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## Bronfman plays Brahms

Ernest Bloch, *Avodath Hakodesh*  
(Sacred Service) (1929-1933)

Swiss-born American composer, July 24, 1880, in Geneva. Died July 15, 1959, in Portland, Oregon.  
Premiered in Turin, Italy, January 12, 1934.

To be or not to be a Jew? This dilemma had accompanied Ernest Bloch all his life, and it has strongly marked his music. When young, he kept a distance from Jewish customs and religious practice, longing for a universal spiritual experience. As a student in composition, he moved from Geneva to Brussels and later on to Frankfurt, Munich and Paris, where he rediscovered his Jewish roots and cultural heritage. They inspired a cycle of Jewish works, composed according to the spirit and the letter of traditional Jewish music, including *Trois poèmes juifs* (1913), *Psalms 137 and 114* for soprano and orchestra (1914), *Psalm 22* for baritone and orchestra (1914), the symphony *Israel* (1916), and *Schelomo*, Hebraic rhapsody for cello and orchestra (1916). The idea to compose an important work for the Sacred Service came very early, but it was not until 1927, when living in San Francisco, that he was finally able to start working on this project. Cantor Reuben Rinder of the *Reform Temple Emanu-El* in San Francisco helped Bloch to re-learn Hebrew, forgotten since his childhood, in order to be able to immerse himself in the text of the Sabbath service. The intense study and the composition of the work brought him to a spiritual journey, an expression of his inmost religious thoughts: “It far surpasses a Jewish service now... It has become a cosmic poem, a glorification of the Laws of the Universe.”

*Avodat Hakodesh* is conceived for the Sabbath morning service of the *American Union Prayer Book*; it was written for a *Reform Temple Emmanu-El* in San Francisco. Bloch’s understanding of the synagogue service and the Hebrew text is rather poetic; he reinterpreted the liturgical source as a libretto for a “great orchestral, choral work”, often referred to as a “Jewish oratorio”. The whole text consists of excerpts from the *Prayer Book*, along with the selected parts of the *Book of Psalms*, *Deuteronomy*, *Exodus*, *Book of Isaiah*, *Proverbs*, and other post-biblical writings, mostly in Ashkenazic Hebrew and, in the final section, English. However, Bloch did wish to emphasize the universal, timeless spirit of his work; as stated in his personal notebook:

This whole text - to be sung or recited in *English* in English speaking countries - in French, in *France*, and in Italian in *Italy* - is thus a *projection*, more general, more universal, of the *hidden* philosophy of the Service proper - a kind of *radiation*, of announcement, to the *whole of mankind* of its *Central Idea* - At least, this was my conception of it. But I know it *is* the conception of the *Hebrew Prophets* - the living, eternal, universal contribution of Israel to *mankind* - And it happens to be my own philosophy too.

The Sabbath morning liturgy was the starting point for this work; nevertheless, Bloch shaped it according to his musical and dramatic vision, clearly closer to an oratorio

than to a liturgical action. The music accommodates various text types: narrative, dramatic and meditative, with a highly poetic intensity. It follows the composer's spiritual journey: "It has become a 'private affair' between God and me."

The *Sacred Service* is set for the baritone soloist as cantor, the choir, the full symphony orchestra and the narrator. It consists of five sections, to be performed without interruption:

- I. Meditation (Prelude) - *Ma tovu* - *Borechu* - *Shema*
- II. Sanctification – *Kedusha*
- III. Silent Devotion (Prelude) - *Yih'yu lerotzon* –*Taking the Scroll from the Ark*
- IV. Returning the Scroll to the Ark - *Chayim* (Peace song)
- V. Adoration - Benediction - *Adom Olon*

All five parts of the work are unified through several recurring themes, the most important is a six- note motif G-A-C-B-A-G, which permeates the entire piece in various shapes. Exotic modes, intervals and harmonic structures (augmented seconds and fourths, consecutive fifths and fourths), melismas and vocal ornaments, syncopations and changing rhythms, all reminding of the oriental sources and the spirit of the synagogue chant. The choral style borrows the 16<sup>th</sup> century polyphonic devices and the orchestra enhances the sonority with its powerful timbres.

The relationship between text and music follows musical phrases, linked together by short orchestral insertions, avoiding any repetition. The chant evolves improvisation-like, although Bloch didn't attempt to rebuild the traditional melodies of the Jews. He wanted to invent his own music, more interested in the Hebrew spirit than the letter, seeking the "ardent, passionate, complex soul vibrating in the Bible."

Here is the path of the spiritual and musical journey of the *Avodat Hakodesh* :

I. The orchestral call to prayer is followed by the soloist's recitation accompanied by the choir, singing *Ma tovu*, and then the prayer embodying the central expression of Jewish faith: *Borechu* – *Shema Israhel*. In his *Notes*, describing the composition, Bloch wrote: "This is a kind of Pastoral - in the desert, perhaps - The temple of God in Nature. The next chorus, "*Borechu* " (Praise the Lord) is more "liturgical" - almost "official" in mood - already a kind of Rite - of invocation." The concluding *Tzur Isroel* (Rock of Israel) is the only traditional music taken from the Sacred Service of the synagogue.

II. *Kedusha* – Saint! Saint! Saint! – glorification of God, starting with gentleness, growing in intensity to the climax, with a blazing *Halleluia!*, soloist, choir and orchestra illuminated by the radiant colors of brass instruments.

III. The *Silent Devotion* brings us to the most emotional music of this work. The meditative orchestral prelude followed by the *a capella* choir - *Yih'yu lerozon*, preparing for the unveiling of the Torah, the central part of the liturgy, set with an intensely

dramatic orchestral introduction. The movement ends with a mysterious *Torah tzivoh* and the chant of the solemn procession through the congregation.

IV. The song of peace and praise accompanies the return of the Torah to the Ark. The final *Sholom*, deeply moving, is intensely resonant when considered in the historical context of the year 1933, when the prospects of war were evident.

V. The last part, Adoration and Benediction, is “like an epilogue. Here is the whole realization of humanity, the love of God, when all men will recognize that they are brothers, a fellowship in spirit and united, and on that day the world shall be one,” wrote Bloch. It starts with the prayer *Va’anachnu* sung in Hebrew, the cantor in a responsorial dialogue with the chorus. Long comments in English are inserted in between each Hebrew phrase, and the melody is set for a “recitant” in the “spoken voice.” The text here is extremely important; it is a composer’s profession of faith:

In the divine order of nature both life and death, joy and sorrow, serve beneficent ends, and in the fullness of time we shall know why we are tried and why our love brings us sorrow as well as happiness. Wait patiently, all ye that mourn, and be ye of good courage, for surely your longing souls shall be satisfied.

In order to make sure that the audience will understand the words of the prayer, Bloch also prepared French and German versions of the English text. The *Sacred Service* ends with the hymn *Adon olom* (Lord of the Universe), and the magnificent *Amen* is the climax of this celebration.

Finally, it is worth mentioning an unexpected encounter between Bloch and Brahms: *Avodath* opens with the same words chosen by Brahms in his *German Requiem*, 65 years earlier: “How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob”, “Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen, Herr Zebaoth”, “Ma tovu oholechoh, Ya’akov.” Beyond language, religion or time, both composers share the universal spiritual experience.

### **Johannes Brahms, *Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 83* (1878-1881)**

Born May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany.  
Died April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria.

The first private performance took place in 1881, with the Meiningen Orchestra, Brahms as soloist, Hans von Bülow conducting. The first public performance was given on November 9, 1881, in Budapest, Brahms at the piano, Alexander Erkel conducting the Orchestra of the National Theater.

“Do you like Brahms?” Well before Françoise Sagan’s novel, the question was a tricky one in French musical circles. The cultural gap between the two shores of the Rhine was almost insurmountable. The French musicians, even the greatest names, considered Brahms’ music as “tiresome, chaotic, noisy, impotent, intolerably dull.” Critics were merciless, Brahms’ contemporaries as well as more

recent reviewers. Their vocabulary bordered on insult, one doesn't dare to quote them.

But today, he is considered as one amongst the great three B's of German music: Bach, Beethoven, Brahms. His two piano concertos are the most prestigious works of romantic repertoire and his art reaches the highest level of classical music.

Such a contrasting reception seems strange indeed. How conditioned is the discernment of the musical ear? What are the criteria of the musical taste? Where are the barriers? Are they dependant on our mental structures, or physiological abilities of hearing, or cultural prejudices? German, too German? (Like Debussy, on the other side of the Rhine: French, too French!) Are we listening to the same composition as the critics who rejected each of the composer's notes without any further consideration?

Nevertheless, the perceptive musicians, Robert and Clara Schumann, recognized "the precursor", at the first encounter with Brahms – in 1853. He was just twenty. Clara's *Journal* and Robert's article "The New Path", published in *Die Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (The New Journal for Music) acknowledged the expected genius, the "chosen one", "destined to give ideal expression to the times". They were right; the future confirmed their presumption.

Where is he coming from? He was born in a modest bourgeois family from Hamburg, the most important city of the Hanseatic League, on the shores of the North Sea. He followed the path from the North to the South, from Hamburg via Leipzig and Weimar to Vienna, which he considered his home-base. His life was smooth and flat, seen from outside. Perhaps just one romance worth mentioning, his sublimate love for Clara Schumann...Everything else he kept within himself, innermost of his music. It suggests a personality of deep sensibility, hidden behind a reserved and introverted character.

The young musician shaped his work step by step. Although highly gifted, he pursued his own task lucidly, with humility and a reverence for the great masters. In the heart of the Romantic era, Brahms stayed on the fringe of current musical trends. In his surroundings, there were aesthetic fights ongoing between two opposite musical sects, sometimes called the "War of the Romantics": the "progressive" composers of the future (i.e. Liszt, Wagner) against the "conservative" (Brahms). As in politics, there were manifestos and pamphlets, but Brahms kept his distance from the conflict, leaving this to his supporters. Was he disturbed by this? Probably, but he remained independent, knowing how to keep clear of the fray. His friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim, wrote about Brahms as "a nature of a special kind, able to develop fully only in retreat, far away from society, a nature pure as a diamond, soft as snow."

Brahms considered himself as "the last of classical composers." True indeed, his work is "classical" in the first, aesthetic sense of the word,

encompassing in his pure forms melodies reminiscent of ancient modes, the art of Flemish polyphony, the counterpoint of Palestrina, Orlando di Lasso, Bach, and above all, Beethoven's orchestral model. The miracle is in his successful fusion of this vast heritage in original, deep and timeless works.

Since his *First Piano concerto* (Op. 15, 1859) more than twenty years had passed before Brahms started to work on the *Second Concerto*. In between was a rich production of master works, including *A German Requiem* (Op. 45, 1868), the *Alto Rhapsody* (Op. 53, 1869), the first two symphonies (Op. 68 and 73, 1876 and 1877) and the *Violin Concerto* (Op. 77, 1879). With his usual modesty and a touch of humor, the composer wrote to his friends announcing his recent work as "a tiny, tiny piano concerto, with a tiny, tiny wisp of a scherzo." For the listener, it is a majestic symphonic composition including piano as an integral component of the orchestral fabric, with a major virtuoso and musical requirements for the soloist.

After the premiere, Brahms went on touring through Europe, accompanied by the Meiningen Orchestra, conducted by Hans von Bülow. It was an immediate and great success overall. Finally, after numerous disappointments, this concerto brought him wide recognition of his pairs, and the audiences acknowledged the value of his music.

The concerto in four movements, lasting approximately fifty minutes, surpasses in its huge proportions all others works in its genre. In order to build this monumental musical architecture, Brahms required the mastery of symphonic orchestra, intimate chamber music effects (cello solo, French horn, clarinets), and a whole range of the resources of the piano. But first of all, the work needs a virtuoso performer, with limitless technique and the heart of a poet.

The first movement, *Allegro non troppo*, opens with a solo horn melody as the principal theme, sublime in its simplicity, reappearing at magical moments. The piano joins in, and almost at the beginning, a brilliant cadenza precedes the orchestral exposition. It is quite unusual in a sonata form movement, but the effect is magnificent. The dialogue between piano and orchestra develops alternating dramatic and lyric episodes, like many such sections in classical concerto. Sparkling arpeggios lead to the recapitulation; it is a delight to hear again the French horn theme, concluding with a very condensed coda, gathering all the musical events to finish in a twinkling bunch of trills.

The second movement, *Allegro appassionato*, is "a tiny wisp of a scherzo", as wrote Brahms. The usual symmetric form is clear, including *Trio*, freely treated, but its content is far from a traditional scherzo. Instead of the witty and light spirit, this "scherzo" is dark and stormy, northern winds blowing in winter. But what a powerful moment! The Brahmsian tempest is lightened up with Slavic accents, just for a short moment, before returning to the tumultuous first section, which is highly varied. Displaying its brilliant sonorities, the piano is in competition with the orchestra, creating a sustained tenseness.

After two epic movements, the third, *Andante*, brings repose. The cello solo sings a melody of transcendent beauty; it flows supported by the orchestra. The oboe answers in echo, just before the piano enters with its contemplative theme. The return of the cello voice is accompanied by the piano in subtle shades, arpeggios and trills alternating in the two hands. The transparent pianissimo, on the border of silence, creates the impression of music losing temporal sense.

The last movement, *Allegretto grazioso*, is dancing in the rondo-sonata form. Beethoven's reminiscences are still present. Brahms is playing with a sparkling suite of Hungarian dances, piano in the forefront and the virtuosity never gratuitous. The soloist uses a wide range of piano subtleties, from pianissimo sounds like a string of pearls to powerful accords, in a rich variety of timbres and densities. The score is technically very demanding, but the music is only for the pianist gifted with poetic sensibility.

“Do you like Brahms?” After this concert, is it still necessary to re-read Françoise Sagan?