

## THE MACBETH OF BLOCH

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ERNEST BLOCH, is of course a leading figure in the world of contemporary chamber and symphonic music, but he is known to only a few in the field of the music theatre. The revival this spring of *Macbeth* in Naples at the Teatro San Carlo was therefore an event of extraordinary significance.

Singular indeed is the case of this, his only opera. It is a work of his youth, first performed at the Paris Opéra Comique in 1910. On that occasion certain honest critics, and later several eminent music-scholars, proclaimed *Macbeth* an epochal work in the history of music-drama. Yet it was left to mildew on the publisher's shelves. Was this due to non-comprehension by the French public of a masterwork which anticipated its era? Partly that, but it seems to have been a result rather of chauvinistic cabals, jealousy, and corrupt criticism—a typical Parisian combination.

But the intrigue has not been limited to the Ville Lumiere. It has been pressed in many other countries, even in the United States after the composer had become an American citizen and was entitled to a hearing not only for his recognized status as an artist but for his contribution to American musical life. *Macbeth* was barred from the Metropolitan, because it was "not a box-office opera" while other less admissible pretexts have kept it from European houses for a generation.

This ignominious ostracism has discouraged Bloch from further attempts in the operatic form. But it could not prevent the theatrical genius revealed in his score from exercising a far-reaching influence, however concealed, on the currents of contemporary stage music. Discussion of this influence would be a subject by itself. Suffice it to mention three composers—Pizzetti,

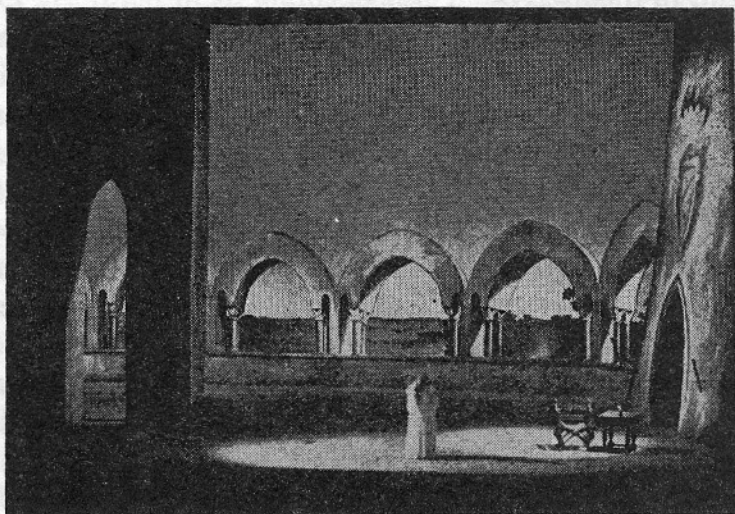
Honegger and Milhaud—whose works have taken a deep imprint, more or less unconscious, let us hope, from Bloch's *Macbeth*. (For example, Pizzetti's *Fedra* and Honegger's *King David*.)



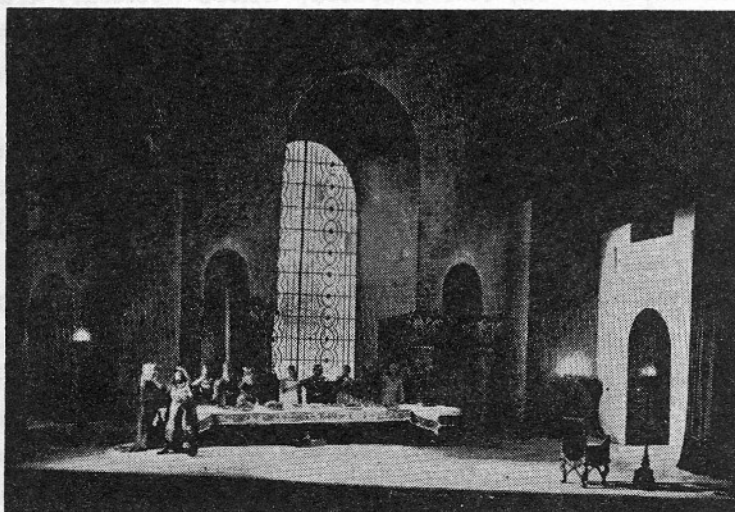
In setting the immortal tragedy, Bloch proposed to mirror Shakespeare as faithfully as possible and at the same time to remain himself. He sought a perfect fusion between poetry and music, but a fusion achieved through free fantasy, without preconceived esthetic or structural formulas. He was then twenty-five years old; he had the enthusiasm of youth not yet disillusioned, a fresh creative impulse, the aspiration for vast and new artistic horizons. Secluded in the woods and mountains of Switzerland, for a whole year he meditated on the poem. Then came the music, quite rapidly, some scenes with feverish ardor, giving him intense joy, others with discouraging slowness and a long process of elimination and re-elaboration, as he himself relates.

The French libretto, styled a "lyric drama," was drawn from the English original by Edmond Fleg in close adherence to the most essential moments of the tragedy; it was divided into a prologue and three acts in six scenes. From the faithful Italian version of Mary Tibaldi Chiesa, the scene of the murder of Lady Macduff and her son was deleted for the San Carlo mounting, to make the action more concise. If, as seems likely, this deletion is maintained in next season's production at the Teatro Carlo Felice of Genoa, and perhaps in other future performances, the division may be described as follows:—

Prologue (Heath and battlefield)—Meeting with witches and investiture of the Thane of Cawdor. Act I, Scene 1 (Castle of Inverness)—Arrival of King and plot; Scene 2 (Idem, courtyard)—The murder. Act II (Palace at Forres)—The banquet. Act III, Scene 1 (Witches' cavern)—The apparitions; Scene II (Dunsinane, castle terrace)—Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking episode and conclusion. Two symphonic interludes—the second especially admirable for breadth and expressive power, serve as links between the scenes of the first and last act; they sum up the spiritual content and prepare the change in action. Like every-



THE SLEEPWALKING EPISODE



THE BANQUET

ERNEST BLOCH'S OPERA  
MACBETH

Two scenes designed by C. M.  
Cristini for the Teatro San Carlo  
production in Naples, March 1938

thing else in this noble score, they function dramatically, never as an end in themselves.

What is the musical structure of *Macbeth*? Bloch's idiom here is declamatory, at times melodic, at others nudely dramatic, but invariably it has high plastic relief and above all absolute essentiality—two of the most remarkable aspects of the score. "In it" Bloch told this writer, "I have not used any tricks or filling or search for effect, but only the musical echoes which the word, the phrase and the situation evoked in me." This is a creed that has actuated innumerable composers, ancient and modern of widely contrasted styles and creative power.

Bloch has given these elements a vivid musical physiognomy, rich with the reverberations of an intense inner life. He has not concerned himself with strophic symmetry or with the traditional forms of musical architecture or development. His intent has been to reflect faithfully the verbal, lyric or dramatic spirit of the phrase, the episode, the tragedy. A projection deeply pondered, re-lived, re-elaborated, where necessary transfigured, exalted, in musical terms of undoubted originality—in an idiom that falls on our ears as fresh and new in its incisive, authentic humanity. The Swiss composer has succeeded in musically recreating Shakespeare's truest and most intimate essence, and at the same time he has preserved his own personality. Except for Verdi of the last manner, he is the only composer to accomplish this feat with such purity and power.

The efforts of Pizzetti in music drama inevitably come to mind, if only by negative comparison, especially on rehearsing his *Straniero* at the Royal Opera of Rome some days ago. A few years after the burial of *Macbeth* at Paris, Pizzetti proclaimed to the world his own new-found esthetics for a modern *dramma in musica*. In substance, what did he offer us? A hybrid academic construction formed from the most diverse assimilations, from Gregorian song to Bloch, not devoid of fine choral or symphonic episodes or expressive, fleeting phrases of declamation, but without organic unity and, worse still, deadened by the interminable, dreary stretches of his pedantic declamatory system.

In contrast to Pizzetti's operatic aridity, what life, what vitality, what unity in *Macbeth*! There is a constant variety of ac-

cents and of atmospheres—each episode has its own stamp—and yet they are fused in an unmistakable homogeneity of style. The free recurrence of some leading themes is merely incidental to the score's unity. A formal system is the last thing to look for in this score. Pages of lyricism, in turn fabulous, dreamy, introspective and expansive, alternate with dramatic episodes of sombre terror or wracking spiritual torment, but which are invariably spontaneous, natural, human. The theatrical "colpo di scena" is at the opposite pole from Bloch's sensibility and practice.

*Macbeth* is of capital importance for two main reasons: first, for the fullness with which Bloch has interpreted this tragedy in all the gamut of its human and symbolical values; secondly, for its fundamental contribution to a solution of the secular problem of music drama. To succeed in only one of the above points would be an outstanding achievement. This writer submits that Bloch has succeeded in both. *Macbeth* is a masterpiece, one more great milestone in the long and tortuous evolution of this music form that, before Bloch, stretched from the Camerata Fiorentina dei Bardi to Debussy.

Guido Pannain, the most acute critic now writing in the Italian daily press, has summarized admirably this historical process and Bloch's relation to it. His synthesis published in the Neapolitan daily, *Il Mattino*, is well worth quoting in full.

"With Monteverdi the verbal values are maintained in their integrity; they adhere to the sound, become plastic sonority, as in the verse of the classic poets. In Gluck, word and music blend unified in the architecture of the dramatic aria and expressive recitative. In Bellini, the word is transfused into melody; in Rossini and Verdi, it becomes a *pezzo di musica*. In Wagner, the word makes an independent musical development of its sonorous values, from alliteration and rhyme to song. In Debussy, recitative becomes musical in the spirit of a Gregorian chant of modern sensuousness. *Bloch retempers the word in music and renews its values harmonically*. Bloch is like Moussorgsky but without the folk-song feeling and with symphonic discursiveness besides. If Gluck and Mozart, each in his own way, brought the stage into the orchestra, it may well be said that Bloch has carried the orchestra onto the stage. . . ."

Signor Pannain's likening of Bloch to Moussorgsky seems particularly apt. If there is a type of music drama that *Macbeth* recalls more than any other, it is *Boris Godunoff*, not, of course, for any thematic or structural derivation (*Macbeth* is personal and non-racial) but for certain spiritual affinities and some unconscious parallelisms of dramatic declamatory style. The hallucination scenes especially evoke comparisons between the two; they are equally gripping in both operas. Again like Moussorgsky, Bloch has given pulsating life to the chorus; he has treated it freely and boldly. But unlike *Boris*, the *Macbeth* chorus is not the semi-mystic embodiment of a people that unwittingly becomes the real protagonist of the opera.

The comparison might be completed as follows: Bloch, like Moussorgsky "retempers the word in music," but with less sense of musical humor (judging from the one comic episode in *Macbeth*). His lyricism and dramatic power are at least equal, his faculty for conjuring up archaic or spirit worlds is superior. In addition, and above all, there is a rich intellectual subtlety which reveals a universal intuition that Moussorgsky does not attain. *Macbeth* is in fact a rare theatrical divination.



For the Neapolitan production, a tribute is due the tenacious missionary work of Signora Tibaldi (translator-librettist-collaborator) and in equal degree to the artistic idealism and moral courage of Corrado Marchi (general director of the San Carlo and of the Carlo Felice theatres) who mounted this revival, against the advice of his associates and all the racketeers of the standard repertory machine. We need several more impresarii of his enlightenment in Italy—and elsewhere. Unfortunately, one blot marred the happy Neapolitan picture: the Government refused to allow the composer to replace the conductor on the podium. It also vetoed a broadcast to the United States (requested by the N.B.C.). The reason? Bloch is Jewish. While the Government is not officially anti-Semitic (not so far, at least), it was feared that to permit either might offend the Führer on the eve of his visit to Naples in May. It was too late to stop the opera altogether without seriously damaging the San Carlo and the artists.

The performance was magnificent—a red-letter event in this century's annals of the San Carlo. The conductor, Antonio Guarnieri, was at first skeptical, and having a lame arm, long refused even to open the score. This forced Bloch to direct the rehearsals, though he, bitter over its unjust suppression, had not looked at his score for thirty years. When Guarnieri heard it, he opened eyes and ears in amazement. By his own confession, he found in it an esthetic joy not experienced since his youth and he conducted it with the conviction of an apostle, in a reading profoundly poetic. The Neapolitan public has scant experience with advance-guard operas, but it was quick to sense and applaud the immense suggestive power of this score, especially the salient climaxes of the murder, the banquet and the finale. Bloch was too ill to attend until the third night. When the audience finally discovered him, it rose and gave him a stirring ovation. A merited reparation for a long, iniquitous neglect!