

Ernest Bloch's *Poems of the Sea, Nirvana, and Five Sketches in Sepia*

– A Stylistic and Pedagogical Study

By

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Abstract

Ernest Bloch (1880-1959) was an important Jewish composer. He developed his individual style by employing several diverse musical styles. His music shows characteristics of his Jewish heritage, Western musical tradition, and French impressionism. Bloch is known for his chamber music, string works, and opera. In addition to these works, he composed several solo piano works which are seldom performed today. It is worthwhile to explore his piano music which contains various musical styles that were influenced by his different life experiences.

Bloch's piano works, *Poems of the Sea*, *Nirvana*, and *Five Sketches in Sepia* were all written in the 1920s when he lived in Cleveland. This paper contains a discussion of the stylistic features of these three works. They show the influences of his Jewish heritage and French impressionistic traits. Bloch did not quote Jewish melodies directly, but he was influenced by the modal characteristics of the music particularly the Phrygian mode. There is also much use of parallel chords, an impressionistic trait, and the use of quartal and quintal harmonies and the octatonic and whole-tone scale.

From the pedagogical point of view, these works are good teaching pieces for intermediate to advanced level students. I will discuss the pianistic problems and how to solve them based on the teachings of Tobias Matthay. I will also discuss musical interpretation based on Matthay's ideas, and musical progression based on Marcel Tabuteau's ideas as explained in David McGill's book, *Sound in Motion*.

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Chapter 1: Biography of Ernest Bloch

Ernest Bloch (1880–1959) was born in Geneva, Switzerland and was the son of a Jewish merchant. Although neither of his parents had a musical background, he developed an interest in music and began to study violin at the age of ten. He also began to compose and wrote pieces for the violin. When he was fourteen, he studied violin with Louis Rey and composition with Jaques Dalcroze. At the age of seventeen, Bloch went to Brussels and studied violin with Eugène Ysaÿe. In the following years, he also studied in Frankfurt, Munich, and Paris. Through these various influences, his music shows characteristics of his Jewish heritage, Western musical tradition, and French impressionism.

Bloch's first important symphonic work, *Symphony in C-Sharp Minor* (1902) was written when he was in Munich. It was a successful work. French novelist Romain Rolland wrote to Bloch and said, "I know no work in which a richer, more vigorous, more passionate temperament is revealed. From the first beat to the last this music has a life of its own. 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."¹

In 1904, Bloch returned to Geneva and took over his family's business. At the same time he was also teaching, composing and lecturing. In this period, he composed poems for orchestra: *Hiver-Printemps* (*Winter-Spring*), songs entitled *Poems d'Automne*, and an opera entitled *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* was written in French and adapted from Shakespeare by the French–Jewish writer Edmond Fleg. In 1910, it was premiered at the Opera-Comique in Paris and received great acclaim.

¹ Quoted in Suzanne Bloch, *Ernest Bloch: Creative Spirit – A Program Source Book*. (Jewish Music Council of the National Jewish Welfare Board: New York, 1976), 3.

During the years 1911 to 1915, Bloch gave lectures on music aesthetics at the Geneva Conservatory. In 1915, the family business was affected by the First World War. The financial situation worsened and Bloch had to give up his position at the Conservatory. However, in this period he composed several works based on Jewish traditions including *Psalms: 114-137-22*, *Three Jewish Poems*, and the *Israel Symphony*. Suzanne Bloch (1907–2002) mentions that Vaughan Williams commented on the *Israel Symphony* and said, “He greatly admires and would much like to hear it again.”² The Italian composer, Guido Pannain (1891–1977), also said, “Bloch is the prince of modern musicians. His *Israel Symphony* recalls the twenty-four rhapsodies of the Iliad.”³

After the *Israel Symphony*, Bloch wrote *Schelomo: Hebrew Rhapsody for Violincello and Orchestra* (1916), which was inspired by a passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes. It expressed his feelings about his life at that time. Of this piece, he said, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Even the darkest of my works end with hope.... The only passage of light falls after the meditation of *Schelomo*. I found the meaning if this fragment, fifteen years later, when I used it in Sacred Service; the words are words of hope, an ardent prayer that one day men will know their brotherhood, and live in harmony and peace.”⁴ Although life was hard, Bloch still believed and had faith that world peace was a possibility.

In 1916, the business difficulties and financial problems which were caused by the war severely influenced his family life. At this time, his friend Alfred Pochon, the violinist of the Flonzaley Quartet, introduced him to the dancer Maud Allen. This resulted in Bloch becoming the conductor for the dancer’s American tour. In the same year, his String Quartet No.1 was

² Ibid., 4.

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ Quoted in Irene Heskes, *Passport to Jewish Music: Its History, Traditions, and Culture*. (Greenwood Press: Westport, CT, 1994), 283–284.

performed by the Flonzaley Quartet and received notable fame. In the following year, he was invited by Karl Muck, the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, to conduct his *Jewish Poems*. In 1918, he also conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra. Therefore, he became known as a conductor as well as a composer in the United States.

In addition to conducting activities, Bloch also taught in the conservatories. He first taught at the Mannes School of Music from 1917 to 1920. He helped to establish the Cleveland Institute of Music and taught there from 1920 to 1925. The two violin sonatas and most of his solo piano works were written in this period. He also received citizenship of the United States in 1924.

After the Cleveland years, Bloch became the director of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. He held this position from 1925 to 1930. In this period, he did not write any solo piano works but did write some pieces for violin and piano for the young talented violinist Yehudi Menuhin, who was only seven years old at that time. One of the pieces was *Abodah (The Worship of God)*, which is an arrangement of a Yom Kippur melody.

In 1930, Bloch went back to Switzerland and was commissioned to write music for the Jewish Sabbath Service. The result was *Avodath Hakodesh (Sacred Service)* (1933), for baritone, mixed chorus, and organ or orchestra. This piece was meaningful to him. He said, "It has become a private affair between God and me."⁵ It was performed many times in the synagogues in the United States. Also, during this period, he wrote two important works which were the *Piano Sonata* (1935) and *Voice in the Wilderness* (1936) for cello and orchestra.

Bloch returned to the United States in 1938. He moved to Agate Beach in Oregon in 1941 and lived there for the rest of his life. He continued to compose and gave lectures at the

⁵ Ibid., 284.

University of California at Berkeley. Important works composed during this period included the *Suite Symphonique* and several string quartets. Ernest Newman commented, “[the Second String Quartet was the] finest work of our time in this genre, one that is worthy to rank beside the quartets of Beethoven. Its musical thinking is unique in modern chamber music for its alternation of subtle contemplative beauty and torrential power.”⁶ After his death in 1959, his family established the Ernest Bloch Society, which was a group of people dedicated to the performance of Bloch’s music. They also collected and maintained the archives of Bloch’s papers, scores, and recordings.

⁶ Suzanne Bloch, *Ernest Bloch: Creative Spirit*, 6.

Chapter 2: Ernest Bloch's Works and Musical Style

Bloch is best known for his chamber music, string works, and opera. He wrote two piano quintets, six string quartets, and a piano trio entitled *Three Nocturnes*. His well-known string works include Sonata No.1 for violin and piano, *Suite Hébraïque* for viola and piano, and *Méditation Hébraïque* for cello and piano. His opera, *Macbeth* (1909), is his only contribution to this genre. In it, one can hear the various influences that affected his musical style. David Kushner mentioned in the book about Bloch that “*Macbeth* exemplified a stunning synthesis of seemingly antipodal elements ranging from Wagnerian leitmotifs and Debussyan color and atmosphere to the urgency and depth of characterization associated with Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*.”⁷

Besides chamber music, string works, and opera, Bloch composed several works for solo piano. These works are seldom performed, but they reflect Bloch’s diverse musical styles that were influenced by his contemporaries Debussy, Mahler, and Mussorgsky, as well as his life experiences gained by living in different places in Europe and in the United States. The solo piano works are: *Ex-voto* (1914), *Four Circus Pieces* (1922), *In the Night* (1922), *Poems of the Sea* (1922), *Danse sacrée* (1923), *Enfantines* (1923), *Nirvana* (1923), *Five Sketches in Sepia* (1923), *Sonata* (1935), and *Visions et Prophéties* (1936). Most of his piano works are programmatic, and many contain sets of character pieces with different titles. *Enfantines*, a set of ten pieces written for Bloch’s daughters, are at the elementary level making them good teaching material for young pianists. Other works like *Poems of the Sea*, *Nirvana* and *Five Sketches in Sepia* make wonderful recital pieces for intermediate to advanced level students. The *Sonata* is his most challenging work, being both technically and musically suitable for concert artists.

⁷ David Z. Kushner, *The Ernest Bloch Companion* (Westport: Greenwood, 2002), 4.

Three of Bloch's piano works, *Poems of the Sea*, *Nirvana*, and *Five Sketches in Sepia*, were written during the years he lived in Cleveland. All three works are programmatic, but they have completely different textures and styles. *Poems of the Sea* contains three movements, entitled *Waves*, *Chanty*, and *At Sea*. *Nirvana* is a single-movement work. *Five Sketches in Sepia* contains five short pieces: *Prélude*, *Fumées sur la Ville*, *Lucioles*, *Incertitude*, and *Epilogue*. These works show various influences on Bloch's style including Jewish music, medieval chant, Western musical tradition, and French impressionism.

Although Bloch was influenced by Jewish music, he did not quote traditional or religious Jewish melodies directly. He said, "In all those compositions of mine which have been termed Jewish, I have not approached the problem from without, i.e. by employing more or less authentic melodies, or more or less sacred oriental formulas, rhythms, or intervals... . It was this Jewish heritage as a whole which stirred me, and music was the result."⁸

The influence of Jewish music and medieval chant on Bloch can be found in the use of modality and the interval of the augmented second. Since medieval times, Jewish sacred music was mainly based on the modes, mainly the Phrygian mode and Ionian mode, which were used for singing biblical texts. For non-biblical sacred texts, setting employed the Mixolydian mode, Aeolian mode, and *Ahavah-Rabba* mode (E – F – G-sharp – A – B – C – D – E) which contains the interval of an augmented second.⁹

Bloch heard lots of the traditional Jewish melodies from his family when he was young. These melodies, with their irregular, chanting-like rhythmic patterns, were embedded in his childhood memories and became an important element of his musical language. They are

⁸ Irene Heskes, *Passport to Jewish Music: It's History, Traditions, and Culture*. (Greenwood Press: Westport, 1994), 285.

⁹ Lewis Stevens, *Composers of Classical Music of Jewish Descent*. (Valentine Mitchell, 2003), 16–17.

reflected in his use of frequent tempo changes, and combination of dotted rhythms, triplet, suspensions, and emphasis on weak beats or weak parts of beats.

The features of Western musical tradition are shown in Bloch's use of regular phrases, clear formal structures, and a traditional tonal language. In addition, he was influenced by French impressionism. Bloch was in France during the years 1903 – 1904 and became acquainted with Debussy's opera *Pelléas and Mélisande*. Lewis Stevens mentioned that Bloch modeled his opera *Macbeth* after the style of *Pelléas and Mélisande*.¹⁰ Characteristics of impressionistic music are shown in Bloch's use of parallel chords, seventh and ninth chords, quartal and quintal harmonies, and unprepared and unresolved dissonances. Bloch also used whole-tone and octatonic scales in their complete forms as well as in segments. Bloch combined traditional Western traditional musical style and French impressionism with his Jewish heritage to develop an original, personal musical style.

Bloch's music is essentially tonal with allusions to modality. He uses modal melodies which are harmonized with traditional harmonic language. He also uses the technique of modal combination which refers to writing in a two-voice contrapuntal texture with the voices in different modes. For example, in the third movement of *Poems of the Sea*, he writes A-Dorian in the right-hand melody and A-Aeolian in the left-hand melody at the same time in measures 15-23. In addition, he likes to use the major-minor triad, augmented intervals and tritone intervals to create unique sound colors.

Bloch uses lots of irregular and free rhythms in his music. He especially likes to use the reversed dotted rhythm which is known as the "scotch snap". Kushner names this rhythm the

¹⁰ Ibid., 134.

“Bloch rhythm” in his book about Bloch.¹¹ Besides rhythmic freedom, he makes good use of meter and tempo fluctuations to make the music resemble a singing or chanting style. Many of these compositional techniques are shown in his three solo piano works: *Poems of the Sea*, *Nirvana*, and *Five Sketches in Sepia*.

¹¹ Kushner, *The Ernest Bloch Companion*, 28.

Chapter 3: Stylistic Analysis of Ernest Bloch's

Poems of the Sea, Nirvana, and Five Sketches in Sepia

1. Poems of the Sea

Poems of the Sea was written in 1922 following a Bloch family vacation in Canada during the summer of 1921. While on vacation, they visited a seaside village called Percé on the Gaspé Peninsula. Bloch spent time with the seamen and fishermen there and acquainted himself with their life. According to Suzanne Bloch, he was inspired while walking along the beach of Percé, and wrote down some sketches in a little book. These sketches later became *Poems of the Sea*, a cycle of three pieces.¹²

Bloch quoted the first verse of the poem *In Cabin'd Ships at Sea* from the collection *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman (1819–1892) in the preface of the *Poems of the Sea*:

In cabin'd ships at sea,
The boundless blue on every side expanding,
With whistling winds and music of 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 either the mid the sparkle and the foam of the 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.¹³

Poems of the Sea is based on a traditional tonal plan with some modal influences. The first movement, *Waves*, can be divided into three large sections with a transition between the first and the second section. Each section consists of several smaller parts with different tonal centers, tempo markings, and melodic and rhythmic patterns. The middle section has a contrasting character and texture from the outer sections. In the last section, the melodic and rhythmic

¹² Suzanne Bloch. *Ernest Bloch: Creative Spirit*, 58.

¹³ Kushner, *The Ernest Bloch Companion*. 60.

materials from the first sections recur. Thus, this movement is in ternary form: A – B – A’
(Figure 1).

Figure 1 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea, I, Waves*

Section	A (Rhythmic and agitated)			Transition	B (Lyrical)	A’
Part	a	bridge	b			a’
Theme	1 and 2					2 and 1
Measure	1-36	37-39	40-54	55-69	69- 81	82-123
Tonality (Centric pitch)	Bbm		F – C# – G (Tritone relation)		Bbm – BbM – Gm	Gm – Bbm – BbM
Melody	Bb Dorian/Phrygian			Octatonic scale	Bb Dorian	Bb Dorian/Phrygian

The A section contains two parts: part a and part b. Part a opens in the key of B-flat minor with a triplet figure in the left hand which creates a sense of the motions of the waves. This repetitive triplet figure with its lowered minor second (C flat) creates the dark feeling of the sea (Example 1). It illustrates what Suzanne Bloch said, “He [Bloch] was able to give a special tang in them (*Poems of the Sea*), of these colder northern seas, for the music surely doesn’t bring to mind a type of Tropical Ocean.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Suzanne Bloch. *Ernest Bloch: Creative Spirit*, 58.

Example 1 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, I, “Waves,” mm.1–7.

The musical score is for a piano piece in 3/4 time, marked "Poco agitato" with a tempo of approximately 112-120 beats per minute. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The score is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 1-3) features a piano accompaniment of eighth notes in the left hand, marked *pp*, and a melodic line in the right hand marked *p* and *espressivo*. The second system (measures 4-7) continues the accompaniment and the melodic line, which is marked *dim.* and *dolce*.

The chromatic sound of the minor second plays an important role in the whole movement. The C-flat leads one to believe that this movement will be in the Phrygian mode. However, the melody, with its C and G naturals, is clearly in the Dorian. This use of bimodality is a characteristic of Bloch and can also be found in other movements.

In part a, the first phrase of theme 1 is a regular eight-bar phrase. It sounds unsettled because of the dotted rhythm, syncopations and suspensions. The second phrase repeats the first phrase an octave lower but ends on an F major triad, the dominant of B-flat minor and returns to B-flat minor chord in measure 31. A German augmented sixth chord appears on the second beat of measure 23 creating tension before being resolved onto B-flat in measure 25.

A new accompaniment of a broken minor third in sixteenth notes is introduced in the three-bar bridge from measures 37-39. The minor-third interval recurs throughout in part b and sometimes appears enharmonically as the augmented second. This part also contains the materials such as ninth chords (measure 40) and segments of an octatonic scale (measure 43). The rhythm in measures 40-45, with its accents on the sixteenth notes, creates a sense of

instability. The tritone relationship in measures 46- 49 (C sharp to G) and measures 50-52 (B flat to E) build a sense of musical intensity, prior to reaching a climax on the G major chord in measure 53. The dramatic key change from E to G in measures 53-54 forms a third relationship (Example 2).

Example 2 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, I, “Waves,” mm.46–53.

The transition, measures 55-69, is written using the octatonic scale: D flat – D – E – F – G – A flat – B, albeit with B flat absent. Section B starts in measure 69. Compared to the agitated character of the A section, this B section is calmer, with a sweet and simple melody supported by an uncomplicated chordal accompaniment (Example 3). As in section A modal inflections are also at work. The key is B flat minor, but the use of G natural suggests the Dorian mode. The tonality moves to the parallel key B flat major in measure 77 before ending in G minor. The A’ section begins in G minor. It contains all the materials from the first section but the opening theme does not reappear until measure 110. Theme 1 and theme 2 reverse their positions in this A’ section. The whole movement ends in B-flat major.

Example 3 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, I, “Waves,” mm.66–76.



The second movement, *Chanty*, meaning “sailor’s song”, clearly shows Bloch’s free use of rhythm. There are also some folk-song elements like the scotch-snap rhythm and the pedal points. This movement can be divided into three sections (A – B – A’) (Figure 2). The first and last sections share the same material, and the second section is in a contrasting mood.

Figure 2. Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, II, *Chanty*

Section	A	B	A’
Measure	1-18	18-35	36-47
Tonality (Centric pitch)	Am	AM – DM – GM	Am
Melody	A Dorian, E Phrygian	In folk-song style	A Dorian

The way Bloch deals with both melody and the harmony expresses the “Andante misterioso” of the A section. Above the long chords played by the left hand, Bloch writes the melody on A-Dorian scale (Example 4). He emphasizes the sound of perfect fifths in both

melody and accompaniment. In measure 10, he overlaps the A minor and A major triads to create a degree of modal tension before resolving it to the E minor chord through chromatic ascending and descending motion. The chord between the A minor-major chord and E minor chord is a German augmented sixth chord. At the end of the A section, the occurrence of the F-natural in the bass suggests the bass progression of the Phrygian cadence (Example 5).

Example 4 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, II, “Chanty,” mm.1–4.

Andante misterioso ♩ = circa 68

p

poco rit.

a tempo

Example 5 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, II, “Chanty,” mm.15–20.

(in the style of a folk-song)

p

pp

mf

The B section begins in A major and according to Bloch’s directions in the style of folk song. The sound is fuller and the color is brighter because of the changes in tonality and texture. Bloch creates an illusion of thicker texture by having all the voices move more. The inner voices allude to the Aeolian mode in measures 21-22 and 28-29, creating a sense of uncertainty and wonder. The melody is accompanied in parallel thirds and 6ths supported by an “A” pedal point and contains motions from scale degree 6 to 1 and 1 to 6, thus avoiding the leading tone. The melody also features the “scotch-snap” rhythm. Both of these elements are features of folk music.

The harmony begins in A major, moves to D major in measure 26, before reaching a climax in G major in measure 31. The perfect fifth interval between the three long bass notes (A – D – G) suggests a partial progression through the circle of fifths.

Bloch combines triplets, dotted rhythms, and syncopations to create a sense of melodic freedom in the melodies. Although the rhythm sounds free to the listener, Bloch actually marked all of the diverse surface features in detail. He often emphasizes the syncopation with accents. In the melody in the A section, he writes the dotted rhythm on almost every second beat, which creates a feeling of moving forward to the next downbeat. The syncopations, dotted rhythms and folk-style rhythms together with the many expression marks contribute to a free singing style.

The third movement, *At Sea*, is the longest movement. It is in ternary form (A – B – A') with each section containing several subsidiary parts with different musical characters and tonal centers (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, III, *At Sea*

Section	A				Tran.	B		A'		Coda
Theme	a	a	b	a	b		c	d	a	b
Measure	1-73		73-126		126-168	168-222		222-278		279-300
Tonality (Centric pitch)	A–		AM–dm – DM			Am – CM – Am		dm	am	Am – AM

This movement begins in A-Dorian, and modulates to the subdominant, D-Dorian, in the second half of the first section. The tonalities are implied in the broken chords in the left hand triplet accompaniment. There are clear characteristics of impressionism.

Theme a has rhythmically vigorous character (Example 6). The low bass F natural in measures 11-22 changes the music to A-Aeolian. F natural plays an important role in the whole movement. It sometimes suggests the A-Aeolian, but in other occasions within D-Dorian.

Bloch's characteristic textural feature, modal combination, appears in measure 15 where the

melody on the right hand is in A-Dorian and the melody on the left hand is in A-Aeolian (Example 7).

Example 6 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, III, “At Sea,” mm.1–4.



Example 7 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, III, “At Sea,” mm.15–19.



In contrast to theme a, theme b has longer lyrical lines. The melody is in A-Aeolian. However, the occurrence of D sharp and C sharp suggest the Lydian mode, which again showing Bloch's use of bimodal inflection. In measures 41-44, Bloch combines the chords of A major, A minor, and C minor chord to create the sound of an octatonic collection. The A major chord and A minor chords appear at the same time in measure 61. In measure 64, the occurrence of the C minor chord together with A major chord again forms a segment of the octatonic scale.

After a short bridge, themes a and b are stated again but this time transposed to D-Dorian, D-Aeolian and D-Lydian. The long transitional passage begins in measure 130 and is built on a sequence of three non-functional harmonies, thus creating a sense of instability in the music. The harmonies in sequence are: A-flat major – D major – E major, D minor – B major – C-sharp

major, and D major – A-flat major – B-flat major. The bass notes of these harmonies are A flat – D – E, F – B – C sharp, and D – A flat – B flat. They form an octatonic scale OCT_{1,2} [C sharp – D – E – F – A flat – B flat – B] minus G.

In the B section, the constant eighth-note triplet pattern is replaced by thick chords in chorale style giving the music a heavier, more settled feeling. In measures 190-199, the climax is reached on an octave progression through an upward moving whole-tone scale (C – D – E – F sharp – A flat – B flat) alternating with major chords built on the octaves, all at a triple forte dynamic level (Example 8). The triplet pattern returns in measure 199 and leads into theme d, which is marked *scherzando*.

Example 8 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, III, “At Sea,” mm.190–202.

Materials from previous sections all reappear in the coda. In measure 296, theme c is presented in open fifths and octaves except for the last chord which adds C-sharp to create an A major triad.

The three movements in *Poems of the Sea* are connected by mode, interval, harmony, and rhythmic patterning. The main two modes are Dorian and Aeolian. They sometimes appear

together and form modal combination; the melody is often in Dorian and the accompaniment is in Aeolian. Bloch uses the tritone to create musical tension in both the first and the third movement. All three movements contain some type of mixture of the major scale and modes. Dotted rhythms such as Scotch snap and the triplet pattern are also part of the structural connection between these movements. Bloch combines all these musical elements to create unity in this work.

2. Nirvana

Nirvana is a single-movement work. Under the title, Bloch indicates "... Sans désir, sans souffrance... Paix, néant..." which means "... Without desire, without suffering... Peace, Nothingness..." Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary explains "nirvana" as: "the final beatitude that transcends suffering, karma, and samsara and is sought especially Buddhism through the extinction of desire and individual consciousness."¹⁵ In the Bloch program source book, Susanne Bloch mentions that "Nirvana is all atmosphere, sonorities, and contemplative."¹⁶ The repeated patterns, slow tempo, texture, parallel motion and soft dynamics reflect Bloch's idea of nirvana as something eternal, timeless, broad, mysterious, and distant. Bloch creates a general mood that is quiet, static, pure, and peaceful.

This piece shows the influences of two major elements, impressionism and exoticism. Bloch freely mixes parallel fifths, thirds, major and minor triads, and quartal and quintal harmonies. These parallel chords are not used functionally, but are used to create atmospheres, moods, and colors. Another characteristic of this piece is the muted atmosphere of the impressionism, which creates a sense of a distant place or time or an image that is unclear. The

¹⁵ Merriam-Webster "Nirvana." in *Merriam-Webster.com*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nirvana> (accessed December 12, 2013)(Oregon, 1976)

¹⁶ Suzanne Bloch. *Ernest Bloch: Creative Spirit*, 58.

overall dynamic range extends mostly from *ppp* to *mf*. On the other hand, Bloch still uses traditional musical elements such as four-bar/parallel phrase structure, regular meter, and clear rhythms, which allows his music to be easily perceived and understood.

This work is in ternary form: A – B – A' and is based on the set class (016) and the intervals derived from it: the minor second, the perfect fourth and its inversion, the perfect fifth, and the tritone. For example, the centric note of the A and A' sections is D and the central note of the B section is G-sharp, a tritone relationship (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Bloch, *Nirvana*

Section	A		B	A'	
Theme	a	b	c	a	b
Measure	1-20	21-32	33-54	55-65	66-78
Centric pitch	D	– A	G#	D	
The central pitch of these three sections form set class (016), which are form the repeated pattern in the left hand.					

In Section A, the repetitive bass figures with its slight variation in its rhythmic pattern create the trance-like mood. They consist of the G sharp/A natural minor second, alternating with the single note D. These pitches form the set class (016), which plays an important role and which will continue to reappear in different forms throughout the piece.

The a theme in the right hand is accompanied by parallel perfect fifths, first ascending and then descending (Example 9). The top voice contains falling half steps and a rising third. The characteristic half steps, in turns create a chromatic aspect but first appear in the top voice in measure 7 and subsequently in an inner voice in measure 8.

Example 9 Bloch, *Nirvana*, mm.1–4.

The musical score for Example 9 shows the first four measures of Bloch's *Nirvana*. It is written for piano in 6/4 time, marked "Assai lento" with a tempo of quarter note = 80. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The score consists of two staves. The upper staff has a treble clef and contains a melodic line with a falling tritone motive. The lower staff has a bass clef and contains a bass line with a similar falling tritone motive. The dynamic marking is *ppp* (pianissimo) in the first measure and *pp* (piano) in the second measure.

The falling tritone motive used in the inner voice in measures 14 -15 and 17-18 reappears in both the B and the A' sections. The melody in measures 14-20 is harmonized using (016) trichords which also contain the tritone (Example 10).

Example 10 Bloch, *Nirvana*, mm.13–20.

The musical score for Example 10 shows measures 13 through 20 of Bloch's *Nirvana*. It is written for piano in 6/4 time. The score consists of two staves. The upper staff has a treble clef and contains a melodic line with a falling tritone motive. The lower staff has a bass clef and contains a bass line with a similar falling tritone motive. The dynamic marking is *p* (piano) in the first measure and *mp* (mezzo-piano) in the second measure. The tempo marking is "poco rit." (poco ritardando) in the first measure and "a tempo" in the second measure. The score ends with the marking "perdendosi" (diminuendo).

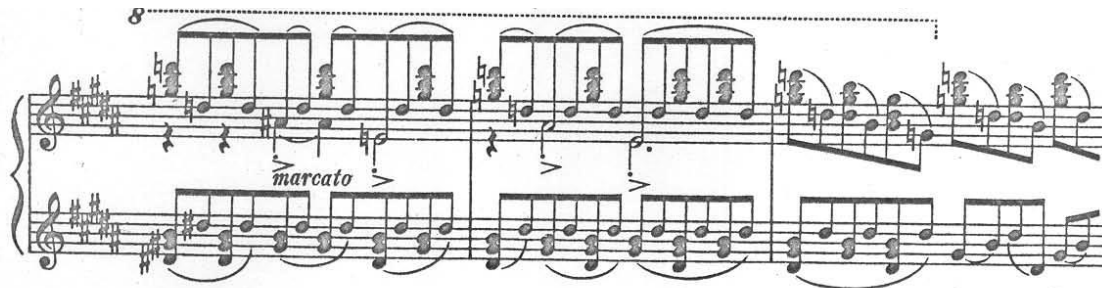
In the b theme, Bloch writes two groups of parallel chords in two staves on the treble clef (Example 11), indicating that these should be heard as “da lontano armonioso” – – “distant harmonies”. The chords start very softly at the *pp* dynamic level and create a sense that the sound is coming from far away. They crescendo to *mf*, the loudest dynamic in this piece. The chords in the uppermost staff descend but lack any identifying third. The ascending chords in the middle staff, however, are clearly major triads in the second inversion. The contrary motion of these

chords creates a series of polychords. The melody of these chords is basically in octatonic scale with some changing and missing notes. This section ends with a change of central note to A, the dominant of D. The set class (016) is now A – C sharp – D. In measures 30-32, the C to B in the top voice is reminiscent of the falling half-step motive from the a theme.

Example 11 Bloch, *Nirvana*, mm.21–23.

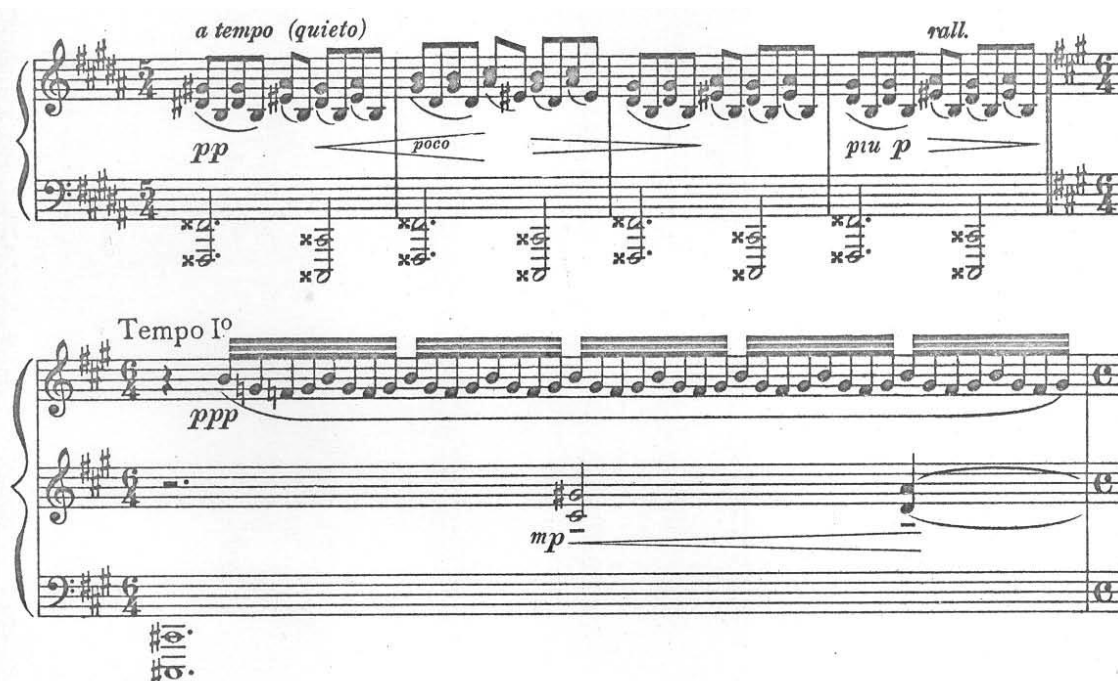
In the B section, the texture suddenly switches to oscillating broken chord in eighth notes over a four-note motive in the bass. The four-note motive outlines the half-diminished seventh chord on E. A broken G-sharp minor triad continues in the left hand with slight variations throughout the section. In measure 42, a G-major triad appears in the right hand while the left hand continues to play the G-sharp minor oscillating chord. These two chords are half steps apart except for the shared third, B (Example 12). At this point, the descending tritone motive introduced in the A section occurs in the middle voice marked marcato. In measures 45-46, the motive A – C – B from the a theme appears as F – A flat – G, sharing the same intervallic relationship.

Example 12 Bloch, *Nirvana*, mm.42–44.



Towards the end of the B section, the two bass octaves in measures 51-54, the F double sharp and the C double sharp, move onto C sharp in the A' section and together form the set class (016) (Example 13). This set class thus appears once again as an important connection between the second and the last sections.

Example 13 Bloch, *Nirvana*, mm.51–55.



In the a theme of the A' section, the repetitive bass pattern of the A section is replaced with a new thirty-second note broken chord pattern in the upper range. The a theme is in the middle range and the bass has the falling tritone motive. Measures 66-75 is a repeat of measures

21-31. The bass in the final three measures establish D as the key center, but the tritone-related G-sharp minor chord in the upper range creates a sense of wonder. Perhaps this is Bloch's way of saying we have reached nirvana (Example 14).

Example 14 Bloch, *Nirvana*, mm.75–78.

The image shows a musical score for piano, measures 75-78 of Bloch's *Nirvana*. The score is written for a grand piano with a treble and bass clef. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The tempo is marked 'rall.' and the dynamics include 'ppp' and 'perdendosi'. The bass line shows a tritone-related G-sharp minor chord in the upper range.

3. Five Sketches in Sepia

Impressionist compositional techniques play an important role in *Five Sketches in Sepia*. Like a number of impressionistic composers, Bloch portrays the atmospheres, moods, or subjects by using non-functional, often parallel harmonies and different tone colors. *Five Sketches in Sepia* also reflects Bloch's fascination with photography. In the 1920s, many photographers finished their prints in sepia, a dark-brown color with a reddish tint.¹⁷ Bloch was inspired by this visual effect and wrote five short pieces as a form of musical analogue, using the titles: *Prélude*, *Fumées sur la Ville*, *Lucioles*, *Incertitude*, and *Epilogue*.

In *Prélude*, Bloch indicates “*con fantasia*” at the beginning. The fantasia style is shown in his use of fermatas, irregular rhythm such as quintuplets, and constant tempo changes (Example 15). The overall structure of this piece can be divided into three small sections (Figure 5)

¹⁷ David Kusher, *The Ernest Bloch Companion*. 61.

Example 15 Bloch, *Five Sketches in Sepia*, Mov.I, “Prélude,” mm.1-7.

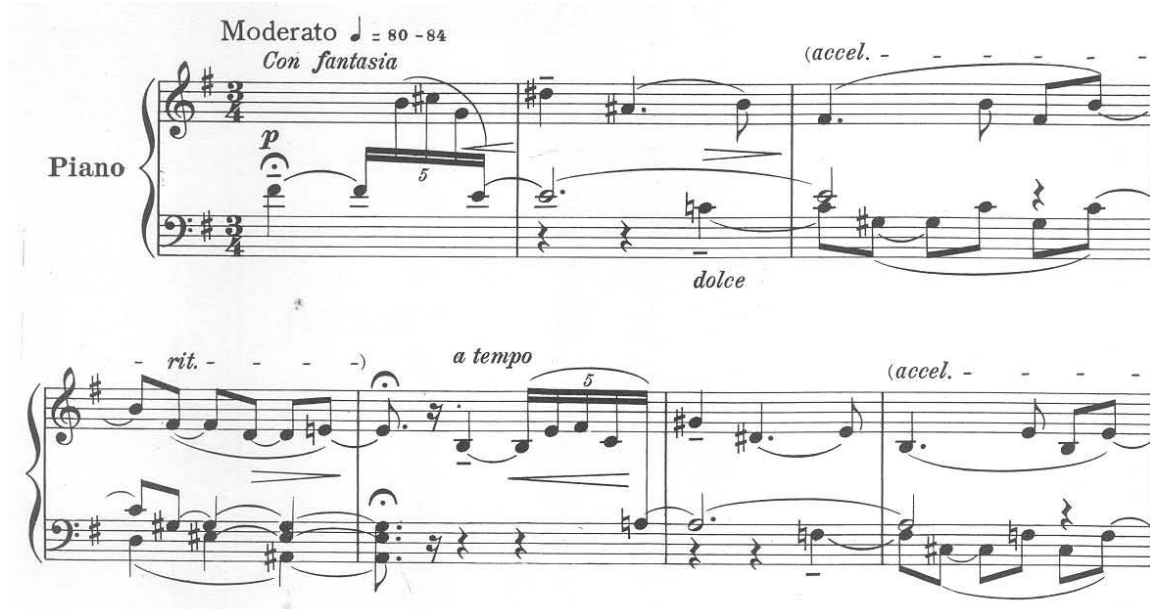


Figure 5 Bloch’s *Five Sketches in Sepia*, I, “Prélude,”

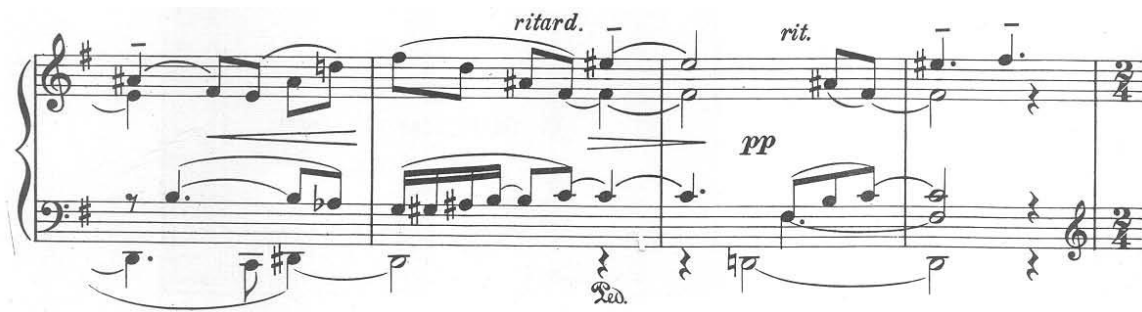
Section	A	B	A'
Measure	1-14	15-27	27-37
Centric pitch	B		

This first piece begins with a thin, linear texture. The first note, F sharp, is the dominant of the centric pitch B. It starts the first phrase, which contains perfect fourths and dissonant intervals such as major, minor and augmented seconds, tritones, and major sevenths. The second and third phrases start with B and E, respectively. Together with the F sharp, these opening pitches form a perfect fifth relationship. The second phrase is the same as the first, but a perfect fifth lower. The third phrase is the longest and is developed from motives unfolded during the first phrase.

Bloch uses varied parallel motions in this movement including parallel thirds, sevenths and quartal patterns. Different kinds of parallel intervals or chords have different musical

characters. For example, parallel major sevenths create tension and the feeling of moving forward in music, but parallel quartal harmonies are more tranquil and steady. Bloch alters traditional harmonies to create new chords. For example, he sometimes raises the fifth of the chord making it an augmented dominant seventh chord (Example 16). In measure 13, he uses A sharp in the D dominant seventh chord.

Example 16 Bloch, *Five Sketches in Sepia*, I, “*Prélude*,” mm.11–14.



Fumées sur la Ville (*Smoke over the Village*) describes the image of floating smoke.

According to Suzanne Bloch, “[Bloch was] inspired by the skies of Cleveland, a city whose soft coal smoke stacks left a constant pall in the skies.”¹⁸ Bloch uses devices such as chromaticism, pedal points, soft dynamics, *rubato*, long held notes in a slow tempo, and *rallentando* to portray this image.

This piece can again be divided into three small sections (A – B – A’). Section A contains phrases a and b. In section A’, phrase b appears first and the movement ends with phrase a, thus creating a symmetrical design (Figure 6).

¹⁸ Suzanne Bloch. *Ernest Bloch: Creative Spirit*, 60.

Figure 6 Bloch, *Five Sketches in Sepia*, II, “*Fumées sur la Ville*,”

Section	A	Bridge	B	A'
Phrase	a – b		c	b – a
Measure	1-12	13-16	17-27	28-35
Centric pitch	C sharp			

The first and the last sections are based on the octatonic scale: C sharp – D – E – F – G – G sharp – A sharp – B (Example 17). The centric pitch of the piece is C sharp, the first note of the octatonic scale. Bloch writes disjunct melodies in the inner voice. The bass outline a C-sharp minor chord. In section B, the C-sharp minor appears as a long sustained chord. Above the chord, Bloch writes the melody in parallel chromatic octaves.

Example 17 Bloch, *Five Sketches in Sepia*, II, “*Fumées sur la Ville*,” mm.1-1



The third piece *Lucioles* depicts fireflies. Bloch portrays their unpredictable flying motion by writing constant eighth-note motion in frequently changing meters (Example 18). This piece can once again be divided into three sections: A – B – A' (Figure 7).

Example 18 Bloch, *Five Sketches in Sepia*, III, “Lucioles,” mm.1–4.

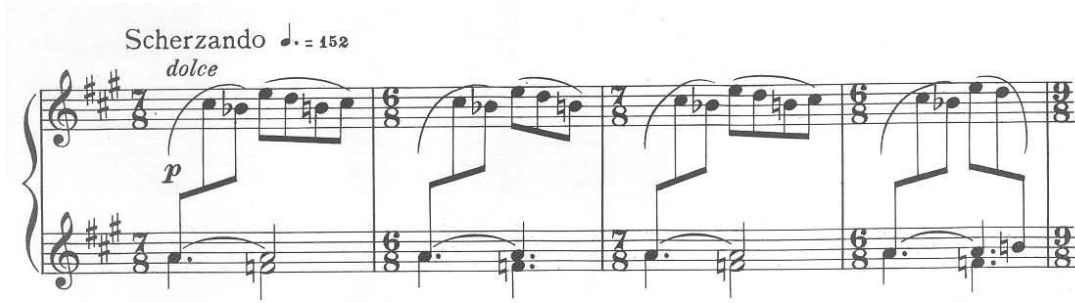


Figure 7 Bloch, *Five Sketches in Sepia*, III, “Lucioles,”

Section	A	B	A'
Measure	1-6	7-22	23-30
Centric pitch	A		

In measures 7-16, the perfect fourth interval appears together with the tritone and creates the trichord (016). The dynamic level progressively increases prior to arriving at the climax in measure 16. The movement is based on the centric pitch A, but an A major chord does not appear until the last two measures, where it occurs simultaneously with a B half-diminished seventh chord, thereby creating a bright flash of color.

Incertitude (Uncertainty) is based on the centric pitch C. It can be divided into two sections (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Bloch, *Five Sketches in Sepia*, IV, “*Incertitude*”

Sections	A	B
Measure	1-17	18-36
Centric pitch	C	

Bloch uses quartal harmonies and triadic combinations to create a mood of uncertainty. In measures 18 and 20, the G major chord sound together with the F-sharp major chord, and they are related by minor second, which plays an important role in this movement. In measures 18-21, there is an unexpected instance of a traditional V-I motion in the bass, although the minor seconds above the bass make the effect appear more chromatic (Example 19). Bloch also uses the octatonic scale of C – C sharp – D sharp – E – F sharp – G – A – B flat over measures 24-35.

Example 19 Bloch, *Five Sketches in Sepia*, IV, “*Incertitude*,” mm.13–36.

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It consists of three systems of music, each with a double bar line and a star symbol below it. The first system (measures 13-21) features a treble and bass clef. The bass line shows a V-I motion. Dynamics include *pp* and *mf*. The second system (measures 22-30) continues the texture with *mf* and *p* dynamics. The third system (measures 31-36) includes the marking *Poco più lento* and *poco*, ending with *pp*. The score is in G major and 3/4 time.

Epilogue is the longest of the five pieces. It is also more tonal than the other components of the set. *Epilogue* also quotes some materials from the previous four pieces. Like them, it can be divided into three sections (A – B – A’) with a coda (Figure 9).

Figure 9 Bloch, *Five Sketches in Sepia*, V, “Epilogue”

Section	A	B	A’	Coda
Measure	1-19	20-33	34-49	49-62
Centric pitch	E	C sharp	E	E

The A section begins with E minor arpeggios with additional F sharps, in triplet pattern in the left hand accompaniment. The right hand brings out the melody in parallel fifths, and the melody outlines E-Dorian (Example 20). In measure 10, the material from the first movement is quoted above the continuous E minor arpeggio pattern. The A section ends in A major, the subdominant of E minor.

Example 20 Bloch, *Five Sketches in Sepia*, V, “Epilogue,” mm.1–3.

The B section has three phrases: the first phrase quotes from *Fumées sur la Ville*; the second phrase quotes from *Lucioles*; and the last phrase quotes from *Incertitude* with slightly variations. In the A’ section, Bloch switches between major and minor triads, such as E minor and E major in measures 38-39, and A major and A minor in measures 46-47. The coda outlines the E-Aeolian, but in measure 55 transitions E major. The piece ends with several alternations between an E major and D major-minor seventh chord. This addition of an upper neighbor C and a lower neighbor A further enhances the final resolution onto a clear E major triad.

Chapter 4: Pedagogical Study of Ernest Bloch's

Poems of the Sea, Nirvana, and Five Sketches in Sepia

Bloch's *Poems of the Sea, Nirvana, and Five Sketches in Sepia* are good teaching pieces for intermediate to advanced students. These pieces develop students' musical knowledge. They provide students an introduction to tonal music with modal inflection, and other basic musical elements such as different melodic phrase structure, harmonic languages, styles and characters. These pieces develop students' basic technical skills as well as interpretive skills. The basic technical skills include articulations, and balance between the melody and the accompaniment. In addition, there are several challenging spots such as playing big leaps, continuous broken-chord patterns, consecutive octaves, irregular rhythm, and the dividing of the melody and the accompaniment between the hands. The interpretive skills include playing rubato, creating subtle qualities of the sound and most importantly good phrasing and a sense of musical direction.

I will focus my discussion on two technical difficulties for students: using rotation movement to play continuous broken-chord patterns, and the control of playing one line with two hands. In addition, for the interpretive aspect, I will focus on: helping students produce different qualities of the sound, and rubato playing based on Tobias Matthay's ideas; good phrasing based on Marcel Tabuteau's ideas.

1. Rotation

In *Poems of the Sea* and *Nirvana*, Bloch writes many continuous broken-chord patterns. It is easy for students to produce tension in their hands when playing these patterns. Tension is created due to repeating the same motion, with the hands in a stretched out position when playing a broken-chord pattern with large intervals (Example 21).

Example 21 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, III, “At Sea,” mm.45–49.



The solution to release tension is to use forearm rotation to play these broken-chord patterns. Forearm rotation includes both lateral and medial motions: the lateral forearm rotation means moving the forearm toward the fifth finger side of the hand; the medial forearm rotation means moving the forearm toward the thumb side of the hand. In example 21, the broken-chord pattern in the left hand continues for 27 measures. Using rotation movement to play this pattern can prevent students from producing more tension. The first step is to prepare the fifth finger and then play the C with a slight lateral rotation. The next step is to play A and E with medial rotation. The arm should be behind the finger which plays so the hand can keep its natural position without stretching. Therefore, a series of lateral and medial rotations help students to play this pattern with greatly reduced tension.

2. One Melody, Two Hands

Dividing the melody and the accompaniment between hands is a technique that appears many times in *Poems of the Sea* and *Five Sketches in Sepia*. Often the right hand and the left hand take turns playing one melodic line. For example, in measure 114 of the first movement of *Poems of the Sea*, the left hand takes over the melodic line from the right hand and the right hand plays the triplet accompaniment (Example 22).

Example 22 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, I, “Waves,” mm.111–110.

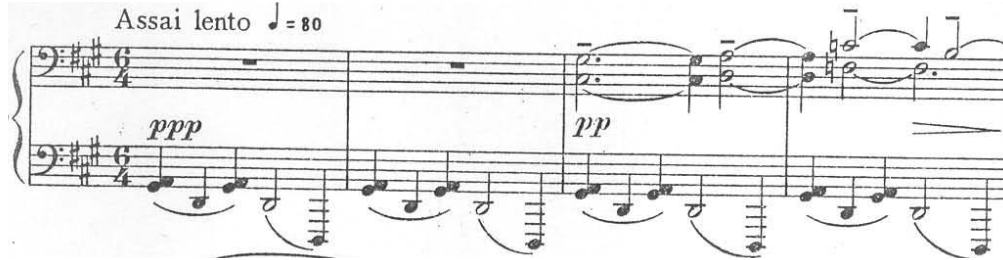
The image displays a musical score for Example 22, Bloch's *Poems of the Sea*, I, "Waves," mm. 111-110. The score is written for piano and consists of two systems. The first system shows the beginning of the piece with a *dim.* marking in the left hand and a *p* marking in the right hand. The second system shows the end of the piece with markings for *rall.*, *a tempo*, *rit.*, and *pp*. The score is in G major and 4/4 time.

In order to play the melodic line smoothly, students should sing the melody first, and then play the melody only, with two hands switching. After the melodic line is well-connected between two hands, the next step is to play the accompaniment only, with two hands switching. The right hand accompaniment should match the sound of the left hand accompaniment. The last step is to combine the melodic line and the accompaniment, working for balance of sound.

3. Sound Quality

Both *Nirvana* and *Five Sketches in Sepia* have impressionistic influences. Subtle differences in sound qualities play an important role in portraying the various atmospheres and moods in these pieces. Different qualities of the sound are based on different speeds of attack and release of the key. Different combinations of fast attack, slow attack, fast release and slow release create distinct sound qualities. At the beginning of *Nirvana* for example, there are two kinds of sound quality: the repeated *ppp* figures in the left hand, and the *pp* parallel fifths with tenuto marking in in the right hand (Example 23).

Example 23 Bloch, *Nirvana*, mm.1–4.



The repeated figures in the left hand should be played very softly throughout this section as a steady and calm background. This requires slow attack on the key surface with a slow release. “Ghost practice”¹⁹ is a good way for students to learn how to produce this kind of soft tone. The first step of this practice is to press the key to the “tone spot”²⁰ without making any sound. In order to do this, one needs to play the key slowly therefore this practice helps students learn how to play slow attack. After numerous repetition of this practice, the next step is to have students slightly increase the speed of the key playing through the tone spot to create the soft tone. Through this practice, students begin to learn how to control soft playing.

In the right hand, the parallel fifths with tenuto marking need a more focused sound and resonance than the repeated figures. This type of tone requires a faster attack from the key surface, but still with a slow release. The different qualities of sound create various colors and layers in this piece.

4. Rubato

In these three pieces, Bloch writes many indications to suggest speed changes. He uses the terms *accelerando*, *ritardanto*, *piu lento*, *piu mosso*, *meno mosso*, *allargando*, and *rubato*. Rubato is an important issue in teaching, and important for students to understand the concept.

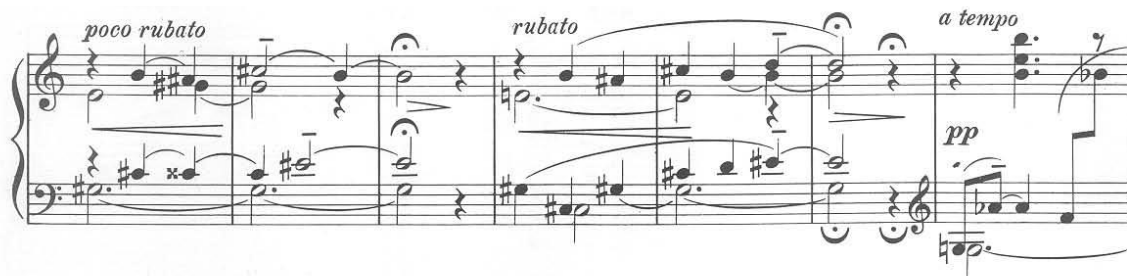
¹⁹ The term that Dr. Scott McBride Smith uses in his piano pedagogy class to describe how to produce soft sound.

²⁰ In the piano action, when the hopper throws the hammer, there is a tiny extra resistance in the key. This moment is refer to the “tone spot”.

According to Tobias Matthay, there are two types of rubato; 1. "...we emphasize a note (or a number of notes) by giving more than the expected Time-value, and then subsequently make-up the time thus lost by accelerating the remaining notes of that phrase or idea so as to enable us accurately to return to the pulse. This return to the pulse must always occur at the most important point or note of the phrase – that is, near its end." ; 2. "...we begin with a pushing-on or hurrying the time...followed up by retarding the subsequent notes of the phrase. This retard serves to bring us back again, at the phrase-climax, to unison with our Pulse."²¹ The most important thing when playing rubato is to have a good sense of the pulse, so when changing the pulse, one can return to it. The returning point is the climax of the phrase. Also, the reason for doing rubato is for the sake of making music more expressive.

In the second movement of *Five Sketches in Sepia*, Bloch writes "poco rubato" and "rubato" in measure 7 and 10 (Example 24).

Example 24 Bloch, *Five Sketches in Sepia*, II, "Fumees sur la Ville," mm.7–13.



In this case, I would tell students to follow the second type of the rubato. For the first phrase, I would tell them to push-on the time in measure 7 and then ritard the notes after the climax C sharp in measure 8. In the second phrase, the climax is D, therefore I would tell them to accelerate in measure 10 and 11, and then ritard after D. Before playing rubato, the first step is

²¹ Tobias Matthay. *Musical Interpretation: It's Laws and Principles, and their Application in Teaching and Performing*. (The Boston Music Company: Boston, 1913). 70–71.

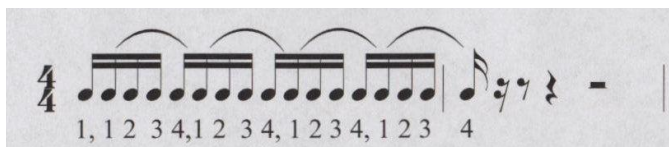
let students play in strict tempo. Then asking them to speed up and slow down while teacher is counting the pulse. Therefore, students can play rubato better while feeling the pulse.

5. Tabuteau Number System

Marcel Tabuteau (1887-1966) is an important American oboist. He was the principal oboist of the Philadelphia Orchestra from 1915 to 1954. As an oboist, he developed new sound of oboe: hybrid tone. He also developed a musical theory of note grouping which is about creating forward motion in music. This theory can be applied to all music. Tabuteau's idea about note grouping is appropriate to apply to these pieces by Bloch. By applying Tabuteau's note grouping ideas, students can produce more beautiful phrasing, and create a feeling of direction in music. Using numbers to define each note is a good way for students to understand and analyze music. The result also makes music sound expressive.

The principle of the Tabuteau number system is that the beginning note is the softest, so he uses the number "1" as the starting point in each group. The remaining notes can be viewed as the anacrusis into the next beat. For example, if there were sixteenth-notes in groups of four, he might apply the numbers as follows (Example 25.1):

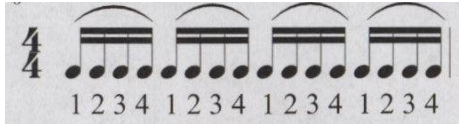
Example 25.1 Note Grouping I



This way, the second, third and fourth sixteenth-notes always lead you into a strong 1st beat and create forward motion. On the other hand, if we group the sixteenth notes as follows (Example 25.2), there is the lack of musical direction.²²

²² David McGill. *Sound in Motion: A Performer's Guide to Greater Musical Expression*. (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2007), 38–39.

Example 25.2 Note Grouping II



In *Poems of the Sea*, the Tabuteau number system can be applied in many places. For example, in the first movement, the numbers of the triplet pattern will be: 1, 1 2 3, 1 2 3, 1 2 3... (Example 26). The same thing can be applied in the triplet pattern of the last movement (Example 27). They both create a feeling of forward motion, and create a sense of the motions of waves.

Example 26 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, I, “Waves,” mm.1–3.



Example 27 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, III, “At Sea,” mm.35–44.



The Tabuteau number system is a good way for students to think about phrasing.

Example 28 shows the numbers as applied to the first phase of the “a” melody in the first movement. Notice, in measure 3, that the sixteenth note (D flat) is softer than C even though there is a crescendo marking in the score. There are three reasons why the D flat is a number “1” rather than “3”. First of all, the sound of the C is getting softer therefore the D flat should match the sound of the C. This makes the melody smoother and more lyrical. Secondly, most students have a tendency to do crescendo too soon, so the backtracking creates an inner intensity, and also prepares for the climax in measure 4. Thirdly, by playing the D flat at “1”, it is easier to create a forward motion in this phrase.

Example 28 Bloch, *Poems of the Sea*, I, “Waves,” mm.1–3.

The image shows a musical score for piano, measures 1 through 3 of the first movement of Bloch's *Poems of the Sea*, I, "Waves." The score is in 3/4 time and has a key signature of three flats (B-flat major/C minor). The tempo is marked "Poco agitato" with a metronome marking of "circa 112-120". The score is for piano, with dynamics ranging from *pp* to *p*. The right hand has fingerings: 1, 1 2, 1, 2, 1 2 3. The left hand has fingerings: 4 5, 4 3 2, 2, 3, 2. The score includes markings for *espressivo*, *dim.*, and *dolce*. The score is divided into two systems, with the first system covering measures 1-2 and the second system covering measures 3-4.

Through learning Bloch’s *Poems of the Sea*, *Nirvana*, and *Five Sketches in Sepia*, students are trained to build more technical skills such as the playing with rotation movements and the control in playing one melody in two hands. The most important thing is that these pieces provide good opportunity for students to create beautiful sounds and expressive musical phrases.

Conclusion

Poems of the Sea, Nirvana, and Five Sketches in Sepia show Bloch's various influences from Jewish music, medieval chant, German traditional music, and French impressionism. By studying these pieces, we can understand how he used and combined the different influences in his original way. He wrote tonal music with modal inflection, and also broke traditional harmony, using parallel intervals, chords, whole-tone and octatonic scales. His style of writing well portrays the moods and images suggested by the descriptive titles of these three works.

Poems of the Sea, Nirvana, and Five Sketches in Sepia are also good teaching pieces for students at the intermediate to advanced levels. Through their study of these pieces, they can build both technical and interpretative skills such as rotational movements, playing rubato, various sound qualities and good phrasing. Both Matthay and Tabuteau's ideas are helpful for building these skills. These skills ultimately allow for expressive playing. They also can be applied in playing other works. Therefore, these three works are important as both solo concert repertoire as well as pedagogical material.

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