

# America, the Land of Promise and Fulfillment for One of Switzerland's Most Gifted Sons, Ernest Bloch

**Meteoric Rise to Fame in Our Country of This Signally Gifted Composer—Writer Notes Characteristically American Qualities in Mr. Bloch—A Man of Action, Broad Interest and Sympathies, and Flaming Imagination—His "Jewish Side"—Early Career and Studies**

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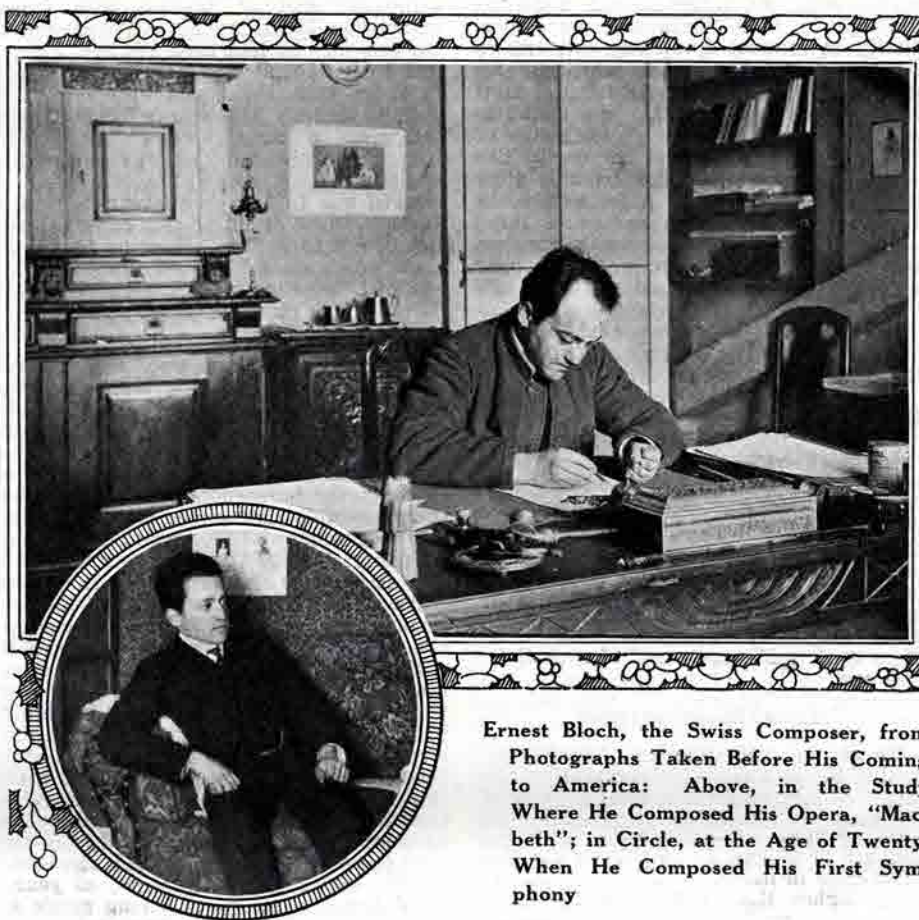
IT is considerably more than a year since Ernest Bloch stirred musical New York with a great orchestral concert consisting entirely of his own works—works of such magnitude and bold design as to arrest the attention of every musician and critic in America. Many were enthusiastic, others were hostile, few were indifferent—a fairly good sign that the works were important.

There was a real fervor in the enthusiasm of the young partisans who gathered about the banner of the Swiss composer; small wonder if it kindled sympathy and gratitude in his heart—not only toward the little band that worshipped, wrote and "talked" (in terms linguistic and material)—but toward the whole of America, which had brought so large a measure of understanding to his message, while Europe had remained almost deaf. I remember Bloch's overflowing joy and hopefulness as he spoke—not of himself but of America and its musical future, and of his determination henceforth to battle under that sign. I remember his showing me a picture of his home in Switzerland, a charming villa by a lake, surrounded by age-old trees, set in an atmosphere of lofty serenity, and my asking how he could bear exchanging that for this—pointing to our Sixth Avenue and its thundering "L." "Ah, yes," he answered, "it was beautiful. But what would you? I had to leave it in order to make myself heard—the prophet in his own country. \* \* \*

America is young and vigorous, open-minded, idealistic; Europe is old, sophisticated, decadent and hostile—an aggregation of cliques. Switzerland was too small; in France they considered me too German, in Germany too French. Here I may be anything—even Jewish!" At this I raised my eyebrows in token of a skeptical frame of mind, and reminded him that some of our own critics had summarily dismissed his works as ugly, brutal, cacophonous. But his enthusiasm could not be dampened. "These are the older men," he said. "It is natural that they should think this way. What is musical criticism, anyway? I work and criticize, I search and suffer, I live between dreams and nightmares for months—perhaps years—to produce a composition. At last I know it is good, or true at least. And then there comes a man, a 'critic,' listens for fifteen minutes and—passes judgment upon it. How is it possible? \* \* \*

But here are others, willing to study, to take time, ever searching for new beauties, such as you younger men (he named a few of us). \* \* \* Ah, it is so refreshing, so different."

"Do you know," he continued, "that I have found more real critical acumen here than in Europe? Americans are fine analysts (again he named a few). All you need is the doing. The creative activity must be encouraged; appreciation, self-reliance, fearless expression of yourselves. Yes, I am going to throw in my lot with you; I see that this is the country in which to work."



Ernest Bloch, the Swiss Composer, from Photographs Taken Before His Coming to America: Above, in the Study Where He Composed His Opera, "Macbeth"; in Circle, at the Age of Twenty, When He Composed His First Symphony

What an inspiring thought—and what an example for our own composers!

That was fifteen months ago. In the meantime Bloch has been in Europe and has returned, bringing his family with him. He has been settled in New York for a year, teaching and composing. Henceforth his works will be written under the influence of American life, will be to all intents and purposes American works. (The fact that an American publishing house is bringing out these massive scores is certainly significant.) And Bloch himself may go down in history as an American composer: he is certainly as "American"—in his music—as many of our native disciples of Strauss and Reger, of d'Indy and Debussy.

Considering the profound influence which this man is likely to exert upon American music I was anxious, after these fifteen months, to know whether he has preserved the enthusiasm which he radiated at our last interview, eager to renew my impressions of his striking personality. I felt that the American public, myself included, did not really know Ernest Bloch.

The thing that is most generally known about Bloch is that he is a Jew. It was as a "Jewish composer" that he introduced himself to America. To borrow the language of politics, his campaign was conducted upon the issue of Judaism in music. The great concert of May, 1917, of which the "Jewish Cycle" formed the program, left the public under the impression that Bloch represents the musical sublimation of the Jewish race—and nothing else. It was with this fact lingering in my mind that I visited the composer in his Lexington Avenue apartment.

Imagine my surprise when the first thing to greet my eye, and by far the most prominent object in the room was—a huge crucifix. After a greeting so cordial as to make one feel at home in an instant, my eye reverted to this strange ornament, and then I remembered being told about it before.

To a lady who had commented upon the apparent incongruity Bloch once retorted something like this: "My dear madam—yes, it is true that I am a Jew. But I should be equally proud to call myself a Christian—a true Christian. For He is to me only the symbol of that Christianity which both Jew and Gentile should strive to attain. Who, indeed, will to-day have the temerity to call himself Christian?"

One may conclude, obviously, that Ernest Bloch is not an Orthodox Jew. How, then, can he express Jewish thought and feeling in his music? It will be recalled that he does not use any traditional Jewish melodies, that he employs no "racial" material of any sort—is, in

fact, not a conscious musical nationalist at all. The fact is that his music, more than Jewish, is just "human." In it, no doubt, one may hear the characteristics of an ancient race, feel the throbs of the passion and the violence that one feels in the lines of eternal scripture. It is because this psychology of a race, echoing down the generations, vibrates a sympathetic string in Bloch, the individual Jew, that Bloch the sensitive artist is able to react to it.

But have we not, with our love for labels, too quickly labeled Ernest Bloch as a Jewish composer, and decided that he writes "Jewish music" and no other, just as Montague Glass writes Jewish stories and no other? At any rate, the "Poèmes d'Automne," which have just been published, or the youthful First Symphony, or the beautiful symphonic poem, "Hiver-Printemps" have no peculiarly Jewish connotations.

I was still reflecting upon this phase of his work when Mr. Bloch showed me the proofs of his String Quartet, just received from the printer. He placed them on the piano rack and began to turn the leaves. Before we realized it we were immersed in the beauties of the work—the composer sketching the parts on the piano while I read over his shoulder. Now and then he commented upon a passage, but—while I could not help being utterly amazed at the technical complexity, the marvelous freedom with which only a master can handle his material—his comments always concerned the spirit of the music alone. They were given with a sort of contemplative detachment, as though he were standing outside of the thing and searching for the kernel of it. \* \* \*

"There," he said at one point, apparently unconscious of my presence, "how Jewish that is!" And presently he added: "But here is already something different. Yes, this is new."

As I listened to his thinking, so to speak, I realized that the Judaism of Ernest Bloch, far from being an end and aim in itself, is really only a passing phase—an inherent quality of his nature which had to find expression, but from which, having expressed it, he could pass to other, even broader things—to the "humanity" which is already the keynote of the "Israel" Symphony. The word "Israel," I felt, even when I heard the symphony, is a symbol, not for the Jewish people, but for mankind.

## A "Cosmopolitan Personality"

There is nevertheless a real historical significance in what we may call Bloch's Jewish period. It has kept him from being on the one hand either too French or too German, on the other from becoming a featureless eclectic. In Geneva and Brussels, in Frankfurt and Munich, and in Paris Bloch came in close contact

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with every contemporary current. His Judaism saved him from being swept away by any of them. It gave him nourishment when after all his studies with different masters he turned within himself to study, as he expressed it, "with nature and with myself." And I believe that his coming to America, when he had evolved this new style of his own, is of still greater significance. For the problem that Bloch has solved for himself, musical America must solve for herself also. We must emerge from this European welter into a freer, brighter world of our own, permeated with the spirit of our own ideals and built by the aid of our own technique. Bloch himself meant this when he spoke, a year ago, of the "fearless expression of ourselves."

The thought that Ernest Bloch is, indeed, the ideal for the American composer, forced itself upon me as we went through the score of the Quartet. No matter if he was born in Switzerland. We may safely accept the message of the old world as expressed through his broad cosmopolitan personality, a personality which, I could not help feeling, is even now capable of an interpretation distinctly American. The broad, yet discriminating catholicity, the profound sincerity, the unqualified democracy, the large idealism and the boundless energy which are Bloch's—are not these the qualities with which we like to invest the American character?

As I looked at the composer there in his American home I could not escape the fact that his appearance, too, is not un-American. He is neither the long-haired foreigner who in our popular imagination has become the type of the European musician, nor the slender *précieux* whom one associates with ultra-modern art. He is first of all a man of flesh and blood; his strong frame, the massive head set upon a sturdy body, the clean-shaven countenance with the vaulted forehead, the deeply set eyes and rather ascetic mouth, and his quick, energetic movements might easily be those of an American professional man or man of affairs. This impression deepened as he sat down in the swivel chair behind the flat top desk in the little "office" next to the studio, where books, papers and pictures jostled one another in cozy confusion. From the walls the faces of Mahler and Moussorgsky—the only musicians' portraits in the entire apartment—looked down as he answered my questions about his career. I will let the reader judge whether that career, contrasting sharply with that of the traditional musician, might not have been that of an American.

## The Son of a Merchant

In the first place Bloch is the son of a business man—a Geneva dry goods merchant. Neither of his parents had any musical predilections, and one wonders where this boy, surrounded by "business" from early childhood, got his artistic leanings. Music was, of course, a part of his education. He studied the violin when he was still a small boy and was considered a "prodigy." When he was eleven or so he resolved to become a composer. He made a solemn vow to that effect, wrote it out on paper, buried it under a mound of stones, and on it built a bonfire by way of consecration.

In due time, after surmounting the usual parental opposition, young Bloch went to Frankfurt to study with Iwan Knorr. Then he went to Brussels and continued in composition under Rasse, the pupil of Franck, while studying the violin with Ysaye. Finally he spent a short time in Munich with Thuille and then returned to his home. When he was twenty he had completed the Symphony in C Sharp Minor, which was played by the New York Philharmonic Society last season. At that time he approached al-

[Continued on page 6]