Satigny, Switzerland 1912

A Composer's Vision
photographs by Ernest Bloch

by

ERIC JOHNSON

In 1922 Alfred Stieglitz made a group of photographs entitled, "Music—A Sequence of Ten Cloud Photographs." The following year, he related what he had wanted in his series:

. . . I told Miss [Georgia] O'Keeffe I wanted a series of photographs which when seen by Ernest Bloch (the great composer) he would exclaim: Music! Music! Man, why that is music! How did you ever do that? And he would point to violins, and flutes, and oboes, and brass, full of enthusiasm, and would say he'd have to write a symphony called "Clouds." Not like Debussy's but much, much more. *And when finally I had my series of ten photographs printed, and Bloch saw them—what I said I wanted to happen happened* verbatim.

The mention of Ernest Bloch by Stieglitz was more than fortuitous, for Bloch photographed seriously for fifty years and is the only important man of music known to have had a strong interest in photography.

Music and photography seem to be radically different media. However, a surprising number of photographers have had a deep interest in music. Ansel Adams, Wynn Bullock, and Paul Caponigro studied music before turning to photography. Adams once drew an illuminating parallel between music and photography when he called the photographic negative the "score" and the print from that negative the "performance." Both negative and score are intermediate steps to the final result, which varies with the mood of the performer. Both photographer and musician work with similar fundamentals. The scale of continuous gray from black to white, within a photographic print, is similar to the unbroken scales of pitch and loudness in music. A brilliant reflecting roof, can be *heard* as a high pitch or very loud note against a general fabric of sound or gray tone. This background fabric serves as a supporting structure for either melodic or visual shapes. The photographer captures a moment out of the continuous flow of time. The composer structures sound to flow *through* time. They must each have the creative intuition to recognize barely perceptible changes in that flow of time: a swiftly vanishing cloud-form intuitively seen—then captured; or a carefully placed half-beat of silence, before a crescendo. But if there are these links and more between photography and music, it is largely thanks to Ernest Bloch's long practice of both arts that discussion of them is more than a theoretical exercise.

In a letter to Bloch, dated July 1, 1922, just after the "Cloud Photographs" meeting, Stieglitz wrote:

My dear Mr. Bloch: Have you any idea how much it meant to me to have you feel about those photographs as you did.—To have you see in them what you do—And to know that what you express I understand—and feel is true.—It was a memorable hour. A very rare one . . .

It was a rare hour because Bloch was a rare man. The leap from qualities in music to tones and shapes within cloud images was natural for him. He had been composing and photographing for twenty-five years before this meeting. Bloch's music is known for its drama and emotion. His photographs have been unknown until today.

Before he was ten, Bloch wrote on a scrap of paper a vow to become a composer and burned it atop a pile of stones. This dramatic quality permeated his life and his music.

A struggle in the grand romantic tradition between a towering intellect and giant emotions, his life was filled with turmoil and suffering. His frequently alternating states of mind were never hidden, and were sometimes truly ecstatic. Julius Haart, writer and friend, relates:

Châtel, France 1935

'Bach," Switzerland 1931

Bloch is sensitive to nature in all her manifestations. Several years ago we were walking in the country. Suddenly from out of the silence there came a great cry, partly of anguish, partly of ecstasy. Turning about I beheld him, his face distorted with emotion, tears streaming down his cheeks and his entire person betraying the most intense feeling. He came to me and resting his head on my shoulder wept for a time in silence. At last in broken accents he told me that after the years of perplexity and confusion he had seen the light again. Nature had spoken to him as she only speaks to those who love her and draw inspiration from her inexhaustible reservoirs.

His music reflects this temperament: first agitated, then tranquil, grandiose then sorrowful, joyous then embittered. His view of art:

Art for me is an expression, an experience of life and not a puzzle game or icy demonstration of imposed mathematical principles.

The final result of creation was always emotionally charged. Bloch's daily life, however, was marked by an extreme self-discipline and concern for logic, which balanced his tumultuous emotions. In his sixties he undertook three years of analysis of Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony.* In preparation for composing his *Sacred Service* in 1929 he did over one thousand two-part counterpoint exercises. He studied the forty-eight preludes and fugues of Bach throughout his life. Bloch's love for the music of Bach was a perfect balance to his own stormy scores. On musical discipline, he wrote:

Composers must remember that greatness lies in doing little things well. With Bach the tiniest detail becomes of magnificent importance in the development of his scores. Even the restrictions he sets for himself become heights of glory.

Bloch's interests ranged far beyond music and photography. At age twenty-three he taught metaphysics in Geneva and composed at night. His other interests varied widely—theology, entymology, genetics, literature, painting, hiking, mushroom-hunting and, late in life, agate polishing. His attitude toward this variety of interests was that "they are all the same, part of life . . . the circulation of the world." To prove it, he would quote Confucius on music or point to the "physiology" similar in a plant and a fugue by Bach.

Consistent with both his global view and temperament, Bloch was never satisfied to stay in one place very long. He wandered over Europe and America, composing, photographing and teaching, until he settled in Oregon at the age of sixty.

Bloch made his first photographs at seventeen, when he was a violin student in Brussels. These were self-portraits, pictures of the countryside and of peasants tending their fields. He developed and printed them himself, then tacked some to his wall and others into an album (the kind with the thick, soft, black paper). The final home for his photographs was nearly always a little snapshot album to show friends. He made some five thousand negatives in his lifetime; they compose a visual diary of his wanderings. The negatives show Bloch realized that discipline is necessary in photography as well as in music, for he always composed his photographs using the entire frame. His early work (4″ × 5″ and 2½″ × 4½″) was contact-printed the same size as the negative. Later, in 1927, he turned to the 35mm camera but continued to be concerned with the discipline of using the entire frame even when enlargements became essential.

As Bloch matured musically, he matured photographically. He became aware of light, relationships of form, and contrasts in tone. His sense for the revealing moment became more acute. During the composition of his opera, *Macbeth*, 1904–1909, his photographs became direct and decisive.

Bloch's daughter, Lucienne, remembers many times when her father would exclaim, "Look at the light on the roofs!" Light reveals the identity of the subjects in Bloch's photographs, whether a peasant face, a cloud, a tree, a roofline, or an old lady—eyes direct, holding large mushrooms in a gesture of invitation. His mushroom lady is an outstanding example of the magical life a photograph can assume when conditions are captured at the revealing moment. Portraits are an important and compelling part of his photography. The character expressed in the weathered faces of Swiss peasants attracted his eye. He had great respect for the unpretentious person, a relief from the posturing socialites he knew as a teacher and musician. Portraits of musicians, artists and writers are also found in Bloch's work. He frequently viewed himself as subject matter and made self-portraits consistently from age seventeen through age seventy-five. Some merely record him in a particular place. Many, though, are self-analytical and searching. When in 1924 his position as Director of the Cleveland Institute of Music was in jeopardy, he sought refuge in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to compose his *Concerto Grosso* and *Poème Mystique*. There is a group of negatives made that winter. He was upset, but his self-portraits are contemplative and quiet. Perhaps they were a means of affirming his concept of Self. It is true, nonetheless, that many of the self-portraits reveal a burning intensity in his eyes, the intensity that permeates his music.

"Beethoven," Roverado, Switzerland 1931

Châtel, France 1936

Midwest, U.S.A. 1929

Switzerland 1903

Cattle Auction, Switzerland 1900

Roverado, Switzerland 1932

Self Portrait: Farm Family and the Photographer, Switzerland 1912

Self Portrait: Bloch and his children, Geneva, Switzerland 1911

The most common subject in Bloch's photography is landscape. He saw character in trees, clouds, mountains, and village buildings in much the same way as he saw it in peasant faces. In 1924, after crossing the American continent, he wrote to Ada Clement (co-founder of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music):

I was tremendously impressed by the prairie. It is as big as the mountains and ocean for me! This solitude! This infiniteness! . . . flat . . . flat . . . and the clouds! and here and there a little home lost in the immensity—and a tree or three, four trees . . . a hedge! How welcome they are—what personality they have! How one would like to know them, to rest under them . . .

Bloch bypassed this century's early concern for making photography accepted as an art. His art was music, photographs were secondary; but they served, like hiking, to release the tensions that built up in composition.

Bloch was a romantic in an anti-romantic age. Describing this age he said:

. . . and "serious" composers persist in the obsession with technique and procedure. They discuss and argue; they laboriously create their arbitrary, brain-begotten works, while the emotional element—the soul of art—is lost in the passion for mechanical perfection. Everywhere, virtuosity of means; everywhere, intellectualism exalted as the standard. This is the plague of our times and the reason for its inevitable death.

He saw Alfred Stieglitz and his use of the camera machine as a rare symbol of the use of techniques toward spiritual ends. In a tribute published in the 1947 memorial portfolio of Stieglitz's photographs, he wrote:

I shall never forget my two short meetings with him, so many years ago. They are alive as he is within me. Since 20 years, I have, in my courses, almost each year referred to him and quoted a few unforgettable talks we had—Not only his marvelous works of art—his interpretations of Life, what he called "the machine!" The "machine" subservient to man's thoughts and visions. His incredible "technique" he never mentioned, it was a tool in his hands, for a higher purpose.—What an example of "Spirit" in our present time of "Robots."

Contemporary abstractionists in music reflected their age. Bloch reacted against it. Merle Armitage, impresario, book designer, promoter of many modern artists, and close friend to Stravinsky, said Bloch was not an "advanced" composer. He did not "push the horizons of music like Debussy or Stravinsky." From his point of view this is true. Bloch might have responded with a statement by Oscar Wilde that he often quoted:

There is no progress in art; all beautiful things belong to the same age.

Bloch felt art lives or dies on its ability to touch man's eternal soul. Short-range assessments such as "advanced" or "conservative" did not interest him. For Bloch, musical composition was an act of faith. It was a means of becoming or being more human.

Isolated in nature for several years, Bloch began to do a series of tree photographs. Lucienne describes her memories:

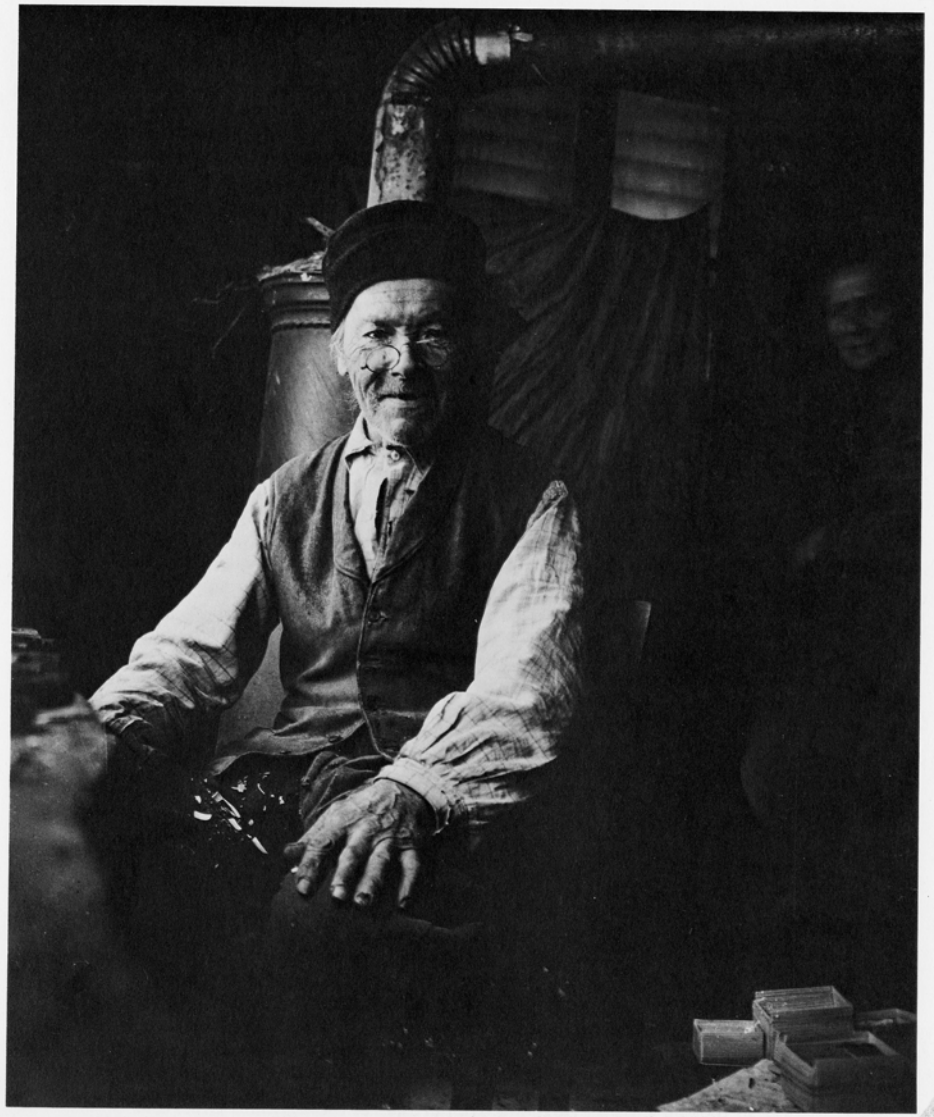
It took him a good year to finally get to photographing them, because when I was there, and we were walking he would say, "You have no idea how extraordinary these trees are when there are few leaves, and when it's dark in back so they show up." He kept saying, "I've got to photograph them. I must make a study of trees." And that's when he would point to them and say, "Now look at this—this harmony of trunks" . . .

Bloch saw music in trees. He labeled some of his tree photographs according to the musical composer who he felt was similar in feeling and structure: "Debussy," "Bach," "Beethoven," and "Mozart." The photographs evoke feelings much like each composer's music. His "Debussy" tree is a continuous thread, incomplete within the frame. Figure-ground relationships become ambiguous, structure is loose and feeling is undefined. His "Bach" tree photograph is a strict counterpoint of illuminated birch trunks with a complex background. Bloch sees "Beethoven" invariably as a single massive tree appearing to twist and struggle out of the soil. "Mozart" is much different; a deceptively light, but sturdy, tree, complete within the frame and clearly defined by light. Yet these preconceived photographs are not Bloch's greatest images. They are enlightening, but their calculated analogies limit their universality. His finest photographs, his portraits and mountain scenes, were made in an intuitive response to immediate experience.

Ivan Bloch, after seeing a group of his father's photographs, commented:

In a real sense his photography is an outlet for something over and above the music—in many senses they are almost a relief from it . . . He was such an abundant person in so many ways . . . He was not a musician, period, end of paragraph—he was much more than that . . . You know, he always said, "First I'm a man."

There is a quiet passion generated from Bloch's photography with little of the violence and introspective turmoil of his music. Those who have only listened to Bloch's music will never experience the full substance of the *man.* His photographs communicate a direct confrontation with life itself. They are pure Bloch—beyond art and ideology.



Near Geneva, Switzerland 1909