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Review: Classical season off to rousing start at Britt

By Bill Varble

In the end, the Bloch rhapsody was as advertised, and so was Alisa Weilerstein. The 26-year-old cellist gave a dramatic performance of Ernest Bloch's "Schelomo — Hebraic Rhapsody for Cello and Orchestra," accompanied by conductor Peter Bay and the Britt Orchestra, to give a rousing kickoff to Britt's 47th classical season Friday night in Jacksonville.

"Schelomo" is a tone poem from about 1915, early in Bloch's "Jewish Period," during which he tried to express musically emotions which he felt were part of his heritage. He wrote in 1933 that the cello was the voice of King Solomon, and the orchestra the external world (or, alternately, his inner thoughts versus his words).

This night Weilerstein's rich melodicism, impassioned playing and robust phrasing — there is a bit of the rock star about her — were worthy of the king.

It was a Bloch composition, "Proclamation for Trumpet and Orchestra," that John Trudeau and the orchestra performed in 1963 at the first-ever Britt concert. Trudeau died in November, and Bay has dedicated the season to him, but he chose "Schelomo" even before Trudeau's death.

Bloch, who lived in Oregon the last two decades of his life, was one of Trudeau's favorite composers. Adding to the emotional tenor of the evening, Ernie Bloch, of Portland, Ernest Bloch's grandson, was welcomed to the stage by Bay to say a few words about his composer grandfather. He said that earlier in the day he gave Bay and Weilerstein each one of the agates his grandfather loved to collect and polish on the Oregon Coast.

"Schelomo" opened with a lament during which Weilerstein made her cello seem to weep. The orchestra added dense colors and striking dissonances, and splashy work by the brass led to the first climax.

The bassoon introduced the second major theme, which was soon picked up by the oboe. Weilerstein, cradling her cello, reintroduced the first theme as the woodwinds and brass played the second as a counter melody.

The cello again insisted on the original theme but was drowned out in a frenetic rush of musical ideas, perhaps the din of the world getting the better of Solomon's inner focus. The third section revisited the themes of the first two, reached a towering climax and fell off to a contemplative mood in which Weilerstein added the final note of resignation, then silence. If the Talmud could sing, it might sound a bit like Weilerstein's cello.

Bloch was born in Geneva in 1880 but left the anti-Semitism of Europe and worked in the United States in the 1920s before returning to Europe in the 1930s. With Nazism on the rise he fled again, settling in Agate Beach in 1941 and living there until his death in Portland in 1959,

composing about a quarter of his works in Oregon.

Bay and orchestra opened the concert with "Bright Blue Music," an agreeable, rather jazzy, somewhat inconsequential number by the contemporary American composer Michael Torke. The composer named the synesthetic piece for the color he thought it expressed (although everybody knows the color of D major is maroon). Whatever hue it was, the number's sunny disposition was a foil for the darker emotionalism of the "Schelomo."

Bay and the orchestra ended the program with a bright, alert performance of Dvorak's romantic Seventh Symphony, a masterful symphony that like "Schelomo" has nationalistic underpinnings.

The first, contrasting themes led to a great early climax. The earthy, visionary later moments alternated between Brahmsian visions and exuberant peasant dances. Dvorak's ninth may be the more famous symphony, but the seventh is unsurpassed in its wonderful unpredictability and its depth of feeling.