

# BLOCH

Symphony in C sharp minor  
Poems of the Sea

London Symphony Orchestra • Dalia Atlas



## Ernest Bloch (1880–1959) Symphony in C sharp minor • Poems of the Sea

Ernest Bloch was a great Jewish composer (who did not convert like most of his contemporaries). He was born in Geneva in 1880 and died in Oregon, in the United States, in 1959. Bloch was a multi-faceted composer, and, in my opinion, was second to none in musical history; he was stylistically versatile, in accordance with the times, the place and the cultural, ethnological or cosmopolitan inspiration that he encountered throughout his life. Because of this a great number of his works have been either forgotten or discarded, even though most of them are masterpieces. The great historical enigma is that only the few works inspired by pure Jewish style have survived and are frequently performed all over the world. It remained in the public memory as the representative feature of Bloch as a composer. One should mention that despite the numerous styles, such as Jewish and Impressionist music, con-temporary, serial, universal and even Chinese music, Bloch's works contain both covert and overt Jewish motifs and scales.

The *Symphony in C sharp minor*, which lasts approximately an hour, was written when Bloch was merely twenty, while he was studying in Germany. The work embodies the dense complexity of his genius and the vortex of his musical, philosophical and intellectual talents and emotions, a phenomenon that can be observed in the early and late works of other great composers. It is amazing to find a similar pattern in Bloch's first *Symphony in C sharp minor* and his last *Symphony in E flat* (1955) in the contemporary style.

The *Symphony in C sharp minor* is written in the perfect neo-Romantic symphonic form customary at the time, like the symphonies of Mahler, Bruckner, Richard Strauss and others. This work reveals exceptional depth and maturity. Bloch said that it was written during a time in which he experienced inner struggles and turmoil, hopes, desires, joy, sorrow and despair. Without searching for external influences, he attempted solely to express his innermost self. Romain Rolland wrote after hearing the symphony: "I know no work in which a richer, more vigorous, more passionate temperament is revealed ... It is not a composition coming from the brain without having first been felt. It is

wonderful to think that it is a first work." Like most of Bloch's orchestral works, this too was written for a large orchestra, in rhapsodic form, with exceptional orchestration and use of polyphony and modes, occasionally featuring pastoral melodies from the Alps. The first bars and the whole work are permeated by a repetitive rhythmic motif of two short beats followed by two long ones, seemingly symbolizing the rhythm of fate. I am of the opinion that this is Bloch's greatest and best work.

The first movement, *Lento – Allegro agitato ma molto energico*, is long and is divided into three parts, which leave their mark owing to the deep and strong emotional expression, ranging from the dark abyss and sorrow to peaks of sweeping force and then back to the dark abyss. The second movement, *Andante molto moderato*, leads us at a slow walking pace to lyrical realms, which alternate with light and humorous themes and outbursts. These are filtered into a tremendous chorale, leading to a march, built on the first theme and to be repeated in the last movement. The third movement, marked *Vivace*, is brilliant and virtuosic and begins with a trumpet fanfare, later joined by the rest of the instruments in turn. This movement is intriguing and innovative. In the middle of the movement, as in most Scherzos, appears a pastoral intermezzo in A-B-A form, followed by the development of the movement's themes and culminating in a heroic vein. The symphony's finale, *Allegro energico e molto marcato*, contains a strict fugue, and here Bloch's inventiveness meticulously combines with the rest of the themes of the work, a device frequently used by the composer in his later compositions. The march from the second movement reigns triumphant and the entire work gradually dissipates into a quiet and tranquil D flat major conclusion.

Throughout history the sea has inspired the imagination of many composers. The sea is one aspect of nature that is close enough for us to reach out and touch; we may swim in it, float or dive into its depths and attempt to understand its magical inner world. The sea represents both incessant movement and mysterious qualities, from the tranquility of meditation to the crushing force of the waters. Many composers have allowed their imagination to bring the sea

to life, combining their musical talents with infinite experiences, visions and descriptions.

It is a tremendous challenge to set the sea to music. The most famous attempt is Debussy's *La Mer*, written in the early years of the twentieth century. Anyone familiar with the score of this masterpiece will discover the myriad of descriptive details buried deep within the sound of the music, just as the sea's surface does not reveal its depths.

Bloch wrote two versions of *Poems of the Sea* in 1922, one for piano, and the other for a large orchestra. The style is clear and pleasing, and includes Irish tunes and jigs, as well as the sound of ripples and of waves crashing onto rocks, all of which were inspired by Walt Whitman's poems about the sea.

Prof. Dalia Atlas

### In cabin'd ships at sea (excerpt)

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

In cabin'd ships at sea,  
The boundless blue on every side expanding,  
With whistling winds and music of the waves, the large imperious waves,  
Or some lone bark buoy'd on the dense marine.

Where joyous full of faith, spreading white sails,  
She cleaves the ether 'mid the sparkle and the foam of day, or under many a star at night,  
By sailors young and old haply will I, a reminiscence of the land, be read,  
In full rapport at last.





Clive Barda

### Dalia Atlas

Dalia Atlas was born in Israel, graduated at the Music Academy of Jerusalem, and studied conducting with the most distinguished conductors abroad. She won seven prizes in prestigious international conducting competitions, the first woman to do so, and was immediately invited to conduct major orchestras. Maestro Fausto Cleva, a member of the jury of the Mitropoulos Competition, invited her to become his assistant conductor at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Unable to accept the offer, she returned to Israel where, inspired by her idealistic visions, she founded on a voluntary basis her two touring orchestras to spread music all over the country for the following 28 years. At the Technion in Haifa, Professor Dalia Atlas formed and directed musical activities to enrich future scientists with music and imagination. At the same time she accepted offers as a guest conductor worldwide with major orchestras and developed her international career. Her extensive repertoire includes about 750 scores, among them hitherto unknown music, some of her own discoveries, and also arrangements of her own. She has conducted some 72 orchestras in thirty countries in concerts, festivals and recordings. She has undertaken extensive research into the music of Ernest Bloch to reveal and revive his neglected compositions. She is President of the Ernest Bloch Society in Israel and Vice President of the Ernest Bloch International Society in London.

### London Symphony Orchestra

The London Symphony Orchestra, based at the Barbican in London and conducted by Principal Conductor Valery Gergiev, with Michael Tilson Thomas and Daniel Harding as Principal Guest Conductors, is widely regarded as one of the world's leading orchestras. Since its formation in 1904, the LSO has attracted excellent players from all over the world. Outside the concert hall, the Orchestra's many other activities include a strong commitment to music education through LSO Discovery, based at LSO St Luke's, the UBS and LSO Music Education centre, which reaches over 60,000 people annually and provides a unique mix of events for people of every age and background. The Orchestra is resident at the Aix-en-Provence Festival, holds an annual residency at Lincoln Centre, New York, and is international resident orchestra of La Salle Pleyel, Paris. LSO Live is currently the most successful label of its kind, making the orchestra available to global audiences.



Alberto Venzago

Composed while Ernest Bloch was studying in Germany and before he moved to America, the richly scored *Symphony in C sharp minor* fits within the romantic tradition of Richard Strauss, Mahler and Bruckner. It expresses Bloch's innermost struggles and emotions, revealing his complex talents through rhapsodic forms, exceptional polyphony and modal tonalities. Inspired by Walt Whitman, the *Poems of the Sea* depict the oceans with striking clarity, including flavours of Irish folk music. Dalia Atlas is a leading expert on Bloch, her acclaimed recordings including *America* (8.557151) and *Four Episodes* (8.570259), "a disc not to be missed" (*Penguin Guide*).

**Ernest  
BLOCH**  
(1880–1959)

**Symphony in C sharp minor 54:38**

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|----------|--|--------------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Lento – Allegro agitato ma molto energico</b> | <b>22:03</b> |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Andante molto moderato</b>                    | <b>11:11</b> |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Vivace</b>                                    | <b>10:18</b> |
| <b>4</b> | <b>Allegro energico e molto marcato</b>          | <b>11:02</b> |

**Poems of the Sea 13:35**

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|----------|-----------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>5</b> | <b>Waves: Poco agitato</b>        | <b>4:25</b> |
| <b>6</b> | <b>Chanty: Andante misterioso</b> | <b>3:24</b> |
| <b>7</b> | <b>At Sea: Allegro vivo</b>       | <b>5:43</b> |



**London Symphony Orchestra**  
**Dalia Atlas**

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Recorded at Abbey Road, Studio 1, London, UK, 14–15 November 2011  
Producer: James Mallinson • Engineer: Arne Akselberg • Editing/Mastering: Jonathan Stokes (Classical Sound)  
Publishers: F.E.C. Leuckart Musikverlag (tracks 1–4); G. Schirmer, Inc (ASCAP) (5–7)  
Booklet notes: Dalia Atlas • Cover image © Ig0rzh / Dreamstime.com