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Universalism and Particularism in Ernest Bloch’s Sacred Service
Joshua R. Jacobson

This article is in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the death of Ernest Bloch (1880–1959).

Editor’s note: Some of the figures for this article can be found on the ACDA Web site. Click on the interactive link on the Choral Journal page. www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal

Ernest Bloch’s Sacred Service — there is nothing like it! Bloch was the first composer to set to music the liturgy of the synagogue in a form comparable to the great masses written for the Catholic Church. Since the beginnings of Rabbinic Judaism some 1900 years ago, the synagogue service has been chanted monophonically. In seventeenth-century Italy, Salamone Rossi created the first Hebrew choral music— a cappella polyphonic settings to be sung in the synagogue. By the nineteenth century, numerous European cantors and composers were setting individual synagogue prayers for cantor, choir and organ. But in 1933, when Ernest Bloch completed his Sacred Service, he became the first composer to create a grand integrated work for chorus and orchestra based on a complete synagogue service.1 This article will explore Ernest Bloch and his Sacred Service and the many intriguing ironies that hover over them.

Joshua R. Jacobson is professor of music and director of choral activities at Northeastern University and visiting professor and acting Dean of the School of Jewish Music at Hebrew College. Jacobson holds degrees in Music from Harvard College, the New England Conservatory, and the University of Cincinnati. He is past President of the Massachusetts chapter of ACDA. jjacobson@neu.edu
Born in Geneva, Switzerland, on July 24, 1880, Ernest Bloch was the youngest of three children. His grandfather (and, to a lesser extent his father) were actively involved in the local Jewish community, and Ernest studied for and celebrated his bar mitzvah by leading portions of the synagogue service. But that seemed to be the end of it; Ernest’s interests were focused on music. By the age of nine, he was already playing the violin and composing. To say that his father did not encourage his musical talent would be an understatement. Maurice referred to his son’s compositions as Scheissmusik. But despite his father’s objections, Ernest continued his musical training, moving from Geneva, where he studied with Émile Dalcroze, to Brussels to work with Eugene Ysaïe, Frankfurt with Ivan Knorr; Munich with Ludwig Thuille, and Paris where he associated with Claude Debussy.

While in Paris, Bloch renewed his friendship with Edmond Fleg (1874–1963), a poet and historian and a fellow Genevan. Fleg was to plant seeds in his friend’s soul that would bear fruit for many years and change the course of the composer’s life.

In 1894, Capt. Alfred Dreyfus had been put on trial in Paris on charges of treason. Dreyfus was quickly convicted and sentenced to life in a prison colony. But within a few years, evidence was brought forth proving that the documents which had implicated Dreyfus were the forgeries of an anti-Semite. Paris was in turmoil over these revelations, and many Jews, Edmond Fleg among them, became ardent nationalists. It was Fleg’s influence that caused Bloch to rediscover his Jewish roots and proclaim his ethnic pride. In 1906, Bloch wrote a letter to Fleg, “I have read the Bible … and an immense sense of pride surged in me. My entire being vibrated; it is a revelation. … I would find myself again a Jew, raise my head proudly as a Jew.”

From 1912 to 1916, Bloch composed a series of works based on Jewish themes, including The Israel Symphony (1912–16), Three Psalms (1912–14), Three Jewish Poems for Orchestra (1913), and Schelomo (1916).

In 1916, Bloch came to New York to conduct a ballet orchestra. He was so taken by the atmosphere and opportunities that the following year he fetched his family and
moved permanently to the United States. “It is true that people are in general more natural and more trusting than in Europe,” he wrote. “It is another planet here. Entirely different from Europe. … And at bottom, I am happy, because I no longer feel that cruel distrust and that bad faith weighing on me. They consider me a man.”

For three years, Bloch was an instructor at the Mannes School of Music in Manhattan. Then, from 1920 to 1925, he served as the founding director of the Cleveland Institute of Music. In 1925, he moved to San Francisco to become director of the San Francisco Conservatory. In 1930, thanks to a generous trust fund administered through the University of California at Berkeley, Bloch was able to resign his position from the San Francisco Conservatory and devote himself full-time to composing and conducting. After nearly a decade in Europe, Bloch returned to California to teach an annual workshop for composers at Berkeley. In 1952, he retired from teaching altogether and moved to a reclusive life in Oregon. Bloch died of cancer on July 15, 1959, in Portland, Oregon.

Ernest Bloch’s biography reveals a profound ambiguity of identification. On the one hand, he was a proud self-identifying Jew. But, at the same time, he seemed to reject the label of “Jewish composer,” and went out of his way to embrace a less parochial identification. This dialectic plays itself out in Bloch’s compositions, as well as in his philosophy.

Bloch achieved a considerable reputation as the first and only great Jewish composer. The critic Guido Gatti wrote (perhaps hyperbolically) “he ought to be considered as the first and perhaps the sole Jewish musician that the history of music affords us.” In his prime, Bloch considered himself primarily a Jewish composer. He wrote, “I am a Jew, and I aspire to write Jewish music not for the sake of self-advertisement, but because I am sure that this is the only way I can produce music of vitality and significance.”

Yet, he came from a largely assimilated environment in Switzerland. In 1890, at the age of 19, he wrote to his parents, “I am certainly not a believer, nor an atheist either. … I become Pantheist!” Bloch considered institutionalized religion “a dogmatic and desiccated form, remote from nature, morbid, lifeless, a fairy-tale that has lost all its meaning.”

His interest in Jewish culture came relatively late. In 1911, at the age of 31, he wrote, “I notice here and there themes that are without my willing it, for the greater part Jewish, and which begin to make themselves precise and indicate the instinctive and also conscious direction in which I am going…. There will be Jewish rhapsodies for orchestra, Jewish poems, dances mainly, poems for voices for which I have not the words, but I would wish them Hebraic. All my musical Bible shall come, and I would let sing in me these secular chants where will vibrate all the Jewish soul…. I think that I shall write one day songs to be sung at the synagogue in part by the minister; in part by the faithful. It is really strange that all this comes out slowly, this impulse that has chosen me, who all my life have been a stranger to all that is Jewish.”

Bloch’s terminology is telling. He writes that he did not choose to become a composer of Jewish music, but rather that the impulse had chosen him. Indeed, Bloch had no sympathy for nationalist composers who deliberately tried to insert folk-like themes into their works; Bloch was convinced that if a composition were to be honest and organic, the Jewish element must be integrated subconsciously into the creative process.

But, by the 1920s, Bloch was feeling confined by the label of “Jewish composer.” “Was he sensitive to the growing anti-Semitism in the world? Was it his desire for broader recognition? Perhaps he resented the implication that “he’s a good composer, for a Jew.” When he was twenty-six, Bloch purchased an antique crucifix, which he hung on his wall. He called it “mon petit Jésus.” He had written a few years earlier; “I admire deeply the doctrine of Christ, and I admire Jesus from the depth of my heart, as being the only man who conformed and acted by his principles.” And, shortly after the end

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of the first World War, Bloch considered composing a mass, as the finale to his Israel Symphony. Not a Catholic mass, but a kind of universalized mass.

This Mass, which would bring my excommunication from among the Jews, the Protestants, the Catholics, would be a tremendous thing. The text of the Mass combines the whole philosophy of Life. The Kyrie would embody all the sufferings of man, since the beginnings of the world. The struggles in the Darkness! The appeals to God. … I would use Jewish motifs. Protestant Chorales. Gregorian chant! The Crucifixus will not mean Christ only, but all those who have suffered and been crucified by man’s insanity, stupidity, cruelty. And the Ressurexit! And the Dona nobis Pacem! Then I could realize my whole Philosophy of Life and Thought. … [This Mass] will destroy the legend that I am a ‘Jewish composer’.11

Bloch strongly self-identified as a Jew, but not so much religiously as nationally or racially.

[Racial consciousness is something

that every great artist must have. A tree must have its roots deep down in its soil. A composer who says something is not only himself. He is his forefathers! He is his people! Then his message takes on a vitality and significance which nothing else can give it, and which is absolutely essential in great art. I try to compose with this in mind. I am a Jew. I have the virtues and defects of the Jew. It is my own belief that when I am most Jewish I compose most effectively.12

But what was Bloch’s nationality? He was born in Switzerland, lived in Belgium, Germany, and France, eventually settled in the United States, but often returned to refresh his soul in Switzerland or Italy. So where did he belong? While living in France in 1915, he wrote:

And I see that the day is coming when I will surely be forced to go into exile, myself and my family. And where? As a Swiss, after this war, it could be neither Germany nor France. In Germany, I am a Frenchman. In France, I am too German. And a Jew to boot! As if one were not a man above all.13

And, thirty-five years later, long after becoming an American citizen, he wrote:

In Switzerland, they say I am a Swiss renegade—In America: a Swiss expatriate who steals the prizes from our native composers. In Germany, I am a Frenchman because I fought for Debussy. In France, I am a German because I defended Gustav Mahler—and now … the Jews put me out, say I am not a Jew … where must I go to live and belong? In the moon!!14

Bloch’s attitude toward his fellow Jews was ambiguous at best. He seemed to agree with the anti-Semitic canard that most Jews conformed to the worst stereotype. In 1911, he wrote to a friend, “The Jews should be ashamed of what they are now and of the false path they have taken … and there should be an awakening among them.”15

And, one year later, “The Jews have not changed since Biblical times. Three quarters of them are nasty Jews. I would like to be part of the community but I am afraid that I will find that it lacks spirit. Will I have to go and look for this spirit among the Goyim?”16

In 1934, the New York Times quoted him in an outrageous statement, “I greatly respect Hitler’s sincerity. He believes wholly and disinterestedly in what he is doing. He is a fanatic, if you will, on fire with his cause, but certainly not an opportunist making political capital. I do not think he is right. But to label him and his movement merely as anti-Jewish is inaccurate.”17

There is one major irony that haunts Bloch’s great liturgical composition, the Sacred Service. Is it sacred or is it secular? Does it belong in the concert hall or the synagogue? Is it Jewish or is it universal? In 1929, Cantor Reuben Rinder of San Francisco’s Temple Emanu-el had commissioned Bloch to compose a setting of the Sabbath Sacred Service. It was based on the Union Prayer Book, which had been created for the American Reform movement. But, Bloch instead composed an oratorio, whose libretto was based on the Union Prayer Book.

It far surpasses a Hebrew Service now. It has become a cosmic poem, a glorification of the laws of the Universe … the very text I was after since the age of ten … a dream of stars, of forces … the Primordial Element … before the worlds existed. … It has become a ‘private affair’ between God and me.18

Bloch no longer conceived of his music as being functionally liturgical music. This was a dramatic composition intended for the concert hall. The composer wrote, “Its Judaism is not that of the Ghetto, but that of the prophets—messianic and universal. The faith it embodies, though inspired by the ancient service, transcends racial boundaries; the appeal it voices, though rooted in one religion, is to brotherhood. It addresses not Jews alone, but mankind.”19

It took Bloch four years to complete his Sacred Service (Avodath Hakodesh),
with most of the work done at his retreat in the Swiss Alps. In 1934, he conducted the first performances in concert halls in Turin, Naples, New York, Milan, and London. Ironically, it wasn’t until 1938 that Temple Emanu-El was able to present the work it had commissioned. But perhaps this grand work, with its universal themes, its post-romantic organic conception, scored for large orchestra, chorus, and baritone soloist, was more appropriate for the concert stage than for the synagogue bimah. Bloch himself considered it more a sacred Hebrew oratorio than a Jewish liturgical service. He once said, “I am completely submerged in my great Jewish ‘Oratorio,’ on an enormous Hebrew text, and more cosmic and universal than Jewish.”

In fact, Bloch’s composition was ultimately unfit for use as a worship service in a synagogue. Bloch took enormous freedom with the order of the liturgy, omitting some texts and inserting others that did not belong. He also specified that the Sacred Service must be performed continuously, without a break. Therefore there could be no chanting of the Torah, no sermon, no participation by the congregation. Furthermore, the liturgy of the Reform movement’s Union Prayer Book was largely in English, with only a few lines of Hebrew. But Bloch chose only Hebrew texts, with just a few lines of English to be recited near the end.

This dialectic of sacred vs. secular; or particular vs. universal, is manifest in the musical content as well. Unifying the Service is a six-note motif (Figure 1), which Bloch weaves with masterful contrapuntal skill and is found on nearly every page of the score.

It is no coincidence that Bloch’s theme is similar to the opening of a Gregorian Magnificat in the Gregorian Chant. (Illustration 1) In fact, in a letter to Cantor Rinder (November 26, 1930) Bloch writes, “… a kind of Jewish Magnificat which, through using my initial motive, is curiously related to the Magnificat of the Gregorian Chant—very, most probably, originating from our old Synagogue in Jerusalem! And which I will restore to US!!”

Bloch constructs his brooding introduction to the Service, treating the motif canonically (Figure 2). Bloch creates an “inclusio” – he frames the service by using a similar technique at the opening of the last movement (Figure 3).

This motif is also heard prominently and triumphantly at the end of the second movement.
Universalism and Particularism in Ernest Bloch’s

(Figure 4) and peacefully at the end of the fourth movement (Figure 5).

Sometimes the motif is hard to spot. In the second movement, the motif, presented as a rapid ostinato, is nearly buried in the orchestration (Figure 6).

While the six-note motif may be thought of as representing the universal message of the Service, another more sinuous melody represents the more personal, the specifically Jewish aspect. This melody is less rigid rhythmically, and more chromatic, evoking the modes of traditional synagogue chant. This contrasting idea is first presented in the eleventh measure of the introduction (Figure 7). Another

![Figure 4. Ernest Bloch, Sacred Service. Part 2, Final 5 measures](image-url)
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Figure 5. Ernest Bloch, Sacred Service. Part 4, Final 4 measures.

Figure 6. Ernest Bloch, Sacred Service. Part 2, Rehearsal 32.

Figure 7. Ernest Bloch, Sacred Service. Part 1, mm. 11–14.
form is heard in the prelude to the third movement (Figure 8).

Bloch’s musical particularism makes full use of the stock-in-trade techniques of “exoticism” or “orientalism” familiar to nineteenth century audiences from works such as Bizet’s Carmen (set in Spain) or Saint-Saëns’ Samson et Dalila (set in ancient Israel) and Verdi’s Aida (set in ancient Egypt).

Most of the music in the Service is modal rather than tonal. There are passages in the Phrygian mode (Figure 9, www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal), the Mixolydian mode (Figure 10, www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal), the Dorian mode (Figure 11, www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal), as well as chromatic modes which feature the “oriental” augmented second (Figure 12, www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal). The melismatic lines in figure thirteen are reminiscent of Verdi’s Middle Eastern passages in Aida (Figure 13, www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal).

Another marker of orientalism is a texture that features bare parallel fourths and fifths (Figures 14, www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal and 15).

Bloch’s “Jewish” themes often appear...
highly ornamented, in imitation of both Middle Eastern music and Eastern European cantorial stylizations (See figure 7). But only once does Bloch quote a traditional synagogue melody. “Tzur Yisroel” was supplied to the composer by Cantor Reuben Rinder, who had commissioned the music. Like much of traditional synagogue music, it has no meter (Figure 16).

Bloch’s Service is conceived in five movements (the composer called them “parts”), perhaps a deliberate attempt to connect to the structure of the ordinary of the Catholic Mass. In fact, Bloch said “…like the Mass of the Catholics it [the Sacred Service] must go on without interruption.” After an opening meditation, the first movement continues with the responsive call to prayer (“Borechu”), the Jewish credo (“Shema Yisroel”) and its subsequent admonition to love God, the bellicose “Mi Chomocho,” and finally the plea for salvation, “Tzur Yisroel.”

According to the composer, the second movement (“Kedushah”) “…is like the Sanctus of the Catholic Church, which was originally taken from the Hebrew.” Indeed, “holy, holy, holy” is derived from the sixth chapter of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible, and is found in the liturgy of the synagogue, as well as the church. The movement ends with “Yimloch,” recalling the martial music with a similar text from the first movement.

The third movement begins with a symphonic “silent devotion,” leading into the beautiful “Yihyu Lerotzon” for unaccompanied chorus. The majestic introduction to the Torah service inspired the rest of the movement, ending in a powerful exaltation. The conclusion of the Torah service (notice that the Torah service itself is omitted), comprising the fourth movement, is much gentler, ending with the metaphor of the Tree of Life (“Etz Chayim”).

The fifth movement is the longest and most complex tonally, rhythmically and emotionally. It begins with the Adoration (“va’anachnu kore’im”) and an eerie recapitulation of “Tzur Yisroel” from the first movement. Over a lengthy orchestral interlude, Bloch has the “minister” declaim and occasionally sing a passage in English. Bloch referred to this as a “personal message, … combining the talking and singing, bringing the whole philosophical message of humanity, brotherhood, the lamentations of mankind, asking what this is all about.” Then follows Bloch’s cosmic interpretation of the hymn, “Adon Olom”— “… in the enormous silence, outside of space, comes an impersonal voice, with the Law of Eternity, that everything was and will be, that He Is, He Shall Be, without beginning, without end.” The movement ends in a more down-to-earth fashion with the threefold benediction from Numbers 6:24.

Curiously, the Sacred Service is only infrequently performed. Perhaps this article will stimulate conductors to take a closer look at this dramatic work, whose breadth far transcends the walls of the synagogue. We might say that rather than bring concert music into a house of worship, Ernest Bloch sought to bring spirituality into the concert hall. As the composer noted, “It is a whole drama in itself … For fifty minutes I hope it will bring to the souls, minds and hearts of the people, a little more confidence, make them a little more kind and indulgent than they were, and bring them peace.”

Bibliography


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Universalism and Particularism in Ernest Bloch's 
Sacred Service cont.


Recordings

Pearl B00005UDXT; London Philharmonic Orchestra and London Philharmonic Choir; Ernest Bloch, conductor; Aron Marko Rothmuller, baritone; 2002; 44.3 minutes. This CD is a re-release of the monophonic 1949 English Sound Recording LP. The composer conducts and the choir sings in English.

Sony SM2K 47533; New York Philharmonic Orchestra; combined choirs of New York’s Metropolitan Synagogue and Community Church; Leonard Bernstein, conductor; Robert Merrill, baritone; 1992; 52.3 minutes. This CD is a re-release of the 1961 Columbia LP. Bernstein and forces deliver a convincing performance, but there are controversial alterations of the spoken text in the final movement.27

Chandos 10288; London Symphony Orchestra; Zemel Choir; Geoffrey Simon, conductor; Louis Berkman, baritone; 2005; 50.9 minutes. This CD is a re-release of the 1978 Chandos LP.

Phoenix USA PHCD146; National Symphony Orchestra of South Africa; The Johannesburger Symphony Choir; Elie Jaffe, conductor; Colin Shachat, baritone; 2000; 58.3 minutes. This is a rather sloppy performance; the cantor indulges in inappropriate glissandi, the choir sounds tired and the orchestra lacks a sense of tight ensemble.
Helicon Classics; Israel Philharmonic Orchestra; The Collegiate Chorale; Zubin Mehta, conductor; Thomas Hampson, baritone; 2009; 49.8 minutes. A beautifully polished live recording of a recent performance in Tel Aviv.

The complete oratorio takes about 50–55 minutes to perform. But the first three movements (lasting about 30 minutes) work quite well as a unit. The orchestration calls for strings, 3 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (3 players), celeste, and two harps, as well as a large chorus and a dramatic baritone soloist. The Service may be sung in Hebrew or English.

Broude Brothers also publishes several excerpts from the Sacred Service as separate octavos:

- Benediction
- Sanctification
- Silent Devotion and Response

Since 1933, several great composers have written complete synagogue services for chorus and orchestra, among them Darius Milhaud and Paul Ben-Haim. But Bloch’s Service stands alone in its post-romantic grandeur.


3 Bloch’s greatest legacy may be his impressive body of compositions. But in addition, he...
affected the lives of many Americans through his inspiring conducting of choruses and orchestras, and through his teaching. The roster of his students reads like a veritable who’s who of American composers, including George Antheil, Henry Cowell, Frederick Jacobi, Leon Kirchner, Douglas Moore, Quincy Porter, Roger Sessions, and Randall Thompson.


8 Ernest Bloch, “Man and Music,” translated from the original French by Waldo Frank, Seven Arts 1, no. 5 (March, 1917), reprinted in Musical Quarterly 19, no. 4 (October, 1933), 377.


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13 Ernest Bloch and Romain Rolland, Lettres (1911–1933), edited by José-Flore Tappy (Lausanne: Editions Payot Lausanne, 1984), 34.

14 Letter from Bloch to Laderman, December 30, 1950, in Schiller, 94.

15 Letter to Fleg, January 11, 1911, in Moricz, “Jewish Nationalism,” 144.

16 Moricz, “Jewish Nationalism,” 172.


18 Letter from Bloch to Ada Clement and Lillian Highead, in Strassburg, 70.


20 Letter from Bloch to Romain Rolland, March 4, 1932, in Schiller, 50.

21 Moricz, “Jewish Nationalism,” 279. Bloch is referring here to the fact that some Gregorian chants are adaptations of ancient Israelite Temple music.

22 Ernest Bloch, lecture at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, September 16, 1933, in Strassburg, 137.

23 Ibid.

24 Bloch lecture, in Strassburg, 140.

25 Bloch lecture, in Strassburg, 142.

26 Bloch lecture, in Strassburg, 137.