

## EAST MEETS WEST

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THREE outstanding composers of the present day, Bloch, Gruenberg and Ornstein are united by a strength that is drawn from a double spiritual allegiance. They come of a race which has always had much to say and belong to a nation that has always had much to do.

To be part of this young country spiritually may on occasion prove of greater advantage than to be its child by direct inheritance. For the "old American," the insularity of his culture sometimes exerts aesthetic limitation, even technical provincialism. But this same restriction may purge the "new American" of his inherited, Continental long-windedness and a tradition that is often merely slavery to dead men and dead music.

Of these three Jews in America, Ornstein seems to have lost the most by his adoption. His music creates the definite impression that he has been artificially torn from his true spiritual fatherland, Russia. A fatal nostalgia is present even in his later works, revealing itself in the strangest succession of influences—in the allegro of the fourth sonata, that of Rachmaninoff, in its scherzando, Borodin, and in its andante, the later Scriabin.

His music has given us the fine main theme of the piano concerto, and also the emptiness of the scherzando in the fourth piano sonata; the trite orientalism of his cello sonata as well as the subtle pages of the violin sonata. This last-named work, despite a labored radicalism and tempestuousness, reveals a kinship with Scriabin and Szymanowski who, whatever else is said of them, are undoubtedly the great latter-day aristocrats.

Ornstein's strong creative nature has been corroded by a typical American disease, auto-didacticism, and by a typical virtuoso failing, facility and omnivorous absorption—which is also to a somewhat damaging extent a characteristic of Gruen-

berg. The self-taught man is apparent beneath the over-abundance of episodic material in the larger forms such as the cello sonata, in the provincial radicalism of his harmonic methods, as in the *Poems of 1917*, and in the inadequate orchestration of his piano concerto. This facility and eclecticism, together with a typical Jewish loquaciousness, keen and pleasing as the latter may be, give to his musical ideas a curiously all-embracing range. But after all one must remember that these are the weaknesses of a still young composer whose admirable gifts and creative ability have been made abundantly manifest.



Gruenberg is the most American of the group; I might even say he is a New Yorker by vocation. He is as definitely American in spirit and expression as any composer today and at the same time exhibits in creative personality certain strong Jewish traits. In him the typical racial loquaciousness has a Heine-like quality. It is spirited, capricious, untamed and vital. His music is a sort of multi-colored, whimsical, modern *rondo a capriccio*. In fact this formal label is more suited to Gruenberg's whirlpools than to Beethoven's Biedermeyer, *The Lost Penny*.

Apart from a definite musical culture and high technical achievement, also a certain Continental and sophisticated morbidity (one might call it Busoni-ism) which lowers the vitality of his second violin sonata and the *Jazz-Berries*, there is little that is European in Gruenberg's music. The magnificent verve, the formidable range of American life, an ecstasy that belongs to the builders of the future, sweep through his *Creation*. It is this complexity which is the real substance of the work. Yet here, as in other of his compositions, are to be found pictorial, humorous and minor designs, evidence of an over-abundant *remplissage*. His tonal dress is at times too sumptuous, too magnificent.

One other American trait is that of gay and attractive showmanship, permeated by a profound feeling for culture, more warm and pulsating than Bloch's ascetic, passionate intellectualism.

Bloch is less American than either of the others. He is the creator of a single scheme, a single color. This single color in Bloch's tonal garments has often been mistaken for formal unity. But as a matter of fact it is his human, his spiritual stature, coupled with a rare mastery of form that accounts for the marvelous construction of his larger works.

Many foolish things have been written about Bloch and his prophetic visions. Leigh Henry, the London critic, has very brilliantly said, "Bloch is of the line of Job, not of Jacob." There is indeed more of Judaism than Hebraism in Bloch, more the spirit of the ghetto than the Promised Land. He often wails over his own and the world's misfortunes, he exhibits his wounds, even in such magnificent music as *Schelomo*.

But it is a different Bloch that appears when the profounder Israel possesses his spirit, the spirit of a conquering race which has given God and the Law to the world. This is the Bloch of the glorious major coda of *Schelomo* and of *Israel*.

Less original and vital than his gift of construction, which is the greatest in his equipment, is his thematic invention. This is obvious even in the piano quintet which, with *Israel* and the violin sonata, is his best work. It is startling to discover in the main theme of the quintet, with its trite succession of fourths, a dangerous kinship with the leitmotiv from D'Albert's *Tiefland* (the clarinet yodel), not to mention the obvious Hebraism of *Schelomo's* first subject and the Franckism of his *Sea Pictures*.

But on grandeur, which one instinctively feels to be his domain, Bloch has still another claim. A true son of his own age, a master of present-day sharp harmonic and rhythmic language, of tonal structure stripped to essentials, Bloch, however, does not write "for today." In fact he does not care for today, he burns no sacrifice to this vain idol. His spiritual and aesthetic aloofness isolate him from the man in the street and the snob, the two law-givers of our ephemeral time.

Bloch is a lesson to his generation. A creator cannot repeat things uttered earlier and better through the proper mouth-pieces. Yet for path-breaking one must be destined, not artificially trained. And Bloch is contemporary by instinct not by design.