

Moses's Brain

By Kyle Gann

Moses und Aron

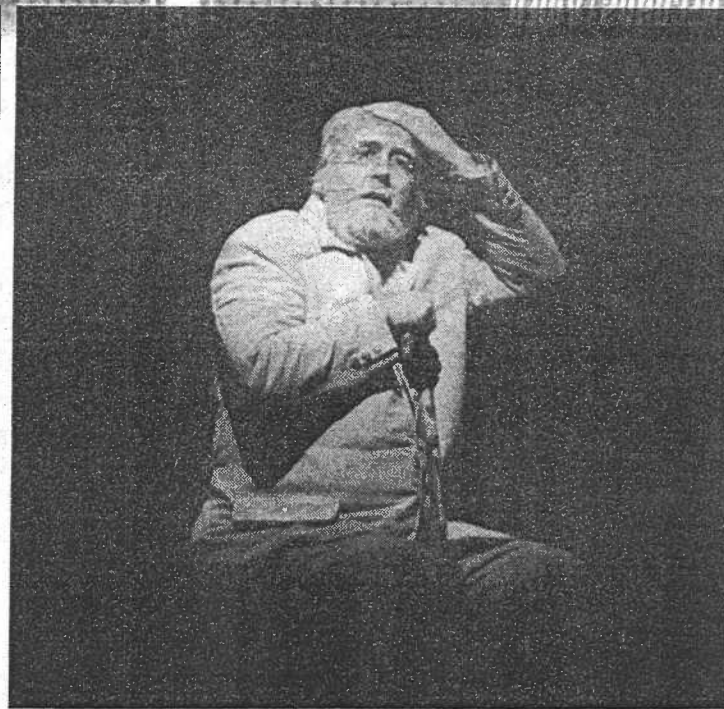
Here's the scenario: you're writing an opera about Moses, see? For the burning bush scene, who're you gonna get to play God? Get the biggest Russian bass you can find and mike 'im, right? That's why you're you, and Schoenberg was Schoenberg. *He* pictured God as six people singing and four speaking at the same time, though not in sync. Three friggin' decades before split-brain theory, he had a dichotic God talking to the left and right hemispheres at once. The man was tuned in to something.

No bush burned in the New York City Opera's production of *Moses und Aron*, no leprosy deformed Moses's hand. Aaron's serpent was limp, the Golden Calf toaster-size. The Ten Commandment tablets were graffiti-streaked blackboards. In short, realism wasn't the aim. Except sometimes: Aaron's water-into-blood illusion was perfect, and the virgins were naked. (But were they virgins?) This beige, blond-wigged production couldn't quite decide whether it wanted to be a bloodless, cerebralized version of *Moses* or a 12-tone *Scheherazade*. But the abstract sets, Aaron's behavior, even the orgy's calculated carnality gave away the underlying assumption: ultimately, this *Moses* was all brain. And they set the tone for New York's experience of *Moses*: in the advance publicity,

performance, postperformance conversation, and reviews, the Schoenberg who wrote *Moses* came off as all brain, too.

Schoenberg, however, insisted that he had a heart as well as a brain. In a revealing 1946 article entitled "Heart and Brain in Music," he said, "It is not the heart alone which creates all that is beautiful, emotional, pathetic, affectionate, and charming; nor is it the brain alone which is able to produce the well-constructed, the soundly organized, the logical, and the complicated." Nothing else in his output proves that so potently as *Moses*. Schoenberg had made mistakes. At 32 he had felt that the complex, four-movements-in-one Chamber Symphony would be a rousing popular success; as anyone else could have predicted, the opposite happened. At 56, he saw himself, like Moses, as a man with a message that no one could understand. Yet he expected and hoped, once the 12-tone language was established, to be popular. In himself, Schoenberg saw and valued both Moses and Aaron, brain and heart, left brain and right. He had a type of mind America seldom encounters, never understands, the type in which passion and logic are inextricably mingled. The balance and irreducible tension between them made *Moses* his greatest work.

But this production, imported from the Cologne Opera and directed by Hans Neugebauer, weighted the scales. Even in orgy, the chorus of George Segal sculp-



MARTHA SWOPE

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tures was stiff and stylized. Schoenberg's Aaron says of the Israelites, "I love this humble folk"; but Thomas Young's Aaron was a cold, phlegmatic PR man who couldn't even walk over to his brother when reassuring him. The orchestral playing was clear and expert but dry, and the only chorus effect that thrilled me was from sheer volume, at the first act's climax. The construction-site set and white 1930s business suits made a postmodern parody of the most modern music ever written. Paradoxically, Richard Cross's wild-bearded Moses, carrier of the "inexpressible, many-sided idea" and a stronger singer than his rival, was the only human onstage or off allowed to writhe in the

passion that seethes through the entire score. It was as though Neugebauer wanted to build up sympathy for Schoenberg's brainy side by making it the only heart the opera had.

The whole effect was to reinforce what Americans already think of Schoenberg anyway. His American reputation was skewed from the start: he was met at the boat by Milton Babbitt. For whatever reason, once in America Schoenberg forgot his heart and wrote a series of sterile, analysis-conscious works not worthy of the creator of *Moses*, *Erwartung*, and the Op. 11 Piano Pieces. How different American music would be today had academics imitated the fiery, God-driven Schoenberg of

Moses, instead of that co-track to hang pitches on, the Fourth String Quartet! As of 1990, there are still few pieces that sound avant-garde or adventurous next to *Moses*, all its hidden waltzes notwithstanding.

Comparisons are odious, I know. I used to cover the Chicago scene, but I was never a Georg Solti fan. I never heard Solti conduct a piece that I didn't think someone else had conducted better—except *Moses und Aron*. I cringe when, in the liner notes to his London recording, Solti says he told his performers, "Play and sing as if you were performing Brahms!" Nevertheless, Solti's Moses (Franz Mazura) and Aaron (Philip Langridge) were perfectly matched, and to the last note their conflicting obsessions left the opera a painful question mark. The chorus nearly tipped over every time they rounded a dissonant corner, and Solti (it was a concert performance, admittedly) drove the orchestra like a madman. Afterward, I could hardly get out of my seat. The breath was just knocked out of me. (My wife was seven months pregnant, and I'm sure my kid's going to grow up and worship a golden calf.) I felt the tragedy that was Schoenberg, the tragedy we all have in this irreconcilable heart-versus-brain existence, in a way no other art had ever made me feel.

New York City Opera's *Moses*, on the other hand, left me craving pizza after my brisk intellectual exercise. People seemed to walk out thinking, "Gee, that Schoenberg was a smart guy." At one point Aaron's supertitles read, "We got the idea, not the form." So did *Moses*'s New York audience. ■

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