

Letter from America

The composer's grandson, Ernest Bloch II, reviews the celebrations taking place in the USA during 2009.

As many readers will know, it was at the International Ernest Bloch Scholars Conference, held in Cambridge (UK) in July 2007, that the **Ernest Bloch International Jubilee Festival 2009 – and beyond** was established. A worldwide celebration of Bloch's works commemorating the 50th anniversary of his death, the Festival has so far inspired a remarkable proliferation of concerts and other events (see Newsletter 1 for a selection of the events that have taken place in 2009).

Bloch's adoptive USA has seen probably the largest number of performances of his music during the Jubilee Festival so far. This 'Letter from America' focuses on a signature event in Oregon, at the only home ever owned by Bloch. As Bloch was a lifelong believer in music education, I am also giving a synopsis of events held at three US-based music institutions associated with Bloch and where his legacy is alive and thriving. In addition, one public higher education organization – Portland State University – has designated this academic year to be a 'Year of Bloch', and this notable event deserves some words too.

In the State of Oregon, Bloch's music has been heard frequently throughout the year, and the Governor of Oregon proclaimed July as 'Ernest Bloch Awareness Month for Oregon Citizens'. Most importantly, at Agate Beach (now part of Newport), where Bloch owned his only home, a week-long series of events took place at the former 'Bloch House'. These included open houses, tours and discussions of Bloch and his time at the house (1941 until his death in 1959). There were several lectures by musicians as well as performances of Bloch's music in the very room where it had been composed.

The largest public university in the State of Oregon, Portland State University (PSU), together with the Schnitzer Family Judaic Studies Program, produced a month-long series of lectures presented by Alexander Knapp. In total, Dr Knapp gave eight lectures under the heading 'Jewish Music', of which the last two involved Bloch. The final lecture was presented at the Bloch House to a standing-room-only audience.

The Department of Music at PSU also initiated a highly interesting programme for their 400 students during the 2009–10 academic year. Each musician has been given a Bloch work to study, learn and perform in a public recital. The total combined audience over the year will be a staggering 73,000 people! The season finale will include a performance of Bloch's *Sacred Service* – an appropriate choice, this being arguably his most public work.

Outside Oregon, and using the opportunity of the 50th anniversary to emphasize Bloch's combined efforts in the fields of composition and music education, we encouraged celebratory events at three music institutions in the USA where Bloch held positions. The motivation for this emerges directly from the mission of the Ernest Bloch Foundation: 'To have Ernest Bloch's music heard! And significantly, to have it heard by younger audiences, and played by younger performers.'

Cleveland Institute of Music honours Bloch daily with his portrait clearly displayed in the main entrance hall. After all, Bloch was the founder and very first Director of the Institute when it was established back in 1920. Fittingly, the Institute produced several Bloch-related events in 2009, over a two-month period. These included faculty recitals, competitions, public performances and symposia with the involvement of faculty staff, the student body (numbering some 700), members of the prestigious Cleveland Symphony Orchestra and participation by the city's Jewish community.

San Francisco Conservatory of Music gave an outstanding performance of the *Sacred Service*. For the first time in the Conservatory's history, an orchestra and choir of students and faculty participated. In fact, Bloch's music is performed frequently by members of the 400-person student body, and the organization itself continues to honour the important role played by Bloch in its early years (as Director, 1925–30).

The **Department of Music of the University of California–Berkeley** (where Bloch lectured during the 1940s and early 1950s) sponsored several events in the latter part of 2009. The Hargrove Music Library, which has a large collection of autographed Bloch scores, displayed a number of them in its own lobby as well as in the lobby of the performance hall where several Bloch works were heard. The Department also produced lectures, symposia and performances, and a competition involving the performance of a Bloch work.

Among other notable Bloch-related events taking place in the USA, the Ernest Bloch Foundation elected Alexander Knapp to its Board of Directors. Alex becomes the first international member and brings with him an impressive background of Bloch studies, lectures and knowledge. And finally, earlier in 2009, Bloch's former home was determined by the US National Parks Service to be eligible for listing as an Historic Site at the National Level. This news came as quite an honour for us as currently there is only one other American composer, Aaron Copland, with a similar designation.

Solving the Ernest Bloch Enigma

The eminent Israeli conductor and Bloch specialist, Prof. Dalia Atlas, has done much to promote Bloch's music – particularly the neglected works – through her numerous international performances and recordings. Here she looks into the enigma why most of Bloch's compositions were forgotten and why only a few unique works survived.

Ernest Bloch (1880–1959) was a rare composer, different from any other in many areas of musical styles and composition. One of the most striking phenomena was that, after his death, history neglected about 90% of his entire compositions, which the present generation are not familiar with. Apart, that is, from a small number of works in the Jewish style which have survived and continue to be performed until this day.

All musicologists who deal with Bloch are still struggling with this mysterious Enigma: how can it be that such phenomenal compositions, all of them masterpieces, from the hand of a truly great composer, were either forgotten, neglected, left unpublished or lost? Especially bearing in mind that most of these very works won prizes and awards and were frequently performed by the greatest conductors and artists during Bloch's lifetime!

Here is the great Enigma: How is it that these pieces suddenly disappeared after his death? And why was it that only Bloch's works in the Jewish style survived?

Since the very start of my research into Bloch's neglected and unknown works, beginning in June 1996, I have carried out many graphological tests on Bloch's handwriting – as I usually do for any composer that I conduct. This tool, among others, enables me to reach – as far as is possible – an accurate evaluation of information and interpretation, as well as allowing me to understand and penetrate the composer's personality and soul.

Studying Bloch's scores, I have been fascinated by his unlimited abilities for change, moving from sphere to sphere in search of different styles and ideas in which to express himself. In short, he was a 'multifaceted' composer working in a vast array of styles, and this is actually the key to solving the great Bloch Enigma.

My solution, based on style analysis, reveals that each composer has constructed his own typical style with personal patterns that

belong only to him and which can be identified as a kind of fingerprint – or as an 'icon', even.

Bloch's music cannot be judged unless one is familiar with the full range of his compositions, as well as the sheer variety of his ideas, philosophies and styles. On the other hand, where precisely can the 'Bloch iconic style' be found in that huge forest of exploration and wandering through the many different styles as found in his music: the Romantic, Impressionist, Expressionist, Serial, Sacred, Neo-Romantic, Jewish, Chinese, Pre-classical, Polyphonic, Contemporary and Ethnological? These were Bloch's styles, not to mention his historical reviews in music of the three nations close to his heart: Israel, Helvetia and America. Among his neglected compositions, there are so many interesting, masterful and beautiful works, none of which today's listeners would immediately recognize as 'typical' Bloch music.

History's collective memory made up its mind and declared that the sole genuine and authentic Bloch style to be identified as an 'icon' was the Jewish style! And it was only these works that survived, while all the others disappeared.

Bloch was blessed with prophetic insights. His attachment to Jewish music was based not only on Jewish prayers and melodies, but mainly on his profound inner imaginary vision. Through his reading of the Bible, he interpreted and imagined the sounds, the sufferings and the emotions and atmosphere of the Jewish experience. This was his true inborn language. So much so that professional musicians, when analysing his scores, might be surprised to find several traces of Jewish scales or motifs inside his 'multi-style' music, consciously or unconsciously.

My recordings over the last thirteen years of thirty neglected Bloch works are a contribution to revealing and reviving the true complete picture of his music. As well as to promoting and returning Ernest Bloch to his pedestal, as one of the greatest composers of genius of the 20th century.



Photographer: Walt Dyke, Ernest Bloch Foundation

This photograph was taken in the 1950s and shows Bloch in his study at his home in Agate Beach, Oregon. Some readers may be surprised to see a life-size crucifix hanging over the piano of the best-known composer of Jewish music. However, Bloch's philosophical and religious interests were as wide-ranging as his own musical styles (see above) and he was much impressed by the teachings of Jesus, among other prophets and thinkers. Bloch bought the crucifix in 1906, as a young man of 26, at the prompting of his friend, the music critic Robert Godet. Over the years, Bloch had confided to Godet his innermost thoughts and feelings, including those pertaining to his private life and to being a 'Jewish composer'. In 1913, however, Godet shocked his friend by producing a translation of a strongly antisemitic social and cultural survey (H. S. Chamberlain's 'Foundations of the Nineteenth Century') and Bloch broke all relations with Godet for a while, maintaining only very occasional contact with him subsequently. But Bloch kept the crucifix, as a symbol of a 'betrayed Jew', which is how he felt as a result of Godet's cynical treatment of him as a human 'guinea-pig' over a period of ten years. Suzanne Bloch, the composer's elder daughter, has written a full account of this episode.

Bloch and Beyond

The Bloch scholar, Dr Alexander Knapp, reports on his lecture tour to Oregon in mid-2009, including commemorations of the Bloch Jubilee.

From mid-June until mid-July, I enjoyed the great pleasure and privilege of giving a series of twenty different lectures on various aspects of Jewish music – as well as the music of Ernest Bloch – at several venues in Oregon.

My main academic focus was the summer course I gave at Portland State University (PSU) at the invitation of Prof. Michael Weingrad, Academic Director of the Judaic Studies Department. Twice a week, for four weeks, addressing lively and responsive audiences, I presented a series of two-and-a-half hour sessions which covered the following topics: (i) a broad survey of Jewish music from Temple times to the present day, incorporating Ashkenazi, Sephardi and Oriental liturgical, folk and art genres; (ii) more detailed explorations of Ashkenazi cantorial music; (iii) Yiddish traditions (including Hassidic and Klezmer styles); (iv) Sephardic traditions (including Judeo-Spanish ballads); (v) the music of the Ethiopian, Yemenite, Bukharan and Chinese Jews; (vi) Israeli art music and the place of Jerusalem in the musical cultures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; and (vii) Jewish art music in the Diaspora over the past 200 years.

The final two sessions were devoted to Bloch's music, the first being an assessment of his self-styled Jewish works (including the 'Jewish Cycle' of 1911–16), and the second being a brief overview of Bloch's life in the USA, followed by an extensive review of the many musical styles manifested in the works that he composed in his house overlooking Agate Beach, just north of Newport – his home during the final eighteen years of his life. This final lecture was given on 15 July – the exact 50th anniversary of his death – at the 'Bloch House' to an audience comprising my PSU students with Prof. Weingrad, other visitors from Portland, professional musicians and lay persons, members and supporters of the Oregon Coast Council for the Arts, local residents, and several members of the Bloch family, notably Ernest Bloch II ('Ernie', the composer's grandson) and Judy Buffo. Even at the risk of seeming presumptuous, I can imagine just how Bloch might have felt when he saw the Pacific Ocean. It was the same for me the first time that I, as a young research student, came to Agate Beach in 1969. It was like being on a pilgrimage. As I sat gazing at the vast horizon, and China beyond, a huge surge of emotion welled up in me on that occasion as, indeed, every time I have returned to this magnificent coast.

I also gave a number of lectures *outside* the auspices of the PSU Judaic Studies Department:

a short speech outlining my activities in Oregon at the Annual Dinner of the Portland Oxford and Cambridge Society;

a pre-concert talk on Bloch's life in the USA and Agate Beach, with special reference to Concerto Grosso No. 2 for

string quartet and string orchestra, for the 'Sound Waves Music Festival' at Lincoln City (Oregon Coast);

a presentation entitled "Macbeth's Line is a Gigantic Crescendo; Lady Macbeth's Line is a Diminuendo": the Fusion of Music and Psychology in Bloch's Opera of 1910' for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival at Ashland (near the border with California);

a speech entitled 'The Life and Music of the Celebrated Oregonian Composer Ernest Bloch: a Jewish Perspective' during a Friday evening Sabbath service at Temple Beth Israel in Portland (this Reform Jewish community, which predates the establishment of the State of Oregon by a few months, has been celebrating its 150th Anniversary);

another pre-concert talk, at the invitation of Linda Magee and David Shifrin, Directors of the prestigious Portland festival 'Chamber Music Northwest', on 'Ernest Bloch's View of the *Shtetl* and *Ghetto: Baal Shem Suite* and *Three Sketches From Jewish Life*';

two short talks on Bloch's *Suite Modale* prior to performances by Krista Johnson and Ramona Martin at the Bloch House;

and finally, a pre-concert talk on Bloch's organ works, performed by Dr John Jantzi at First Presbyterian Church, Newport.

My personal hosts were Ernie Bloch II and Judy Buffo, whose hospitality and generosity in all things were truly magnificent. Ernie and Judy entertained me to numerous lunches and dinners in their delightful apartment and elsewhere in Portland, as well as taking me sight-seeing whenever their busy schedule (and my teaching commitments) allowed. Ernie transported me about 1,000 miles in his comfortable and spacious car throughout the city and its environs; also to several towns along the Pacific coast, and to Tumalo, Central Oregon, where he and Judy have a beautiful house: the view from the veranda includes seven snowcapped peaks. While there, we visited Redmond for the traditional July 4th Parade, and Bend for the fireworks display that evening. The return journey to Portland took in the spectacular Mount Hood. Other highlights included my stay at the Bloch House, where I slept for two nights (14 and 15 July) in Bloch's own bedroom!

Ernie and Judy and I enjoyed many creative discussions regarding, for example, the possible uses to which the Bloch House could be put – if and when it might be purchased from the Baptist Church in Salem (Capital of Oregon) who are the present owners. Other areas of discussion included: the chamber orchestra version of Bloch's *Sacred Service* arranged by the New York conductor, Suzanne Peck; Ernie's keen interest in the IEBS, its committee, membership and newsletter; the

Bloch and Beyond (cont.)

Wigmore Hall recitals of 20 April and 15 July 2009; and many other philosophical, administrative and scholarly matters pertaining to the past, present and future.

I participated in a number of interviews with the local media, most of which were graciously arranged by Ernie. For example, I contributed to a programme on Bloch for Oregon Public Broadcasting (TV) with Katrina Sarson, while two complete PSU sessions (Yiddish and Hassidic musics, and Sephardic popular and art song) were recorded by Elizabeth Schwartz for her 'Yiddish Hour' radio programme. Additionally, a two-hour interview with David Stabler, Music Critic of *The Oregonian*, for a major feature on Bloch from the perspective of Jewish music, took place in Ernie and Judy's Portland apartment, as did a twice-broadcast interview with Andrea Murray for 'All Classical Radio', while Laurence Cotton, freelance film maker, who was also a student in my class at PSU, conducted an interview with me about many aspects of Bloch's life and music for a ten-minute promotional feature in preparation for an hour-long documentary. On a different topic, I had a telephone interview with Texas student Elana Estrin, now working for the *Jerusalem Post*, on the status and history of the violin in Jewish life.

It was a great pleasure for me to meet several good friends from past visits to Oregon, as well as making new ones. A selected sample would include Ernie's daughter Suzanne and her family; Laurie Bloch; Rabbi Michael Cahana of Temple Beth Israel and his wife Cantor Ida Rae Cahana; Cantor Judith Schiff of Temple Beth Israel and her husband, the composer and academic Dr David Schiff of Reed College; prominent members of the Oregon Coast Council for the Arts (OCCA) including Lee Freed, Frank Geltner and Greg Steinke; the conductor Yaacov ('Yaki') Bergman; Sarah Langan of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival; Theodora Karatzas, the daughter of Professors Sylvain Frémaux and Jill Timmons

(translators of Joseph Lewinski's 3,000-page French-language compendium of Bloch letters); Mark and Cindy McConnell, custodians of the Bloch House; radio presenter Elizabeth Schwartz; Joella Werlin, oral historian of the Bloch family, and her husband Robert Autrey; Marsha Emerman, film maker with a special interest in Iraqi and Iraqi Jewish music and musicians; Ken Selden, Conductor of PSU Orchestra, who is preparing a university performance of the *Sacred Service* for June 2010; the cellist Hamilton Cheifetz; Cliff and Naomi Wamacks; Professor Greg Steinke, with whom I had a long talk at the Bloch House regarding the revival of the 'Composers' Symposium' and other activities of the now dormant 'Ernest Bloch Music Festival' (1990–2005) at the Newport Performing Arts Centre, as well as several academic matters; and Helen Johnston Kintner, Bloch's student and secretary in the 1950s, and author of the recently published book: *The Ernest Bloch I Knew: The Agate Beach Years*.

Among the documents I brought with me from London, and presented to several friends and colleagues, were original publications of my own (books and recordings) as well as programmes produced by various authors for the University College Opera performance of *Macbeth*, the Roehampton University performances of the *Sacred Service*, the Crete Festival, and the Wigmore Hall concert of 20 April. (The 15 July concert had not yet taken place at the time of my outward flight to Portland.)

The total experience of spending such an intensely active calendar month in Oregon was, for me, enormously enriching and unforgettable. I am deeply grateful to the Blochs and to the many other individuals who made me feel so completely welcome and part of the 'family'. I trust that the friendships that I have been fortunate enough to establish during this and previous trips will continue and develop over the years to come.

I am in great anguish, dear sir, dear friend ... and I need to speak to you of all this with an open heart, and to ask your advice and perhaps your support. For, you see, I know that I have a mission that must be fulfilled, and that my sufferings are not pointless. I do not complain of them. I accept them as my due. But only up to a certain point ... as long as they do not compromise my task. One has to salvage something from the disaster.

What I have done so far is nothing in comparison with what I sense I have yet to do.

Ernest Bloch, letter to Romain Rolland, 22 March 1915

For membership enquiries, please contact: J. Audrey Ellison (Secretary), 135 Stevenage Road, Fulham, London, SW6 6PB; e-mail jaellison@btinternet.com; fax +44 (0)20 7381 2406.

To discuss a text or a submission for a future issue, please e-mail the editor: Robert Sargant (rsargant@btinternet.com).