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Ernst Bloch and the utopian dimension in music

Gary Zabel

There is a fitting vindication of Ernst Bloch's theory of culture in the circumstances surrounding its appearance in contemporary musical circles. His writings are coming to influence discussions in the philosophy of music as well as actual compositional practice[1] seventy years after the publication of his early masterwork, *Spirit of Utopia*, and a decade after his death. Throughout his long and prolific life as a philosopher and critic, Bloch argued that unilinear notions of progress are inadequate to comprehend the rich variety of human cultural experience. It is not just that the realm of music obeys a different principle of historical progression than, say, literary history or the history of the visual arts. It is also that advance within this or any other cultural sphere is not a matter of simple forward motion, since abandoned or neglected positions can suddenly achieve new relevance in light of subsequent concerns and events. The artifacts which record the creative activity of human beings are never exhausted by the moment of their original production. They have an anticipatory dimension, a claim on the future. Bloch insisted that we need a concept of cultural time at least as flexible as the non-Euclidean concept of space made famous by relativity physics. There is no more telling evidence in support of this position than his own posthumous entry into the active centre of musical theory and practice.

Bloch was born in 1885 into an affluent and assimilated Jewish family in the Bavarian industrial city of Ludwigschaffen. Though he was later to boast of his frequent contacts with the Social Democratic workers of his native town, he found Ludwigschaffen to be dreary and confining, and his youth was saturated with fantasies of escape. These early dreams of a better life were stimulated by the presence, just across the Rhine, of the ancient imperial city of Mannheim, with its beautiful medieval cathedrals and developed cultural life. In Bloch's mature speculations, the paired cities of Ludwigschaffen and Mannheim became a symbol of what he called the 'presence of noncontemporaneity,' the coexistence of industrial modernity with remnants of the preindustrial past. Unlike his friend, the Hungarian philosopher and literary critic, Georg Lukács, Bloch was never to renounce his fascination with such remnants, not even when he declared allegiance to Marxist theory and politics at the end of the First World War. There is a considerable degree of truth in Lukács's contention that Bloch always remained a 'romantic anticapitalist.'[2] His Marxism was indeed mixed with incongruous elements from such premodern systems of thought as Hermeticism, mysticism, and Messianism. Still, Bloch drew on each of these disparate traditions in the service of a common aim: rehabilitation of the concept of utopia in all of its substance and scope.

In order to secure a positive conception of utopia, Bloch had to fight a battle simultaneously on two fronts. A rejection of utopian modes of thinking was common to the traditional conservative right as well as the orthodox Marxist left. For conservatives, utopias were abstract pictures of unattainably perfect societies in the name of which radical intellectuals were willing to disrupt delicate networks of social relations which had taken centuries to evolve. Bloch responded to this characterisation by pointing out that traditional social relations involved forms of deprivation and human injury which merited disruption by the utopian imagination. For orthodox Marxists on the opposite front, utopias were wishful projections of emancipated societies which remained pragmatically empty because they lacked any foundation in objective social tendencies. Bloch replied to this critique by demonstrating that utopias were rooted in people's concrete aspirations for more gratifying forms of life, and that these aspirations themselves helped to define the parameters of objective possibility. Yet, Bloch's explicit counter-arguments against the anti-utopianism of left and right were not the most significant aspect of his theoretical contribution. Far more important was the fact that he went on to shift the terrain where the debate over utopia took place. According to him, the social utopias were merely one expression of a universal utopian impulse active in many spheres. In fact it would be impossible to understand anything at all about human experience without comprehending the desire for a more fulfilling existence which lies at its core. In Bloch's description, hunger in the general sense of the urge to overcome deprivation is the most basic human drive.[3] It expresses itself especially in the emotion of hope, with its felt anticipation of a brighter future. Hope in turn generates wishful images of the missing state of satisfaction, images which extend from the simplest daydreams to the most sophisticated works of culture. Cultural elaborations of these hunger-based wishful images include the social utopias to be sure, but they also include works of art. The purpose of art is to fashion a 'preliminary appearance' (*Vorscheinung*) of possibilities which are as yet unrealised. It accomplishes this end by driving its material to the furthest extremity of expression through exaggeration and

[1] See, for example, Alexander Goehr's 1985 opera, *Behold the Sun*, which is based in part on Bloch's writings on Christian millenarianism.
[2] Georg Lukács: *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, 1971), Preface

[3] See Ernst Bloch: *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, 1986), Part II

fantasy, thereby giving what appears in its images a decisiveness which mundane reality lacks. Thus for Bloch, all art is utopian in that it presents imaginary realisations of what is not-yet-actual. But music is the most utopian of all the arts.

The special status that Bloch accords to music is evident in the work that first established his reputation as a major figure on the German intellectual scene. *Spirit of Utopia*, published in 1918, devotes half of its pages to the elaboration of a philosophy of music. It does so in the context of an expressionist critique of the reification of modern existence. As the sociologist Max Weber pointed out, the epoch of bourgeois modernity is dominated by principles of social organisation based on the market economy on the one hand, and administrative bureaucracy on the other. The direct and transparent relations between people that characterised traditional societies are thereby replaced by highly efficient though depersonalised modes of interaction. With regard to the estranged rationality of market and bureaucracy, there is only one reasonable course of action for the individual to take – that of adaptation. The concept of reification refers to this alienated rationalisation of social life with its attendant loss of freedom, this tendency of human beings to be imprisoned, in Weber's words, in an 'iron cage' which they themselves have constructed. As an early form of aesthetic modernism, the expressionist movement was a response to such imprisonment. With its emphasis on exaggerated and sometimes grotesque forms of self-display, it developed as a protest on the part of individual subjectivity against the reification of life in society. In *Spirit of Utopia*, which is itself a work of philosophical and poetic expressionism, Bloch argues that music is in its essence an expressionist art. This is so principally because, as the youngest of the fine arts, its aesthetic tasks are uniquely modern. Although music certainly existed in the ancient and medieval worlds, it was not until the late sixteenth century that it emerged as a centrally significant cultural endeavour. According to Bloch, it was only then that, in the work of Giovanni Palestrina and Orlando di Lasso, Italian melody and Flemish counterpoint coalesced to create a tonal language in which the nuances of passion and subjectivity could be articulated.[4] By virtue of its possession of this versatile language, music inevitably pursues the expressionist project. Its most basic function is to effect a liberating flight from despirited social existence into the depths of subjective inwardness.

In *Spirit of Utopia* then, music appears as the radical negation of society, an aesthetic sphere in which the contents of a profound subjective experience can be developed in opposition to the superficiality of reified life. This purported tension between music and society leads Bloch to deny that a sociology of music has any genuine explanatory power.[5] The facts of social history may establish the outward context in which the various stages of musical development occur, but they have no determining influence on the creative substance of this mode of art. Still, for Bloch music remains an intensely historical phenomenon. However, the history that is relevant in this respect is not that of society, but of the inward encounter of humanity with itself. In Bloch's view, there is nothing simple about the achievement of self-awareness. Human beings are initially opaque to themselves both as individuals and as a species. Lacking any distance from the circumstances of their own existence, they cannot see what is immediately in front of their eyes. They are enveloped by what the Protestant mystic, Jacob Boehme called 'the darkness of the lived moment.' By virtue of its expressive capacities, music is a beacon which penetrates ever more deeply into such darkness, dispelling the original obscurity of our awareness of self.

According to Bloch's treatment in *Spirit of Utopia*, music accomplishes this task of self-illumination in three distinct, though temporally overlapping phases.[6] The first and most primitive phase is that of 'singing-to-oneself and the dance'. Here the musical note and the dance movement that accompanies it well up out of the performer with an immediacy that does not permit any personal shaping. Although it is a genuine medium of expression, such primordial musical activity is essentially anonymous. (With this description, Bloch is undoubtedly thinking of the musical life of tribal and peasant cultures in which the performer is primarily an instrument through which the community expresses itself.) The individual personality does not really assert itself until the second phase of musical self-encounter. This is the phase of the 'uniform song' (*geschlossene Leid*), of uninterruptedly flourishing, monothematic melody. Its key figures are Mozart and Bach. Subjectivity reveals itself in Mozart's work in the form of gayly coloured musical shapes which exhibit an extremely buoyant, ariel movement, without being frenzied or explosive. This calm and plastic music articulates the quiescent moods of what Bloch calls 'the small secular self'. The province of Bach's music, on the other hand, is that of the 'small sacred self' of a restrained Protestant spirituality. In the elaborate, multi-layered counterpointing of the fugue, Bach gives voice to the emotions evoked by Christ's Passion, but in a stable, solid, and measured way. The subjective freedom released by uniform song, however, cannot be contained within its narrow limits. It inevitably presses onward to the more expansive field of expression made possible by the 'open-ended song' (*offenes Lied*). In this field – whose most significant formal manifestations are the sonata and the symphony – tension and energy are accumulated and released; action, decision, and destiny are displayed. The key figures here are Beethoven and Wagner, whose seething ferment and propensity to dramatic form unleash, in Bloch's words, 'the *great secular, Luciferan self*, questing, rebellious, not to be satisfied by anything given, full of militant presentiments of a higher life.' And yet, this higher life is nowhere to be found in the history of music to date. What remains missing is 'the great sacred self, the upper stages of human essentiality, music that has reached its final destination.'[7]

Bloch's use of religious language in *Spirit of Utopia* can appear disconcerting to the more sober of contemporary readers. But it is important to keep in mind that he is not making any dogmatic theological claims in this work. On the contrary, despite his respect for religious tradition, Bloch always characterised himself as an atheist. In his treatment of music, religious ideas do not carry their ordinary meaning; instead, they serve as models or metaphors for various stages of human development. In particular, the purpose of Bloch's reference to 'the great sacred self', whose proper musical treatment lies in the future, is to emphasise the sheer

[4] Ernst Bloch: *Essays on the Philosophy of Music* (Cambridge, 1985), 4-5. A 139-page excerpt from *Spirit of Utopia* is translated here uner the title, 'The Philosophy of Music.'
[5] Ibid., 9

[6] Ibid., 2-65
[7] Ibid., 115

profundity of one possible collective destiny. It is a destiny that can be secured only through the consummate satisfaction of human wishes. The religious concept of redemption is the most vivid embodiment of that utopian condition of fulfilled hope that our culture has yet evolved. That is why Bloch chooses to employ an eschatological language for fundamentally aesthetic purposes. Like religion, music anticipates the event of 'homecoming', the promise of a world at last suitable for human habitation. It is in light of this metaphorical affinity between religion and music that passages like the following must be read: 'Music – this kernel and seed, this reflection of the brightly illuminated death-night and of eternal life, this nucleus of the mystical interior sea of the servants, this Jerico and first township of the holy land. If we could name ourselves, our Chief would come, and music is the only subjective theurgy.'[8] In such formulations, theological language does not have any transcendent referent. Instead, it anticipates the liberated human subject who would dwell in a fulfilled utopian future.

While in exile in the United States during the fascist period, Bloch wrote his second masterwork, the 1600-page *Principle of Hope*. In that treatise, he presents a mythical equivalent of his central ideas about music.[9] There is a legend, related by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, that accounts for the origin of the pan-pipe, also known as the syrinx or Arcadian flute. In the story, Pan is chasing a group of nymphs, and ambushes one of them, Syrinx the dryad. She flees from his erotic advances, but her escape is cut off by the river. In response, she implores her sisters the waves to alter her appearance, and when the god attempts to seize her, he finds himself with only a reed in his hands. While Pan is lamenting the loss of his beloved, the wind produces notes in the reed-bank. Gripped by the beauty of the melody, he binds together several reeds of varying lengths with wax and plays them by blowing into them. Pan's invention allows him the consolation of union with the nymph, who is missing and yet remains present in the sound of the flute. For Bloch, the virtue of Ovid's story is that it explains both the need for music in the experience of lack, and the origin of music as a well-ordered series of notes, a genuinely expressive medium. It shows the way in which the subjective and utopian dimensions of music are intimately connected. The power that allows subjectivity to articulate its innermost depths is also the vehicle of a utopian refusal of deprivation.

Like any aesthetic philosophy, Bloch's reflections on the meaning of music will seem convincing only to those who have shared the profound but elusive experiences upon which they are based. He has nothing to say to people who hear in music merely an embellishment of the status quo, instead of – as in the trumpet blast in Beethoven's *Fidelio* – an invitation to break free from the prison of want and denial. But this does not imply that Bloch can be challenged solely from a conservative point of view. Even those who share his revolutionary social inclinations are likely to remain unsatisfied with some aspects of his treatment. From this perspective, the opposition that Bloch establishes between music and society is too rigid. It is unable to account for the fact that the creation as well as the experience of music are mediated by social factors. After all, the very liberation of individual subjectivity that makes genuine musical expression possible is a product of social forces, a result of the dissolution, in the bourgeois era, of traditional communal bonds. This concrete social mediation does not rob music of its ability to reject the established order in the name of a utopian future. It merely indicates that the preconditions that make the utopian dimension in music possible are first assembled in the real historical process. In some passages, Bloch seems aware of this truth. But he never really integrates it into his central discussions of music. We can forgive him, however, for having left a lacuna in his work that we must fill. He has also given us one of the few important philosophies of music of the twentieth century, perhaps of all time.

[8] Ibid., 139
[9] Ernst Bloch: *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, 1986), 1058-1060

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MT FEBRUARY COMPETITION

It is the evening of 29 May 1913 and you have been assigned by a leading tabloid newspaper (e.g. *The Sun, The National Enquirer*) to attend the premiere in Paris of a new work by the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky. The work is a ballet entitled *The Rite of Spring*, and is to be conducted by Pierre Monteux at the Théatre des Champs-Elysées. Provide a headline and review of the event in no more than 200 words for the following day's front page.

The winner of the February Competition will receive a free one-year subscription to *The Musical Times*, and the winning entry will be published in April issue. All entries to be sent by 1 March, please.