

AN EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH INTENT
IN THE MUSIC OF ERNEST BLOCH

A CREATIVE PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF MUSIC IN PERFORMANCE

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MUNCIE, INDIANA

MAY 2011

Ernest Bloch is known as an American composer who was famous for his portrayal of Jewish music. This portrayal of the Jewish sound is so deeply rooted in his music that it becomes impossible to separate the man from the religion, and one cannot talk about Bloch without talking about racial elements.¹ However, it is debatable how much of this was intended and how much of the Jewish image was placed upon him. Through a discussion of his personal influences, education, and a technical discussion of how and why some of his works sound Jewish, it will be possible to better determine his intent.

In order to understand Bloch's intent as a Jewish composer it is first necessary to understand his relationship to the religion itself. Bloch was born on July 24, 1880, in Geneva, Switzerland, to a family of lengthy Jewish history. His grandfather, Meyer Bloch, was President of the Jewish community of Lengnau, and his father, Maurice Bloch, at one point planned on becoming a rabbi. Bloch took Hebrew lessons until he was nine years old and had a Bar Mitzvah at age thirteen. He was known to fondly recall early childhood memories of lighting the Shabbat candles and other festival rituals, especially Passover.²

Bloch's musical education was intensive and included a number of teachers in many different locations. Some of his most prominent composition teachers include Emile Jacques-Dalcroze in his hometown of Geneva from 1894-1897, Rasse in Brussels from 1897-1899, and Thuille in Munich from 1901-1903.³ After studying with Thuille, Bloch travelled to Paris for the next year where he was exposed to the French impressionistic style of composition. He then returned to Geneva in 1904 where he married Marguerite Augusta Schneider and entered his

¹ Dika Newlin, "The Later Works of Ernest Bloch," *The Musical Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (1947): 453.

² Alexander Knapp, "The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?" *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association* 97 (1970-1971): 99-100.

³ Knapp, "The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?" 100.

father's business as a bookkeeper and salesman of Swiss tourist goods. While in Geneva he continued to compose, conduct, and give lectures at the Geneva Conservatory.

While in Geneva, Bloch completed his only opera, *Macbeth*, which premiered in Paris on November 30, 1910. It is important to discuss *Macbeth* because it contains many characteristics often associated with the Jewish works. These characteristics include: frequent changes of meter, tempo, and tonality; repetition of note patterns, ostinato, pedal points; and dark instrumentation. It is also with this work that he began to experiment with different modes and began to use perfect fourths and augmented seconds at critical emotional places. Bloch also incorporated cyclic formal procedures that he had learned from Rasse in Brussels.

In 1916, Bloch travelled to the United States of America, where he lived for the rest of his life. He taught theory and composition at the David Mannes College of Music in New York from 1917-1920, during which many of his orchestral works, including *Schelomo*, premiered in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. In 1920 he became a founding director of the Cleveland Institute of Music before becoming director of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in 1925, where he stayed until 1930. In the 1930s Bloch travelled back to Switzerland embarking on a period filled with composition and festivals throughout Europe. In 1940 growing anti-Semitism caused him to move back to the United States where he became a professor at the University of California until 1952. He lived the rest of his life reclusively in Oregon where he continued to win prizes and compose until he died from cancer in 1959.

During his travels throughout Europe before 1916, Bloch began to think about developing his personal sound and approach to music. He felt that German music was too regular and even lacked passion, while French music was mediocre and lacked "grandeur."⁴ According

⁴ Klara Moricz, "Sensuous Pagans and Righteous Jews: Changing Concepts of Jewish Identity in Ernest Bloch's 'Jezabel' and 'Schelomo'" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54, no. 3 (2001):441.

to Moricz, his experiences with French and German music left him “adrift between French and German aesthetics.”⁵ One of his teachers, Schillings, criticized Bloch’s music for lacking a national identity and stated that was the most troubling aspect of his music.

While he was studying abroad, Bloch began to lose touch with Judaism. In Knapp’s opinion, even in Geneva the attitude “towards the Jews at this time caused Bloch to feel ostracized from the musical life of his home town; and so, unable to find a niche in his environment, he naturally sought his identity in that which he felt most fundamental to his personality.”⁶ It was at this point when Bloch began to consider incorporating his Jewish heritage into his music, and he even went so far as to say that nationalism is not essential in music, but racial consciousness is.⁷

Bloch’s compositions can be divided into three main categories, the works composed before his Jewish Cycle (like *Macbeth*), his Jewish Cycle, and the works composed after the Cycle. His move to New York in 1916 is considered to be the catalyst that led to the Jewish Cycle because city life provided more acceptances for all denominations and there was far less anti-Semitism than in Geneva.⁸

When Bloch set out to compose using his Jewish heritage he was opposed to purposefully inserting Jewish elements into his music. Moricz states that “a conscious effort would have inhibited precisely those instinctive layers from which he expected the emergence of a racially determined creative impulsive.”⁹ Instead he said that he was taking an impulsive role and that he

⁵ Klara Moricz, “Sensuous Pagans and Righteous Jews: Changing Concepts of Jewish Identity in Ernest Bloch’s ‘Jezabel’ and ‘Schelomo’” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54, no. 3 (2001):441.

⁶ Alexander Knapp, “The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?” *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association* 97 (1970-1971): 99-100.

⁷ Knapp, “The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?” 101.

⁸ Knapp, “The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?” 101.

⁹ Klara Moricz, “Sensuous Pagans and Righteous Jews: Changing Concepts of Jewish Identity in Ernest Bloch’s ‘Jezabel’ and ‘Schelomo’” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54, no. 3 (2001):455.

“allowed God to dictate to him by leading his fingers on the piano,”¹⁰ therefore allowing him to take an unconscious role in creating his Jewish personality. The work that resulted was an unfinished opera called *Jezabel*, which allowed him to work on and develop his Jewish musical style. The works directly following this failed attempt became what is known as the Jewish Cycle.

Because of his attitude towards creating the Jewish sound through unconscious influences the Cycle contains very little authentic Jewish material. The exceptions to this include quotations from the Song of Songs in his *Israel* Symphony and a “gemora nigun” in *Schelomo*, a Hebrew Rhapsody for cello and orchestra.¹¹ Other characteristics that come directly from the Jewish religion include repeated note patterns and augmented- and perfect-fourth intervals that represent the sound of the shofar in the synagogue on the High Holy Days. The works also include accents on the penultimate beat of the bar related to the patterns of the Jewish language. Melodies in this style are highly ornamented, rhapsodic, metrically unmeasured, and independent of counterpoint or harmony, and they are constructed by juxtaposing short patterns rather than by developing extended phrases.¹²

A prominent example of Bloch’s Jewish sound is *Schelomo*, a rhapsody for cello and orchestra. It is the last and most popular work of the Cycle and was premiered in 1916 by the principal cellist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Hans Kindler. Instead of using the Bible for

¹⁰ Moricz, “Sensuous Pagans and Righteous Jews” 455.

¹¹ David Z. Kushner, “Bloch, Ernest” *Grove Music Online* (2007): 4, <http://www.oxfordmusiconlin.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/03287> (accessed February 17, 2011).

¹² Alexander Knapp, “The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?” *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association* 97 (1970-1971): 102-103.

inspiration, Bloch used a wax statue of King Solomon created by European Jew, Katherina Bajansky, who was the wife of cellist and friend, Alexander Barjansky.¹³

In *Schelomo*, Bloch used the rhapsodic form of ancient Greece. In a rhapsody there is a singer of epic tales, typically suited for uninterrupted recitation. Here, he separated the voices of the cello and the orchestra where the cello is the hero, Schelomo, and the orchestra is the atmosphere around the hero, much like Strauss' *Don Quixote*. This separation of cello and orchestra allows for contrast between the two, and the work opens with a free, cadenza-like, descending theme in the cello juxtaposed with a rhythmical, regular passage.¹⁴ While they are often contrasting, there are similarities between the two as well. Both the cello and the orchestra play all the themes in the piece and sometimes their only difference is in contour.

Schelomo and the rest of the Jewish Cycle contain further elements that make the music sound Jewish. According to Knapp, these general Jewish traits can be divided into five categories: melody, rhythm, form, texture, and mood.¹⁵ The melodies can be broken down into intervals and scales. Bloch used perfect fourths and fifths, often as upbeats, to represent ritualistic fanfares, such as the shofar during the High Holy Days. Perfect fourths and fourth-chords, including tritones, are used for melodic expression. He used exotic scales to include augmented intervals, such as seconds and fourths, and quarter tones, which first appeared in *Schelomo*, in order to create a sense of emotional intensity. Fourth and fifths also often occur at

¹³ Klara Moricz, "Sensuous Pagans and Righteous Jews: Changing Concepts of Jewish Identity in Ernest Bloch's 'Jezabel' and 'Schelomo'" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54, no. 3 (2001):477.

¹⁴ Klara Moricz, "Sensuous Pagans and Righteous Jews: Changing Concepts of Jewish Identity in Ernest Bloch's 'Jezabel' and 'Schelomo'" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54, no. 3 (2001):477.

¹⁵ Alexander Knapp, "The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?" *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association* 97 (1970-1971): 102-103.

cadences.¹⁶ Quasi-improvised passages are fairly common throughout his melodies. The melodies are often strings of motifs sequencing upward in different tonalities.

Bloch uses a rhythmic language of irregularity and change. The tempo frequently changes, as does the meter with alternating time signatures. The phrases consist of irregular lengths and the beats are split into unequal groups with complex cross-accents. The other main component of Bloch's rhythm in the Cycle is known as the 'Bloch rhythm,' where a dotted rhythm with a short note, typically a sixteenth note, comes before the dotted note.¹⁷

The most important element of the form of Bloch's Jewish works is the fact that they are cyclic. This helps them to maintain unity even though they consist of many smaller sections.¹⁸

The texture of Bloch's orchestration includes a large orchestra to allow for deep texture. His typical orchestration consists of double woodwinds with accessories, triple or quadruple brass, a large percussion section, celesta, two harps, and strings.¹⁹ Bloch uses various string techniques to allow the texture to affect the mood. These techniques include tremolo, sul ponticello, and pizzicato.

The mood of Bloch's works is in part created by subjective expression marks like misterioso, intense, and frenetico.²⁰ Kushner summed these works well when he stated that these "biblically inspired works, with their luxurious waves of phantasmagoria, engage the listener more emotionally than intellectually."²¹

¹⁶ Knapp, "The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?" 108.

¹⁷ Dika Newlin, "The Later Works of Ernest Bloch," *The Musical Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (1947): 446.

¹⁸ Alexander Knapp, "The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?" *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association* 97 (1970-1971): 108.

¹⁹ Knapp, "The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?" 108.

²⁰ Knapp, "The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?" 108.

²¹ David Z. Kushner, "Bloch, Ernest" *Grove Music Online* (2007): 4, <http://www.oxfordmusiconlin.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/03287> (accessed February 17, 2011).

The intent of the works in the Jewish Cycle to sound Jewish is clear, and it is the works after the Cycle that are uncertain in origin. The sound of the Jewish Cycle is so different from the music before the Cycle, and so many of the general traits of the Cycle then became permanently incorporated into his musical style that it becomes nearly “impossible to distinguish between a passage taken from a ‘Jewish’ works and one taken from a ‘non-Jewish’ work.”²²

The works after the Cycle include pieces that sound Jewish consciously through direct quotations and Jewish titles, and pieces that sound Jewish without direct quotations or Jewish titles where the Jewish sound is potentially subconscious. Some of the Jewish pieces after the Cycle include *Baal Shem*, a suite for violin and piano composed in 1923, that contains direct Jewish quotations, and *Avodath Hakodesh*, which contains motives and texts directly from the Reform Jewish prayer book and service.²³

A prime example of Bloch’s Jewish works from after the Jewish Cycle is a piece for cello and piano called *From Jewish Life* completed in 1924. It is dedicated to Hans Kindler, the same cellist who premiered *Schelomo* a few years before. This piece consists of three movements titled Prayer, Supplication, and Jewish Song. It uses various techniques shared with the Cycle. The melody is highly ornamented and uses intervals such as quarter tones and augmented seconds, which add to the emotional intensity of the piece. The piece also uses many tempo and meter changes, clearly marked by the composer. The second movement uses considerable amounts of two-against-three rhythms where the cello has eighth notes against triplets in the piano. This work contains no direct quotations or motives from the Jewish service.

Bloch’s works from after the Jewish Cycle also includes pieces that are not Jewish in intent, but sound Jewish regardless. As Knapp states, “priority has been given to comparisons

²² Knapp, “The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?” 110.

²³ Alexander Knapp, “The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?” *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association* 97 (1970-1971): 108.

between Jewish melody and its actual appearance in Bloch's works, and between the character of Jewish music and Bloch's overall style."²⁴ He found inspiration in folk songs of Switzerland and America along with American-Indian music, Gregorian chant, and music of the Far East. Despite these influences, much of this music continues to sound Jewish. In *Voice in the Wilderness*, an orchestral work, there is an obligato cello line reminiscent of *Schelomo*. *Evocations*, another orchestral work, shows influence of the Far East, but the quasi-oriental atmosphere and pentatonic scales (which feature the augmented second) recall the Cycle. Bloch's Violin concerto also recalls the Cycle through its cyclic format, frequent Bloch rhythm, and use of perfect fourths and fifths at emotional points throughout the work.²⁵

In discussing the Jewish intent in Bloch's music, it is important to remember both his Jewish heritage and his education, which included stays in many different locations. In Knapp's opinion, Bloch's art is a reflection of his personality and "he was as much susceptible to the influences of his cultural and ethnic (i.e. Jewish) background as to his immediate (i.e. Western) environment."²⁶ This could possibly be caused by the fact that while he travelled and studied in different places, his environment changed, but his cultural heritage did not.

While studying in Germany, Bloch met a Jew named Edmond Fleg. He continued correspondence with Fleg for years and was influenced by this. Fleg believed in a universal mission for the Jews and that they should be connected despite geographical location. Fleg once wrote that "we are neither French nor Germans, it is true, but Jews."²⁷ This idea appealed to Bloch because of his background. He was more attracted to the Jewish spirit than actual religious

²⁴ Knapp, "The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?" 99.

²⁵ David Z. Kushner, "Bloch, Ernest" *Grove Music Online* (2007): 4, <http://www.oxfordmusiconlin.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/03287> (accessed February 17, 2010).

²⁶ Alexander Knapp, "The Jewishness of Bloch: Subconscious or Conscious?" *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association* 97 (1970-1971): 99.

²⁷ Klara Moricz, "Sensuous Pagans and Righteous Jews: Changing Concepts of Jewish Identity in Ernest Bloch's 'Jezebel' and 'Schelomo'" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54, no. 3 (2001):444.

beliefs and had Jewish ideals as opposed to the typical life of a Jew. “Bloch’s ideal Judaism existed nowhere in the real world. It had to be constructed in his art.”²⁸

Bloch began to identify his artistic personality as racial after being criticized by Schillings as nationally ambiguous. While he incorporated Jewish ideas into his music, he also stated that “I do not propose or desire to attempt a reconstruction of the music of the Jews, and to base my works on melodies more or less authentic. I am no archaeologist. I believe that the most important thing is to write good and sincere music – *my own* music.”²⁹ This clearly suggests that while Bloch wanted to create a Jewish sound, he was more concerned with his personal artistic satisfaction. According to Newlin, “his relationship to Hebraism is beautifully symbolized – as probably it was intended to be – by the decorative device that appears on the covers of the Schirmer publications of his music” where his initials, E.B., appear in the center of a six-pointed Star of David.³⁰ This symbol helped in establishing Bloch as a Jewish figure in the public mind.

Even with his intentions clear for the Jewish works, there is still debate about the ‘non-Jewish’ works composed outside of the Cycle. The use of augmented intervals, scales, Bloch rhythm, and other characteristics of the Jewish works were so woven into his general musical style that his music is so “permeated with the spirit of the music of his people that its characteristic features are woven into the texture of his score without his knowing it – whether the score has a nationalistic theme or not.”³¹ Others go so far as to say that his artistic persona as a Jewish composer was “as much forced on him as voluntarily assumed.”³²

²⁸ Klara Moricz, “Sensuous Pagans and Righteous Jews: Changing Concepts of Jewish Identity in Ernest Bloch’s ‘Jezabel’ and ‘Schelomo’” 444.

²⁹ Dika Newlin, “The Later Works of Ernest Bloch,” *The Musical Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (1947): 453.

³⁰ Newlin, “The Later Works of Ernest Bloch,” 443.

³¹ Newlin, “The Later Works of Ernest Bloch,” 453.

³² Klara Moricz, “Sensuous Pagans and Righteous Jews: Changing Concepts of Jewish Identity in Ernest Bloch’s ‘Jezabel’ and ‘Schelomo’” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54, no. 3 (2001):440.

In conclusion, while Bloch intended specific works to sound Jewish, the techniques he used to create the Jewish sound became so incorporated into his music that all of it sounds Jewish with or without the purpose. In other words, although “actual traditional melodies and motifs are not ubiquitous in his music, their influence is so pervasive that the traits which differentiated the Jewish Cycle from his earlier compositions remained the unique and essential features of his idiom during the rest of his life.”³³

Ernest Bloch’s Jewish heritage and educational background led to his development of a Jewish sound that became so much a part of his music that it is not always possible to dissociate the religion from the man. Understanding Bloch is relevant because the Jewish identity associated with Bloch may have been partially assumed, as opposed to intended, because of political and geographic stigmas, which is something that can happen to any artist at any time. Also, the understanding of the technical reasons of how and why his music sounds Jewish, aids in the appropriate application of techniques to performance practice.

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