slow movement.

This *Adagio* begins with one of those noble chorale-like themes that recur in Beethoven from the *Pathétique* Sonata to the late quartets. It is given to the piano, and the violin enters with a gentle dovetailing of its final cadence before offering her own more intimate melody. Later the roles are reversed, each instrument playing the other one's melody with subtle variations and decorations. The G minor Scherzo follows without a break. This terse movement encloses a smiling trio in E flat, in the easy-going style of a country dance. After the *da capo* a brief coda translates the Scherzo theme into G major, ending with an abrupt flourish.

The final movement is a set of seven variations on a gentle, almost child-like theme. The first four variations are easily distinguishable; all except the first are double variations, each eight bar section being itself varied instead of merely repeated. The climax comes with *Adagio espressivo* fifth variation, a miracle of graceful ornamentation recalling the deeply meditative mood of the slow movement. In the last two variations Beethoven finally lets himself go, but keeps reining himself in for another last moment of tender retrospection.

Francis Humphrys

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