

Solti's Schönberg: An Evening of Great Art

MOSES UND ARON

Chicago Symphony Orchestra
at Orchestra Hall
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By Kyle Gann

From a superficial description, Schönberg's *Moses und Aron* would seem to have everything going against it. Take an opera about Jewish theology of all things, with no love interest whatsoever, nary a significant female lead, and couched in the forbidding 12-tone style; imagine all the things that could make such a work dry, sectarian, ponderous, abstract, long-winded, irrelevant, and limited in popular interest. But Arnold Schönberg was a type of man that modern America hardly knows to exist, let alone understands—a man in whom intellect and passion are not opposed, but inseparably intermingled. *Moses und Aron* is no dry treatise. With unnerving passion, it poses the Problem of Religion, the Problem of Leadership, the Jewish Problem, the Problem of 20th-Century Alienation and Materialism, and the Problem of God, all in terms relevant to modern life on many levels, as well as Schönberg's own problem of justifying to himself a world that could neither understand nor accept him. Even on a purely physical level the work is devastating, and especially when under the powerful control of Georg Solti.

In the opening bars, God speaks to Moses in the form of the burning bush, and Schönberg's genius is already evident. A lesser composer would have simply amplified the biggest Russian bass he could find, and let that do for God, but Schönberg's solution is radical, mystical, and unearthly: two choirs intone the same text, one singing,

the other speaking, simultaneously but *not* in rhythmic unison. This spooky echoing effect sets up the opera's problem at once. Moses conceives of God as infinite, omnipresent, unperceived, and inconceivable, and considers any image of him a falsification. (Lao-tzu: "The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao.") Ordered to prophesy despite his deficient speaking ability, he must rely on his brother Aaron (from whose name the superstitious Schönberg dropped an "a" to prevent a title with 13 letters) as a spokesman. Glib Aron, a suave PR man if ever there was one, knows that so ineffable a god simply won't sell, and he is all too willing to compromise the idea in order to give the people of Israel a faith they can more readily grasp. Between these two poles, idea and image, mind and heart, Tao and idol, the opera flashes with frighteningly high voltage, and with a huge cast and chorus as a magnificent backdrop.

Schönberg, who considered himself a playwright and painter as well as composer, wrote his own libretto. Dramatically, it is as stripped down as a Samuel Beckett play, only in an opposite way: where Beckett eschewed all abstractions and demonstrated his metaphysics through everyday banalities, Schönberg strips his dialogue of all mundane references and leaves only the barest abstractions. It is easy to see Schönberg, who never understood why his cerebral music wasn't popular, autobiographically in the figure of Moses, and it is significant that he adds most to the Biblical account in the scenes that show Moses's inability to communicate his idea to the people. *Moses und Aron* was for Schönberg an effort of self-overcoming. Of his Moses,

he admitted that "He is not at all human," and in the opera's totality, Moses's love of the Truth and Aron's love of the Children of Israel are presented as equal, if perhaps incompatible, virtues.

Never has a play of ideas been so sensuously rendered. The music aptly expresses Moses's theistic conception: there are few motives and no themes at all, nothing for the listener to hold on to during the course of the piece; the musical surface is as thick, wild, and unrepeating as a late Pollock canvas. Yet the orchestration is scintillating and kaleidoscopic, the rhythmic energy often brutal, and the orgy scene around the golden calf, which climaxes with the sacrifice of a quartet of naked virgins, descends to new levels of musical bestiality. Schönberg makes his most powerful points, though, with the simplest musical means, and Moses's final, anguished monologue—"O Wort, du Wort, das mir fehlt" ("O Word, thou Word, which I lack")—is accompanied only by a single, tortured line in the first violins, with truly devastating effect. (This is the end of act two. Schönberg never wrote the music for act three, and was denied a Guggenheim grant that would have allowed him to finish it.)

A really quite funny aspect of the work, however, is that underneath the wild 12-tone profusion and dense Hebraic abstraction, turn-of-the-century Vienna is rarely completely absent. The work is filthy with waltzes. Moses and Aron meet in the wilderness to a waltz; the Children of Israel question them to a waltz; the golden calf is constructed to a waltz; and the animals are slaughtered and sacrificed to a waltz. Some of these waltzes are in 3/4,

some in 6/8 and 9/8, some even in 4/4 and changing meters, but they are waltzes just the same, however abstracted by offbeats and angular, 12-tone lines. Nevertheless, *Moses und Aron* makes the entire body of choral and orchestral music composed since look tame and pale by comparison, and the CSO's concert performance was really a more daring move than even last season's *Gruppen*.

Any reading of this greatest work of one of history's greatest composers would have been a rare delight. This performance, though, was one of the two most memorable musical evenings I have ever experienced.

To begin with, the Chicago Sym-

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phony Chorus was not a whit less than spectacular. There may be more difficult works for chorus, but none comes to mind. In two hours of rigorous, often athletic, 12-tone counterpoint, I heard not one hesitant rhythm, not one misjudged interval. Margaret Hillis must have prepared these people with a whip and a chair. They didn't make the work sound easy, though; they sounded throughout at the limits of their technique, always in danger of losing control and falling apart, and this fact was largely responsible for the performance's frightening power. In the racing, complex, double-fugal chorus "Der neue Gott

wird uns auch nicht helfen!" ("The new god will not help us") they were electrifying, and despite Solti's hurricane pace, never lost their strength or clarity for a moment.

The six singers who sang the voice of God in the burning bush were superb, mysteriously sustained and with every half-step slide in place. The soloists were all well cast, and not one sang with anything less than the fury and terror that an operatic staging would require. Maybe it's a prejudice of mine, but the women seemed especially good, and Barbara Bonney distinguished herself as the "Young Girl" with a frightened, birdlike presence.

As Moses, Franz Mazura was perfect: gruff, hesitant, anguished, in consummate control of the sprechstimme technique, which required him to speak his words more or less on pitch throughout. Philip Langridge as Aron was smooth, pretty, and lyrical, and made his suave part sound becomingly effortless. If his voice was a little too weak in its upper register to project the full range of Aron's arrogance, I still would not have traded him, so perfectly contrasted was he with Moses, even in looks. The measure of their brilliance was that they succeeded in absorbing between the two of them the tension built up by the entire chorus for the climax of the work, their duet in the fourth and fifth scenes of act two. Here, after the fiasco (from Moses's point of view) of the golden calf, Langridge's Aron was convincingly and incomprehensibly innocent and conciliatory. By infinite contrast, Mazura's Moses was exasperated beyond endurance, anguished beyond hope, defeated, and all on account of a theological/intellectual

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larger painting: she simply paints a "crack" down the middle of her painting.

Cy Twombly's abstract gesture drawing of black crayon scrawled freely over beige oil paint is a media combination that makes interesting texture, looks good, and could be a satire of, or just another, Pollock.

Let's call Jake Berthot humorous, too, because his painting resembles a late Monet study, brought down from someone's attic, darkened by age, varnish, and not being looked at. With pigment like penuche, and diffident, tentative brushwork, Berthot explores the central area and then invades the margin/frame he has incorporated into the painting. This overlapping of "frame" emphasizes the brushwork.

Joel Shapiro's amorphous, ephemeral, charcoal drawing seems like an effortless experiment, and a sort of joke. I'm tempted to wonder, "Where's the drawing?"—which is, perhaps, the message.

This is a show of atmospheres and backgrounds brought forward, forcing you to examine restricted design elements myopically if you are to see anything at all. Such painting certainly shows a dedication to art for art's sake. It's precious—that is, fine, valuable, and

potentially vulnerable to ridicule. But such criticism can be directed toward most overspecializations.

Sometimes, because of its democratic, squabbling decision-making processes, the Hyde Park Art Center has eccentric, inconsistent shows. A photographer in its last show liked to take snapshots of Christmas trees thrown out into the street but forgot to make those photographs interesting for other people. (Home movies at least move.)

The new show (also without the steady hand of a curator) is representational painting and sculpture. Artists were invited to submit works of "pseudorealism," but the center has given the show no title. I'll call it "Salute to Spring," since this winter has seemed endless. Here's another brand of "meditative surface," art that expresses yearnings for and remembrances of nice weather and getting out of the house. "Leave this show," the show exhorts, "and explore, perceive, create for yourself!" Like the unfulfilled Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* and the quite fulfilled Auntie Mame, art and the season order you not only to "see all you can" but to "live all you can—it's a mistake not to."

Ted Gadecki "lives" by taking off in his flashy car paintings zooming with "speedy" tail fin

forms; Nancy Hild swims at the bright blue acrylic Y; Tom Czarnopys and Virginia Woods "go fishing" for subjects, Woods "picking flowers" that she paints in watercolor and frames in good arrangements of twigs; Arthur Lerner paints oils of the shells and stuff that he picked up on his vacation last summer; and Robert W. Hutchison has made decorated, shaped canvases that look like kites in the wind.

What grabbed me before I could get out the door on the wings of this hedonistic message was the paintings by Arthur Lerner, the sculptures by Tom Czarnopys, and the nicely nasty caricatures of *Mom* and *Dad* by Nancy Hild—Lerner for his painterliness and subtlety; Czarnopys for his fish heads carved onto the ends of bare planks (*Salmon Plank*) and painted in the style of neo-taxidermism; Hild for combining in her satirical parental images something of the drollery of Daumier and the freakishness of Diane Arbus. But see for yourself or don't.

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tual idea that he was unable to communicate. In act one, there had been unity of purpose between them, and their phrases overlapped, as if they each knew what the other was

going to say. Here, they were carefully separated and diametrically contrasted, and carried off a cathartic two-person climax with absorbing realism.

Oddly enough, the one fly in the ointment was the orchestra. In act one, they simply would not play together. Racing 16th-note figures were turned into vague gobbledygook by the first violins, and one merely needed to glance at the lower strings to see that they were not playing their pizzicatos in unison. I often get the feeling that there are members of the CSO who think that, in modern music, precision is an unnecessary effort: the audience can't tell the difference anyway. Wrong. Lax playing will give off a disagreeable odor no matter how convoluted the music. But perhaps I am being unfair, and act one was merely insufficiently rehearsed. Whatever the case, by the scene in act two where the animals are marched in, in 4/4 with accented quarter notes, the entire orchestra came together at last, and executed Solti's pyrotechnics without flaw to the end, in a crescendo of excitement.

Someday I am going to learn to quit underrating Sir Georg Solti. I think of him as a conductor who brings more power and style to his interpretation than thought, but to even approach so thorny and multi-leveled a work as *Moses* is to be forced to think it through. Schönberg

could orchestrate exquisitely (though he often chose not to), and *Moses und Aron* can sound much prettier than it did here; but Solti went after not prettiness of sound, but a demonic kind of Jewish passion, and to say I was satisfied with the trade would be to understate. Vocal sibilants and rough string sounds were emphasized; rough edges were not smoothed over, and the immense effort involved (save in Aron's part) was not hidden. This was a frightening performance of raw power, bursting at the seams in spite of its incredible exactitude. Instead of Boulez's careful, colorful *Moses*, this was Mahler's Eighth squared and intensified. Sir Georg, I dub thee Saint Georg, for thou hast wrestled with the dragon without defeat.

I heard a performance once—Rozhdestvensky conducting Cleveland in the Mahler Ninth—which left me unable to rise from my chair as the rest of the audience filed out. This *Moses und Aron* kept me awake late into the night, and reawakened me at 5 AM with a cacophonous blaring of trombones. Normally I think it uncritical to yell "bravo," but there are times when remaining silent is simply in bad taste, and this was one. When the CSO records the work, that will be the recording to have, and Sir Georg had best make place on his mantel for yet another Grammy. Great art should change your life. This performance changed mine.

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