

Monday 27 May 2019, 5PM
The Camden Opera House
Camden, Maine

Program Notes

Ernest Bloch: Sacred Service / Avodath Hakodesh

Ernest Bloch was born in Geneva, Switzerland in 1880. As an adolescent musical prodigy he had been sent by his parents to study music theory and violin at Geneva Conservatory of Music with Emile Jacques Dalcroze and Louis Etienne Reyer. When Bloch was 16 a French musician who admired Bloch's talent arranged for him to go to Brussels to study violin with Eugene Ysaye. Bloch's talents as a violinist did not impress Ysaye but he predicted that Bloch would be more successful as a composer and encouraged him to study the works of Franck and Debussy. Bloch followed this advice and went to Germany where he studied with Iwan Knorr and Ludwig Thuille. From then until the outbreak of World War I, Bloch spent most of his time in Paris and Geneva, conducting, teaching and composing. During this time he became acquainted with Debussy, whose influence is apparent in his first published work, *Historiettes au crepuscule*. In 1910 his only opera, *Macbeth*, was premiered in Paris to mixed critical reaction but public enthusiasm.

Bloch then decided to turn his attention to new kinds of composition and wrote his "Jewish Cycle." Although not especially religious, Bloch was interested in the links between music and Judaism in correspondence with the French poet Edmond Fleg. The trilogy included *Schelomo*, *Israel Symphony*, and *Trois Poemes Juifs*. These works received favorable reviews in both Europe and America, but Bloch, like many other artists during the war, remained isolated.

An opportunity to break out of this isolation came in 1916 when the English interpretive dancer Maud Allen invited Bloch to accompany her touring recital of the United States. A friend of the composer, Alfred Pochon, the second violinist in the Flonzaley Quartet, had encouraged Bloch to seek refuge in the U.S., and Bloch's benefactor, the novelist Romain Rolland, wrote Bloch a letter of introduction to an American music critic. As it turned out, the dance tour collapsed less than two months after it opened but Bloch had the chance to establish himself professionally nonetheless. Performances of his First String Quartet and *Trois Poemes Juifs* in Boston were well received. He also accepted a faculty position at the Mannes School of Music in New York City in 1917 and soon established an affiliation with the Hartt School of Music in Hartford, CT.

In 1920 Bloch became the director of the Cleveland Institute of Music and then moved to San Francisco in 1925, where he became the director of the newly founded San Francisco Conservatory of Music. During the 1920's his "master theory" courses taught to aspiring young composers attracted several promising students, including George Antheil, Frederick Jacobi,

Quincy Porter, Isadore Freed, Leon Kirchner, Theodore Chandler, Bernard Rogers, Randall Thompson, Herbert Elwell and Henry Cowell. His teaching methods were quite unorthodox. In many of his classes he used original sixteenth century scores instead of the more standard theory books to underscore the importance of establishing “living” connections with the Renaissance masters. In Cleveland, Bloch allegedly created quite some controversy by proposing that grading systems be eliminated in order to promote greater “individualism” among the composition students. Bloch’s teaching methods, his passionate beliefs in promoting individual styles of composition, his own skill as a composer and his antiestablishment credentials as a Jewish immigrant all combined to earn him a reputation as one of the best and most independent composition teachers in the US at the time. One of Bloch’s better known students, Roger Sessions, wrote of his teacher, “His personality is such that one weighs every word, to absorb it into one’s mind and let it achieve a new and individual growth there.”

Bloch returned to Switzerland in 1930 to compose the *Sacred Service*. By 1939 the political situation in Europe convinced him that he needed to return once again to the US. He accepted a faculty appointment in the Music Department at the University of California in Berkeley, where he remained until his retirement in 1952 when he moved to Agate Beach, Oregon. He died in Portland, Oregon in 1959.

Bloch’s *Sacred Service* was composed on commission from Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco, which had established a century-long tradition of performing new Jewish liturgical music. Its late cantor, Edward Stark, was the first to set to music the American Reform Jewish Prayer Book in the early 1900’s and some of his music is still performed. In addition to Bloch’s *Sacred Service*, Temple Emanu-El also commissioned a *Service Sacré* by Darius Milhaud, and a *Sacred Service* by Marc Lavry. The major part of the funding for the commission of Bloch’s *Sacred Service* was provided by Gerald Warburg, a cellist and second eldest son of Felix Warburg, a philanthropist and banker. The *Sacred Service* is dedicated to Gerald Warburg. The rest of the funding for the commission came from members of the Congregation.

The composition of Bloch’s *Sacred Service* was strongly inspired by the cantor of Temple Emanu-El at the time, Reuben Rinder. Rinder served as cantor at Emanu-El for 53 years. Bloch is often credited as being one of the major “Jewish” composers of his day but he was not, in fact, an authority on Jewish liturgical music and did not know Hebrew when he accepted the commission. Rinder in essence became Bloch’s tutor, providing him with musical examples from various parts of the service. The *Tzur Yisroel* (Rock of Israel) in Bloch’s *Sacred Service* actually came from Rinder’s own arrangement, which is based on traditional chant.

Cantorial chanting in the synagogue is based on what is referred to in Hebrew as *Nusach Tefilla* (mode of prayer). Various services are chanted in different modes. The *Tzur Yisroel* in Bloch’s *Sacred Service* is arranged in the melodic mode used in the Sabbath Morning chant. The rest of the work is Bloch’s own composition. To a listener who is acquainted with Jewish liturgical music, the only part of Bloch’s work that sounds authentic is the *Tzur Yisroel*.

Bloch scored the *Sacred Service* for baritone solo (cantor), large orchestra and chorus. He also stated that the work could be performed with keyboard (preferably organ) if space did not permit or in cases where it might be sung liturgically. It is based on the liturgy for the Sabbath Morning from the Reform Jewish prayer book, *The Union Prayer Book for Jewish Worship*. Bloch used the Hebrew text from the prayer book but modified the English translation to suit his own composition. The work can be performed in either Hebrew or English. The Hebrew transliteration in the score is in the Ashkenazic form, but the composer stated that it could also be performed in Sephardic Hebrew. Some Hebrew words are retained in the English version. The Minister's part was written only in English. This includes the *Alenu* (Adoration) and *Kaddish* (Memorial Prayer) and may be spoken by a reader or sung by a cantor. In the premiere performance in San Francisco in 1938, the Minister's part was read by Cantor Rinder, who had lost his singing voice by that time and had become a speaking cantor until his retirement in 1965.

The *Sacred Service* is divided into five parts. Part I begins with a short Meditation which leads into the traditional prayer recited when entering the synagogue, *Ma Tovu* (How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling place, O Israel!) The *Borechu* includes the blessings, which serve as a prelude to the *Shema Yisroel* (Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One!) (Deuteronomy 6). This section is the centerpiece of the service which is the Jewish proclamation of faith in one God and only one. The following *Veohavto* section (And thou shalt love Him...with all thy heart...) is scored in the special mode used in the liturgy of the Three Pilgrim Festivals (Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles). This is another example of Bloch's inclusion of traditional modes. The *Mi Chomocho* (Who is like thee?) follows. It is a text derived from the Song of the Red Sea in the Book of Exodus. Part I concludes with *Tzur Yisroel* (Rock of Israel) already mentioned above.

Part II consists of the *Kedusha* (Sanctification) that is recited at all daily, Sabbath and festival services except the Evening Service. This consists mainly of passages from the Book of Isaiah. It represents a dramatic dialog between the Creator and the Ministering Angels.

Part III begins with a Silent Devotion. The music here is a fine example of Bloch's ability to write counterpoint. In the orchestral version it is scored for flutes, bassoons, then violas, oboes, English horn, cellos and double basses. The choir then sings *Yiyu lerotzon* (May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart...) (Psalm 19: 14) unaccompanied. This leads to one of the most dramatic sections of the work: The removal of the *Torah* (Scroll of the Law) from the Ark. The text of this part of the service is derived mainly from the Book of Psalms.

Part IV consists of texts from the Book of Psalms. During this part of the service the *Torah* is brought back to the Ark.

Part V begins with the *Alenu* (Adoration) sung by the cantor and followed by the Minister's part, which is scored only in English. The Memorial Prayer follows and is also scored in English for the Minister. This leads again to the *Tzur Yisroel* chant heard earlier in Part I but

performed this time by both cantor and choir. The concluding hymn is *Adon Olam* (Eternal God who reigns supreme). It is sung by the choir with the cantor joining in on the final verse. The work concludes with the Aaronic blessing whose text comes from the Book of Numbers (Now may the Lord bless you and keep you...). It is scored with alternative settings in Hebrew or English. The work ends with a sustained Amen.