

# On the Horizon: Ernest Bloch's "Sacred Service"

*The composer Ernest Bloch, who recently passed his seventieth birthday, was prominent among those who brought the aesthetic revolution of "modernist" music to these shores. But, Kurt List suggests here, Bloch's lasting contribution may be not to the broader stream of modern music in general, but rather to the tributary of Jewish music, where his work is preeminent.*

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Now that Ernest Bloch has passed his seventieth birthday, many musicians look back on his career with a sense of unfulfilled promise, expressed most clearly, and with a touch of cruelty, in the remark of one well-known American composer: "Isn't it amazing what a disappointment Bloch has turned out to be?"

To understand this attitude, one must go back to the circumstances in which America became acquainted with Bloch. He came to the United States first in 1916 as conductor of an orchestra accompanying the dancer Maud Allen. In his thirty-six years he had already earned a small reputation in Europe: mostly in Paris, where his opera *Macbeth* was produced in 1910 with all the concomitants of a minor scandal, and in Switzerland, where he was born and at whose Geneva Conservatory he taught for several years; but American musicians were quite unaware of his existence. The Allen tour collapsed, and Bloch found himself stranded in a cheap furnished room in New York. From there he stretched out his feelers, got in touch with some of the younger composers, played his scores for them on a battered piano, and because of the unusual melismatic-Oriental aspects of most of his music (exemplified in the constant repetition of certain basic note-patterns) was hailed as a prophet of uncharted musical courses. Stravinsky and Schoenberg were then quite unknown on these shores; and to a young generation in quest of music beyond the traditional Wagnerisms then prevalent in our concert life, Bloch's simple declamatory music, strongly infused with medieval and Oriental melodic turns, looked like an important revolutionary step. It was not long before Bloch became a musical culture hero of America. There is today a whole generation of composers, including such men as Roger Sessions, Douglas Moore, Randall Thompson, Frederick Jacoby, and George Antheil, whose musical education was guided by him.

In the 20's the question of "Jewish music" was not yet so much in the foreground of discussion as it has been in recent years. Bloch's music appealed purely on its musical merits, although even then it included programmatic works of a consciously Jewish character, such as the *Israel* symphony, the *Schelomo* rhapsody, the orchestral *Trois Poètes Juifs*, and the vocal-orchestral *Psalms 22, 114, and 137*. In healthy contrast to the attitudes prevailing today, music was appreciated for its aesthetic

values and not for its ideological basis; what composers admired in Bloch was his introduction of certain exotic strands that considerably enriched Western music.

But Bloch was no innovator like Stravinsky, whom he seemed at first to resemble most, or Schoenberg. His melismatic and rhapsodic style was purely personal. As such, it remained fixed in his development and did not, as in Stravinsky's case, lead to anything further. Bloch is definitely a minor master, and, like many other minor masters, he sprang full-grown into the public's eye at an early age and has not essentially developed since, though his late work clearly remains on the same high level of craftsmanship and emotional sincerity as the earlier.

It is understandable, therefore, that Bloch has been a disappointment to those who looked for guidance toward the future. Yet today, when we can look back on his work, we still find logic and consistency in it. Possibly none of his music has influenced or ever will influence the mainstream of Western music. But in the field of "Jewish music" it occupies much more than a modest niche.

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This was brought home quite forcefully last season when London Records released Bloch's *Avodath Hakodesh (Soared Service)*<sup>1</sup> The recording of this work, commissioned in 1930 by Gerald Warburg, written between 1932 and 1934, and first Performed in 1934,<sup>2</sup> was decidedly the high point of a season of Jewish music otherwise as barren and devoid of creative inspiration as the preceding ones. More than merely a well-wrought musical work, the *Sacred Service* opens up an original facet of Jewish music that should prove of interest to all those concerned with the field.

The *Avodath Hakodesh*, in Bloch's words, "is a setting of Hebrew texts used in the Reform temples of America. Most of them belong to the Sabbath morning service, and they originate from the Psalms, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Proverbs, and other sources of Jewish spiritual patrimony. . . . Musically, the work falls into five parts, following the liturgy, the whole to be performed without interruption."

In many ways the piece is highly eclectic. Undoubtedly, Brahms is its godfather in several respects, such as the pastoral setting of the beginning or the dark and terrifying melancholia in *Etz Chayim*. Then there are strains of British epic music: the same influences that shaped the climaxes of William Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* can also be heard here in the *Borechu*. Occasionally a folk idiom is invoked that has no specific source, but gains its folk character from a forced simplicity that is best described as an international folk language (German Romantic composers always used to prefix such sections with the term "*Mit Innigkeit*"). Puccini very often makes use of this device, and it is with his music that the *Kodosh* seems to have its greatest affinity.

Original Jewish or Hebrew melodies are used but rarely. Whenever they appear, as in the *Tzur Yisroel*, where a traditional tune is left unaltered in the melody, with the orchestra furnishing a disproportionate harmonic and coloristic background, the composer seems quite helpless; this is the more surprising since technical craft is Bloch's most conspicuous asset. The same helplessness appears again when he attempts to emulate a traditional idea with his own material as he does in the *Veoharto*. The result sounds stiff and markedly unconvincing.

From this one might conclude that the *Avodath Hakodesh* is a work in the Western tradition, far removed from Hebrew liturgy. This, however, is not the case. While Bloch at his most convincing steers clear of traditional emulations, he stamps his liturgy with a Hebraic character by other and far more important means. These are musical, organizational, and ideological.

Musically, Bloch differs from other composers by an original harmonic approach that employs the modes of medieval music in a unique fashion. At first glance, his music appears tonal in the modern sense; that is to say, it uses the classic harmonic progressions in a seemingly modified way. But what is primarily felt as modification is essentially a throwback to much earlier times. Bloch's chord progressions are separated from the melodic line; they are not, as in traditional harmony, invented together with the melody; instead, they are repeated tone clusters into which a melody, which is mostly traditionally Western, is integrated *a posteriori*. Thus both harmony and melody are felt as almost traditional; yet the divergence from the classical covenant is obvious. It is this aspect of his music that earned Bloch his original reputation as a revolutionary inventor. Actually he skirts the modern issue skilfully and beautifully. By interrelating modern melodic and ancient harmonic aspects he seemingly avoids both traditional epigonism and neoclassic preciousness. Yet he manages, without actually going the whole way with the "modernists," to shift his music to a new level where it sounds unusual, even revolutionary, to modern ears. Beyond that, it sounds "foreign," for often the melodies have to be modified chromatically to fit the modal harmonic scheme. Since this scheme, by repeating rather than adapting stereotyped formulas, runs counter to late Wagnerian chromaticism, the patterns of Bloch's melodies often have a chromatic repetitiveness reminiscent of Oriental melisma. These patterns, taken together with Bloch's unusual harmonic scheme and the titles he appropriated from a liturgical or Biblical frame of reference, have often suggested a new kind of Jewish music.

The organization of the *Avodath Hakodesh* embraces the basic tenets of both Hebrew and Christian liturgy. The invocations of the precentor, the subsequent responses, and the meditative orchestral interludes, are in the broad tradition. It is this organization that most decidedly gives the work its liturgical character.

Where the work differs most markedly from all other compositions of similar intention is in its ideology. Bloch establishes an immediate relationship with God. But unlike the God of Catholic liturgy—an alternately benevolent and scolding father—Bloch’s is the immutable, strict, and avenging Lord of the Old Testament. Where Bloch attempts to express joy, as in the *Borechu*, he succeeds only in expressing stern savagery. “Sing praise to the Lord” is praise of God the Avenger. In the *Toroh Tzivoh*, when the Scroll is taken from and returned to the Ark, the Lord is one with the Torah, “the Law of the house of Jacob.” In the *Toras Adonoy* the words read, “The Law of the Lord is perfect, It doth restore the soul.” But this soul is restored to a musical accompaniment of a coldness such as can be found in no other composer, save perhaps in some passages of the severely pietistic North German *Deutsches Requiem* by Brahms.

It is, of course, ultimately inadmissible to speak of music in such literary terms as I have used above; these can convey at best only the writer’s personal reaction to a work. But the fact remains that Bloch creates a unique personal mood which can hardly be analyzed in musical terms, and which has tended to affect almost all critics in the same manner. Adolfo Salazar speaks of Bloch’s inspiration as something to be found “in the robust pages of the Scriptures”; Peter Gradenwitz remarks on Bloch’s “confessional style”; Marion Bauer sees the role of the cantor in the *Avodath Hakodesh* as that of “leader and prophet”; and Alfred Einstein asserts that Bloch “tries to construct the character and spirit of his race out of himself.”

For Bloch himself, the *Toroh Tzivoh* is his high point. He remarks in his notes to the work that man’s “‘equations’ of his pride and ‘knowledge’ are formulas, mere labels and theories, to be changed from time to time in the course of history. He is completely ignorant of the causes of all that is essential—Time, Space, Matter, Thought. Thus, as a last resort, he commits himself, soul and body, into God’s hands; or, if one prefers it, he relies humbly upon the vast forces, the laws, the everlasting and higher Truth of the Universe, and upon their ultimate wisdom.” Here is none of the trust in a higher being whose final decisions can be swayed by prayer and supplication; for Bloch, as for the Hebrew prophets, God is immutable Law, and the central theological question is not that of faith but that of truth. It is in this respect that Bloch’s music is perhaps most expressive of the classic Jewish spirit; for by asserting the existence of an objective eternal truth, as distinguished from the subjective state of faith, Bloch poses the theological problem as basic. Thus he admits and even implies the possibility of skepticism and disputation. In a lesser degree Bloch may be regarded as the Spinoza of modern music.

And thus he has opened another avenue towards the creation of Jewish music. I have already demonstrated in some previous articles the main directions in which a Jewish renaissance in music is being attempted. Bloch follows none of these. He avoids the integration of traditional melos with

modern textures, as indicated by Schoenberg, Fromm, and others. Where Bloch uses traditional melos he becomes markedly awkward. He also refrains from emulating Eastern melodies in the way Weinberg, Binder, and Saminsky do. Whenever Bloch re-creates a Hebrew tune that is not in his own image, it is a complete failure. And he engages in no effort such as Vinaver's to revitalize the Orthodox traditional line. On the contrary, one might go so far as to say that Bloch is essentially ignorant of the Jewish and Hebrew treasury of folklore and synagogue chant.

Bloch has said of himself that he is not an "archeologist." He is interested in the Jewish soul, "the complex, glowing, agitated soul that I feel vibrating throughout the Bible: the freshness and naivety of the Patriarchs; the violence of the Prophetic Books; the savage Jewish love of justice; the despair of Ecclesiastes; the sorrow and the immense greatness of the Book of Job; the sensuality of the Song of Songs."

By and large, Bloch has admirably conveyed all this. Where he errs is in believing that "this message . . . in its great simplicity and variety . . . embodies a philosophy acceptable to all men." It seems rather that, by depicting the spirit of the Scriptures, Bloch has created such a uniquely separatist and Jewish world that it becomes radically unassimilable for the Western world. Yet, if there is such a thing as Jewish music, Bloch's comes closest to it.

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It is something of a mystery why a man born and raised in Switzerland in the 1880's, a place and time of almost absolute indifference toward the Jewish question, should have felt it so constantly and passionately. Perhaps the answer is to be found in Bloch's essential lack of concern with "Jewish" data in the concrete sense, his basic ignorance of Jewish musical tradition which forced him to treat Judaism as almost an extraneous element to be *added* to music, his religious fervor and literary pre-occupation. For Bloch's music is essentially literary, both in its source of inspiration and in its purpose. And this dependence upon literature presents the greatest obstacle to his attaining greatness.

Bloch's music is basically liturgical, even in its most abstract moods. As such, it is bound to be programmatic. It is symptomatic that Bloch's chief faults—lack of structural coherence, as we find most markedly in his *Schelomo*, and lack of taste, as in the community-sing passages of *America*—are absent from the *Avodath Hakodesh*. This only reasserts the fact that Bloch's first love is the liturgy. For while it is true that even in his secular works, such as *America* and *Helvetia*, there is an almost liturgical confessional turn toward things holy to the composer, it is not until the *Avodath Hakodesh* that Bloch freely and unashamedly peruses all the established patterns of the liturgical form.

Having created in his *Avodath Hakodesh* a rather unique and unmistakably Jewish work, Bloch forces us to ask ourselves a very pertinent question: can Jewish music be anything else but liturgical, in the same way that Catholic or Protestant music is liturgical? And as the Church has justly recognized the masses of Mozart or Rossini to be secular, essentially un-Catholic works, should not all Jewish music outside the liturgy be recognized as an unhistorical hybrid? If we answer this question in the affirmative, very little of so-called “Jewish” music, except Bloch’s works and the traditional chant, will preserve its reason for existence, either as music or as “Jewish.”

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**1** Marko Rothmuller, baritone, Dorothy Bond, soprano, Doris Cowan, contralto, with the London Philharmonic Choir, chorus master Frederick Jackson, and the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by the composer. One 12” long-playing record. London Records LLP-123. \$5.95.

**2** The first performance was in Turin, Italy, in January 1934, with the composer conducting. The first American performance was in Carnegie Hall, April 11, 1934, by the Schola Cantorum.

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**Written by Kurt List for Commentary, Dec. 1950**

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