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978-0-521-89615-3 - Listening for Utopia in Ernst Bloch's Musical Philosophy

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Excerpt

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Introduction

In a memorable passage in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, Edmund Pfühl, the parish organist with a local reputation for contrapuntal learning and a bent for tradition, describes the music of *Tristan und Isolde* as "a perfumed fog, shot through with lightning." Pfühl, a committed opponent of Wagner, is asked by his sensitive and cultivated patron, Gerda Buddenbrooks, to play "some piano arrangements from *Tristan*." He can manage just "some twenty-five bars" before breaking off in apparent disgust to declare: "That is not music – believe me! I have always flattered myself that I know something about music – but this is chaos. This is demagoguery, blasphemy, insanity, madness! It is a perfumed fog, shot through with lightning! It is the end of all honesty in art. I will not play it!" But still Pfühl cannot simply leave the music, for "with these words he had thrown himself again on the stool, and ... accomplished another twenty-five bars."¹

For me, Pfühl's words neatly describe an early and persistent perception of Ernst Bloch's writings on music. Bloch's prose can be terribly foggy, but even on first reading it contains if not flashes of lightning then gleaming fragments that seem to promise great insight that lies just beyond one's grasp. One magnificent yet mysterious passage, which uses the figure of the carpet in some very intriguing yet puzzling ways in Bloch's first major book, *The Spirit of Utopia*, came to fascinate me in a way not unlike the way that *Tristan* captivated Pfühl. The impression made by Bloch's text too was marvelously unclear, perhaps even tinged by a suspicion of madness, but I sensed that its verbal chiaroscuro hid some deeper meaning, even mysterious wisdom, and I found myself drawn to it almost magnetically:

For what takes shape here I introduce the conceptual aid [*Hilfsbegriff*] first used by Lukács of the carpet [*Teppich*] as pure, corrective form and reality as fulfilled, impinged, constitutive form. Thus, half by remembrance and half by explication, according to direction of the energy applied, three schemas are distinguished. The

¹ Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York, 1967), p. 407. Note that I have emended Lowe-Porter's translation of Mann's "fünfundzwanzig Takten" to read "twenty-five bars," not "twenty-five beats."

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first is the endless singing-to-oneself, the dance and finally chamber music, which is descended from higher things and for the most part has become inauthentically carpet-like. The *second* takes a longer approach. It is the closed *Lied*, Mozart or the *Spieloper*, moving in a narrow secular ambit; the oratorio, Bach or the Passion, moving in a narrow sacred ambit; and above all, fugue, which is obviously, in view of its endless melody, already changing into an event-form [*Ereignisform*], from which it is decisively separated, however, by its purely architectonic, undramatic counterpoint. Here reside structures with closed, or at most tranquilly unfolding, monothematic melody ... Next to any more powerful movement, a corresponding event-form, it [the second schema] looks like a prelude, like a carpet, albeit an authentic one, like pure form, like a corrective, which with its beautiful and stationary unity – animated purely lyrically and otherwise simply fitted together – is now meant simply to shed light upon the third schema, *event-form*, the uproar of the weighty, more chaotic, dynamically symbolic symphony. The *third* is the open song, the *Handlungsoper*, Wagner or the transcendent opera, the great choral work, and Beethoven-Bruckner or the symphony as broken-loose dramatic form, secularly even if not yet spiritually great, thoroughly dramatically motivated, thoroughly transcendently objective event-forms, these forms assimilate everything authentically or inauthentically carpet-like and fulfill it in their movement toward the tempo, toward the thunder and lightning of the upper regions of the self.²

Bloch's grasping for profundity may cost him, as it often does Wagner, a slightly disagreeable heaviness of verbal gait and, if read unsympathetically, his writing could be judged demagogic, blasphemous, or chaotic. Here, however, the parallel with Pfühl largely ceases. Mann tells us that despite Gerda's encouragement the organist was never able to "reconcile himself to *Tristan*," while Bloch's words gradually opened themselves to me through long reflection and patient unfolding. Eventually, they became the entryway to an involved and fruitful program of interpretive criticism that reaches back through Bloch's writing toward the roots of his thought and extends forward through original essays in criticism.

The mode of fabulistic opacity that Bloch essays in this passage is very characteristic. His tumbling, allusive prose, which Adorno compares with good reason to the elliptical syntax and breathless presentation of Schoenberg's atonal music, lends even his most opaque prose flickerings of meaning that resonate even on first reading, yet never become fully available.³ Bloch's first great English-speaking exegete, Fredric Jameson,

² Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford, 2000), pp. 46–47, trans. modified.

³ Adorno's comment is in Theodor W. Adorno, "The Handle, the Pot, and Early Experience" in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, 2 vols, Vol. II (New York, 1992), pp. 215–16.

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turned poetic in an effort to capture the way that Bloch's work always seems to remain just out of reach: "It thus lies before us, enigmatic and enormous, like an aerolite fallen from space, covered with mysterious hieroglyphs that radiate a peculiar warmth and power, spells and the keys to spells, themselves patiently waiting for their own ultimate moment of decipherment."⁴

Listening for Utopia starts with a curious desire – my curious desire – to find, and where necessary to try to forge, keys for this decipherment, to untangle threads of meaning from Bloch's *Teppich* metaphor, and to fathom Bloch's standard of musical authenticity. There is no possibility, of course, of doing justice to the fullness of Bloch's musical thought in any one work of criticism; my purpose here is more modest, yet still ambitious: to explore some critical possibilities emerging from sustained critical study of Bloch's musical philosophy, focusing on *The Spirit of Utopia*, using as a touchstone Bloch's complex metaphorical usage of the concept of the *Teppich*, which is loaded with philosophical and historical meaning and connects to musical structures as well. This method itself is Blochian: start from a salient detail, work outwards, and inwards, from it. As Bloch wrote in *Spuren* (*Traces*), a collection of often aphoristic essays: "One should observe precisely the little things, go after them. What is slight and odd often leads the furthest."⁵

The first half of the book sketches the nature of Bloch's philosophical project and considers its significance to his musical concerns. This discussion circles back around the *Teppich* metaphor, tracing as it emerges from *The Spirit of Utopia*, making reference to some of Bloch's later writings and to some works by other writers in Bloch's orbit. In the second half of the book, attention shifts to the possibilities of Bloch's musical philosophy as a means of music criticism. This section comprises four essays, each of which starts squarely with Bloch's words and ideas, only to range quite widely beyond this starting point in the hope of reanimating Bloch's ideas by working them out in ways that connect with – and benefit from – the methods of modern critical musicology. My hope is both to illuminate aspects of the music Bloch discusses and to perceive how Bloch's thought connects with the

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, 1971), pp. 158–59.

⁵ "Man achte grade auf kleine Dinge, gehe ihnen nach. Was leicht und seltsam ist, führt oft am weitesten." Ernst Bloch, *Spuren*, Gesamtausgabe, Vol. I (Frankfurt, 1969), p. 16; translated in Bloch, *Traces*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford, 2006), p. 5. This line is quoted in a different English rendering in Klaus Bergahn, "A View through the Red Window: Ernst Bloch's *Spuren*" in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, ed. Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan (London, 1997), pp. 202–14 (p. 204).

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sounding forms of music. This work often hews quite closely to Bloch's own text, but at times it does venture beyond Bloch and take on something of a life of its own.⁶ Perhaps in this way it may be possible to learn to listen, with Bloch, for glimmers of utopia as they sound in music and thus through us.

⁶ This is the case in the later stage of Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

1 | Bloch's *Teppich*: an initial approach

The passage from *The Spirit of Utopia*, which is quoted above in the Introduction, contains a number of intriguing terms and concepts, including “endless singing-to-oneself,” a set of three schemas, event-form, and the reference to the “thunder and lightning of the upper regions of the self.” The figure that Bloch singles out as a conceptual aid and returns to four times in the passage is the seemingly enigmatic term, *Teppich*, or carpet. Bloch’s application of the *Teppich* to music initially obscures at least as much as it illuminates. He makes no effort explicitly to define his usage, but does use the term a few sentences previously to represent a form of limitation, a “model,” a “perimeter of encirclement, an inventory of all possible content” that resists the tendency of music to expend itself in “unremitting novelty,” “with all the bad infinity” of an endless, straight line.¹ Yet exactly why he chooses to adapt Lukács’s notion of “the carpet as pure, corrective form” for this purpose is not immediately evident (p. 46). Nor is it at all clear how the metaphor, which works “half by remembrance and half by explication” (p. 46, modified), relates to the aesthetic experience of music and its historical, social reality. Indeed, the first questions raised by Bloch’s words are basic, even wondering. What can it mean to discuss music, with an eye toward both metaphysics and historicism, using the image of a carpet as conceptual aid? How can music be “authentically or inauthentically carpet-like?” Why does this topic figure so prominently and in such involved, cryptic ways in a book like this about utopia? Bloch means something, many things, that much is sure; he returns to the term *Teppich* repeatedly in the book, yet he does so without clear system, developing the idea in a variety of directions and connections, but without ever quite explaining himself. It is not hard to dream up analogies between the image of a carpet or a tapestry and music, possibly beginning with similes between the patterns and textures of music and those of a Persian carpet, or with the ghostly yet palpable historical traces encoded in museum tapestry and old musical texts alike. But this sort of free interpretation will not make much headway toward understanding Bloch’s thinking. For this, a fuller, more rigorous approach is needed, one

¹ Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford, 2000), p. 46.

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that makes recourse to both careful analysis of Bloch's philosophical text and critical study of the context of his musical philosophy – or, as Bloch suggests, by explication and remembrance.

Textual explication does provide some clues about the meaning of Bloch's *Teppich* metaphor by locating and comparing passages in which Bloch uses the term *Teppich*. He introduces the image of the *Teppich* early in *The Spirit of Utopia*, before he turns to music, in a discussion of the plastic arts entitled "The Production of the Ornament."² Here Bloch sketches a historically established duality of high art and applied art that opposes the chair, representing applied art, to the statue, which stands for high art. A chair is to be used, physically occupied by the sitter's body. A statue is not: it is set above us and elicits our gaze; it is not a seat for us below, but rather "the shrine for the body of the higher, the godly" to be "occupied solely by the individual experiencing himself *symbolically* therein" (p. 16). While the statue embodies the vertical aspiration to transcend the mundane, the chair, as an object that inhabits the daily world, aims instead to be an "agreeable but unspiritual accompaniment to life" that stabilizes and arrests formal patterns and figural expressions born of high art into an ornamentation that is "comfortably luxurious" and "maintain[s] an elegant perfection." This marks "a powerful difference between tastefully appointed functionality and high art," which aims to portray a "higher story of redemption" (p. 16).

Having proposed what seems to be a fairly simple opposition, Bloch begins to complicate it. This polarity of mystical art and tasteful luxury was a product of the old order, when "the theological majesty of Sun Kings and Holy Roman Emperors" was secured by "a blasphemous bond with the metaphysical." Bloch invokes two of his greatest intellectual lodestars in proposing that "if with socialism and reformation in our hearts ... we dissolve this bond in order to rethink the past as well as the present, we destroy this sacrilege." Then "it immediately becomes clear that *truly great historical applied art*" properly serves neither merely quotidian ends nor "wealthy, feudal, theocratic, pontifical luxury" but instead "points toward a spiritual *a priori* of construction ... to a mundanely useless construction for the sake of a great seal [*Siegel*] to another world." It is this second-order art, a "higher order of 'applied art,'" that Bloch identifies with the carpet lying physically "between chair and statue, perhaps even above the statue." This

² An English translation may be found in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA, 1988), pp. 78–102, as well as in *The Spirit of Utopia*.

carpet is not, as Bloch makes clear, a cozy rug nor an elegant carpet, but “an authentic [echt] carpet that stretches out and points toward pure abstract form” (p. 17). In this third guise, the *Teppich* is an actual carpet, standing for the principle of abstract structuring brought into material existence and thus delivered from its original state of merely hypothetical purity, and mediates between the elegant utility of chair and the transcendent impulse of high art. Thus in “The Production of the Ornament,” Bloch strategically introduces the image of the *Teppich* in a discussion of art that encapsulates basic concepts of form, function, and history.

In “Philosophy of Music,” which comprises the next section of *The Spirit of Utopia*, Bloch revives this image, now treated as full-fledged metaphor, to represent a basic dialectical synthesis in music figured in the by-play between what he called “the naïve expressive musicality, inaccessible to formal criticism, that mirrors human being and not technical form” (p. 95, modified) and the abstract, objectifying impulse to pattern and to form. Bloch’s formulation must not be treated too reductively, though; he is not proposing a simple formula by which solid handicraft constructs transcendent aspiration into great works of art. The decisive matter for Bloch is that the artwork take up into itself the formative as well as the expressive and synthesize them. One can “speak objectively” about form, he writes, only “where the formal, constructive, objectivating element is not mediation, but an objective component itself, such as above all in theatrical events, in the rhythm, [and] especially in various types of counterpoint that determine the shaping subjects as categories of true particularity ... Here the shaping has truly advanced into a ‘form’” (p. 115, modified). Based on this initial reading, then, the *Teppich* represents artwork that is faithful to the demands of “the spiritual *a priori*” of abstract construction (which is itself a cryptic concept) and thus reaches toward something greater than mere functionality or tasteful elegance but which at the same time has, unlike a purely mystical statue or altarpiece, received a material “impression from life” (p. 17) that tempers and meliorates the artificial perfection inherent to abstraction.

This sort of reading does begin to connect with what Bloch is really after; he clearly wants to get at something great and deeply significant about the “spirit of utopia” and music’s authentic participation in it. Yet while a preliminary working definition of this sort is helpful, perhaps even essential, to the task of achieving a fully rounded understanding of the subject, it is no more than a provisional starting point for a deeper, more extensive exploration of the topic both as it emerges from Bloch’s philosophy and as it can be elaborated through critical application. Indeed, to stop here would betray Bloch’s philosophical approach, which almost aggressively resists

paraphrase, not to mention eager appropriation. This hallmark of Bloch's philosophical style is inscribed in his writing by a reliance on striking, often imagistic, metaphors, which are often deployed at length and upon which much palpably depends. These include, among others, the upright gait, the "darkness of the lived moment," images of the "hollow space," as well as the *Teppich*. Figures of this sort, as Christopher Norris puts it, often carry "a burden of meaning that resists articulation in more prosaic terms, and that might appear largely nonsensical if so treated."³

It is the nature of metaphors to transport meaning often freely and unexpectedly; in Quintilian's classic definition, metaphor transfers a word "from the place to which it properly belongs to another where there is either no literal term or the transferred is better than the literal" (*Institutio oratoria*, 8.6.5). Bloch is, however, generally less interested in these explanatory possibilities of metaphor than in its capacity to create connections that go beyond the prosaic, the empirical, even the conventionally reasonable. In this regard, his use of metaphor, analogy, and similitude is akin to roughly contemporary tendencies in Expressionism and Symbolism. It is even closer to Walter Benjamin, who, as Hannah Arendt describes, had little investment in "consistent, dialectically sensible, rationally explainable process," but became a master at treating "directly, actually demonstrable concrete facts" as metaphors, "provided that 'metaphor' is understood in its original, non-allegorical sense of *metapherein* (to transfer)."⁴ For Benjamin metaphor was important in part because it "establishes a connection which is sensually perceived in its immediacy."⁵ The gist of this "allegorical method," as Klaus Bergahn puts it, "lies not in projecting a meaning into a thing; instead, it is to be discovered in the thing" so that "the subjective activity of narration and interpretation corresponds to an objective quality of the world."⁶ Jameson comes to a similar conclusion regarding Bloch, suggesting that for him the world comprises "an immense storehouse of figures" in which "the task of the philosopher or critic becomes a hermeneutic one to the degree that he is called upon to pierce this 'incognito of every lived

³ Christopher Norris, "Utopian Deconstruction: Ernst Bloch, Paul de Man and the Politics of Music" in *Music and the Politics of Culture*, ed. Christopher Norris (New York, 1989), pp. 305–47 (p. 313).

⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin, 1892–1940" in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), pp. 1–55 (p. 13).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Klaus Bergahn, "A View through the Red Window: Ernst Bloch's *Spuren*" in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, ed. Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan (London, 1997), pp. 202–14 (p. 206).

instant' and to decipher the dimly vibrating meaning beneath the fables and the works, the experiences and objects."⁷

This aspect of Bloch's project bears a profound atavism that reprises modes of understanding essentially repressed in modern thought and which do not consistently play by the rules of modern rationalism (which may help explain Bloch's palpable affinity for many pre-modern characters, from Avicenna to Giordano Bruno and Thomas Münzer). He is willing, even eager, to grant constructive roles to resemblance and similitude; accordingly, his sense of meaningful connection does not finally rest on empirically evident or historically defined patterns of identity and difference. It is striking the extent to which Michel Foucault's famous analysis of the Renaissance *episteme* seems to mirror Bloch's approach.⁸ For example, Bloch (like pre-Cartesian mentality as sketched by Foucault) is more interested – and bolder, more skilled, more brilliant – in “drawing things together, in setting out on a quest for everything that might reveal some sort of kinship, attraction, or secretly shared nature within them” than in “*discriminating*, that is, in establishing their identities, [and] then the inevitability of the connections with all the successive degrees of a series.” “The old system of similitudes,” Foucault explains, was “never complete and always open to fresh possibilities.” Much like Bloch's philosophy, it is not greatly convinced of the need to establish inevitable connections or to draw systematic conclusions, but instead prizes the unveiling of things “secretly shared.”⁹ For this reason, Bloch leaves many of his key metaphorical figures only loosely defined so that they remain capable of supporting a web of historical, ontological, aesthetic, and technical connections. Indeed their explanatory power derives in large measure from an artful imprecision exercised by means of allusion, implication, and proximation. This allusive openness conditions the task of Bloch's interpreters; perceiving and tracing lines of metaphorical meaning as they cut through Bloch's philosophy often requires a special effort to identify, isolate, and concentrate them in ways that facilitate understanding.

Metaphors of all sorts are specially important in writing about music, for in “describing the indescribable,” to borrow Cormac Newark's phrase, the process of assigning verbally articulate meaning begins with a metaphoric leap. Particularly if they are composed and used with conscious intent, verbal metaphors can be a powerful means of explaining music by

⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, 1971), p. 145.

⁸ The reference is to Foucault's classic *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

linking it with broader contexts of meaning and by allowing music, which ordinarily is mute, to enter into discourses that move past purely technical concerns.¹⁰ In approaching Bloch's musical philosophy, this effort, if it is to succeed, requires the conviction that although Bloch's musical references and allusions, both metaphorical and direct, may seem almost casual, they are in their own way trenchant. He does consistently avoid specific, technical reference, let alone musical analysis. Bloch has been criticized for this. Adorno felt that this absence left him unable to mediate between his musical response and his larger ideational framework.¹¹ David Drew proposed that it would be preposterous to try to furnish "Philosophy of Music" with footnotes or musical examples and suggested that "it is impossible to imagine him [Bloch] poring over scores to check his references."¹² Yet under close sympathetic scrutiny, many of Bloch's musical comments, even passing ones, reflect careful observation and acute perception; it is clear that he listens well and knowingly, even if he does not offer what might be called "close readings." While the risk of flattening Bloch's thought and his allusive prose is real, this should not mean that Bloch's many, often fleeting musical observations must simply be left mute. These are not vain elements of his work, but rather can sustain further productive criticism and are too stimulating, too richly thought-provoking, to let rest easily. The problem and possibility, as it appears to me, is to chart and navigate a way through a body of extremely provocative musical philosophy in ways that can connect it to critical discussion that re-engages with the actual aesthetic experience of music. In practice, as latter chapters of this book will show, this means reimagining elements of Bloch's thought through the eyes and ears of a present-day observer in ways that respond to the basic principles of his cosmography and remain alive to the great "not yet" of his project. Approached in this way, Bloch's metaphor of the *Teppich* eventually serves as a point of entry into his complex, often illuminating, if occasionally frustrating, philosophy of music. First, though, it is necessary to uncover something of the genealogy of the *Teppich* metaphor that Bloch inherited and then to survey some aspects of his larger philosophy that bear upon the topic.

¹⁰ Cormac Newark, "Metaphors for Meyerbeer," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 127 (2002): 24–43 (p. 25).

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, "Bloch's *Spuren*: On the Revised Edition of 1959" in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, 2 vols., Vol. I (New York, 1991), pp. 200–15 (p. 207).

¹² David Drew, "Introduction. From the Other Side: Reflections on the Bloch Centenary" in Ernst Bloch, *Essays on the Philosophy of Music*, trans. Peter Palmer (Cambridge, 1985), pp. xi–xlvi (p. xxvi).