

# twentieth-century analysis: essays in miniature

by lothar klein

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG: *Spiritual Journey (II)*. How did Arnold Schoenberg, the skeptic of *Pierrot Lunaire*, become an Old Testament prophet? To discuss Schoenberg's opera *Moses and Aron* in a brief essay may be as presumptuous as it is hazardous; never has a composer's musical life been more attuned to his spiritual progress. The task is simplified only if one remembers that music, for Schoenberg, was synonymous with religion. Lest it be thought this is not unusual, the vast difference between a composer living during an age of belief and a time of skepticism should be pointed out.

Psychology easily explains that beads and prayer books are the baubles of old age. Fortunately, this diagnosis neither explains Schoenberg nor how his Promethean *Moses and Aron* came into being. Despite his Jewish background, Schoenberg was raised an Austrian Catholic, but at eighteen, with characteristically fierce independence, he exchanged both family background and Catholic training for German Protestantism. If the young Schoenberg was sufficiently religiously concerned to experience conversion, this concern did not manifest itself in his early music. It is not surprising that his early dramatic works (*Erwartung*, 1909; *Pierrot Lunaire*, 1912; *Die Glueckliche Hand*, 1913) are deeply psychologically motivated in probing relationships between man and woman.

His early dramatic characters are

not, like Wagner's, concerned with or ruled by the gods; instead, they are committed to the ecstatic ideals of super-personal German Romanticism. While these works are nourished by a boiling musical imagination, their libretti dangerously border on lurid, psychiatric soap opera. Compared with the later, more metaphysically involved dramas, their Freudian haunted protagonists seem ends unto themselves, full of dark selfishness. The veiled mysticism permeating these works found fuller fruition in literary forms. Two narratives written in 1915 (*Totentanz der Prinzipien*, *Die Jakobsleiter*) are of a religious-philosophical nature. Inexplicably, neither work received full musical attention. It may well be that Schoenberg felt his musical language had not matured enough to distinguish between secular and sacred styles. Had he not yet discovered that personal, unique way of which every real composer dreams? Whatever the reason, during the years 1915-1922, his musical production ground to a halt. They turned out to be years of musical and personal ruminations and perhaps they also proved that in our age the first step towards belief is non-belief.

Schoenberg's method of composition, with twelve tones related only to one another, is the most influential concept of twentieth-century music. Chromaticism relates all tones, melodically and harmonically, through the switchboard of secondary dominants; re-

jecting the triad, dodecaphonic twelve-tone music coordinates a set series of tones in spheres of their own polyphonic interactions. After carefully studying early Netherlands masters and Beethoven's final quartets, Schoenberg believed he had discovered techniques of proven historical worth, permitting continuation of the German musical tradition. A composer's individual inspiration—still a combination of head and heart—was to provide this pitch series. A tone row and its inversions manipulated by polyphonic devices would provide enough working material for an entire composition. To prove his point, Schoenberg composed *Moses and Aron* using only one tone row. Criticized as cerebral and arbitrary because of its strong mathematical implications, this basic plan nevertheless restored organization to chromatically drenched music. Schoenberg maintained his idea was no better or worse than the composer embracing it.

No composer converted from Judaism, be it Mendelssohn, Mahler or Schoenberg, has ever been able to escape his emotional heritage. Baptismal water cannot cool temperament. As anti-Semitism began to poison Germany, Schoenberg, who resided in Berlin, must have become increasingly aware of the faith he had denied. By 1933, the composer's ancestry and music proved too much for the National Socialist state to bear. Reacting to the Ministry of Education's edict that "the Jewish influence at the

Academy of Art must be eliminated," Schoenberg left his teaching post. In Paris, he rededicated himself to the faith of his fathers. If this was an official, ceremoniously carried out return to Judaism, the 1930-1932 composition of *Moses and Aron* must have been an inner consecration.

No opera has a more difficult or lofty subject matter than *Moses and Aron*. Schoenberg agonizingly questions how the true man of God can outwardly express his inner knowledge of God "the inconceivable, invisible and inexpressible." Two highly dramatic acts pit Moses, the humble bearer of divine truth, against his dynamic brother Aron. Moses feels unworthy and incapable, Aron is the facile-tongued leader of men; yet God speaks through Moses, who entreats Aron to convey his divinely inspired message to the people. But Aron needs an image, for the people require visible proof of God. When he fails to return from Mount Sinai, the people believe Moses dead. In order not to lose them forever, Aron gives them the Golden Calf to worship with wild orgies. Moses, returned from Sinai with the Tablets of the Law, scornfully overturns the idol.

The brothers are deadlocked. Moses preaches God the Invisible, while Aron proclaims the people cannot believe in a God they cannot see. The Burning Bush, the Tablets, are they not images? Moses begins to doubt his mission. The people sight a fiery pillar, God's signal which will lead them by day and night. Moses protests the "Godless image." Now Aron exalts: "God sent signal, the Infinite thus shows not Himself but the way to Himself and the promised land." In despair Moses declares: "Then I have fashioned an image false as an image must be. All I believed was but madness and can and must not be given voice."

Here the opera breaks off. Text for another scene and a fragment of music exist, yet Schoenberg never composed a concluding act. Why? Perhaps no conclusion was possible without violating Moses' own admonition, "No image can depict the Unimaginable." Or perhaps Schoenberg felt that he, like Jacob, had still to wrestle with the Angel to claim his blessing. Thoughts of

a third act occupied the composer's mind for the remaining nine years of his life, and followed him from Paris to Los Angeles. On retiring from UCLA in 1945, the seventy-one-year-old composer applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship to permit completion of *Moses and Aron*. One wonders what would have materialized had his application been successful.

Schoenberg's own texts approach the strength and rough-cut simplicity of Luther's Old Testament translation. Music's dialectical powers

---

This article is the fourth in a series of "Essays in Miniature" featuring important musical compositions and developments of the twentieth century. The series will include analyses of works by Schoenberg, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Stockhausen, Cage, and others. The author is Assistant Professor of Theory-Composition, Department of Music, The University of Texas, Austin.

---

however, add additional dimensions. Since dialogue is crucial to drama, the opera becomes a three-way dialogue between God, Moses, and Aron. Compared with Schoenberg, all composers fail in the delicate business of portraying the Almighty.

Aron is a lyric tenor of beguiling fluency; Moses never sings, he only recites, groping for words. God's voice from the Burning Bush is summoned by six solo voices seated with the orchestra. This division of singing and speaking, solo and chorus, is of great importance; Schoenberg's technical master stroke assumes philosophical significance. When man sings, he becomes metaphysically expressive; when he speaks, man expresses a disciplined, intellectual separation from the spontaneous act of singing. As in primitive tribes, singing is primordial. Thus the brothers are placed in dialectical opposition; Moses, the ascetic intellectual, ponders spiritual ideas and their visible form: Aron, more physical, wishes to make God physical in visual and auditory terms. Moses is impaled by Aron's logic: "O shape of the Highest Imagination, to You we owe the urge to shape." This dialectical opposition is only unified in God, who both sings and speaks.

Moses feels impelled to be the mediator between God and man. In his inability to fathom divine reasoning and in his self-doubt, the great patriarch becomes one with modern dialogical man.

Since its 1957 staged premiere in Zurich—six years after Schoenberg's death and a quarter century after its composition—many critics have claimed the opera incomplete. If one thinks in terms of traditional climax opera, they are right. Personally, one finds the work quite complete, for we are certainly not dealing with a traditional opera. What is inevitably demanded on stage, the climatic appearance of God as final arbiter, is obviously impossible to represent. When words reach the point of inexpressible spirituality, music must take over the Divine presence. To be able to compose music capable of assuming such a function requires no small gift, and Schoenberg is uncannily thus gifted.

Arnold Schoenberg personified the Biblical spirit. Afflicted by ridicule and neglect, he became a Job. The composer has turned religious philosopher, offering the world a confession of faith. Like Kierkegaard's knight of faith who realizes that faith begins where thinking leaves off, Schoenberg wills his art for only one end, the continuous tension of faith. *Moses and Aron* is very difficult listening but beauty, in the aesthetic sense, is of little concern to a musically religious philosopher, as are Sunday sermons to the knight of faith. Schoenberg sought a superhuman synthesis of life and music, transcending art for art's sake. Schoenberg's music seems an exercise of mystical discipline in chaste dialogue with itself; the aesthetic becomes ethical. Unlike the tragic hero who equates the ethical with the universal, Schoenberg suspended the traditionally ethical for something higher (when Abraham agreed to sacrifice Isaac, he overstepped the universally ethical to prove his love for God). As the tragic hero is great because of moral virtue, the knight of faith is great by reason of personal virtue. *Moses and Aron* is the personal testimony with which Schoenberg dares the great leap into faith, defying the supreme metaphysical cowardice of our age. ■