What Gleams Must Be Good

Reading Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*

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Abstract

Arnold Schoenberg's opera, *Moses und Aron*, is widely lauded as his greatest achievement. The opera retells two major scenes from the Exodus traditions: Moses' call from the burning bush (Exodus 3–4) and the golden calf incident (Exodus 32). Through this operatic retelling, Schoenberg develops the relationship between brothers Moses and Aaron. The composer's version of the story heightens the differences between the brothers, both through the changes and additions he makes to the biblical story, and in the way he presents the brothers musically. This article therefore explores the characterisation of Moses and Aaron (Aron) in Schoenberg's opera with reference to its libretto and music.

Key Words

Moses; Aaron; Exodus; Arnold Schoenberg; *Moses und Aron*; opera; classical music

Introduction

This article examines Arnold Schoenberg's opera *Moses und Aron*, which he composed in the early decades of the twentieth century. Schoenberg provided his own libretto for the opera which is set in three acts, though only two were set to music in his lifetime. I examine the differences between the biblical traditions of Exodus 3–4 and 32 and their retelling by Schoenberg in this opera, focusing on matters of characterization. Specifically, I explore how Schoenberg's use of serialism and his musical presentation of Moses and Aaron serve to characterize the brothers in particular ways. When discussing the first act of the opera, I also consider Schoenberg's representation of YHWH in musical form, as this has a direct relationship with Moses' characterization in the opera.

Important to this discussion is the issue of what characterization means and represents. Characters exist within story worlds and texts, sometimes in just one text but sometimes across multiple texts. Each of these texts are subject to the imaginative responses of readers who create the characters in their mind (Margolin 2007). Moses and Aaron are brothers, and so readers construct these characters on the basis of their own understanding of that relationship. Moses is a significant leader, and so familiar traits of leadership are attached to the reader's imagination of Moses. These are also religious texts, and so readers' religious understanding and their attitude to scripture play a significant role in framing what they may or may not be willing to imagine in their construction of these characters.

In this opera, Moses and Aaron are recreated in a new text, one that is designed to be performed, made visible, and rendered audible. This new text takes the biblical Moses and Aaron of our imagination, puts them on stage, and surrounds them with music. This "new" Moses and Aaron are continuous with their biblical "originals" but also with the artworks that have depicted them for centuries, and, to more recent audiences, with the Moses and Aaron of cinema.[1] These "cultural afterlives" (Exum 1996) of Moses and Aaron also contribute to readers' understanding and imagining of their biblical characterization. Any approach to Schoenberg's work is therefore one that is already marked by significant intertextuality and character development across multiple media forms. So, while Moses and Aron may be new characters for the first-time viewer or listener of Schoenberg's opera, they are also entirely *not* new.

Arnold Schoenberg and Serialism

The significance of Arnold Schoenberg in the context of twentieth-century music cannot be overstated. Even those who dislike his music are likely to say that his system, which came to be known as serialism, has exercised a profound influence on the development of music from the early decades of the twentieth century and up to the present day. In Schoenberg's system, all twelve notes of the chromatic scale hold equal weight. They are arranged in a sequence called a "row," and the use of the notes corresponds with the arrangement of the row. However, the row comes with a set of variants: it can be used in retrograde, in which the twelve pitches are reversed; in inversion, whereby the relationships between successive notes are inverted (that is, if in the original row a B is followed by a C, a rising semi-tone, in inversion the B would be followed by a B flat, that is, a descending semi-tone); and in retrograde-inversion, which combines the two previous variants. The tone row can also be transposed while maintaining the intervallic relationships between notes. That is, the whole row can be raised a semi-tone higher, so that the row can begin on any of the twelve different chromatic pitches, so long as the intervals throughout the row remain the same. A single row thus presents an extraordinary matrix of opportunity for the composer (Kennedy and Bourne 2012).

Schoenberg's music marked a decisive break with the concept of tonality which had defined Western music since the Renaissance. This earlier tonal system was crystalized in the music of Bach, and was foundational to the formal structures of the classical period as exemplified by Haydn and Mozart. Yet, in their hands, and subsequently those of Beethoven, the traditional laws of tonality, or key, began to be challenged as they pushed beyond their received parameters. Through the late-nineteenth century, the use of classical tonality continued to unravel as composers such as Brahms and Wagner found different ways to explore the relationships between keys and harmonic movement.

In the work of Schoenberg, this unravelling meets its most startling response. Schoenberg created a new system, which he boldly claimed would ensure the supremacy of the German music tradition for a least a century (Rosen 1996, 71). This new system displaced the dominance of a tonic triad (the chord formed by the

[1] See, for example, Charlton Heston's Moses in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and more recently, Christian Bale in *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014).

first, third, and fifth notes of the scale in the key of the composition),[2] which held particular relationships to other triads. In tonal music, each note of the melody has harmonic implications: the melody itself is governed by the harmonic and rhythmic world from which it derives (Rosen 1996, 25). In Schoenberg's hand, this order is fully dismantled, or to borrow Wagner's expression, music outgrows its baby shoes (see Adorno 2002, 559). A tone row is in no sense a melody. Rather, it is pre-melodic and furnishes the stuff of melody (Rosen 1996, 78). That is, the tone row provides the material to create melody not just by the simple progression to the subsequent note in the row, but by creating the melody in a way that is then supported by the other notes of the row. For Schoenberg, the creation of melodies from the matrix of opportunity presented by the tone row is primary, a creation freed from the harmonic strictures of previous centuries. Schoenberg hoped that, in time, his own melodies would be heard, sung, and whistled by music lovers, in the same way that people knew the tunes of Puccini (Jones 2017).[3]

Tellingly, Schoenberg, a noted teacher, did not enforce his system on his students, going so far as refusing to teach it to them (MacDonald 2008, 97). Some, most notably Alban Berg and Anton Webern, followed in his steps, but as MacDonald notes, in his vocation as a teacher, Schoenberg was primarily concerned with his students finding their own musical vocabulary, having little interest in "how" they composed (2008, 67). He also did not develop a theory of twelve-tone music in his numerous writings (61).[4] Indeed, Schoenberg tried to conceal his method from the public, rarely giving lectures on it, and even then, only speaking of its application within particular works.

Schoenberg and Vienna

An Austrian Jew, Schoenberg's life was marked by the anti-Semitic sentiments which were a significant part of European life in the early twentieth century. Like Gustav Mahler before him, Schoenberg found that a conversion to Christianity (Catholicism for Mahler, Lutheranism for Schoenberg) did little to ease the difficulties of the time. Malcolm MacDonald suggests that Schoenberg's conversion in 1898 was perhaps an act of self-defence in the face of resurgent anti-Semitic sentiment in Vienna, and Europe more broadly, at this time (2008; also Cross and Berman 2013). But while his religious commitments may have changed, his Jewish identity remained, and like many who experience similar prejudice, it ultimately served as a catalyst for a return to the religion of his upbringing. While "resolution" is a musical idea ultimately uprooted by serialism, Schoenberg's music demonstrates a struggle for some kind of ultimate resolution that may be religious in some sense, capturing a sort of unity with God (MacDonald 2008, 292). That is, for Schoenberg, music was a form of searching for truth, and was thus intimately linked to matters of religion and spirituality.

Vienna holds a significant place in the history of Western music. In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, it was the home of the First Viennese School, the name commonly used to refer to Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven, great

[2] Harmonic resolution drives towards a return to this triad.
[3] Later in his life, Schoenberg commented that he wanted nothing more than to be known as a "better sort of Tchaikovsky" (cited in Ross 2002).
[4] Schoenberg was a prolific writer about music, art, and theory. For a collection of his written works in English, see Schoenberg (1984).

masters of the classical period. As the artistic home of these towering figures, Vienna developed into a staunchly conservative city, often violently resistant to musical work which challenged accepted norms. As Schoenberg's home, it was therefore not a place where he was always well received or understood. Schoenberg became accustomed to the rejection of his works, particularly in Vienna (Rosen 1996, 3), but also elsewhere. During the 1930s, he was anxious about arranging a concert of his music whilst on vacation in Barcelona, noting that he had made friends there and was worried he would lose them when they heard his "terrible music" (Rosen 1996, ix).

As Rosen notes, minor riots were a ritual element in the concert life of Vienna, particularly at premieres (1996, 4). This early period culminated in the great success of Schoenberg's cantata *Gurrelieder* (1900–1901, though not premiered until 1913), a gigantic work scored for six soloists, four choirs, and an orchestra of 150 members, which in terms of scale sits alongside works by his contemporaries, Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss. But the success of *Gurrelieder* was not easily won. Indeed, Schoenberg had moved back to Berlin in 1911 following the successful performances there of his symphonic tone poem *Pelleas und Melisande* (1902–1903, premiered in 1907), and perhaps more significantly, after the death of Mahler in May 1911.

Despite a relationship that was a times tense, Mahler was one of Schoenberg's great protectors. Arriving as the musical director of the Vienna State Opera, Mahler understood the genius of the nascent composer and assisted him in numerous ways, both professionally and personally. Knowing that Schoenberg's music was destined to be largely misunderstood, Mahler did what he could to support him and his family. In 1911, four years after his own departure from Vienna, Mahler was instrumental in Schoenberg securing a minor position at the Vienna Royal Academy of Music, an appointment which sparked a major debate in the national parliament (MacDonald 2008, 102). It was this controversy, as well as the lack of adequate work and the death of Mahler in May of that year, that ultimately drove Schoenberg away from his home city of Vienna and back to the more hospitable surrounds of Berlin. He only returned to Vienna as World War I came to its end.

Schoenberg's return to Vienna was difficult in the wake of the war. He worked long days with his students, but lacked the stability of full-time employment. During this period, his wife Mathilde passed away, and he promptly wed a much younger woman, damaging relationships with family and close friends who were dismayed by his speedy remarriage. In 1926, he accepted an offer to return to Berlin, replacing Busoni at the prestigious Prussian Academy of Arts, an indication of the high regard with which he was held in that city. His stay there was perhaps the happiest period of his life (MacDonald 2008, 64), the position providing a measure of stability, as well as opportunities for travel around Europe in order to perform his works. His prestigious appointment facilitated a growing international reputation, and his fierce intellect and good humour allowed him to develop positive relations in Berlin, where he became well known for his radio broadcasts. As Duault (2015) notes, it is little wonder, then, that given this level of stability, he was able to produce during this period a piece of such magnitude and audacity as the opera *Moses und Aron*.

Moses und Aron: From Biblical Text to (Un)Biblical Opera

Schoenberg wrote the libretto for *Moses und Aron* in 1926 and composed the score between 1930 and 1932. The work began as a cantata, but developed quickly into an opera, though Schoenberg recognized how unlikely it would be for his creation to ever reach the stage, given the production demands are extreme, even in operatic terms.[5] The drama is presented in three acts, though only two were set to music before the composer's death. The first act is inspired by the burning bush episode in Exodus 3–4, while the second leaps forward to the apostasy of the golden calf in Exodus 32. The third act, for which Schoenberg never completed the music, is entirely fictional, and shows Moses presiding over the trial of Aron, who is accused of fostering false hopes and ideas about God among the people of Israel. At the end of the trial, Aron is found guilty, and although he is spared the death penalty, he immediately falls dead. The opera ends with Moses averring that the people can achieve their true goal—unity with God—even if they are still in the wilderness.

In terms of the opera's title, the unusual spelling of Aaron's name has two related explanations. The first is related to Schoenberg's superstitious nature, in particular, his acute form of triskaidekaphobia (fear of the number thirteen). Noting that *Moses und Aaron* had thirteen letters, he removed the second "a" from Aaron's name (Leneman 2014, 58). Secondly, this then left the opera title with twelve letters, which also corresponds to the twelve-tone serial system that brings it to life.

Act 1, Scene 1

The first act of *Moses und Aron* is set in four scenes. The first retells the events of Exodus 3 with a remarkable rendition of Moses' call to leadership at the burning bush. In Exodus 3, YHWH initiates dialogue with Moses, calling to him from the bush (Exod. 3:4). In Schoenberg's libretto, however, this event is completely overturned. While in the biblical account, Moses turns aside to consider the bush and hears his name called, Schoenberg has Moses see the burning bush and immediately recognize the source of this mysterious event: "Only one, infinite, thou omnipresent one, unperceived and inconceivable[6] God." This is a programmatic statement for Moses, a concept to which he adheres for the length of the opera (Gyger 2007, 427), demonstrating his understanding of God that includes these apophatic qualities.[7]

Throughout the opera, Moses' inability to communicate about the imperceptible, inconceivable deity will be set against Aron, who speaks of God in a fashion that is embraced by the people, but resented by Moses. Yet, as Cherlin (2007, 237) notes, God, YHWH, or any other traditional way of naming the divine is absent from Schoenberg's *dramatis personae* for this opera. Instead, the composer lists among the characters a "voice from the thornbush," which fills the role taken by God in the biblical account, conversing with Moses at the burning bush. This character speaks not with a single voice, but comprises a choir of six singers and a chorus of speaking voices (including children), as well as a doubling of the sung parts by instruments in the orchestra. Moreover, the singers are situated in the

[5] Even ahead of the 1990 New York premiere, there were questions as to whether the nudity required of the libretto would threaten the production. See Allan (1990).
[6] All quotations from the libretto are taken from Schoenberg (1957).
[7] Duault translates unvorstellbarer as "unimaginable."

orchestral pit, so that the range of human voices which make up the "voice from the thornbush" appear to come from different directions. Together, the voices are carefully crafted so that their balance shifts, but they never threaten to separate, and the listener is constantly left in a state of flux. Gyger (2007, 427) suggests that the elusiveness of the sound is analogous with both the flickering flames of the bush and the elusiveness of the divine idea. The one-ness of God and the inconceivability of God is thus manifest in this perfectly balanced, ever shifting aural experience. God is one, just as Moses has declared, and yet the one-ness, the unity, is a composite of ever-changing realities. This elusive sound is heard before Moses' first utterance, though there are no words, simply the sound of human voices blended with the orchestral forces. The theological claim is significant, even if it is not immediately evident to the hearer: God is (omni)present, though unperceived, inconceivable, and unable to be understood. When the voices initially sing non-verbally, the presence of God is an unknown reality. With the eventual shift from sound to words, what was once unknown becomes known.

YHWH's response to Moses in this scene resembles Exod. 3:5, with the deity instructing him to remove his shoes and affirming the holiness of the ground. Schoenberg immediately adds an imperative to highlight what is happening here: "Be God's Prophet!" Immediately, the biblical text is reversed again as Moses gives YHWH's character reference—"God of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"—and signals his inability to act as prophet on account of his age. In Exod. 3:6, it is YHWH who gives this genealogy to Moses as a way of establishing connection. The reversal of the biblical text continues in this scene, as YHWH tells Moses, "You have seen your kindred enslaved," and places the responsibility of freeing them in Moses' hands. This contrasts with Exod. 3:7, where YHWH asserts that *he* is coming down to free "my people" on account of hearing their cries. In Schoenberg's interpretation, it is Moses who must "set [his] folk free." Moses then complains to YHWH about his slowness of tongue, echoing his words in Exod. 4:10.[8] "Thought is easy," Schoenberg has him say, "but speech is laborious."

Moses' first utterance, "Only One, infinite, thou omnipresent one, unperceived and inconceivable God," the philosophical idea that haunts him throughout this opera, provides a sharp contrast with the lush texture of the "voice from the thornbush" that preceded it. In a world filled with music, Schoenberg marks Moses' status as an outsider by creating a character that does not sing.[9] Instead, Moses' role is performed utilizing a technique called Sprechstimme, which is a cross between singing and speech. The pitch is inflected, following a melodic contour, without being precise.[10] This is, of course, particularly vital in a piece like *Moses und Aron* because of the ubiquitous use of the tone row. As I have noted, the whole system of composition in this opera is guided by the possibilities afforded by

[8] "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Exod. 4:11, NRSV).

[9] The fact that Moses recognizes the presence of YHWH, in a fashion that is withheld from the hearer, also functions to create a Moses who is remote from us. That is, Moses' intuitive connection with God serves to differentiate him from the listeners, as it will also differentiate him from the other characters in the story.

[10] Schoenberg is the figure most responsible for the utilization of Sprechstimme in western music. His most famous use of the technique is in *Pierrot Lunaire*, though he also used it in the monumental *Gurrelieder*.

the tone row; by having Moses' Sprechstimme operate outside this carefully crafted system, Schoenberg highlights the prophet's position and role as an outsider. There is, however, nothing haphazard about Schoenberg's notation of Moses' role. The inflection of his voice is provided by Schoenberg, the "pitch" being deliberately imprecise, though a precise rhythmic notation is provided. Attention to detail is a hallmark of Schoenberg's work, and in *Moses und Aron* we have an emblematic example (Cherlin 2007, 298). Moses, then, is doubly estranged: by the nature of his intuitive knowledge of the divine, and by his "musical" marking as an outsider.

A further feature of Schoenberg's work is the absence of talk about the promised land in this initial encounter between God and Moses. This land is evoked prominently in Exod. 3:17 but is overlooked by Schoenberg in his libretto. In the biblical account, God declares an intent to take the people from Egypt and bring them into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, the land "flowing with milk and honey" (v.17). In *Moses und Aron*, this gives way to a declaration that Moses' folk are the chosen ones, and that through their hardships, they will become a model to every nation. The idea of Israel's election and the theological implications of that election are significant themes in the Old Testament (Kaminsky 2006). Whereas in the Exodus account God speaks only of the benefit to Israel, Schoenberg puts a focus on the more universal benefit of election to the nations, an idea present in Abraham's story (Gen 12:1-3) and more fully developed in Second and Third Isaiah.[11] The composer's emphasis on the universal nature of Israel's mission may reflect the political circumstances of the time. As a Jew living in early twentieth-century Europe, he would have been aware of the dangers of promoting nationalist and racial ideologies. Later in the opera, this universal picture is undermined by a patriotic song vocalized by the Hebrew people. But for now, the present scene ends with YHWH's command to Moses to go greet Aron and inform him what is to occur.

Act 1, Scene 2

The second scene commences as Moses meets Aron in the wilderness. In the Exodus account (Exod. 4:27), this meeting comes after Moses returns to his father-in-law to ask if he may return to Egypt. He gathers his family, and on the journey to Egypt, there is a terrifying scene where Moses' life is saved by Zipporah in the face of a divine attempt on his life (Exod. 4:24-26). So, although Zipporah and her sons are not mentioned in the biblical account of Moses' and Aaron's wilderness meeting, the narrative context suggests they are present. Schoenberg, however, does not include them in this scene.

The Exodus account of the meeting between Moses and Aaron simply has Moses relaying to his brother what YHWH has said to him (Exod. 4:28), yet Schoenberg develops this conversation quite significantly. The scene clearly demonstrates the philosophical gap that divides Moses and Aron. While Moses is insistent that the almighty God eludes human imagination and physical image, Aron asks "Can you worship what you dare not even conceive?" Aron's assertions about God's character in this scene will be familiar to readers of the Bible: "You punish sins of the father on his children and children's children" (Exod. 34:7); "You reward those who are faithful to your commandments" (1 Sam. 26:23); "You

[11] See, for example, Isa. 42:6; 49:6; 60:3.

perceive the pleas of the beggars" (Ps. 102:17). These declarations by Aron are interspersed throughout his conversation with Moses, who in turn deconstructs them, repeatedly challenging his brother's overly simplistic understandings of God. Indeed, Moses is exasperated to the point of saying to Aron, "Purify your thinking. Free it from worthless things." Moses' words indicate that their engagement here is not so much a dialogue as a talking at cross-purposes. At the scene's end, Aron prays for the deliverance of the Hebrews from Pharaoh, while Moses retorts, "Law of thought, irresistible forces fulfilment." While Aron resorts to prayer, Moses' mind thus turns to the law of logic, and his belief that the inconceivable one will simply do what it wills.

This philosophical distinction between the brothers is also given expression through the contrast in musical style of their communication. Against the lush texture of YHWH's voice and the stilting, unnatural, un-singing voice of Moses, stands Aron, a coloratura[12] tenor who soars where Moses stammers. The distinction between the brothers is sharper here than in the biblical account, and Schoenberg's musical decisions aid this differentiation. Aron's first appearance is met with a dance-like theme from the flute and strings which is juxtaposed against the eerie stillness of YHWH's presence and Moses' lack of song (MacDonald 2008, 285). After Moses' initial claims to inarticulacy in Exod. 4:10 and 6:30, the biblical text makes little mention of his inability to communicate. Indeed, reading on through Exodus and further into the Pentateuch, it appears that he overcomes his handicap and manages to say a lot of things, even while Aaron is present.[13] This difference in capacity to communicate becomes the cornerstone of Schoenberg's interpretation of the story (Gyger 2007, 429). While in the biblical account Moses overcomes his self-diagnosed speaking difficulty and becomes a powerful communicator to both Pharaoh and the Hebrew people, in *Moses und Aron*, Moses' communication retains its impotence.

Act 1, Scene 3

In the third scene, which has no biblical basis, the people of Israel speak amongst themselves about Aron, Moses, and the possibility of a new god. Before Moses and Aron even arrive, Schoenberg hints that Aron has already won the hearts of the people. A young girl and man speak about Aron, the girl saying that Aron appears as a hot flame, while the man suggests that Aron's movement is more akin to floating than walking. The mention of Moses' name creates anxiety, with the people noting that their affliction at the hand of Pharaoh was only worsened by Moses' actions. But amidst this conversation, it is clear that there is a thirst for a new god, a god stronger than those of the past who have not been able to usurp the power of Pharaoh, and a god that might be more reflective of Aron. A priest tries to control the rising passion of the crowd, though the young girl and man quickly fantasize about their changing fortunes with the new and as yet unknown god. This god swells hearts with joy and sits higher than all other gods. Another man declares that if this new god shields the people from Pharaoh, the people will serve him. The people respond even more fervently: "We give him obedience! We want to make offerings!

[12] "Coloratura" derives from the Italian word for "colour." When applied to singers, it indicates the ability to sing ornate, elaborate melodies. Aron, the florid singer, thus forms a remarkable contrast with the unsinging Moses.
[13] See, for example, Exod. 8:9-10; 9:29; 10:9, 25; 11:4, where Moses repeatedly speaks to Pharaoh.

We want to give worship!" The scene ends with the appearance in the distance of Moses and Aron, who move slowly together as the people strain to behold them.

Schoenberg thus hints here at an inherent desire within the Hebrew people to turn to their god, who remains as yet unknown. They want to believe, they want to worship. And yet the image of Moses and Aron in the distance also hints at the problems that will soon develop. All too soon, the absence of Moses will lead to a terrible series of events.

Act 1, Scene 4

The fourth scene is inspired by the events mentioned in Exod. 4:29-31, though the biblical narrative is far more succinct than their presentation by Schoenberg. The Exodus account merely mentions that Moses and Aaron gather the elders, speak to them, and perform signs, leading to the people believing and worshipping God. In *Moses und Aron*, the scene opens with the people asking for information. Moses responds with a statement that echoes his utterance at the beginning of the opera: "The only one, infinite, all-powerful one, the omnipresent one, invisible, inconceivable." Moses' philosophical statements are immediately contrasted by Aron's more personal rhetoric: "[God] has chosen this folk before all other people." As they exchange ideas, Aron moves to the foreground while Moses retreats into the background. The people respond with incredulity. Who are they to worship? Where is this one? Point him out! Where is he? Moses is silent as Aron attempts to move the crowd, but their doubts rush upon them quickly. On hearing them tell Aron to get away, Moses laments that his thoughts are powerless as Aron attempts to speak to them. Frustrated, Aron grabs Moses' rod and turns it into a serpent. The people marvel at the power of this demonstration, and as Aron places the rod back into Moses' hand, the people discuss these matters amongst themselves, concluding that the god demonstrated by this marvel is a powerful god indeed. They again sing their desire to make offerings to this new god, but are interrupted again by the priest, who notes that the rod has done nothing to change the power wielded by Pharaoh. At this, Aron asks Moses to show his hand, which moves from normal, to leprous, to normal again. The people are moved once more. The wonders they have seen are visible manifestations of a real god, so that it can be imagined. They sing of the destruction of their taskmasters, the purging of their clergy, and the demolition of idols.

Schoenberg has made Aron the focus of these miraculous signs, and yet in the biblical text they are revealed to Moses, and it is Moses who is commanded to use them to demonstrate YHWH's siding with the people (Exod. 4:1-9, 17). While the Hebrew text allows the possibility of Aron being involved, given the ambiguity of subject alignment in Hebrew verbs, it seems most plausible given the earlier context that it is Moses who performs the signs. But for Schoenberg, Moses is a man of ideas and Aron is the performer, and so it is Aron who is responsible for these miracles.

Throughout the scene, Moses' inability to communicate clearly is again juxtaposed against the character of Aron, who performs wondrous signs and speaks to the crowd in a way that they are able to understand. He talks to them of their chosen-ness, freedom from toil and misery, and introduces the notion of the promised land. Amazed by the demonstrations of divine power, and persuaded by

Aron's rhetorical flourish, the people commit themselves to Moses and Aron, and make ready to depart from Egypt.

Moses' words fail to convince them because there is nothing to see. His speech fails to excite the peoples' imagination and they mock him on account of it and claim no interest in his invisible god. At this point, Aron intercedes and performs the miracles, singing to the people of freedom and the overthrow of Pharaoh through Moses' leadership. Almost immediately, the people respond to Aron, and declare their readiness to offer sacrifices, kill their taskmasters, and destroy the idols of Egypt. Aron's demonstrations of divine power are enough to sway them. Throughout this scene, the halting, stuttering voice of Moses is silent. The people march away singing a song of disturbingly fervent nationalism (MacDonald 2008, 282), proclaiming themselves as the chosen people of God, eagerly anticipating the smiting of Pharaoh and his servants.[14] In Schoenberg's hand, Moses' power of communication is permanently stunted, impacting on all his relationships. He may be able to speak, but his words have no effect. By Lewin's reckoning, (1967, 2) this (in)ability to communicate is definitive of the dramatic relationships present in the opera. Moses is unable to converse effectively with the people, and as such, they do not love him, and neither does he love them. Aron, conversely, loves and is loved by the people, precisely because of his capacity to communicate with them through singing. In fact, it is because of his love for the people that things eventually go awry.

Interlude

An interlude joins the two acts of *Moses und Aron*. In it, the chorus, representing the Hebrews, whisper amongst themselves. "Where is Moses?" they ask, in a manner that recalls their doubts when presented with the idea of an invisible god. This question moves us forward to Exodus 32 and the episode of the golden calf which begins when Moses is delayed on the mountain (Exod. 32:1).

There is a further divergence from the biblical account here. In Exodus 32, the motivation to approach Aaron is predicated on the length of Moses' absence. The people know Moses ascended the mountain, so their question is not related to the whereabouts of Moses, but rather a lack of knowledge about what has become of him during his absence (Exod. 32:1). However, in Schoenberg's retelling, the question is "where?" suggesting Moses' present location had not been communicated to them. Similar to the biblical account, the question and actions of the people highlight the relational distance that exists between them and Moses.

Act 2, Scene 1

The second act begins with a discussion between Aron, the elders, and the priest. The elders relay their anxiety and speak of rising tensions amongst the people in Moses' absence. As they confront Aron about Moses' prolonged time away, it is clear that the nationalistic fervour evident in the hymn that closed the first act has abated. Their absent leader and the invisible god are too much for the people to bear, and so they long for a return to their former gods and a purge of the priesthood; they even threaten Aron's life. Anarchy has begun to reign in the absence of law and command, a precursor to what will follow shortly. The biblical text says nothing of

[14] The earlier universalism has given way to a far more ominous tone.

any concerns about the breakdown of social relations amongst the people, and by turning to Aron for intervention, they reveal their trust in his ability to quell their concerns. While Aron appears to play this role well, events change quickly, and his actions unleash a sequence of events which go beyond the anarchy feared by the elders.

Act 2, Scene 2

The second scene begins with the appearance of an angry mob, threatening to tear Moses to pieces. They surround Aron and the elders, who implore Aron to do something. In the face of this hostile crowd, Aron responds to the peoples' demands to return their gods to them, calling for them to give him their gold, akin to Aaron in Exod. 32:2. In the biblical account, Aaron makes the calf and presents it to the people, saying "These are your gods, O Israel" (Exod. 32:4), followed by the construction of an altar and the proclamation of a festival unto YHWH. That is, Aaron attempts to salvage the situation by insisting that the image created is intended to remind the people of YHWH. Such ideas are absent in Schoenberg's opera. Instead, Aron speaks of "gods imagined in our image," and implores Israel to joyfulness in the presence of this image. While the biblical Aaron declares a feast to YHWH, linking the calf to their liberation from Egypt (Exod. 32:4), Schoenberg's Aron speaks of "return[ing] your gods to you." This is seemingly a repudiation of the "new" god, that is, the god of Moses, who had been so positively imagined earlier. Aron's trust in the image, and his ability to respond to the perceived needs of the people, cut a strong distinction between himself and Moses, the man of abstract idea.

The biblical account of this scene has less angst than Schoenberg's retelling. The people claim to be unaware of what has happened to Moses (Exod. 32:1), but there is none of the violent intent which characterizes Schoenberg's version. Missing from the *Moses und Aron* libretto is the exchange between YHWH and Moses, in which Moses persuades YHWH not to destroy the people on account of their apostasy (Exod. 32:11-14). Missing too is the scene between Joshua and Moses that hints at the Hebrew people's excesses—what Moses refers to as the sound of revellers in Exod. 32:18.[15] Nonetheless, that revelry forms the basis of the next scene.

Act 2, Scene 3

Scene three presents Schoenberg's imagination of the golden calf incident, a drama which pushes the edges of possibility. The scene is made up of a series of wild scenes: the dance of the butchers, drunkenness and further dancing, destruction, suicide, and finally, an erotic orgy. Schoenberg wondered if the excesses called for (nudity, rape, sacrificial suicides, and all manner of other vices) would prevent the work from being staged; certainly, in his lifetime, it wasn't.[16] These excesses, in Schoenberg's imagination, are the debaucheries Moses heard from the mountain. The composer makes them the centrepiece of his drama, as the people give themselves over to all manner of vice and violence.

[15] In a similar vein, Hamilton suggests "the sound of debauchery" (2011, 541-42).
[16] The music of the "Dances of the Golden Calf" was performed in his lifetime in concert from, which is to say the music is performed without any staged element. It continues to be a staple in major orchestral repertoire.

In the face of the threats against his life, Aron produces a golden calf, to the immediate joy of the people. In this sense, Schoenberg follows the biblical script closely. What is hinted at in the biblical text[17] is brought to life by Schoenberg in an extraordinary demonstration of operatic and orgiastic excess. The dancing quickly gives way to revelry. Animals are slaughtered by enlivened butchers. Actors eat raw meat, while pieces are thrown into the crowd. Sacrifices are prepared, old men perform acts of sacrificial suicide, a young man offers himself for slaughter. Four naked virgins appear, compelled by the light of the golden calf. "What gleams must be good," one cries out, before they are seized by priests and knifed in the heart, their blood poured out upon the altar. People run through the fire, vessels are broken, and sacrifices and suicides continue throughout the crowd, until a young man takes a young woman, strips her naked, and carries her to the altar, an example which is then followed by many other men as they exclaim, "Holy is fertility! Holy is desire!"

This last orgy brings the sequence to an end, and the frenzied music subsides. For nearly thirty minutes, the stage has been filled with all manner of debauchery, accompanied by music which is of rare ferocity and power (MacDonald 2008, 286). Here, more than in any other place, the creative genius of Schoenberg is in full bloom, the triumph of his ideal (Rosen 1996, 94). The twelve-tone technique demonstrates its ability to be utilized in a work of major scope and ambition: propelled by fanfares and crude march-like figures (short musical phrases), the music appears to transcend the system developed to bring it to life. The increased drunkenness is imagined in a "befogged" waltz, which gives way to frenzied rhythms that accompany the violent acts on stage (MacDonald 2008, 286). The dances were, in Schoenberg's mind, the most truly "operatic" scene in the piece, and represent the stretching of his mind and creative capacities (Duault 2015).

This scene begins with Aron's presentation of the golden calf, at which point he disappears from the action, overwhelmed by the series of orgies which follow. His final words before his exit are, "Revere yourselves in this gold symbol!" What follows is hardly an act of reverence to themselves, or to God. Instead, it seems like a giving over to human vice and a rejection of Aron's authority. Aron's ability to communicate, and his provision of the golden calf ultimately prove to be ineffective in allowing him to understand the people.

Act 2, Scene 4

Moses' reappearance at the beginning of scene four is flavoured by an anger we are familiar with from the biblical account. In Exod. 32:20, Moses burns the calf, grinds its ashes, and mixes them with water that the people are then forced to drink. Schoenberg, in contrast, shows Moses destroying the calf with a mere utterance: "Be gone you image of powerlessness to enclose the boundless in an Image finite!" This departure from the biblical text is significant. In Exodus, the work of Moses' hands brings about the demise of the calf, firstly as he burns it, and then grinds it down. In *Moses und Aron*, it is the thing that has previously proved ineffective with the Hebrews—Moses' words—that destroys the calf. This is far more dramatic and instantaneous than the biblical account and evokes much grief among the Hebrews,

[17] "It is not the sound made by victors, or the sound made by losers, it is the sound of revelers I hear" (Exod. 32:18).

who claim that with the calf's absence, every joy, pleasure, and hope are likewise gone. At that point, the stage is left empty but for Moses and Aron. It seems that Moses has usurped Aron at this point, as his words have, at last, begun to have effect.

Act 2, Scene 5

Scene five is based on the encounter between Moses and Aaron in Exod. 32:21-24, where Moses confronts Aaron about what has happened in his absence. Aaron speaks of the people being bent on evil, trying to justify his behaviour in the face of Moses' hostility. The biblical scene is expanded on considerably in Schoenberg's work and offers a full realization of the philosophical distance between Moses and Aron concerning the nature of God's essence. Aron claims that his production of an image is borne out of his love for the people, and a desire for them to understand just a fraction of what they are being asked. Moses on the other hand refuses to compromise; his love is only for his idea of God, and any image is an oversimplification of this idea. Aron points out that the stone tablets are themselves an image, a part of the whole idea, and so Moses responds by smashing them. The exchange ends with Aron chiding Moses for his faint-heartedness (MacDonald 2008, 282). Suddenly, a pillar of fire appears, and the people follow, seemingly seduced by another image. Their words recall the earlier hymn, and in it they reiterate their commitment to following the god that will lead them to the promised land. Moses sinks to his knees, lamenting his defeat as the people and Aron exit in the background.

Schoenberg's depiction of this scene between Moses and Aron is notable in the way that it switches the power differential evident in the biblical account (Exod. 32:21-24), where Moses appears as the victor. In the biblical text, following Aaron's dishonest reporting of the golden calf incident, Moses commissions the execution of three thousand people, and then intercedes (unsuccessfully) on behalf of the people in order to stay further divine punishment. Throughout the operatic exchange, Moses' words are unsupported by the orchestra, and he speaks almost into silence. Aron, on the other hand, is supported by the sonority of the orchestra, as if they are fully on his side (Gyger 2007, 420). The scene ends with Moses slumped in defeat, saying, "O word, word that I lack." Against his defeated utterance, the violins play an ascending melody of extraordinary beauty, one of Schoenberg's finest creations, a tune which seems to hold all, and more, of what Moses has been unable to say (MacDonald 2008, 282). This melody is the clearest presentation of the tone-row, the clearest presentation of Schoenberg's "Idea." The melody, unsupported by any harmonic material, reveals in its purest form the very material upon which the entire opera has been built. As such, it represents the essence of what Moses has been attempting to communicate to Aron and the Hebrew people. And yet it is at this point, when Moses is entirely on his own at the point of defeat, that it most clearly emerges.

Conclusion

The differences in characterization between the biblical Moses and Aaron find musical expression in Schoenberg's opera. Moses, a man of law, is presented using an abstract, austere form of music that is absent of any melody and often with little if any meaningful accompaniment. His isolated social position is likewise mirrored

by Schoenberg's musical representation. Aron, conversely, is presented as a showman, fast of tongue and quick of wit, who is accompanied by music of great imagistic imagination (Prieto 2012, 126). From his first appearance, he is characterized by a far richer texture than that afforded to Moses, with the orchestra seemingly taking great delight in his presence. Much has been made of this differentiation, and scholars are quick to suggest that a great deal of Schoenberg's own self-perception is invested in his characterization of Moses (Leneman 2014). There are reasons to see this, given the representation of Moses as an isolated, misunderstood prophet. But there is also much of Aron in Schoenberg. The composer imagined himself following the steps of the German masters. He was supremely confident in his achievements, evidenced in his belief that his system would ensure the supremacy of the German tradition. Perhaps the rollicking excesses of act two are a type of thumbing of the nose to the establishment, a form of satire, mocking the entire façade of what he saw as an empty style of music. In this estimation, the Hebrew people, led by Aron, become those who are distracted by things that are shiny and new: all that gleams must be good. But those things are a distraction from what is true, real, of ultimate meaning, the essence of the Idea. But such a view, I think, resists the truth of Schoenberg's own religious heritage. Would he, in the historical circumstances of his time and in light of the prejudicial treatment he bore, respond in such a fashion? And if Schoenberg imagines himself as Moses, why are the greatest achievements of the musical system given to the anti-hero, Aron? Rather, we have a work of profound searching, of true genius, in which Schoenberg is invested as much as any artist could be.

Through the characterization of the two main protagonists, and the earlier representation of the divine, Schoenberg beckons us into his own searching, inviting us to reconsider the programmatic claim: one, infinite, thou omnipresent one, unperceived and inconceivable God. For Moses, this remains an unspoken, unspeakable mystery. For Aron, the idea of God finds expression in symbols. The opera explores this dichotomy, and ultimately sides with Moses. While this is not so evident in the two-act opera, Schoenberg demonstrates Moses' eventual victory in the third act. In doing so, the composer invites us to resist the title of this article: what gleams must be good.

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