

ERNEST BLOCH

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Ernest Bloch was born in Geneva to Jewish parents on 24 July 1880, and began playing the violin at the age of nine and began composing soon after.

He studied music at the conservatory in Brussels, where his teachers included the celebrated Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe. He then travelled around Europe, moving to Germany where he studied composition from 1900–1901 with Iwan Knorr at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt, moving on to Paris in 1903 and, then, back to Geneva before settling in the United States in 1916, taking American citizenship in 1924.

His compositions are said to have fallen into several categories:

Unpublished juvenile pieces 1885-1900

First European period 1901-1916 including the Jewish cycle 1912-1916

Works written in New York 1917-1920

Works written in Cleveland 1920-1925

Works written in San Francisco 1925-1930

Second European period 1930-1938

American West Coast period 1939-1959

The first Symphony is in C sharp minor and dates from 1903 and lasts about 55 minutes. It is well structured and the opening movement is hugely impressive and has a tremendous impact, some times heroic. The music can be heart rending and then very powerful and the orchestration throughout is superlative. The second movement often has a lilting beauty, perhaps with a slight hint of a landler. The music evolves naturally unlike the bombastics of Mahler. The third movement with its fanfares has an epic and medieval feel while the final has many intimate moments and is, again, on an epic scale. A truly remarkable work but when do we hear it in a concert hall? Indeed, it is a masterpiece.

The Israel Symphony was written between 1912 and 1916 and is in three movements. The first, *lent e solennel*, is quite beautiful and very brief and is a meditation and an evocation of the mobile temple in the wilderness. The second movement is forceful and based on the Day of Atonement and the third movement introduces two sopranos, two altos and a bass and the text is reminiscent of Psalms 142 and 143. The music is gorgeous and gives an enduring satisfaction. The composer conducted the premiere in Carnegie Hall, New York, on 3 May 1917.

The Suite for viola and orchestra dates from around the same time and was said by the composer not to be a Jewish work, but inspired by the Far East such as Java, Sumatra and Borneo. From a child, Bloch had been interested in the Far East and things exotic. The work is rhapsodic and recitative but the music has a glow and warmth its very own.



He held several teaching appointments in the U.S.A with George Antheil, Frederick Jacobi, Quincy Porter, Bernard Rogers, and Roger Sessions among his pupils. In 1917, Bloch became the first teacher of composition at Mannes College also known as The New School for Music, a post he held for three years. In December 1920, he was appointed the first Musical Director of the newly formed Cleveland Institute of Music, a post he held until 1925. Following this, he was director of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music until 1930.

Much of his piano music dates from 1922 and 1923. *In the Night* is subtitled a Love Poem for piano and is a nocturne in A flat minor with a restless bass part and a chromatic right hand. Some unfortunate person described it as rather Scriabinesque, which is a bewilderingly comment, but the work takes on a sunnier clime and ends in A flat major. *Nirvana* appeared in 1923 and is dedicated to the Danish soprano, Poyla Frijsh, and the title refers to Buddhism. The extremes of the keyboard are used and the drum like opening figure returns and there is a real feeling of impressionism, and a throbbing fanfare-like figure.

Enfantines is a series of ten pieces for children with ink drawings by his 15-year-old daughter Lucienne. The third is dedicated to his eldest daughter, Suzanne.

Five Sketches in Sepia also date from 1923 and this is an unfortunate title since the music has colour.

The major work in this genre is the *Piano Sonata* of 1935, published in 1948. It is different from the pieces of the 1920s being more advanced and challenging. The music is often sunny with dotted rhythms and elements of a toccata as well as a chant. The first movement ends in an eastern flavour which is taken up in the second movement which is both haunting and beautiful and builds up into massive climax. The final is a march perhaps portraying the tense atmosphere of the mid 1930s and the dreadful and unforgiveable persecution of the Jews. While he was working on this sonata, he was also working on *Voice in the Wilderness* for cello and orchestra which is in six movements and a cadenza, and may describe the prophets of the Old Testament and their visions.

The work is six meditations written while the composer was living near Geneva. It was originally written for the piano as *Visions and Prophecies* consisting of five of the six movements. Each movement is bipartite in structure, the first part for orchestra and the second introducing the cello. The first movement is grave and solemn and the second may suggest bitterness. The third is somewhat extrovert and the fourth is idyllic whereas the fifth is lively and the sixth is marked *allegro giocoso*. The work is deeply felt and contains some fine music and the writing for the cello is superlative. No composer of his time wrote better for the cello and yet inferior works for cello and orchestra are regularly played.

Schelomo for cello and orchestra was composed in 1915 and is in three movements and entitled a Hebrew rhapsody. The title is Hebrew for Solomon, but may not be entirely based on his life but taken from verses in the book of Ecclesiastes, said to be written by Solomon, with a possible future view of Bloch writing a vocal work based on these writings.

The cellist Alexandre Barjansky (1883-1961) was profoundly impressed by the work and his wife Katia (1890 -1965) made a sculpture of Solomon. Perhaps the character of Solomon is here, a proud and pompous man who had many women whose turned him away from the true God. He built places of worship for these pagan gods. His ruthless actions on his people to build the temple and his own palace left the Jews in poverty and lead to the division of the kingdom into two kingdoms namely Israel and Judah. The work hints at a synagogue chant *Tzur Yisroel* (*Rock of Israel*) which appears in Bloch's *Sacred Service* and *Schelomo* is technically difficult to perform and superbly written for the soloist.

The *Sacred Service* of 1933 is clearly a masterpiece and one cannot fully understand why it is seldom performed. The composer had been considering setting pages from Ecclesiastes since 1914 but could

not find a suitable text in any language and his Hebrew was scant. Many settings of the mass were available but nothing from the Jewish tradition. The work was premiered on 12 January 1934 on Radio Turin and was a dramatized account of a spiritual journey. The scoring is truly amazing from its deftness to its power but it has never become popular perhaps because of anti-Semitism such as expressed by Wagner and Chopin and practised by Hitler and the ruthless Nazis. Even today in the UK, we have politicians and public figures like George Galloway and Ken Livingstone who hate the Jews. This racism and bigotry is both unacceptable and cruel.

This choral masterpiece has no equal although Walton and Fricker wrote exceptional choral works.

The Violin Concerto of 1938 recalls some of the cantorial content of the Sacred Service and Amerindian songs from New Mexico. It has some splendid music and was taken by Joseph Szigeti and Menuhin did not understand the work and misrepresented the composer's instructions.

In 1941, Bloch moved to the small coastal community of Agate Beach, Oregon and lived there for the rest of his life. He taught and lectured at the University of California, Berkeley until 1952.

His Sinfonia breve of 1953 lasts about 20 minutes and is in four short movements namely Moderato, Andante, Allegro molto and Allegro deciso and it is somewhat rhapsodic, that is to say it often stops and starts. The final allegro ends at a leisurely pace and is peaceful, but there are moments of high voltage and the work again shows the composer's skill in orchestration. The conductor, Antal Dorati, revelled in this work.

The unusual Sinfonia (or Symphony) for trombone and orchestra appeared in the following year and, in 1955, we have the Symphony in E flat. The trombone work, among many things shows its lyrical side in an 18 minute concerto. The E flat symphony lasts about 25 minutes and is in four movements viz Allegro deciso-tranquillo,

Allegro, Andante and Allegro deciso. It is not his best work and is, in fact, rather ordinary, and the content becomes very wearisome at the end.

The chamber music is very fine as shown in the piano quintets and the string quartets although these may be somewhat intense for some listeners.

Bloch died on 15 July 1959 in Portland, Oregon, of cancer. He was 78. His body was cremated and his ashes were scattered near his home in Agate Beach.

The Bloch Memorial has been moved from near his house in Agate Beach to a more prominent location at the Newport Performing Arts Center in Newport, Oregon.

Works

Stage

Macbeth, Opera in 3 acts (1909 Geneva-Paris)

Orchestral

Symphony in C# minor (1902)

Hiver-Printemps (1905 Paris-Geneva)

Trois Poèmes Juifs for large orchestra (1913 Satigny)

Israel, Symphony for orchestra (1916 Geneva)

In the Night: A Love Poem (1922 Cleveland)

Poems of the Sea (1922 Cleveland)
Concerto Grosso No. 1 for string orchestra with piano obbligato (1925 Santa Fe - Cleveland)
Four Episodes for chamber orchestra (1926 San Francisco)
America: An Epic Rhapsody for Orchestra (1926 San Francisco)
Helvetia, Symphonic Poem (1929 Frankfurt - San Francisco)
Evocations, Symphonic Suite (1937 Châtel, Haute Savoie)
Suite Symphonique (1944 Agate Beach)
In Memoriam (1952 Agate Beach)
Concerto Grosso No. 2 for string orchestra (1952 Agate Beach)
Sinfonia Breve (1953 Agate Beach)
Symphony in E \flat (1955 Agate Beach)

Concertante

Schelomo, Rhapsodie Hébraïque for cello solo and large orchestra (1916 Geneva-New York)
Suite for viola and orchestra (1919 New York)
Voice in the Wilderness, Symphonic Poem for orchestra with cello obbligato (1936 Châtel, Haute Savoie)
Concerto for violin and orchestra (1938 Châtel, Haute Savoie)
Baal Shem for violin and orchestra (1939)
Concerto Symphonique for piano and orchestra (1948 Agate Beach)
Scherzo Fantasque for piano and orchestra (1948 Agate Beach)
Concertino for flute, viola and string orchestra (1948, 1950 Agate Beach)
Suite Hébraïque, for viola (or violin) and orchestra (1951 Agate Beach)
Symphony for trombone and orchestra (1954 Agate Beach)
Proclamation for trumpet and orchestra (1955 Agate Beach)
Suite Modale for flute and string orchestra (1956 Agate Beach)
Two Last Poems for flute solo and orchestra (1958 Agate Beach)

Vocal and choral

Historiettes au Crépuscule for mezzo-soprano and piano (1904 Paris)
Poèmes d'Automne for mezzo-soprano and orchestra (1906 Geneva)
Psaume 22 (1913 Satigny)
Deux Psaumes pour soprano et orchestre, précédés d'un prélude orchestral (1914 Satigny)
Avodath Hakodesh (Sacred Service) (1933 Roveredo-Ticino)
America: An Epic Rhapsody for chorus and orchestra (1926 San Francisco)

Chamber

Piano Quintet No. 1 (1923 Cleveland)
Piano Quintet No. 2 (1957)
String Quartet
String Quartet in G (1896)
String Quartet No. 1 (1916 Geneva - New York)
String Quartet No. 2 (1945 Agate Beach)
String Quartet No. 3 (1952 Agate Beach)
String Quartet No. 4 (1953 Agate Beach)
String Quartet No. 5 (1956 Agate Beach)
In the Mountains (1924 Cleveland)
Night (1923 Cleveland)
Paysages (1923 Cleveland); the first movement Night was inspired by Robert J. Flaherty's
Nanook of the North

Prelude (1925 Cleveland)
Two Pieces (1938, 1950 Châtel, Haute Savoie - Agate Beach)
Three Nocturnes for piano trio (1924 Cleveland)

Instrumental

Violin

Sonata No. 1 for violin and piano (1920 Cleveland)
Baal Shem (1923 Cleveland)
Poème Mystique, Sonata No. 2 for violin and piano (1924 Cleveland)
Nuit Exotique (1924 Cleveland)
Abodah (1929 San Francisco)
Mélodie (1929 San Francisco)
Suite Hébraïque for violin and piano (1951 Agate Beach)
Suite No. 1 for violin solo (1958 Agate Beach)
Suite No. 2 for violin solo (1958 Agate Beach)

Viola

Suite for viola and piano (1919 New York)
Suite Hébraïque for viola and piano (1951 Agate Beach)
Meditation and Processional for viola and piano (1951 Agate Beach)
Suite for viola solo (unfinished) (1958 Agate Beach)

Cello

Méditation Hébraïque (1924 Cleveland)
From Jewish Life (1925 Cleveland)
Suite No. 1 for cello solo (1956 Agate Beach)
Suite No. 2 for cello solo (1956 Agate Beach)
Suite No. 3 for cello solo (1957 Agate Beach)

Flute

Suite Modale for flute and piano (1956 Agate Beach)

Piano

Ex-voto (1914 Geneva)
In the Night: A Love Poem (1922 Cleveland)
Poems of the Sea (1922 Cleveland)
Four Circus Pieces (1922 Cleveland)
Danse Sacrée (1923 Cleveland)
Enfantines, 10 pieces for children (1923 Cleveland)
Nirvana, Poem (1923 Cleveland)
Five Sketches in Sepia (1923 Cleveland)
Sonata (1935 Châtel, Haute Savoie); written for Guido Agosti
Visions et Prophéties (1936 Châtel, Haute Savoie)

Organ

6 Preludes (1949 Agate Beach)

4 Wedding Marches (1950 Agate Beach)

Ernest Bloch and his wife Marguerite Schneider had three children : Ivan, Suzanne and Lucienne. Ivan, born in 1905, who became an engineer with the Bonneville Power Administration in Portland, Oregon. Suzanne Bloch, born in 1907, was a musician particularly interested in Renaissance music who taught harpsichord, lute and composition at the Juilliard School in New York. Lucienne Bloch, born in 1909, worked as Diego Rivera's chief photographer on the Rockefeller Center mural project, became friends with Rivera's wife, the artist Frida Kahlo, and took some key photos of Kahlo and the only photographs of Rivera's mural (which was destroyed because Lenin was depicted in it).

The Western Jewish History Center, of the Judah L. Magnes Museum, in Berkeley, California has a small collection of photographs taken by Ernest Bloch which document his interest in photography.

Many of the photographs Bloch took—over 6,000 negatives and 2,000 prints—are in the Ernest Bloch Archive at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona in Tucson along with photographs by the likes of Ansel Adams, Edward Weston and Richard Avedon.

Some of the pictures that Bloch took in his Swiss residence are visible here. The snapshots have been donated to the Archivio audiovisivo di Capriasca e Val Colla by the Associazione ricerche musicali nella Svizzera italiana.

Bloch's photography was discovered by Eric B. Johnson in 1970. Johnson researched, edited and printed many of Bloch's photographs. 40 of these prints from Bloch's negatives are now in the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson AZ along with the entire collection of his negatives and prints. Johnson is currently Professor of Art and Design at Cal Poly State University, San * Luis Obispo Ca. An account of his discovery can be found on his website.

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