11 : The Voice of God

A. The Problem

1. Class title 1 (Decker production stills)
2. *Moses und Aron* DVD covers

The music in this class is going to be a little tough. *Moses und Aron,* the unfinished opera by **Arnold Schoenberg** (1874–1951), is a key work in the history of music, and an opera about a truly important subject. Yet it is undeniably hard to listen to, in both its musical language and Talmudic theology. It presents a more difficult problem for the Stage Director, I think, than anything we have seen so far. Yet the reason for its difficulty is not merely a stylistic choice on the part of the composer, but intrinsic to its basic subject. It is worthwhile spending ten minutes to examine this point.

3. Oskar Kokoschka: *Arnold Schoenberg*, with shots of other Moses representations

Schoenberg was not the first to tackle the subject of Moses and the Exodus. Its inherent drama attracted **Rossini** in 1818, and of course we have the blockbuster *Ten Commandments* (1956) by **Cecil B. De Mille**, which actually appeared before the first staging of Schoenberg's opera. Both these focus on the spectacular, such as the twelve plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. But Schoenberg was after something different.

4. Section title A (transformation of the above)

Schoenberg was not interested in events so much as the *ideas* in Moses' mind and his own. How can you persuade a people to follow a god who cannot be seen or even put into words? Here, in audio only, is a half-minute excerpt in which Aaron (the Madison Avenue man always looking for the sales pitch) asks his brother that very question. How would you describe the music to which it is set?

5. Schoenberg: *Moses and Aron*, Aaron's question and Moses' reply

It's not easy music, is it? Schoenberg deliberately made it so, giving Aaron something of a smooth line, but making Moses half speak the lines rather than sing them, and deliberately throwing out any comforting implications of traditional harmony. It is true that Schoenberg had developed his theory of **twelve-tone composition** before starting this opera, but you might think he had been preparing it for just this purpose, as the voice of a God that gives no easy answers, and if He can be decribed at all, it would be by mathematical perfection, not by words or pictures.

6. Piano keyboard

Let me give you a brief demonstration of what is meant by twelve-tone, or **serial**, composition. Here is an octave from a piano keyboard, in which each of the 12 notes appears once. I shall play two quite

simple **Two-Part Inventions**, one by **Bach** and one by a follower of Schoenberg's, **Hanns Jelinek.** As I play each note, you will see a red dot appear on the relevant key. First, the Bach:

7. Bach: *Two-part Invention #1*

You will see that we have red dots on all the white notes, because this piece is in the key of C-major, which basically uses the only white notes of the piano. There are a few dots also on one of the black notes, F#, because the piece is moving temporarily to a new key, but even if I were to play the whole thing, you would get very few of the black notes. The sense of key comes from prioritizing some notes over the others. Now compare the Jelinek, which is the first piece in a set of ten books intended as pedagogical tools to explain Schoenberg's method.

8. Jelinek: *Two-part Invention #1*

You will see that each note has exactly five dots on it. None is prioritized over the others; there is no key. You probably did not notice that the second, third, fourth, and fifth sets were laid down in the same order as the first dozen, but this is the essence of strict serial composition: everything is derived from manipulation of the same basic **tone-row**. But remember that this was Jelinek's first example in the first book of ten; Schoenberg's method is a lot more complex than that. But it still tends towards an intricate mathematical structure, which the composer no doubt was a more appropriate metaphor for God than giving him—heaven forbid!—an actual tune.

9. The stage première of *Moses und Aron*, Zurich 1957

Well, where does this leave the poor stage director? The first staged production, in **Zurich**, six years after the composer's death, was an austere affair, though I am sure this black-and-white photo makes it seem more so. But audiences are not going to keep coming back for austerity.

10. Various productions of *Moses und Aron*

There is one even more austere production in the montage above, though it gets less so in the scenes that follow. As for the rest, the one thing you can say is that none of them take the literal approach of showing Moses in the desert (although there was a film that did just that). All of these use conventional theater spaces, with a stage set and theatrical lighting. But the production I am going to show for the rest of this class, by **Willy Decker** (the director of last month's *Traviata*) in Bochum, is more radical than that, in building a theater to house the production—one, in fact, that doesn't have a stage at all!

B. The Decker Solution

11. Section title B (The Decker Solution)

If you were an audience member attending the **Centennial Hall in Bochum** for Willy Decker's production of the opera at the **Ruhrtriennale 2009**, this is what you would see. You would be sitting somewhere on

a slope of bleachers with an identical slope directly opposite. **No stage**; the ankles of the people in your front row would almost touch those in the row opposite. **No visible orchestra**, though you would hear it. Then the lights would go down, and you would hear the voices from the **Burning Bush** coming from somewhere behind you. An **old man** in a row just in front of you would get up, move into the aisle, and begin to undress….

12. Schoenberg: *Moses and Aron*, opening
13. Dale Duesing as Moses

Can you imagine being in that hall? What do you think this opening would do for you? It would be a surprise, for one thing. And I believe you would feel a little disturbed by the sense of being on the stage, not sitting safely in the audience. You might also begin to wonder how this was achieved technically.

14. Ground plan

What has happened is that both sets of bleachers—yes, the entire audience—move back on casters, revealing a neutral space between. Simultaneously, the walls at the side withdraw, revealing the large orchestra and conductor. Later, a separate acting platform will slide into the neutral space, eventually changing places with the orchestral platform, which will pass over it to the opposite slide; you will see how this works ten minutes from now, in the Golden Calf scene.

15. Golden Calf scene ("LATER")

I said that Schoenberg avoids the kind of spectacular scenes that fill the Charlton Heston movie, but he does have one: the **Golden Calf scene**, which in most productions probably comes closer to explicit sex and violence than you ever see on the opera stage. But it is essential to Schoenberg's philosophical point about a people so fixated on physical action that they can be led entirely astray. And he makes you wait for it; the sequence does not begin until at least an hour into this 90-minute opera. Meanwhile, he needs to make the point with which I started: Moses believes in an **idea**; Aaron needs an **image**, words, a miracle, something the people can actually *see* or *do* as opposed to contemplating the indescribable. Decker uses his very simple stage brilliantly to achieve this; I will play two excerpts. First, the meeting between Moses and Aaron, in which Aaron at once begins thinking in terms of symbols, but Moses rejects this. This clip ends with the passage I played at the beginning.

16. Schoenberg: *Moses and Aron*, first encounter between Moses and Aaron
17. — still from the above

I am sure nobody is going away humming the music, but how many of you were intrigued nonetheless? If so, it is a remarkable tribute to both Schoenberg and Decker. You are not seduced by music, but intrigued by the exchange of *ideas*, and a staging that makes this exchange very clear.

18. Chorus box

When the Chorus enters, Decker lowers a huge transparent box from the ceiling. Clearly, it represents captivity—but less their physical enslavement by the Egyptians than being trapped in an old way of thinking. They have heard of this new God; some want to worship him, others to offer blood sacrifices,

but a Priest tells them they had better stick with the gods they know. Moses despairs, but Aaron realizes he has to do something, so he takes the rod from Moses and turns it into a Serpent. Note that this is not just a magic trick but another demonstration of the basic point, that although the Law is rigid in Moses' hands, it has some flexibility in Aaron's

19. Schoenberg: *Moses and Aron*, the Serpent episode

C. The Word, betrayed

20. Section title C ("The Word, betrayed")

Aaron's flexibility concept comes into play in the second act. The Exodus has happened, without much fanfare in this opera, and the People are now in the desert. Moses has gone up Mount Sinai to receive the Law. The People are once more growing restive, so Aaron has to give them something. I was interested to see, in the words at the very beginning of this, that he is not offering the Golden Calf as another god to worship, but as proof that his God can exist in *anything*, even the Golden Calf. It is a long scene, almost half an hour in all. I will play most of it, because the way it evolves is so interesting, both in Schoenberg's scenario and Decker's staging. But I will cut out before it gets too grisly at the end. Even so, I have to issue a trigger warning: if you are upset by blood, turn away before the crowd parts at the very end; **I will let you know**. I used the word "evolves," but really we are talking about *devolution, dissolution.* See if you can note the stages by which this happens.

21. Schoenberg: *Moses and Aron*, Golden Calf scene
22. — still from the above

Did you take notes about what was going on? I can imagine people hating this, but I hope nobody thought it meretricious. To me, it is absolutely essential to the theological argument, and any attempt to censor it, or "do it tastefully," would destroy the point. Moses comes back, of course, with the written Law, which is this case are not stone blocks but a huge sheet of paper. I'll play the start of this, and then cut to the last five minutes of the opera, ending with Moses' despairing words, "Oh WORD, word that I lack!" Schoenberg wrote the text for a brief third act, but never composed it; perhaps after this it no longer seemed necessary.

23. Schoenberg: *Moses and Aron*, return of Moses
24. Schoenberg: *Moses and Aron*, final scene
25. Class title 2 ("Notating the Voice of God")