



Ernest Bloch.

Ernest Bloch Comes to London

A Festival of Jewish Music.

By JOSEPH SACK.

THERE is much excitement in musical circles in London at the moment. Ernest Bloch, the famous Jewish composer, has come here to conduct concerts of his own works, and wherever music-lovers gather you can hear them talking about Bloch. And on all sides you will hear it acknowledged that he is not only the greatest Jewish composer of our time, but one who has a vital message to convey to the world, and who ranks as highly as the greatest composers of any other nationality.

Who is Ernest Bloch? He is a short man, grey-haired, and his eyes have a philosophic twinkle. To look at him you might think him a typical business man. He has no mannerisms, no stupid peccadilloes—he is just a sincere and human musician.

One can learn quite a good deal about a composer by watching him conduct a rehearsal of his works, so let me take you to the Queen's Hall to watch Ernest Bloch conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra. It is Saturday night and this is one of the last rehearsals before the concert.

The stage is brilliantly lit up. The rest of the hall is like a tomb of shadows. The atmosphere is that of any other important orchestral rehearsal, except that there is an air of expectancy among the players. They are eager to play one of Bloch's works which is new to them. The members of the orchestra come on to the stage and take their places. They tune up. They chat and crack jokes, and play over the intricate passages.

Mr. Bloch steps nimbly on to the rostrum and salutes the orchestra. They applaud warmly.

And then the rehearsal begins. A few privileged people sit in the darkened auditorium. They are the first to see Ernest Bloch conduct in London.

Outside there is the low rumble of traffic; the blaze of London's lights and electric signs; the blended chatter and laughter of her cheerful crowds about to visit theatre-shows; all the mingling sounds and sights that make London such a vivid and noisy place at night.

But here in the Queen's Hall we are lost to all this. The only sounds that fall upon our ears are the sounds of wonderful music; now it murmurs softly as if some hidden grief is clamouring for expression; now it grows into a poignant lament; and then as deftly as Nature can make light

alternate with shadow, the mood of the music changes to that of gaiety and abandon. Here indeed is great music, music that sums up the grief, the sorrows, the disappointments, the joys, the hopes of the Jewish race . . .

The London Philharmonic Orchestra is playing very beautifully to-night. Mrs. Bloch, the wife of the composer, who is sitting next to me, remarks how pleased he is with their playing.

As a conductor, too, Mr. Bloch has indisputable merits. His baton is handled with great vigour; but there is grace and meaning in every movement of his hands. As the mood of the music changes so does the expression on his face. At one moment shadows flit across it. Then they vanish and his expressions becomes one of repose and serenity. It is clear that when he conducts his music, he lives it.

There is a short break, and then the rehearsal is resumed. Maurice Eisenberg, the famous Jewish 'cellist, comes on to the platform to play "Schelomo," a remarkable work for solo 'cello and orchestra.

Bloch intended "Schelomo" to be a work for a solo singer and orchestra, and it was, in fact, inspired by the Book of Ecclesiastes. But he found it difficult to find a Hebrew text to fit his music, so for a number of years he had sketches for his work without being able to complete it. Then he thought of giving the vocal part to the 'cello, and letting this noble instrument speak the message he would otherwise put into words.

And he succeeded.

"Schelomo" is an eloquent work. The 'cello part is fierce and rhapsodic. The notes seem to have more meaning than any words could carry. And listening to it one cannot help feeling the urge of a great Hebrew mind and spirit. No other composer could have written music like this. Although Bloch does not deliberately use the traditional songs of the synagogue, his melodies have the same spiritual urge and feeling. There is the same sadness, the same poignancy; but the same hope and aspiration smouldering behind it all.

But to return to the rehearsal! When this ended, Bloch, who had discarded his coat in the heat of his exertions, mopped his brow and dismissed the hundred players of the Philharmonic Orchestra. But they did not leave until they had paid the great composer a moving tribute. "Bravo!"

they shouted. And they applauded loudly.

After the rehearsal I met Bloch in the artist's room, and congratulated him on the excellence of the music I had just heard for the first time.

"When did you first start composing?" I asked him.

"At an early age. But actually my first lessons of real value were received in Geneva when I was fourteen. That was in 1894."

Bloch, by the way, was the only member of the family to follow musical studies. His parents had a business in Geneva and Bloch was obliged to enter this, after seeing the impossibility of living on composition alone. From 1904 to 1916 he composed, taught, lectured, conducted concerts in Lausanne and Neuchatel; and all this quite apart from his commercial work.

After a cordial chat in which Bloch spoke of many things; his love of Nature; the struggles he had to endure when he emigrated to America in 1916; his success there; he summed up his attitude towards his art.

"I am not trying to reconstitute Jewish music, or deliberately to base my work on melodies more or less authentic. I am not an archaeologist. What I consider most vital is the writing of good genuine music. It is the Jewish soul that interests me, the complex, glowing, agitated soul that I feel vibrating throughout the Bible . . . the freshness and naivety of the Patriarchs, the violence of the Prophetic Books; the Jews savage love of justice; the despair of Ecclesiastes; the sorrow and the immensity of the Book of Job. All this is in us, all this is in me. And it is this that I try to put into my music; the sacred emotion of the Jewish race, that slumbers far down in our soul."

When I told Bloch that the South African Jewish community had always been very liberal in its support of music, he was very pleased and interested.

I asked whether he could consider going out to South Africa to conduct his works there, and he replied:

"I should like very much to have my works performed there, but for the present I am very busy with important engagements on the Continent. Immediately my concerts in England are over I have to go to Milan, where I am booked to conduct several further concerts at the Scala Theatre."