

MODERN MUSIC

ERNEST BLOCH

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AMONG the European musicians who have made the United States their home, Ernest Bloch is a unique figure. Not only is he, aesthetic controversies aside, indubitably of the first rank; he has gone farther than any other in a conscientious effort to identify himself with our musical life and future. His part has been a more active one than that of an independent purveyor of musical wares. As musical director of the Cleveland Institute of Music, and later of the San Francisco Conservatory, he has established himself in the country at large as an important influence in our artistic development, and has at the same time acquired an intimate knowledge of "American musical life:" that odd conglomerate of women's clubs, music "weeks," music memory contests, and other earnest efforts of which the average composer remains in happy ignorance. It was in the United States, moreover, that his most mature work first gained performance and recognition. Thus it is not merely through his assumption of United States citizenship that we are privileged to consider him as an American musician, and to regard his personality and achievement as in a most real sense identified with the development of music in his adopted country.

The principal facts of Bloch's career are fairly well known. The earliest which need concern us here is the completion in 1903 of his first important work. The *Symphony in C# minor*, while by no means free from "influences," is prophetic in that it not only reveals a consummate mastery of technique, but

sketches in its main aspects all that future works will confirm as the temperament, the "artistic personality" of the composer. The opera *Macbeth* followed; four years were required for its completion, and four more elapsed before it was finally performed at the Opéra-Comique. In the meantime Bloch had composed *Hiver-Printemps*, two short movements for orchestra, and a cycle of songs, *Poèmes d'Automne*. These four works must be considered together as what Wilhelm von Lenz would have called Bloch's "first manner." *Macbeth* in particular is interesting, not only because of its own great qualities, but because of the light which it throws on certain aspects of his later development.

Indeed, it is difficult at some moments to resist the temptation to regard *Macbeth* as Bloch's masterpiece. Since writing the *Symphony*, he has obviously become acquainted with *Boris* and *Pelléas*; but while he has been deeply impressed by both styles, he has molded them to his own uses, with a result that is neither Mussorgski or Debussy. One is aware of a new personality, full-blooded, uninhibited, and conscious of its own strength. The irony, the violent and uncompromising sincerity, the profound pessimism of Bloch's later works, are already here, transmitted through the impersonal medium of the Shakespearian tragedy. This is not the place for an analysis of this very remarkable work, nor could the criticisms of Lalo, Gatti, and Pizzetti be easily improved upon. But to those who know *Macbeth* it must remain a mystery why it has not been revived, or performed elsewhere than in Paris.

It seems to us that while Bloch's more mature works show an enormous advance in originality, force, and sharpness of contour, there is in *Macbeth* a freshness of mood, an exuberance and fecundity alike of spirit and of musical invention, which do not again fully appear. Is it possible that this later music does not completely contain the whole man? It is as though in becoming more conscious of his personality, his "message," he had almost deliberately thrown aside the serenity—one is even tempted to say the universality—of his native musical impulse.

The projected opera, *Jézabel*, still today only a mass of remarkable sketches, served as point of departure for the *Jewish*

Cycle: the *Trois Poèmes Juifs*, the *Psalms* for soprano and orchestra, *Schelomo*, the *Psalm 22* for baritone, and finally the unfinished symphony, *Israel*, which filled the years from 1912 to 1916. In these works, Bloch's style defines itself with splendid assurance.

Wherein, exactly, lies the specifically "Jewish" character of this music? Bloch has stated his aims clearly enough: "It is not my desire to attempt a 'reconstitution' of Jewish music It is the Jewish soul that interests me, the complex, glowing, agitated soul that I feel vibrating throughout the Bible All this is in us, all this is in me, and it is the better part of me. It is all this that I endeavor to hear in myself and to transcribe in my music: the venerable emotion of the race that slumbers way down in our soul." It would be difficult indeed to find a better statement of the aesthetic which underlies these works. His music is self-revelatory, and quite consciously reveals an ideal self rather than an actual one. His role is prophet or orator, rather than lyric poet; least of all is it creator of objective aesthetic worlds.

Materially, this music is above all sumptuous and grandiose; rich and exuberant in color, luxuriant and full-blown in form. Its austerity, if such it can be called, is a pagan austerity of mood; intensity and concentration rather than essential restraint, a quality of his soul rather than of his art. Indeed, the overwhelming power not only of the Jewish works, but of Bloch's music as a whole, is perhaps attributable before all else to this extraordinary directness and intensity of feeling, together with the splendor of its material embodiment. And if we speak of body and soul as more or less separate existences in art, we do so in deference to Bloch's own thought, the consistent basis of his whole creative activity.

More specifically, the orientalism of the Jewish works shows itself in certain melodic and harmonic traits. The trumpet calls, for instance, with which they abound, give them a character at once barbaric and ritualistic. Actual Jewish melodies, on the other hand, occur but rarely and incidentally, and not as the result of a desire on Bloch's part to reproduce folk-lore. What he has done is to allow his imagination to play on the embodi-

ment of a truly Jewish spirit in music, and in so doing he has created a style which is entirely personal. His orientalism is a part of the fully assimilated substance of his music, and in no sense a pseudo-oriental décor. To his work as a whole it lends a singular freedom which, as Guido Gatti has well said, is "before the schools and not after them." Thus the use of a single quarter-tone in *Schelomo* is in no way disturbing to our sense of a style in which, through the completeness of its imaginative mastery, the utmost freedom of melodic line becomes natural and in the aesthetic sense inevitable.

More profoundly individual, perhaps, than Bloch's orientalism is the quality which arises from its amalgamation with an element of quite different origin. He is not only a Jew, but a European. The solid fruits of his musical culture are everywhere present in his work. Years ago he startled a critic by acknowledging the influence of Beethoven in *Macbeth*; yet this influence, with that of the other classics, has persisted in his later music, and is a no less living force in *Schelomo* than in the *C# minor Symphony*. Above all, in his approach to the problems of form, he is a traditionalist in the best sense of the word. As truly as his orientalism, his classical culture is something inherent in the nature of his art. Even when, in his less felicitous moments, two different aesthetic impulses seem to conflict in his music, one cannot question the reality of either.



An increasing affirmation of this cultural heritage is evident in the four large works which follow the *Jewish Cycle*. The *Quartet*, the *Suite* for viola, the *Sonata* for violin and piano, and the *Quintet* were composed at intervals of approximately two years, the three last-named in moments literally snatched between hours of teaching or administrative work. All four reveal a progressive tendency towards more closely-knit formal construction.

In these works he gradually divests his style of its Jewish garments. In the first movement of the *Quartet* they are still

very much in evidence; indeed nowhere are they more perfectly fused, more profoundly felt in the aesthetic sense, than here. In the finale of the same work they appear episodically; and there are still traces of them in the *Suite*, where, however, they are merged in a style of altogether different character. In the *Sonata* and the *Quintet* they have virtually ceased to exist; Bloch's style, even his attitude towards his art, has undergone a radical change. If, in the *Jewish Cycle*, he gave voice to a positive belief in the value, the grandeur, of human suffering, in the greatness of his racial tradition and hence, by implication, the essential greatness of the human spirit, in these later works his dominant moods are those of pessimism, irony, and nostalgia, felt with the utmost intensity and embodied in works whose emotional or even philosophical tendencies are defined with unmistakable clearness.

It is significant that he writes no longer primarily for the orchestra. The *Suite*, to be sure, is orchestral in its final form; but here his conception of the orchestra differs in essentials from that which had produced *Schelomo*. Although the *Suite* has the same richness and depth of coloring, it is astonishingly different in texture. *Schelomo* is conceived on the broadest and grandest scale; for all its wealth of color, its power lies above all in its largeness of utterance. The *Suite*, on the other hand, retains its character as chamber music even in the orchestral version. Individual timbres, finely wrought details, a texture reduced to barest essentials, make it the most delicate of Bloch's works. On the piano this consummate transparency is lost. The proportions are completely altered through the undisputed supremacy of the solo instrument.

The smaller medium in which these works are cast, is the logical vehicle of a more personal mode of speech. Bloch no longer writes as a Jew, but rather as a solitary individual. His language becomes, in fact, at once more individual and more detached. In abandoning the expression of a collective faith, he grows increasingly aware of the menace of superhuman forces over which he has only a limited control. The violence of his later music is ruthless and mechanical; it is no longer the voice of human suffering and revolt. It externalizes itself more

often in brusque and vehement rhythms, insistent sometimes almost beyond endurance, than in the sharp and broken pathetic accents of his earlier style. Irony, of which there is hardly a trace in the Jewish works, becomes one of his characteristic moods, manifesting itself above all in a fondness for the grotesque, for caricature; the *allegro ironico* of the *Suite*, like its Lisztian prototype, is the embodiment of the "Spirit that denies." In the moments of rarest beauty, disillusion becomes resigned. A serenity akin to that of the end of *Israel* returns, deeper and richer in true eloquence, in the wonderful last pages of the *Violin Sonata*; but whereas in the earlier work this serenity arises from faith and ultimate confidence, it is in the later one imbued with profound sadness.

The nostalgia at which we have already hinted grows out of this disillusion. A longing for distant lands, softer climates, simpler conditions of life, shows itself in the guise of an increasing fondness for the exotic, quite different in essence from the orientalism of the *Jewish Cycle*. For many years Bloch has been an ardent collector of exotic music from all parts of the world, and his later style is interspersed with conscious borrowings from this source: it abounds in sonorities, modes, rhythms, actual musical fragments, of Far-Eastern origin or suggestion. The parallel with Gauguin immediately suggests itself; there is no doubt that the same moment in the history of the human spirit produced both artists, nor that the bitterness and despair which led Gauguin to the islands of the Pacific have taken Bloch there many times in thought.

From the purely musical standpoint, the exotic elements in Bloch's later works tend sometimes to assume the character of external bodies, absorbed into his style by sheer force of will and technical mastery. We have spoken already of the rare moments in the Jewish works when the European and the oriental elements in the music seem to clash with one another. At its best, when the elements are most perfectly fused, this duality of culture and sensibility gives Bloch's work its most profound character. But the exoticism of the *Quintet* and the *Sonata* is more essentially picturesque, felt less through its sounds and rhythms than through its powers of evocation; and at certain

moments, enchanted by the rare and beautiful sonorities, one suffers a passing resentment when an architecture belonging in essence to our own time and place—an architecture of which Bloch is preeminently a master—begins to assert its sovereign rights.



Since 1916 Bloch had lived in the United States. The experience of American life, with its ruthless impersonality, its restlessness and confusion, intensified the pessimism, the sense of a decaying culture, which had been part of his European experience. In the *Suite*, the *Sonata*, and the *Quintet*, however, he is still the spectator. His real contact with American life began in 1920 with his appointment as director of a Middle-Western conservatory. This chapter is most illuminating; from a distance it assumes the form of a sort of panorama of American provincial life in its most characteristic phases, thrown into clear if lurid relief by the apparition of a personality such as Bloch's. Starting with the highest artistic ideals, Bloch soon became aware of the tendency to institutionalize which in the newer parts of the United States applies itself no less ruthlessly to education and culture than to industry. His very name was from the start capitalized for advertising purposes; he was, moreover, expected to devote to the gaining of enrollments or subscriptions his force of conviction, and his immense persuasive powers—powers already strained in the defence of fundamentals of his educational policy. Even his proposal to establish a Theory Department met with some opposition at first; it was considered a quite unwarranted addition to a "practical" curriculum. What, then, of solfeggio? What of the "fixed *do*," long established in Europe as the basis of musical instruction, but regarded in America as difficult and unproductive of quick results? The convincing demonstration, by means of musical tests, of Bloch's accuracy of judgment in these matters, was of no real avail in lessening the obstinacy with which certain of his pedagogical principles were opposed. A system of instruction which, eliminating

“marks” and text-books, took as its point of departure the direct musical experience of the pupil, and sought constantly to enlarge, to co-ordinate this experience through observation rather than rules: such was Bloch’s aim. But to the majority of those with whom he had to deal, such a conception was quite incomprehensible, and its methods of procedure unheard-of innovations.

In the end, one is forced to conclude, Cleveland’s rejection of Bloch was a rejection precisely of the best that he had to give—that, as all who were with him can testify, he wanted so passionately to give. His very geniality, his force of conviction, his ironic laughter—his richness of temperament and culture, in other words—stood in his way. The city which had summoned him, at first disarmed by his magnetism into partial capitulation, took alarm before the full impact of his personality. It was not, in the last analysis, an individual, a style, or an aesthetic that went down to defeat in Cleveland; it was rather just those disinterested and humane conceptions which form the indispensable background for artistic creation of any kind. The story of this episode deserves to be written more fully, and with more detachment, than is possible here; its value as documentation to some future historian of American culture would be inestimable.

Could it be wondered at had the chief protagonist emerged from such a struggle for the moment a little wearied, a little less prodigal of himself, a little on his guard? When we consider the music which Bloch has written since the *Quintet* it is impossible to escape some such conclusion. Certainly it contains fine pages, but little that is intrinsically new. Four years, however, may count for little in the sum of an artist’s work. One has only to look back over Bloch’s most memorable works: the *Cortège Funèbre* of the *Trois Poèmes Juifs*; *Schelomo*; the *Quartet*, on the whole his most deeply beautiful work; the slow movement of the *Sonata*; the massive opening movement of the *Quintet*—but why enumerate them?—to realize all that it is one’s right to expect, and one’s duty to hope for in the future, from an artist of such stature. Let us then content ourselves for the present with the fact that he now lives in the mellower and more congenial atmosphere of San Francisco, where he is allowed comparative freedom from administrative details, re-

membering that the career of a man like Bloch is inevitably full of surprises.



Since the critical moment of Bloch's artistic life, the moment at which his mature style formed itself, changes have taken place—changes which penetrate to the very depths of the soul of Europe and America. Art, too, has felt the fatal impact of these changes, and it has become increasingly evident that the future must see either the death of Western culture or a supreme effort towards reconstruction. Younger men are dreaming of an entirely different type of music—a music which derives its power from forms beautiful and significant by virtue of inherent musical weight rather than intensity of utterance; a music whose impersonality and self-sufficiency preclude the exotic, which takes its impulse from the realities of a passionate logic; which, in the authentic freshness and simplicity of its moods, is the reverse of ironic and in its very aloofness from the concrete preoccupations of life, strives rather to contribute form, design, a vision of order and harmony. Such a music, like all that is vital in art, seeks affinities in the past. Bloch, in his splendid enthusiasm for the masters of the sixteenth century, for Bach, for Haydn, has helped more than one of his pupils to comprehend the true nature of such an art, and to appreciate the forces in the culture of today which make our impulse toward it inevitable. Of a passage in the *De Profundis* of Orlando di Lasso he once said, "I can conceive of a day when Beethoven will seem old-fashioned; even Bach may one day seem old-fashioned, while Wagner has begun to seem so already. But this can never grow old." The newer music, so radically different from his own, owes then something very concrete to the culture which has gone into the making of Bloch. And if the effort of a different conception to assert itself has temporarily seemed to isolate him, to deprive him of adequate recognition, there can be no doubt that the adjustments of history will restore to him his true place among the artists who have spoken most commandingly the language of conscious emotion.