

# Ernest Bloch Describes His Quartet Which Flonzaleys Are to Introduce

Swiss Composer's New Work Largely Hebraic in Spirit—Much Expected of It in View of Its Author's Previous Achievements in Writing for Orchestra and the Lyric Drama—A Composer Whom Romain Rolland Predicts Will Become "One of the Master Musicians of Our Time"

By FREDERICK H. MARTENS

A RECENT essayist,\* writing on "Music for Museums?" exclaims indignantly: "Chamber music! Its title explains it. It is music intended to be played at home . . . music intended to be played, not to be listened to, except perhaps, by some doting members of the performers' families." And again: "The string quartet plays in the very dustiest part of the museum in which 'modern' concerts are given. Its audiences are fanatics who have gone mad over an old religion . . ."

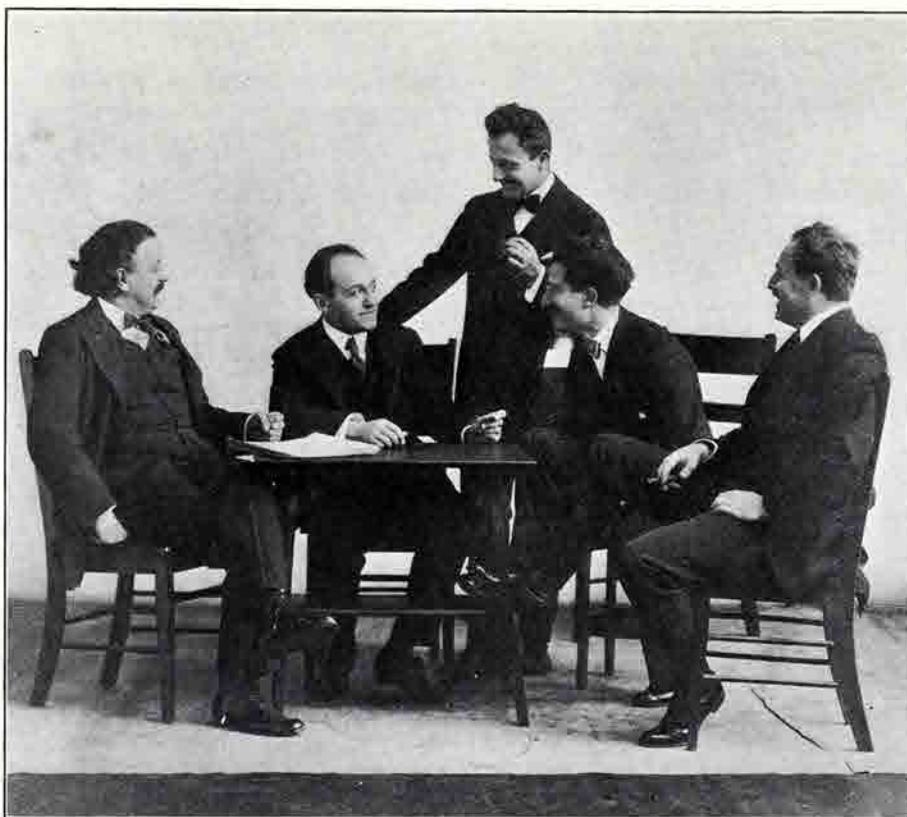
And yet, strange to say, despite these annihilating dicta, the Flonzaleys, the Kneisels, the American String-Quartet and numerous other chamber music organizations, instead of confining their efforts to the modest seclusion of the "home" where, in strict accord with the titular qualification of their art, they might be listened to "by doting members" of their families, persist in obtruding themselves on the public. And stranger still, in view of the essayist's condemnation, is the fact that in the "museums" in which they play—"Why they should play string quartets I do not know," is the essayist's plaint—the dust is pretty well swept out at each recurring concert by the ever-growing and enthusiastic audiences of "fanatics" who worship at these debasing shrines.

The evidence of eyes, ears—and "gate-keepers" cannot but lead the unprejudiced observer to the conclusion that our essayist's crusade against chamber music is as futile as would be a sandwich-man's attempt to popularize a post-presidential campaign song by a promenade along the shores of the Dead Sea. If this fairly obvious deduction is accepted there is no reason why the new String Quartet by Ernest Bloch, written for the Flonzaley Quartet, and to be played by them for the first time in their New York concert on Dec. 27, should not awaken the interest which its composer's previous works undoubtedly justify.

## His Principal Works

Ernest Bloch (now in this country as conductor of the Maud Allan Symphony Orchestra) is probably the most original and individual of Swiss composers of his generation. He has composed principally for orchestra—a Symphony in C Sharp Minor, (1902); symphonic poems: "Vivre-Aimer" (1900), "Hiver-Printemps" (1904), "Trois Poèmes Juifs" (1914), and a symphony, "Israël" (1915)—but his most ambitious effort, which Pierre Lalo has called "one of the most profoundly interesting works with which the music drama may be credited in recent years," is his lyric drama, "Macbeth," in seven tableaux, first produced in Paris, at the Opéra Comique in 1910.

\*Carl van Vechten, "Music after the Great War and Other Studies." G. Schirmer, New York.



Ernest Bloch, the Swiss Composer, Now in America, and the Flonzaley Quartet. Seated, from Left to Right, Adolfo Betti, Ernest Bloch, Ugo Ara and Ivan Archambeau; Standing, Alfred Pochon

Chamber music is, of course, essentially "absolute" in its character. Yet beginning with Haydn, whose quartets are permeated with the flavor of Croatian folk-song, we find many works which stress the national or racial theme. Beethoven, in his Rasumowsky quartets, Tschaiowsky, Smetana, Dvorak furnish instances which suggest themselves. Ernest Bloch's new quartet, his first work of its kind, is largely Hebraic in spirit. And during his stay in New York, over the coffee which marked the last stage of one of those genial luncheons which the Flonzaleys know so well how to give, and at which he was the guest of honor of the Quartet, the Swiss composer gave the writer some interesting details anent the work he had recently completed for his friends.

"The *quatuor* comprises the usual four movements, but is quite free in form and development. The first movement, *Lamento*, is essentially Hebrew, a mingling of violence and grief. I ask my friends, when they play it, to think of the Bible, the ardor of the Psalms, and the hot pulsing blood of the Orient. I ask them to think of those poor devils whom one meets at times in the streets or along country roads, with long beards, dirty, sad, despairing . . . and yet holding fast to some obscure glimmering hope while they mutter their Hebrew prayers. I have tried to express something of all this in the *Lamento*—and I feel that one theme (in the viola) almost speaks to this effect.

## Influence of a Painting

"The whole movement is very free, a continual fluctuation of motion and nuance. Some of my themes are a direct result of my recollections of a painting by Gauguin. They embody something of Tahiti, of the distant Papuan isles, especially in an ornamental passage where the four strings, suddenly leaving their proper orbit for a moment, rely altogether on polyrhythm and sonority to obtain a genuine exotic effect."

M. Bloch intimated that this exotic color was also in part based on his recollections of colonial expositions, with which his imagination had to content it-

self in place of tours of the world which a slender purse forbade. But then, some of the best descriptive literature and music, some of the most exotically colorful and convincing, has been written by those who never heard the surf break on a Polynesian beach, nor saw "the dawn come up like thunder outer China 'crost the bay!"

"I told my friends, the Flonzaleys," M. Bloch resumed, "that the *Allegro frenetico* which follows the *Lamento* might make them grit their teeth at first. But it is sincere—I despaired of mankind in general at the time I wrote it—and it reflects a good bit of my most intimate feeling and the grimace of disgust which I perforce cut at humanity at large.

"The third movement, the *Pastorale*, is 'chamber music' composed almost altogether in the open air, in the woods or on the mountains. I used to make little excursions with my wife and children into the beautiful country in the environs of Geneva and Neuchâtel and, far away from the distractions of the city found in nature the inspiration I sought. And the children . . ." Here M. Bloch quite forgot about his new quartet. He drew from his pocket letters which had recently come to him from his boys of twelve and ten and his little girl, and read them aloud. They were delightful to listen to, full of little details of their home life and studies and of fervent affection for their father in far-away America. Ugo Ara, the letters duly admired with Machiavellian craft, once more brought back the conversation to the *Pastorale* of the quartet.

"No," said M. Bloch, "it is not a *Pastorale* in the usual sense of the word. It is, rather, a reverie evoked by solitude and nature. In it the 'dolorous theme' of the first movement reappears in a transition full of serenity and tenderness, and other themes are folk-themes, 'of the countryside.' Two of my themes, a dance-theme and one of a 'savage lullaby,' I borrowed from an earlier drama, never completed, of the Lacustrian epoch—the age of the lake-dwellers.

"The *finale*, an *Allegro con fuoco*, is rhapsodic in style, and is intended to

emphasize the subtle bond of character which, without a set program, links together the four movements of the quartet.

## An Interview with Debussy

"But now let me tell you of other things . . ." added M. Bloch—and he did. He spoke of a recent interview with Debussy, in which the great impressionist, with entire confidence in Bloch's ability to undertake the task, gave him a free hand in the rescoring of the *poème miné*, "Khamma" (which Maud Allan will produce in this country), for an orchestra of forty in place of the original sixty or more. M. Bloch expressed his sorrow at noting the ravages caused by the dread disease, the inroads of which are sapping the strength of the greatest creative artist in modern French music. He told of the vexations and difficulties to which neutral musicians are subject in view of the official attitude of belligerent governments during war-time. And he spoke with real veneration of his friend, Romain Rolland, and showed the writer a letter received from him in which Rolland says, among other things: "Your Symphony is one of the most important works of the modern school. I know of no other work in which a richer, more vigorous, more passionate temperament makes itself felt. . . . Continue expressing yourself in the same way, freely and fully. I will answer for your becoming one of the master musicians of our time!"

One who has seen the manuscript of Bloch's new quartet and heard some excerpts of its music cannot help but feel that the composer has taken Rolland's advice to heart. The writer could have informed M. Bloch, however, that no matter how novel, original or musically good his quartet might be, there was but little hope for it. For has not the author of "Music for Museums" in another essay, "Music After the Great War," explicitly stated that: "The new music will not come from England, certainly not from America, not from France, nor from Germany, but from the land of the steppes . . ." Switzerland, the home of Bloch, is evidently too negligible, in a musical sense, even to call for mention. And yet, though the printed page of the essayist plainly states that "for the new composers, the new names, the strong, new blood of the immediate future in music, we must turn to Russia," these evidently misguided and misinformed Flonzaleys insist on playing Bloch's Quartet in B Major, and even allow themselves to grow enthusiastic anent its beauties.

## Phonograph Music as an Aid to Speed of Typists

BOSTON, MASS., Nov. 14.—That a phonograph playing beside a stenographer at work can increase her speed was practically demonstrated by Emma B. Dearborn of Columbia University at the fourteenth annual meeting of the New England Federation of High School Teachers in the High School of Commerce, N. Y., on Nov. 11. Miss Dearborn had a phonograph play several airs while young women pounded the keys in the rhythm of the music that they heard. The student of typewriting, following the sway and spirit of the music, is supposed thus to gain efficiency.

## Chicago English Opera Company Visits Sioux City

SIoux CITY, IOWA, Nov. 13.—The Chicago English Opera Company, with Basil Horsfall as manager and conductor, gave the opera "Il Trovatore" before a fair-sized audience at the Auditorium Saturday evening. The company pleased the audience in its initial appearance here, and had some less hackneyed opera been given a larger audience would probably have attended. Florentine St. Clair was *Leonora*; Edna Haseltine, *Azucena*; J. Ellenhorn, *di Luna*; Ernest Davies, *Manrico*, and Charles Gerol, *Fernando*. F. E. P.

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