

Musical Treasure Chest #43

Between the summer of my senior year of high school and the start of college I had a chance to attend a superb summer music program sponsored by the American Federation of Musicians. Called Congress of Strings, it ran for eight weeks each summer, one institute on the west coast and one at the University of Cincinnati. Advanced high school and college students, after winning an audition, were sponsored by the union to attend. All expenses were covered, including the costs of coaching and master classes with the best teachers and performers at the time, attendance to concerts (this is where I learned to love opera) and much more. The Congress of Strings was a fantastic program: immersive, inspiring and enjoyable. Sixty plus string students (violins, violas, cellos and basses) from all over America and Canada attended. We had string orchestra rehearsals every morning, followed by quartet rehearsals and coachings, and frequent private lessons. In the evening there were often masterclasses or concerts to attend. In other words, for a young person embarking on a music career, it was nirvana!

The summer I went the orchestral director was Milton Katims. Maestro Katims was an outstanding violist, who played in the NBC Symphony under Toscanini (Toscanini respected Katims musicianship enough to allow him to conduct the symphony). He went on to conduct orchestras all over the world and for more than two decades led the Seattle Symphony. Katims also knew personally many of the great composers of the 20th century and made a point of including their chamber orchestra repertory on our programming that summer. We played the string orchestra staples of Tchaikovsky, Elgar and Dvorak, but we also played works of Ulysses Kay, George Walker, Carl Nielsen, and Lars Erik Larssen, among others. To this day, I love all of this repertory.

A work that particularly resonated with me that summer and was on our final concert was the **Bloch Concerto Grosso No. 1**. Ernest Bloch was another one of Katim's friends. Bloch, though Swiss-born and educated, spent a large portion of his career in America. Without getting too lengthy here, Bloch, who trained as a violinist and then later as a composer, taught in the music departments of Mannes

College of Music (in New York City), Cleveland Institute of Music, San Francisco Conservatory, and the University of California, Berkeley. He was also a co-founder of the Music Academy of the West (which continues to this day). That Katims and Bloch were friends is not surprising, they moved in the same elite musical circles and shared a European Jewish background that helped inform their musical activities.

Bloch, as prodigious and respected as he was during his life, is remembered today for just a handful of Jewish-themed works, such as *Schelomo: Hebraic Rhapsody* and *Baal Shem*, but he wrote more than one hundred works, including string quartets and other chamber music; symphonies, tone poems and concertos. His style is unique and recognizable, with a colorful harmonic palette, great melodic intensity and driving passion in his thematic development. I encourage you to search out his music, there are some outstanding recordings from the 1950s and 60s with some of the great American orchestras.

The Concerto Grosso No 1 was composed in 1924-25 in Santa Fe and Cleveland, and is dedicated to the Cleveland Institute of Music students, who gave the premiere (he was the music director of their orchestra at the time). Written for string orchestra and solo piano, the title refers to the baroque form of contrast between the full string orchestral forces (called *tutti*) and the smaller solo forces (piano, and solo string instruments). In four movements: Prelude, Dirge, Pastorale and Rustic Dances, Fugue. The music is exciting, gorgeous, sinuous, and entirely compelling. I quote below from the program notes of the 1951 Chicago Symphony Orchestra recording with Rafael Kubelik, whose recording I have included as well.

The first movement takes the form of a terse and powerfully accented Prelude. There follows a somber and elegiac 'Dirge' with a contrasting middle section featuring the solo violin. 'Pastorale and Rustic Dances' brings the 'Swiss' Bloch very much to the fore - even to the quotation of a folk melody remembered from childhood. In essence, this movement is a study in contrast between dance and lyric elements, with the lyrical strain winning out with triumphant intensity in the final pages. The finale is a sturdy four-square fugue, whose rhythmic vitality and delightful countersubject carry the music to a surging and brilliant conclusion complete with recall of the accented thematics of the initial Prelude."

I thank Maestro Katims for introducing me to this piece all those years ago! I hope you will love it too.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aUGs0B4IqY>