

WEST VALLEY SYMPHONY
SEASCAPES - MARCH 1, 2026
DANIEL WILEY, MUSIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR
PROGRAM NOTES

German-born **Max Bruch** (1838 – 1920) had the misfortune of living too long: he had outlived his era and his popularity. In his heyday, the latter half of the nineteenth century, he was one of the leading musicians in Europe. In his last years he was embittered and angry – no one was playing his music and younger musicians no longer sought out his wisdom. Bruch's musical style placed beautiful melody, properly harmonized, and sumptuously orchestrated foremost. As music evolved he was left behind. He was horrified by “modern” music from the likes of Schoenberg, Stravinsky and others. His symphonies and choral works were once widely performed and loved, but nowadays he's mostly known for three works: the ubiquitous *First Violin Concerto*, *Kol Nidre* for cello and orchestra, and today's music: the *Scottish Fantasy*.

The *Scottish Fantasy* was composed during the winter of 1879-80 and first performed in Liverpool in 1881 by Joseph Joachim, “carelessly, with no modesty, very nervously, and with altogether insufficient technique,” according to Bruch, who conducted. The work was dedicated to another virtuoso – Pablo de Sarasate.

Interest in folk music and its use in concert music was widespread in the era it was written. Bruch was not immune from this musical Nationalism; indeed his oeuvre reaches into the folk music of many cultures. But he had a special fondness for Scotland and its folk songs. To help re-create the Scottish atmosphere he also wrote a significant part for the harp in the *Fantasy* as well as using several Scottish tunes. There is “Thro' the Wood, Laddie” in I, “The Dusty Miller” in II, the enchanting “I'm a-Doun for Lack o' Johnnie” in III, and the rousing “Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled” in IV.

Ernest Bloch was born on July 24, 1880, in Geneva. He began playing the violin at age 9 and studied music in Brussels at the conservatory, where his teachers included the celebrated Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe. He traveled around Europe, moving to Germany then on to Paris and back to Geneva before settling in the United States in 1916 where he became the first teacher of composition at the Mannes School of Music in 1917. He then moved on to the Cleveland Institute of Music in 1920 and then to the San Francisco Conservatory in 1925. In 1930 he returned to Geneva but left Europe in 1939 when the political situation made life for Jewish musicians like himself difficult. Back in the USA (he

became a US citizen in 1924), Bloch went to Berkeley where he taught at the University of California until retiring in 1952. He and his wife lived in the coastal town of Agate Beach, Oregon. He died on July 15, 1959 in Portland.

Bloch was a highly respected composer, conductor and teacher and administrator, but sadly other than the well-known *Schelomo*, a *Hebraic Rhapsody* for cello and orchestra, little of his music appears in orchestral concerts nowadays. It was while he was working in Cleveland that Bloch wrote a piano suite titled *Poems of the Sea* in 1922, which he orchestrated two years later. The three movements depict different aspects of the sea: Waves, Chanty and At Sea. Bloch prefaced the score with poem from American poet Walt Whitman:

*In cabin'd ships at sea,
The boundless blue on every side expanding,
With whistling winds and music of the waves, the large imperious waves,
Or some lone bark buoy'd on the dense marine.*

*Where joyous, full of faith, spreading white sails,
She cleaves the ether 'mid the sparkle and the foam of day, or under many a star at night,
By sailors young and old haply will I, a reminiscence of the land, be read,
In full rapport at last.*

The small island of Staffa belongs to the Hebrides group and lies in the Atlantic Ocean off the western coast of Scotland. On its southern side is its famous basaltic cavern, “Fingal’s Cave”. The cave is about 30 feet wide, 60 feet high and penetrable for several hundred feet. **Felix Mendelssohn** (1809 – 1847) visited there in 1829 as a young man of twenty with a companion, Klingemann, who wrote of the adventure: “Staffa, with its strange basalt pillars and caverns, is in all picture-books. We were put out in boats and climbed – the hissing sea close beside us – over the pillar stumps to the celebrated Fingal’s Cave. A greener roar of waters surely never rushed into a stranger cavern – comparable, on account of the many pillars, to the inside of an immense organ, black and resounding, lying there absolutely purposeless in the utter loneliness...”. Mendelssohn wrote to his sister: “In order to make you understand how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me, the following came into my mind there;” and he quoted the opening measures of the overture. Mendelssohn completed the first version in December, 1830 in Rome, but more than a year later, in January 1832, he wrote that he could not bring ***The Hebrides*** to have a hearing because he did not consider it finished as he originally wrote it – “the whole so-called

development smacks more of counterpoint than of blubber, sea-gulls, and salt cod." By the spring he had re-written it to his satisfaction and on May 14 the overture was performed at concert in London creating "a great sensation."

British composer **Frank Bridge** (1879 – 1941) enjoyed considerable success during his lifetime, but he was never considered among the top rank. Although Frank Bridge is best known for his chamber-music compositions, his orchestral suite, "The Sea," has been extremely popular in England ever since its first performance there in 1912. Like Mendelssohn and Wagner and Debussy before him, the English composer has tried to picture in tone the ocean's varying aspects, and he has said that it is "a sea-lover's dedication to the sea." The work is in four movements: I. Seascape, II) Sea-Foam, III) Moonlight and IV) Storm. The composer supplied his own detailed program:

"Seascape paints the sea on a summer morning. From high drifts is seen a great expanse of waters lying in the sunlight. Warm breezes play over the surface. Sea-Foam froths among the low-lying rocks and pools on the shore, playfully not stormy. Moonlight paints a calm sea at night. The first moonbeams are struggling to pierce through dark clouds, which eventually pass over, leaving the sea shimmering in full moonlight. Finally, a raging *Storm*, rain and tempestuous seas, with the lulling of the storm an allusion to the first number is heard and which may be regarded as the sea-lover's dedication to the sea."

By coincidence, *The Sea* was composed mostly in Eastbourne, on the English Channel, and it was there that Claude Debussy composed much of his own take on the sea, *La Mer*.

~~~Marty Haub