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

Benjamin M. Korstvedt

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Listening for Utopia in Ernst Bloch's Musical Philosophy

The musical writings of the German philosopher and theorist Ernst Bloch are extraordinarily rich, but also unusually dense, at times even cryptic. Bloch, a profoundly heterodox thinker, brilliantly wove cultural criticism into a larger project of what he termed "revolutionary gnosis". *Listening for Utopia* is both an explication of Bloch's musical thought and a critical development of it. Ultimately, the book seeks to reanimate Bloch's philosophy of music in ways that connect with current musicology. The work begins with a detailed study of concepts crucial to Bloch's aesthetics that situates them within both his philosophical system and German critical theory of the early twentieth century. The second half of the book comprises a series of essays that take up key ideas from Bloch, decipher them through contextual and close reading, and develop them through critical application to salient musical masterpieces by Wagner, Mozart, Bruckner, and Brahms.

BENJAMIN M. KORSTVEDT is the George N. and Selma U. Jeppson Professor of Music at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, and a former Senior Fellow at the Internationale Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften in Vienna. He is the author of *Bruckner: Symphony No. 8* in the Cambridge Music Handbooks series, and has published articles on Bruckner's symphonies, music criticism in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, and Bruckner scholarship in the Third Reich. He is the editor of the first modern edition of the 1888 version of Bruckner's Fourth Symphony, which is published as part of the Bruckner Collected Works edition (Vienna, 2004) and has been widely performed and recorded.

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BENJAMIN M. KORSTVEDT
Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts



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To my students – past, present, and future

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Preface

I can recall with unusual clarity the first time I read anything by Ernst Bloch. As a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania in the early 1990s I was struck by a strange passage about Bruckner quoted in Dahlhaus's *The Idea of Absolute Music* (trans. Roger Lustig [Chicago, 1989], pp. 122–23; I consider this passage in Chapter 7) that suggested a cryptic, yet somehow sympathetic evaluation of the composer's symphonies. I made a mental note to return to Bloch some time in the future. A year or two later when I was writing my doctoral dissertation, which dealt at some length with the role of music in Nazi culture, one of many, many things I read was Bloch's discussion of Nietzsche in *Heritage of Our Times*, but I am not sure that I even connected this Marxist philosopher with the intriguing comments on Bruckner from a year or two before. It was only some years later that I turned intently to Bloch's writings. I found myself puzzled, provoked, and fascinated by his oracular words about music. My interest grew deeper as his texts revealed themselves to be an extraordinary field in which to think through music in relation to a whole set of issues with which I have a deep and complex relationship, personally as well as intellectually, including Christianity, Gnosticism, existentialism, Marxist analysis, and critical theory. Throughout the course of this project, I have grown to enjoy and admire Bloch's work, despite many points that I resist and even reject. Despite its complexity, its sometimes maddening style, its undoubted limitations and partialities, it has taught me a great deal about music, about the value of philosophy for life, and about myself.

My first public outing with Bloch was a paper called "Ernst Bloch's Concept of the *Teppich* and Symphonic Criticism," which I presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society in 2002. The experience of writing that paper, which was the kernel of the last chapters of this book, taught me that I could not do justice to the topic in the limited format of a scholarly article. As I began to dig into Bloch's thought, the scope of the project continued to expand. Gradually I came to understand that I had to write a book about Bloch's musical philosophy, even though such an undertaking would involve a great deal of background study. A number of other professional obligations inevitably interposed

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themselves, but over several years, especially in the summers, I plunged into Bloch's texts, their history, and reception. This process was both challenging and rewarding. I found my thoughts about Bloch ramifying in all sorts of directions. Finally, a sabbatical from Clark University during the 2008–09 academic year afforded me the time to devote myself full-time to the completion of the book.

The basic purpose of this book is to present Bloch's musical philosophy in ways that connect with modern critical musicology. It is both an explication of Bloch's musical thought and an effort to develop critically and imaginatively possibilities that lie dormant within it. One of its tasks is to explain Bloch's thought by locating it in its intellectual and historical tradition, drawing and articulating points of connection with other thinkers, including his well-known contemporaries Adorno and Lukács, as well as others less so, such as Wilhelm Worringer, August Halm, and Alois Riegl. Throughout my work, I have sought a just balance between fidelity to Bloch's ideas and original creative appropriation, between accessibility and fairness to Bloch's density, between exegesis and explanation. My intention is certainly not to try to provide a substitute for Bloch's own writing; to the contrary, my hope is to encourage other readers to turn to Bloch's texts. I have tried to find my own path through one corner of his extraordinary work; myriad others remain to be charted and explored. One approach I have found useful in comprehending Bloch's thinking involves tracing his use of certain salient terms (the *Teppich* or carpet, *melisma*, the parlor, "the darkness of the lived moment," among others), often shuttling between passages separated by many pages, and occasionally between books, in order to construct the fullest, most coherent understanding possible of his terminology. Bloch was acutely aware that writing about music influences how music is heard. "For too many," Bloch writes, "hearing would come more easily if they only knew how they ought to talk about it" (*The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony Nassar [Stanford, 2000], p. 94). Yet his writing about music is often haunted by a persistent difficulty in finding the means to articulate his thoughts in relationship to actual musical experience, in knowing how he "ought to talk about it." Although his musical perceptions are rarely carefully explained, let alone clearly exemplified, I am convinced that his musical observations carry a greater philosophical meaning than his manner of talking about them initially suggests. Therefore, in the latter part of this book, I work to develop, almost as one develops photographic film, ways of hearing Bloch's musical perceptions, albeit undoubtedly filtered through my own frames of reference, understanding, and experience.

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Bloch's work fits no standard disciplinary box, and part of the fascination of writing this book has been following threads into many different areas, some of which were not well known to me when I began. In the process, I received informative suggestions; good ideas; conceptual assistance; practical help; and, perhaps most importantly, encouragement from friends, colleagues, and even a couple of brief acquaintances, including Aleida Assmann, Hans Belting, Marcia Butzel, Stephen Dirado, Violeta Gerjikova, Jennifer Jordan, William Kinderman, Monica Kjellman-Chapin, Andrea Lepage, Michael McGrade, Iris Mendel, Jean-Guy Meunier, Lutz Musner, Natalia Pavlova, Yifat Shohat, Daniel Jiro Tanaka, Jessica Waldoff, Yiman Wong, and, each in their own special ways, my mother, Sylvia Surdi Korstvedt, and my father, Arne J. Korstvedt. These people were often more helpful than they may realize, and I gratefully offer them my thanks. Jim Buhler, Ed Goehring, and Julian Horton each graciously read one or more chapters of the book in draft form, and each of them gave me incisive, perceptive feedback. I am sure that the book is better for their input, and I thank them for it. Bill Holab of Bill Holab Music engraved the music examples with great professionalism. I am grateful to Dr. Gerald Köhler of the Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung at the University of Cologne for his generous permission to use an image of Ewald Dülberg's set design for *Der fliegende Holländer* on the cover of this book. The staff of the Robert H. Goddard Library at Clark University was unfailingly helpful in many ways, especially by filling numerous interlibrary loan requests with dispatch. In 2007, I was most fortunate to spend a semester as a Senior Fellow at the Internationale Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften (IFK) in Vienna. My primary project there was not directly related to Bloch, so I was especially pleased to have the opportunity to offer one facet of my Bloch project as the topic of one of the center's internal seminars. This proved to be a fruitful occasion for me. Two of my colleagues at the IFK, William Rasch and Rüdiger Zill, took particular interest in the project in the form of both helpful critique and worthwhile suggestions, for which I remain most appreciative. Not many people can ask you with no irony whatsoever while walking the night streets of Vienna to explain Bloch's notion of the *Ding-an-sich* in music. I also would like to thank Victoria Cooper of Cambridge University Press for taking interest in a book on a somewhat unusual topic. Finally, many thanks are due to Rebecca Jones, also of Cambridge University Press, who was a most patient and supportive editor during the latter stages of this book's composition, and to Robert Whitelock for his conscientious and careful copy-editing.

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My deepest and fullest gratitude is, as ever, to my wife, Paula, and our wonderful son, Samuel. They are my truest motivation. To me they personify the spirit of utopia and the highest hope.

Bibliographic note

The difficulties of translating Ernst Bloch's work into English are surely immense and largely intractable. His syntactic style and grammatical structures are intrinsically complex, his vocabulary often obscure. Moreover, his prose is idiosyncratically German, often in highly subtle, elusive ways, with nuances that are, as I understand, all but inaccessible to non-native speakers. As a result, linguistic challenges are constant in working with Bloch. The available English translations of his main musical writings, notably Anthony A. Nassar's of *The Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford, 2000) and Peter Palmer's of *Essays on the Philosophy of Music* (Cambridge, 1985), have been invaluable to my work. In the course of this project, I have also worked closely with Bloch's writings in the original, using the editions published in the Bloch Gesamtausgabe. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Bloch's *The Spirit of Utopia*, which is the text I explore most extensively, are taken from Nassar's translation, with page numbers indicated parenthetically in the main text. Quotations from Palmer's translation of *Essays* and from the English version of *The Principle of Hope* (trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990]) are cited in footnotes. For reasons of clarity or textual fidelity, I have on occasion modified Nassar's and Palmer's translations (and indicate this with a note). When an untranslatable linguistic nuance seems to call for it, I have supplied Bloch's original German words for key terms and phrases.