



## ERNEST BLOCH

(1880-1959)

### *Yihyu lerotzon imrei fi*

"Response" of *Silent Devotion and Response*  
from *The Sacred Service (Avadath Hakodesh)*  
SATB a cappella

#### ANALYSIS

**Broad Description** a short *a cappella* movement from a large choral-orchestral work based on the Reform Sabbath morning service (Psalm 19:15)

#### **Background Information**

Source: Ernest Bloch *Avodath Hakodesh (The Sacred Service)*  
for Baritone (Cantor), Chorus (SATB), and Orchestra  
Broude Brothers: New York [Full Study Score No. 23; BB 4077]

Composed 1930-33

Edition: Available as a separate octavo, *Silent Devotion and Response*, from Broude Brothers Limited [B.B. 179] Copyright, 1962

Ernest Bloch, (born July 24, 1880, Geneva, Switzerland - died July 15, 1959, Portland, Oregon, U.S.), composer whose music reflects Jewish cultural and liturgical themes as well as European post-Romantic traditions. His students included Roger Sessions and Randall Thompson.

Bloch studied with the noted Swiss composer Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and in Belgium with the violinist Eugène Ysaÿe. From 1911 to 1915 he taught at the Geneva Conservatory. He toured the United States in 1916 with the dancer Maud Allen, and after the tour company went bankrupt he settled in New York. He was director of the Cleveland Institute of Music from 1920 to 1925 and of the San Francisco Conservatory from 1925 to 1930. In 1930 he went to Switzerland, but he returned to the United States in 1939, settling in Oregon in 1943. He taught composition for several summers at the University of California at Berkeley.

Bloch's music reflects many post-Romantic influences, among them the styles of Claude Debussy, Gustav Mahler, and Richard Strauss. His interest in the chromatic sonorities of Debussy and Maurice Ravel is evident in the tone poem *Hiver-Printemps* (1905; *Winter-Spring*). Bloch composed a significant group of works on Jewish themes, among them the *Israel Symphony* (1916), *Trois poèmes juifs* for orchestra (1913; *Three Jewish Poems*), the tone poem *Schelomo* for cello and orchestra (1916; *Solomon*), and the suite *Baal Shem* for violin and piano (1923). His sacred service *Avodath Hakodesh* for baritone, chorus, and orchestra (1930–33) represents the full maturity of his use of music appropriate to Jewish themes and liturgy. Many of Bloch's works show a strong neoclassical trend, combining musical forms of the past with 20th-century techniques. Examples include his *Concerto Grosso* No. 1 (1925) and his *Quintet* for piano and strings (1923), which utilizes quarter-tones to colour and heighten the emotional intensity of the music. His other notable works include an "epic rhapsody" for orchestra (*America*, 1926), the *Suite* for viola and piano (1919), and five string quartets (1916, 1945, 1952, 1953, 1956). [Encyclopedia Britannica]

**Great research source:** Ethan Nash and Joshua Jacobson, *Translations and Annotations of Choral Repertoire, Volume IV: Hebrew Texts*, earthsongs, 2009. Chapter Two (p.13-47) is dedicated to this work. Pages 13-16 give a informative introduction to this work and includes historical background and performance practice issues.

**Another resource:** Melvin Berger, *Guide to Choral Masterpieces: A Listener's Guide*, Ancor Books, 1993.

|             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                |
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| <b>Text</b> | <p><b>Psalm 19:15</b><br/> Yihyu lerotzon imrei fi,<br/> <i>May be acceptable the words of my mouth</i><br/> Vehegyon libi lefonecho,<br/> <i>And meditations of my heart before You</i><br/> Adomoy tzuri vegoali.<br/> <i>Lord my Rock and my Redeemer.</i><br/> Amen.</p> | <p><i>May the words of my mouth</i><br/> <i>and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight,</i><br/> <i>O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.</i><br/> <i>Amen.</i></p> |
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(Note: "Adomoy" is substituted here for the Hebrew word for the ineffable name of God.)

IPA and word for word translation of Ashkenazic text on page 25 (Nash and Jacobson)

- Text Issues**
1. The singing of G-d's Name. See p.11-12 (Nash and Jacobson)
  2. Decision regarding Ashkenazic or Sephardic Pronunciation. See p.16-17 (Nash and Jacobson)

**Program Note**

The Swiss-born composer Ernest Bloch's *Sacred Service (Avodath Hakodesh)* constitutes a genuine milestone in the history of liturgical music: for whereas the various Catholic and Protestant services have been set by great composers, the *Sacred Service* is the first large scale choral-orchestral composition to be written for Jewish worship by a composer of stature and renown. Bloch's masterpiece was commissioned in 1930, had its first performance in New York in 1933, and is now the best known and most often performed complete setting of any Jewish service. Part III of the service begins with what Bloch called "a silent meditation which comes in before you take your soul out and look at what it contains." It consists of an orchestral interlude (Silent Devotion) and a Response, *Yihyu lerotzon imrei fi* (May the words of my mouth). It is this reflective *a cappella* response that is performed this evening. (Note: "Adomoy" is substituted in our performances of the Hebrew word for the ineffable name of God.)






## ELEMENTS OF MUSIC

*For our purposes, we will begin measure numbers at the 2/4 of the first note sung – that will be measure 1 (top of p. 2)*

### Form

- There are four phrase pairs (antecedent/consequent), each pair repeats one line of text and the Amen is treated as a line of text. Every thought repeats, stressing the importance of the desire.
- Because of the use of lengthened, halting cadences and pick-up notes, the phrases lengths feel like 3 measures. Perhaps the number 3 is important: three lines of the psalm text, 3 measure phrases. The number 3 is a symbol of *holiness* in Judaism.
- This short piece is through-composed with each of the four sections (phrase pairs) coming to a clear concluding cadence.

### Rhythm

- Mostly in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time – there is one measure of  $\frac{4}{4}$  in the middle of the first phrase pair. Three again. Perhaps that one measure of  $\frac{4}{4}$  signifies the imperfection of the ones offering the plea.
- Tempo is marked **Andante moderato** (quarter = 69)
-   are the most common in the phrases, with a few s.
- There are a number of ties to extend cadences over bar line and an interesting   in the bass in m. 12.
- The relatively slow rhythmic movement sets the meditative, prayer tone of the piece.
- Each phrase begins with either a one or two quarter pick up, until the final phrase pair – the two statements of Amen, which begins on the downbeat, giving the sense of a tranquil confidence to the "let it be so" of the Amen.
- There is a fermata on the final note of this excerpted movement (not in original).

### Melody

- The melody is found primarily in the soprano line and moves primarily in seconds and thirds, with a couple fourths.

- In the first phrase pair (*Yihyu*), the bass voice is initially imitative of the soprano line, a measure later than the others – perhaps signifying the individual and personal within the community.
- At the second phrase pair (*Vehegyon*), the entrances are imitative and the soprano begins the melody (harmonized by altos), followed by tenor and then bass – the entire community expressing the individual, personal desire.
- At the third phrase pair (*Adonmoy*), the soprano melody contour repeats in the second half, but soars higher as the text sings of characteristics of the L-rd.
- While the first and third phrase pairs rise in the second half, the second and fourth move downward. The rising has a sense of pleading and imploring, while the downward movement gives a sense of humility – almost bowing.

### Harmony

- The harmony of this short work is sometimes surprising and always expressive of the text. There are several suspensions (and an appoggiatura) and chromatic harmonies used in this piece.
- Phrase Pair 1 (*Yihyu lerozon imrei fi*) harmonic movement:
  - f#m, B7, c#m7 (or E6),
  - f#m, bm, G, A, em A bm
 The B major and G major harmonies are quite unexpected
- Phrase Pair 2 (*Vehegyon libi lefonecho*) harmonic movement:
  - E, c#m, D, f#m, (bm), E, f#m, (bm w/g# passing),
  - f#m 6/5 appoggiatura, E 4/3 suspension, f#m, B7, c#m
- Phrase Pair 3 (*Adomoy tzuri begoali*) harmonic movement:
  - A, E, f#m, B7 c#m, B, c#m, B7, c#m 4/3 suspension
  - D, A, D, E, D, E, D, E4/3 suspension (and back).
 The second phrase in this pair soars with all major chords! The plea becomes praise.
- Phrase Pair 4 (*Amen*) harmonic movement:
  - Bm, C, D 4/3 and 2/1 suspension, am, D, am -- the C natural is quite unexpected (C & am)
  - D, bm, (G), A – tenor (3, 2, 3) and alto (5, 6, 5) have neighbor tones on last chord.

### Timbre

- The timbre of this excerpt is one that is dominated by the color of the *a cappella* SATB choir, but this is in strong contrast to what has come before in the work – the "Silent Devotion" orchestral introduction. The timbre of voices alone points to the "words" of the text – the words that one wants to be acceptable.
- Voices typically use a rich, full tone with vibrato in this work, though experimentation with non-vibrato at the phrase cadences (*diminuendos*) may provide a lovely color change.

### Texture

- Most of the texture is homophonic – melody in the soprano with the other voices providing a rich accompaniment.
- There are several moments when the texture is thinned or varied for effect
  - *Yihyu lerozon imrei fi* begins with the upper three voices in homophonic movement, while the bass follows behind – only to "catch up" on the final note of the cadence. Perhaps this signifies one's words being out-of-sync or the personal prayer.
  - In the second section, *Vehegyon libi lefonecho*, the soprano and alto voices move mostly together in homophonic fashion, while the tenor enters imitatively in the following measure and the bass two measures following the tenor. This most personal phrase of text – desiring that one's most deep thoughts and meditations be pure – is represented with the most individual textural treatment.
  - The third section, *Adomoy tzuri begoali*, is the most homophonic of the sections. The voices move exactly together in each phrase until the suspensions in each of the final cadences. There is no overlapping of the phrases in the pair as in the first two sections. The community speaks as one, in agreement.
  - The final section, *Amen*, is also mostly homophonic, but has more varied harmonic movement in the voices. Again, there is no overlapping of the two phrases.

## Expression

- As in most 19<sup>th</sup> - and 20<sup>th</sup> -century works, expression markings are indicated by the composer.
- The rise and fall of each phrase lends itself to a crescendo and decrescendo at the resolution of the cadence. This is also a function of the tension/release of the cadences.
- Bloch has indicated additional expressive markings.
- Each phrase begins at a *p* or *pp* marking.
- The only *mf* marking is in measure 23, the soaring repeated phrase, "Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer".
- The third section includes the marking *poco animando* for both of the phrases – the prayer almost becomes praise.
- *Più tranquillo* is marked at the start of the final section, *Amen*. There is a *poco rit.* at the final *Amen*.

**HEART/ESSENCE** The heart of the piece is the use of varied texture to portray both the desire of the individual and the community.

## INTRODUCING THE PIECE

1. Ask students to jot down an example of when their words or actions did not reflect their best self or were not in line with what they really want to be. Or, more easily, an example they saw in another person. [You may need to put out a disclaimer that you will not ask them to share]
  - a. How many of you have an example?
  - b. How many could come up with several more examples?
2. Set up the work with something like this: "I think that if we all honestly reflect on our words and our actions that there are often times when we say, do, and think things that are in conflict with what we want our best selves to be. I also think it is a universal desire for each of us to want our motivations and our thinking to be right within us – to be true to our best self. There is piece that we are going to study that uses an ancient biblical text that expresses this concept as a plea to God, from Psalm 19, 'May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.' Let's begin our study of a piece by Ernest Bloch that uses this text and see what musical choices he makes to express this concept. Let's ponder the universality of that individual desire to be right within ourselves as we study this music and we will revisit this idea as we become more familiar with this work."

## SKILL OUTCOME

Students will sing a four-part choral score containing accidentals and harmonic complexity with both pitch accuracy and attention to expressive markings.

## Strategies

1. Review & practice chromatic solfège scale in warm-up activities, as well as major and 3 minor scale activities (use solfège chart on board).
  - a. D di R ri M F fi S si L li T ↗D T te L le S se F M me R ra D
  - b. M & 3m scale pattern (sing without pause from one to the next in 8<sup>th</sup> notes until last La ):  
Major: D R M F S L T ↗D T L S F M R D ↘T  
Natural minor: ↘L ↘T D R M F S L S F M R D ↘T ↘L ↘S  
Harmonic minor: ↘L ↘T D R M F si L si F M R D ↘T ↘L ↘si  
Melodic minor: ↘L ↘T D R M fi si L S F M R D ↘T ↘L ↘S ↘L
2. Work on the piece without text – solfège initially, then neutral syllables.
  - a. Day one: Sight-read m. 1-7 with little or no piano assistance. Work out any pitch issues/counting issues (i.e. m. 4; D# and D natural m. 3&5; G naturals m. 6). Repeat with attention to dynamic markings.
  - b. Day two: Review m. 1-7. Continue sight-reading/working process for m. 8-15. Note the imitation. Repeat with attention to dynamic markings.
  - c. Day three: Review m. 1-15. Continue sight-reading/working process for m. 16-24. Repeat with attention to dynamic markings.
  - d. Day four: Review m. 16-24. Continue sight-reading/working process for m. 25-30 (c and g naturals). Repeat with attention to dynamic markings. (easy to add text to this phrase)

- e. Day five: Review all with attention to dynamic/expressive markings.

### **Assessment**

1. At every point in the process, the teacher assesses the note accuracy and performance of dynamic markings.
2. Students can be assessed individually on performance during the term voice checks.

### **KNOWLEDGE OUTCOME**

Students will identify phrases structure and form within a work and shape phrases accordingly.

### **Strategies**

1. Review "suspension" and the tension/release of this device. Find suspensions (and appoggiatura) in the score and perform with the sense of tension/release.
2. Determine phrase beginnings and endings.
  - a. There may be good discussions about phrase lengths (3ish vs. 6ish). Note that with 6 measure phrases, there is a more defined cadence.
  - b. Have students label phrases and discuss as they make decisions (4 sections or phrase pairs).
    - i. Note that in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> phrase pairs (sections), the two parts are more distinct. Some students may tend to see them as separate phrases.
    - ii. When text has been added, it will also help with these decisions as the phrases change with the textual ideas.
    - iii. Discuss antecedent/consequent
3. Review basic phrase shape. Perform phrases with shape – both in the antecedent/consequence and the full phrase – especially aware of suspensions and cadences.

### **Assessment**

1. Students mark phrasing and form in score for assessment.
2. Assessment of discussion is ongoing.
3. At every point in the process, the teacher assesses the performance of phrases, suspension, etc.

### **AFFECTIVE OUTCOME**

Students will explore how compositional techniques – particularly texture – can be used to express the individual and the community in a given text.

### **Strategies**

1. While learning the piece on solfège/neutral syllable (see Skill Outcome above), ask these questions along the way:
  - a. M.1 -7: Hmm... what is with the bass line?
  - b. Another day, M. 8-15: Describe what Bloch is doing here with texture.
  - c. Another day, M. 16-24: How are these two phrases different from the first two sections of the piece. (no imitation/completely homophonic)
2. Have class read the "Singing of God's Name" excerpt (p.11-12 Nash/Jacobson)
  - a. Have students underline important or interesting ideas (first steps of RAP).
  - b. Have students share some of these and discuss.
  - c. Share choice and explain a bit about Ashkenazic and Sephardic pronunciation. Adomai and Adomoy – have students change the "n" to "m" m. 17 and m. 21.
3. Have class look at p. 25 (Nash/Jacobson) – translation and IPA
  - a. As learning pronunciation, have students write in word for word translations and any IPA helps.

- b. Can spread out over 3 days... for the three sections of text
- 4. As the choir rehearses with text, continue to come back to the earlier questions, pointing to the varied texture in the first two sections versus the last two.
- 5. Ask students, "Do you think this text is a personal plea or a community plea (group)" – how so?
  - a. If it is private and personal, why does Bloch have it sung by a group?
  - b. If it is a community plea, why is the text singular? (my mouth, my heart)
  - c. Can it be both?
  - d. How does Bloch treat it musically?
  - e. Do you see any ways he conveys the personal? The community? Both?
- 6. Have students write (in portfolio or on a notecard):
  - a. The individual desire and the desire of the community as expressed in Psalm text and music of our Bloch piece work hand in hand together. Can you transfer this idea to our choir and the way we work together? We are a group of individuals who also are a group – a community who learn and perform together. Discuss the tensions and connections between the individual and the community in our classroom.
  - b. Share some of these student thoughts throughout the learning processes.

### Assessment

1. Assessment is done throughout classroom discussions and writings regarding Bloch's compositional choices and how they reflect the personal and the corporate, the individual and the community.
2. The final assessment comes in the student's ability to express that understanding in performance.

### MUSIC SELECTION

Bloch is a major composer whose significance in music history is well known and whose music regularly graces concert stages. Bloch's *Avodath Hakodesh* is among the best known and likely the most often performed complete setting of any Jewish service. This short *a cappella* work from it allows high school choirs to experience a bit of this monumental work. It is reflective and stands powerfully on its own.

In a recent performance, I paired the Bloch *Yihyu lerotzon imrei fi* [Psalm 19:15] with the Palestrina *Exultate Deo* [Psalm 80:1-3 Vulgate; (81:1-3)] without pause (the Palestrina starts in A major). The style and "affect" of the two pieces contrast, while the praise of the Palestrina seems to rise from the more meditative mood of the Bloch. It also allows students to see polyphony in its full glory in the Palestrina and when studying both pieces simultaneously, it helps when discussing the texture of the Bloch.

*Rebecca Renee Winnie* has taught high school choral music for 30 years, 25 at Homestead High School in Mequon, WI. She has served on the CMP committee since 1997 and especially enjoys the adventure of searching for diverse and powerful music to study with her students.

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