

# IEBS Newsletter

The International Ernest Bloch Society  
President: Sir Charles Mackerras CH CBE AC

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## Honouring Bloch

The first two societies honouring Ernest Bloch were established in 1937, when the composer's international reputation was at its peak. Indeed, in the eyes of many of his contemporaries, he was the 20th-century's direct successor to the lineage of great composers stretching from Bach via Beethoven to Brahms. It was an American Ernest Bloch Society that was the first to emerge, followed swiftly by a British counterpart, whose inauguration took place at London's Aeolian Hall on 10 December 1937. The celebrated Griller Quartet performed the composer's First String Quartet on this occasion, a heroic and compelling work from 1916.

As its honorary president the UK's Ernest Bloch Society boasted none other than Albert Einstein, and the membership was equally distinguished, comprising many of the musical luminaries of the day, from composers Vaughan Williams, Bax, Smyth and Bliss to conductors Beecham, Barbirolli, Koussevitzky, Walter and Wood.

Sadly, the Second World War saw the demise of the Society, and in the following decades Bloch's works began slowly to fade from the concert scene, although a handful of pieces, in particular the ones for cello (*Schelomo* and *From Jewish Life*), continued to maintain their place in the repertoire. In recent years, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in the composer and, as the 50th anniversary of his death approached, an international conference focusing on Bloch's musical legacy was held at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge University, in July 2007, co-ordinated by the Jewish Music Institute (SOAS, University of London).

An important landmark in the Bloch revival, the conference was attended by scholars and enthusiasts

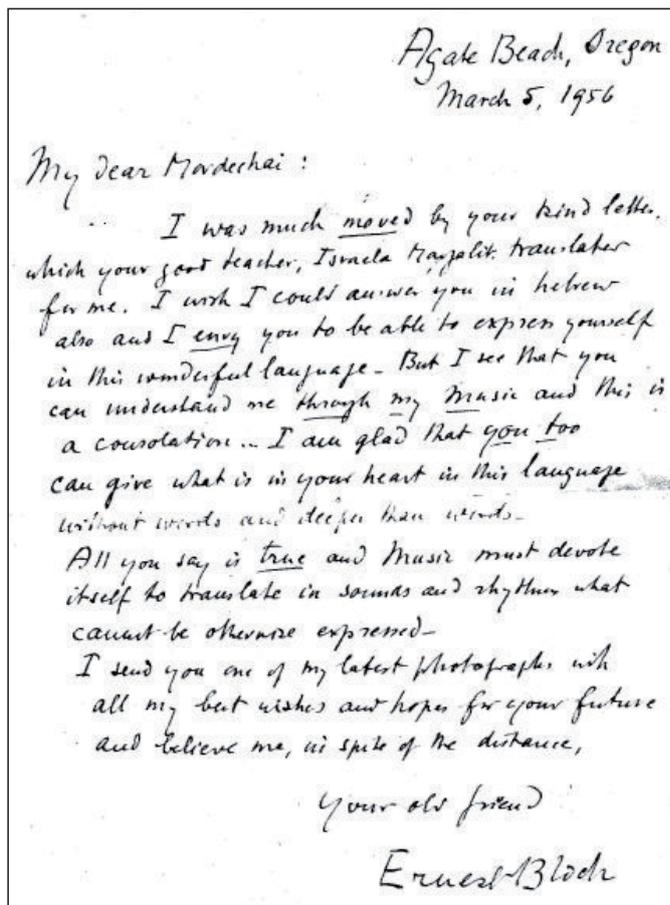
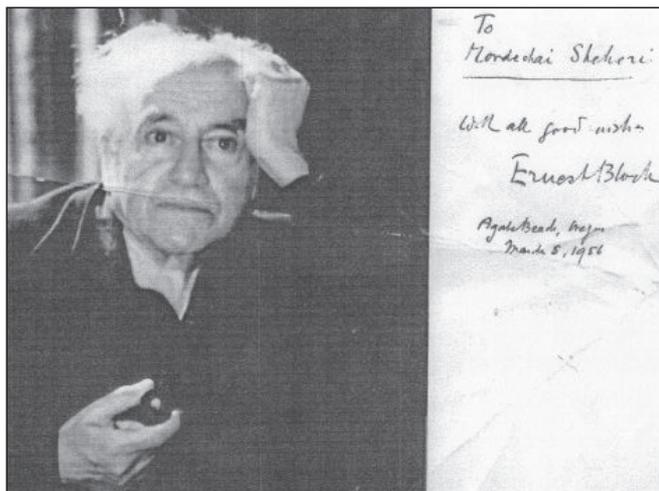
from around the world as well as members of the Bloch family – from Oregon, California and Switzerland. One year later, the International Ernest Bloch Society (IEBS) was re-launched in London, its remit to promote greater awareness and appreciation of the composer's music and to encourage performances by professional and amateur musicians alike. Similar societies were also established in the composer's homeland – the Swiss Association BloCH09/10 ([www.ernestbloch.ch](http://www.ernestbloch.ch)) – as well as in Israel ([dalia\\_atlas@yahoo.com](mailto:dalia_atlas@yahoo.com)).

In Bloch's adoptive USA, the Ernest Bloch Legacy Foundation of Agate Beach, Oregon ([www.ernestbloch.org](http://www.ernestbloch.org)) carries out parallel promotional work. In 2009, fifty years after the composer died, the Foundation is co-ordinating an International Jubilee Festival of Bloch performances, celebrations, talks and workshops, in tandem with the Jewish Music Institute and in collaboration with partner organizations in a number of countries. Centrepiece of the celebrations is a special five-day event taking place from 12 to 16 July in the Ernest Bloch home in Agate Beach. The home, where Bloch and his wife lived from 1941 onwards, will be open for tours, lectures, musical offerings and other 50th-anniversary opportunities, including a commemorative lecture by Bloch scholar, Dr Alexander Knapp, on the actual anniversary day, 15 July.

Festival highlights in the UK are two special chamber concerts at Wigmore Hall (20 April and 15 July), with acclaimed Australian pianist Piers Lane as artistic director, and the first fully-staged performances in Britain of Bloch's operatic masterpiece *Macbeth* (late March, University College London Opera). See the calendar of events on the back cover for a selection of other performances taking place worldwide this year.

## A Composer's Philosophy

This letter and signed photograph were sent by Bloch, just three years before his death, to a young admirer in Israel, the 10-year-old Mordecai Shehori. Shehori, who was later to achieve international fame as a concert pianist, had recently learned and performed all ten of Bloch's piano pieces for children called *Enfantines* (see also opposite page). He then wrote a long letter in Hebrew to the composer in the USA, quizzing him on various matters of interpretation. The reply that he received – written in Bloch's beautifully clear hand – crystallizes some important elements of the composer's musical philosophy.



## Book Review

### Western Music and Race

Ed. Julie Brown

Cambridge University Press, 2007

ISBN 0780521838870 (hardback)

£53.00 (US\$100.00)

*Julie Brown's recently-published collection of essays deals with the period 1883 (death of Wagner) to 1933 (Hitler's accession to power) and contains a chapter on Bloch by Klara Mórícz entitled 'Ancestral voices: anti-Semitism and Ernest Bloch's racial conception of art'.*

*IEBS Honorary Chairman, the pianist, teacher and writer Malcolm Troup reviewed the book in Piano Journal (Issue 87: Spring 2009). As a collection of essays discussing relatively uncovered ground, Troup described it as 'unputdownable'; however, the chapter on Bloch he found controversial and one-sided. After all, the Jewish works form only one relatively small (albeit the best known) part of the composer's output. The following is the review of the Bloch chapter in condensed form:*

Nowhere does this book come more into its own than with Mórícz's chapter on Bloch. How could it be otherwise than with the heroic (or for Mórícz anti-heroic) figure of Ernest Bloch – founder of Jewish Music like some musical *conquistador* single-handedly laying claim for the first time ever to a whole lost continent named not for king and country but for his Jewish forefathers. Just as Wagnerian polemics had deeply

influenced him through his ultra-Wagnerian mentor Robert Godet, might we not also attribute to this most universalist composer the idea that deliverance comes from the Jews? Be that as it may, it gave flesh – Bloch's own – to an existent belief at a time when nationalism had not yet put on racial clothing in practical terms. He was certainly egged on by Godet to follow his racial instincts as the only way toward authenticity of utterance. 'Godet convinced Bloch that the particular (in this case the expression of a particular race) would ultimately lead to the universal, to some shared human reality.' The downside, as Mórícz snidely points out, was Bloch's seeming conformity to Wagnerian type in his inability to create anything but 'Jewish' music, setting racial consciousness against nationalism. Mórícz's final testimony (as a hostile witness): 'An outsider among both Jews and gentiles, Bloch's descent to a barbaric pre-linguistic condition ... turned the specific expression of racial identity into a gesture of generic barbarism.' She further finds him guilty of 'inflated racial rhetoric' before concluding 'Godet's prediction was false: Bloch's racially specific expression never came to serve as a transitional stage preceding a universal language. Bloch would be permanently confined to the ghetto he had constructed for himself on a foundation of racial theory.' One can only account for this unforgiving act of character-assassination as being directed more against Godet than against his unwilling one-time disciple.

## Bloch for Young Minds

The letters Bloch wrote as a young man reveal a decidedly troubled, even angry soul – a portrait quite removed from the serene Prophet-like image the composer came to acquire in later years.

Starting in 1911, the struggling and still barely known composer began to correspond with the writer, philosopher, and future Nobel-prize winner, Romain Rolland, who had developed an interest in the Swiss musician at the time of the premiere of his opera *Macbeth* in Paris in the previous year. The correspondence, which was to last more than two decades, gives a fascinating portrait of both men. On the one side is the older man, who listens and counsels patiently, while, in letter after letter, Bloch pours out all the bitterness and frustration he feels as an artist unrecognized – and even deliberately thwarted – by the Swiss musical establishment. It is only in 1916, when Bloch leaves for America, that the anger subsides and the letters begin to speak of hope and optimism.

All this soul-searching inevitably left a mark on the music. But it is not only the pre-American compositions that deal with inner struggle, questioning and pain, for, throughout his career, Bloch remained a profoundly serious and humanitarian artist. And it is precisely the searching and penetrative qualities of his music – and not only the works from the ‘Jewish’ period – that help imbue it with the ‘universal’ dimension that his contemporaries so admired, and which inspires and moves us as deeply today.

It is perhaps also this musical depiction of inner strife and soul-searching that makes Bloch so appealing to younger musicians. Certainly the elements of autobiography and introspection so audible in the music are bound to resonate with many a young artist. Added to this is the fact that quite a number of the pieces are not particularly heavyweight, either in length or technical difficulty. String players are particularly blessed in this respect – one has only to think of *From Jewish Life* or the *Méditation hébraïque* for cello and piano, or the beautiful *Suite hébraïque* that violinists and violists share, or some marvellous shorter pieces that Bloch provided for both these instruments.

For more advanced string players, there are of course the ‘great’ works – the massive Suite for viola and piano and the solo viola suite; *Schelomo* and *Voice in the Wilderness* for cello and

orchestra, not to mention the three solo suites written right at the end of the composer’s life. Violinists, by contrast, have the two imposing Sonatas as well as the Concerto and *Baal Shem*.

It is through the shorter works, however, that most young players arrive at Bloch. So finely crafted are these pieces, and so direct in their appeal, that they have been set on examination syllabuses for several generations now – and proving very popular each time. On the Associated Board’s current cello syllabus, for example, Prayer (*From Jewish Life*) is by far the most played piece in the 20th-century list at Grade 8, with more than 50% of candidates regularly choosing it, far outranking its six rivals in the field, including composers as august as Debussy (10% of candidates) and Shostakovich (9%). In fact, looking at cello entries in the last five years for the whole of Grade 8 – i.e. taking into consideration the Baroque/Classical and Romantic lists as well – the Bloch piece is still the most popular of all, outstripping even the Bach solo suite in List A (41% of candidates) and the Rachmaninov sonata in List B (39%).

The same is true for viola exams, with a remarkable 69% of candidates choosing to perform Processional (from *Meditation and Processional*) in recent Grade 7 exams, while composers such as Ibert and Milhaud languish far behind, and in the current Grade 8 violin exams the uplifting Affirmation (*Suite hébraïque*) is only outflanked by Monti’s show-stealing Czardas.

Also perfect as examination material are the exquisite, but little known, piano miniatures that Bloch wrote for teaching purposes in 1923 and which he called *Enfantines*. In the Associated Board’s 2005/06 piano syllabus, the final piece from the set – the haunting and lyrical Dream – proved the second most popular choice in the Romantic list in Grade 5. And it is not hard to see why, since Bloch has that rare gift of being able to inhabit the child’s mind utterly, while crafting music that is eminently suitable for adult performers too. With its hypnotic slow ostinato of triplets, over which a melody of magical simplicity floats, it is a veritable jewel. Even more remarkable, perhaps, is the piece’s prophetic element for, in the mirage effect it produces through nuance and repetition, it can be seen as a precursor of musical minimalism – by some 50 years. Once again, even in this tiny masterpiece, Bloch was ahead of his time.

**Robert Sargant** Syllabus Manager, ABRSM

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*I have suffered so much, dear friend, so much! I have drunk bitterness to its dregs. I have been bound, stifled, suppressed. It is as if everyone knew the frailties of my heart so as to hound me there. It is as if everyone knew the words that would wound me the most! It is not the solitude that is terrible, but the desertions and acts of cowardice... And yet, I know that I have a great Truth to proclaim, greater and truer and more human than all the passing games of those entertainers the pleasure-seeking masses feed upon. They are afraid! Afraid of looking their conscience in the face – and afraid of those who remind them of their conscience.*

Ernest Bloch, letter to Romain Rolland, 24 February 1915

# International Bloch Festival 2009 and beyond...

A selection of Bloch performances & events worldwide this year

## JANUARY

**Sun 11:** Three Nocturnes (1924)  
Osiris Trio  
Kohl Mansion, Burlingame, California, USA

**Thu 29:** 'Helvetia – Israel – America: Identity in Ernest Bloch's Life and Music'  
Lecture by Dr Alexander Knapp  
Royal College of Music, London, UK

## FEBRUARY

**Sun 22:** From Jewish Life (1924)  
Natalie Clein, cello, Margaret Fingerhut, pno  
Wigmore Hall, London, UK

## MARCH

**Sat 7 & Sun 8:** Macbeth (1909): Interludes Acts 1 & 3  
Spokane Symphony, Eckart Preu, cond.  
Martin Woldson Theater, Spokane, USA

**Tue 17:** Three Nocturnes (1924)  
Oberon Trio  
Kongresshalle, Giessen, Germany

**Mon 23–Sat 28:** Macbeth (1909)  
First UK staging, UCL Opera,  
Charles Peebles, cond.  
Bloomsbury Theatre, London, UK

**Mon 30 & Tue 31:** Sacred Service (1933)  
Montreal Symphony, Kent Nagano, cond.  
Place des Arts, Montreal, Canada

## APRIL

**Sat 18:** Trois poèmes juifs (1913)  
Muncie Symphony Orchestra, Bohuslav Rattay,  
cond.; Emens Auditorium, Muncie, USA

**Sun 19:** Suite hébraïque (1951)  
Roberto Sawicki, vln & cond., Orchestre de  
Lancy-Genève  
Temple des Eaux-Vives, Geneva, Switzerland

**Mon 20:** Piano Quintet No. 1 (1923), Paysages  
(1925); Goldner String Quartet, Piers Lane,  
pno; Pre-concert talk by John Amis  
Wigmore Hall, London, UK

## MAY

**Fri 15:** Baal Shem (1923)  
Alexandra Mendes, vln, Gulbenkian Orchestra,  
Lawrence Foster, cond.  
Grande Auditório, Lisbon, Portugal

**Sat 30:** Suite hébraïque (1951), Baal Shem  
(1923), Meditation hébraïque (1924)  
Temple Israel, Ottawa, Canada

## JUNE

**Mon 1:** 'Ernest Bloch Reconsidered'  
Lecture by Dr Alexander Knapp  
Spiro Ark, London, UK

**Thu 4:** Piano Quintet No. 1 (1923)  
Supernova Quartet, Peter Allen, pno  
Scotia Festival of Music  
Dalhousie Arts Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia

**Sat 6:** Six Organ Preludes (1949)  
Ian Hare, organ  
King's College Chapel, Cambridge, UK

**Sun 7:** Sacred Service (1933)  
Orchestre de Chambre de Genève,  
Didier Godel, cond.  
Pre-concert talk by Harry Halbreich  
Victoria Hall, Geneva, Switzerland

**Thu 11:** Schelomo (1916)  
Mischa Maisky, cello, Orchestra della Svizzera  
italiana, Alexander Vedernikov, cond.  
Palazzo dei Congressi, Lugano, Switzerland

**Sun 21:** Violin Sonata No. 1 (1920), Piano  
Quintet No. 1 (1923)  
Renaud Capuçon, vln, Martha Argerich, pno  
Auditorio RSI, Lugano, Switzerland

**Wed 24:** Ernest Bloch Evening  
Noemi Rueff, pno, Walter Labhart, lecturer  
Jewish Cultural Organization Omanut  
Kulturhaus Helferei, Zurich, Switzerland

**Fri 26:** Concerto Grosso No. 2 (1952)  
cond. Yacov Bergman  
Lincoln City, Oregon, USA

**Tue 30:** Schelomo (1916)  
Mischa Maisky, cello, St Petersburg  
Philharmonic, Nikolai Alexeev, cond.  
Grand Philharmonic Hall, St Petersburg,  
Russia

## JULY

**Sat 4:** Cello Sonata (1897), Meditation  
hébraïque (1924), Baal Shem (1923)  
Musikfest Schloss Wonnfurt, Bavaria, Germany

**Sun 5:** Piano Quintet No. 2 (1957)  
Musikfest Schloss Wonnfurt, Bavaria, Germany

**Fri 10:** 'Ernest Bloch: a Jewish Perspective'  
Lecture by Dr Alexander Knapp  
Portland, Oregon, USA

**Sun 12:** Suite modale (1956) &  
Commemorative Dinner  
Ernest Bloch Home, Portland, Oregon, USA

**Mon 13:** 'Art Music and Ernest Bloch'  
Lecture by Dr Alexander Knapp  
Portland State University, Oregon, USA

**Wed 15:** Commemorative lecture  
Dr Alexander Knapp  
Ernest Bloch Home, Portland, Oregon, USA

**Wed 15:** Violin Sonata No. 1 (1920), Baal Shem  
(1923); Jack Liebeck, vln, Bengt Forsberg, pno  
Pre-concert talk by Prof. Brian Foster  
Wigmore Hall, London, UK

**Wed 15:** Suite No. 3 for cello solo (1957)  
Maud Hodson, cello  
Leytonstone Festival, Leytonstone, UK

**Wed 15:** Baal Shem (1923), Violin Sonata No. 2  
(1924), Abodah (1929)  
David Peterhoff, vln, Matthias Brack, pno  
University of Regensburg, Germany

**Wed 15:** Six Preludes for Organ (1949), From  
Jewish Life (1924), Baal Shem (1923)  
Church sv. Mikuláš, Cheb, Czech Republic

**Thu 16:** Tzavta First Ernest Bloch Competition  
Royal College of Music, London, UK

**Tue 28:** Piano Sonata (1935)  
Cedric Pescia, pno; Davos Festival  
Kongresszentrum Davos, Switzerland

**Thu 30:** Suite modale (1956)  
Oxford Philomusica, Marios Papadopoulos,  
cond.; Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, UK

## AUGUST

**Sat 1:** Piano Quintet No. 1 (1923)  
Goldner String Quartet, Piers Lane, pno  
Townsville Civic Theatre, Australia

**Sun 2:** Violin Sonata No. 1 (1920)  
Eugene Faygelson, vln, Malcolm Troup, pno  
Stanmore, UK

**Sat 15 (until 6 Sept):** Ernest Bloch Exhibition  
Created by Walter Labhart in the context of  
the Jüdische Kulturwoche  
Dorfmuseum Lengnau, Switzerland

## SEPTEMBER

**Thu 24:** Quatre Episodes (1926)  
Orchestre de Chambre de Genève,  
Manuel Valdivieso, cond.  
Geneva, Switzerland

## OCTOBER

**Tue 13:** Suite hébraïque (1951), Baal Shem  
(1923), Abodah (1929), Violin Sonata No. 2  
(1924), Poems of the Sea (1922)  
Cora Gordon, vln  
Riverdale Y, Bronx, New York, USA

**Sun 18:** Night (1925), From Jewish Life  
(1924), Concertino for Flute, Viola and String  
Orchestra (1950)  
Hochrheinisches Kammerorchester,  
Luzi Müller, cond.  
Synagogue, Endigen, Switzerland

**Thu 29:** In the Mountains (1925), Paysages  
(1925); Amaryllis String Quartet  
Villa Boveri, Baden, Switzerland

**Fri 30:** Violin Concerto (1938)  
Deborah Marchetti, vln, Zurich Symphony  
Orchestra, Christoph Escher, cond.  
Tonhalle, Zurich, Switzerland

## NOVEMBER

**Sat 14:** Macbeth (1909): Interludes Acts 1 & 3  
Portland Youth Philharmonic  
Portland, Oregon, USA

**Thu 19:** Three Nocturnes (1924)  
Trio Elégiaque  
Villa Boveri, Baden, Switzerland

## DECEMBER

**Thu 10:** Proclamation (1955)  
Pasi Pirinen, trumpet, Oulu Sinfonia,  
Rory Macdonald, cond.  
Madetoja Hall, Oulu, Finland

**Wed 30:** Baal Shem (1923), Schelomo (1916)  
Amsterdam Trio, Alexander Boeschoten, pno  
Rüttihubelbad, Switzerland