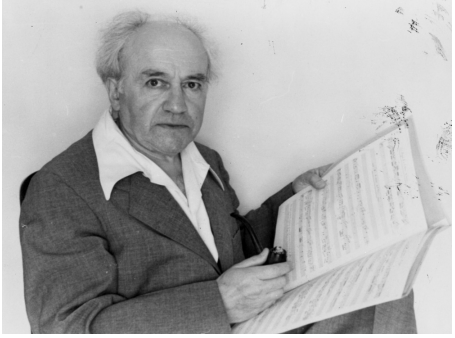
Ernest Bloch (1880-1959)



Ernest Bloch, a Jewish immigrant who spent his final twenty years in Agate Beach, was recognized in his native Switzerland as a child prodigy on the violin by the age of six. By nine years of age, he had written a pledge that he would one day become a composer of music. He placed the pledge on a small stone byre, set it afire, and watched until the flames had consumed it. As he pursued training on the violin in Brussels, Frankfurt, and Munich during his teen years, Bloch never forgot his promise, and the thirty-three works that he composed by his twentieth year fulfilled his pledge.

In 1904, Bloch married Marguerite Schneider, a young German music student. They had three children: Ivan in 1905, Suzanne in 1907, and Lucienne in 1909. Believing that he was being ignored by the European musical establishment, Bloch left his family in Switzerland in 1916 to seek employment in the United States. His search led him to New York City and to Maud Allen, founder and choreographer of a traveling dance troupe, who hired him as the conductor of her dance orchestra.

Bloch soon recognized that the small group of musicians was inadequate to perform the Debussy work, "Khamma;" Bloch wrote Debussy for permission to amend the score. In a return letter, dated July 28, 1916, Debussy wrote: "In the end, my dear Bloch, the orchestral fate of Khamma is in your hands.... I’m certain you won't do any harm to it because I know you. "

The dance tour folded after six weeks, leaving Bloch stranded and penniless in New York. Fortunately, his music had caught the attention of Carl Muck, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Muck invited Bloch to conduct his "Jewish Poems" in Boston, and by the early 1920s, his scores had attracted the attention of New York's musical society. This led to positions for Bloch as director of the Cleveland Institute of Music (1920-1925) and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (1925-1930).

At the end of his tenure in San Francisco, Bloch was offered a generous endowment that allowed him to return to Switzerland, where he composed the monumental "Sacred Service," the "Piano Sonata," and "Voice in the Wilderness," among other works. The endowment required that Bloch return to lecture and conduct master courses at the University of California at the end of the ten-year sabbatical, so in 1939, as war loomed over Europe, he sailed with his family to the United States. The family settled in Lake Grove, Oregon, where their son Ivan and his family lived.

In the summer of 1941, as he was en route from Lake Grove to Berkeley, Bloch was waylaid by a mud-slide on the Oregon coast, just north of Newport. Groping his way through the rugged and unfamiliar area, he found a small motel, where he spent the night. He awoke the next morning surrounded by tall evergreen trees, invigorating ocean breezes, and the crashing of the surf on the beach. He later described the experience as a "reawakening." "I felt as though I was home again in Switzerland,” he remembered, “and I asked the proprietor of the motel 'where am I'?" "You are in Agate Beach, Oregon, sir,” was the reply. Bloch inquired about the availability of land and was told that a large home owned by the Asahel Bush banking family had recently been listed for sale.

Ernest and Marguerite Bloch bought the Agate Beach property in 1941, and it was there that Bloch composed the final third of his greatest works. His attachment to the land, his love of Oregon's forests and open spaces soon bound Bloch's heart to Oregon. This bond, while difficult to pinpoint specifically in his scores, framed the background for all of the works he composed over his twenty years at Agate Beach.

In 1958, Bloch was diagnosed with cancer and was told that he must undergo surgery. With his usual ferocity, he persuaded the doctors in Portland that he must first return to Agate Beach to complete a score. Following surgery and through a long and painful recovery, Bloch composed several important works, ending with the dolorous solo numbers for unaccompanied violin, viola, and cello.

Bloch received his American citizenship papers in 1924. Out of a sense of gratitude for his adopted country, he wrote "America," hoping that the symphony's final, triumphant anthem would eventually become the National Anthem. He conducted his works with the Portland Symphony, and his notebooks contain numerous references to the joy of living in a state that claimed him as "its own." Bloch was also well known for his photographic skills, and he captured the beauty of Oregon in black-and-white photographs. Six thousand of his negatives are in the archives of the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona.

In 1990, the arts community in Newport sponsored the first annual Ernest Bloch Music Festival, and a memorial plaque—originally placed just south of the entrance to Yaquina Head lighthouse in Agate Beach—was installed at the entrance to the Performing Arts Center.

Written by Helen Johnston Kintner

Further Reading:

"The Robert Strassburg Collection of Ernest Bloch." University of Florida, George A. Smathers Libraries. www.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/belknap/composers/bloch.htm.

Ernest Bloch Legacy. www.ernestbloch.org/.

Stabler, David. "The Symphonic Camera: Composer Ernest Bloch reveals photographic skill in show at Oregon Jewish Museum." *Oregonian*, Jan. 10, 2011, pp. B1, B2. www.oregonlive.com/performance/index.ssf/2011/01/ernest_bloch_reveals_photograp.html.

Strassburg, Robert. *Ernest Bloch: Voice in the Wilderness*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Robert Strassburg, 1977.

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