

YOUNG CLASSICAL WRITERS PRIZE 2021



Sounding Together

by **Thomas Gibbs** (age 26) – joint Third Prize

on Ernest Bloch's Symphony for Trombone and Orchestra

Trombonists know all about transcription. You'd be hard-pushed to find a full-length recital programme not seasoned with music 'stolen' from the library of another instrument, but for the compliment to be returned is rare - this would have to be special music.

Ernest Bloch's Symphony for Trombone and Orchestra is special music, and cellist Raphael Wallfisch's recent premiere recording is testament to this. The published piano reduction of the work jointly designates it for "trombone or violoncello" (perhaps because the trombone writing is no walk in the park), but when you've got Haydn, Dvořák, and Lutosławski, why would your cap need this feather?

Firstly, the notes are good. Richly angular, it's music of striking clarity and boldness. Direct, perhaps even severe, though always with a warm honesty. There's real drama around every scrupulously chiselled corner. We sense that stories are being told: old stories, stories carried in the echoes of a ram's horn.

It's not a concerto like the Dvořák is a concerto. Yes, there are three movements, but here the soloist shows us ways through landscapes while attempting neither to obscure nor become the view. It's inviting, and we're allowed to see as much or as little as we choose. For me, it's always had something of a low tide sun about it.

The symphony's instigator was the great trombone soloist Davis Shuman (1912-1966). An oft-forgotten hero of the instrument, Shuman was responsible for commissioning a number of significant works from some of the most distinguished composers of his day: from Darius

Milhaud to Tibor Serly. The sweeping pogroms of the early twentieth century had prompted his family to relocate to the United States from their home in Ukraine, and to appreciate this casts fresh light on the composers he approached: fellow European Jews resettled in America.

This is solidarity. I don't much care for any assertion of what music *should* be for, but I am always interested in ideas of what music *can* be for, and here Shuman has used the mission to promote his instrument as a platform for supporting his colleagues. In his excitement about the symphony - which he hoped would be "the most beautiful work for the trombone" - Bloch refused to charge a fee for his work. Whilst we should be critical of not providing a bill, it did result in the Blochs receiving annual installments of 'the most marvellous' fruitcake from Mrs Shuman.

Since its premiere in 1954, the piece has been a cornerstone of the trombone's repertoire. It's a work of great substance, completely free of the kinds of tawdry flavours a listener might expect from the trombone. The music and the instrument share a sort of mutual understanding, each respecting the integrity of the other. Indeed, the notes sound infused with the understated social responsibility at the heart of Shuman's commission.

So this is special music, and music to learn from. The lessons? We can use music as a means of supporting each other, working together sensitively to build and cultivate new and exciting landscapes. And we should bake each other cakes.

Thomas Gibbs