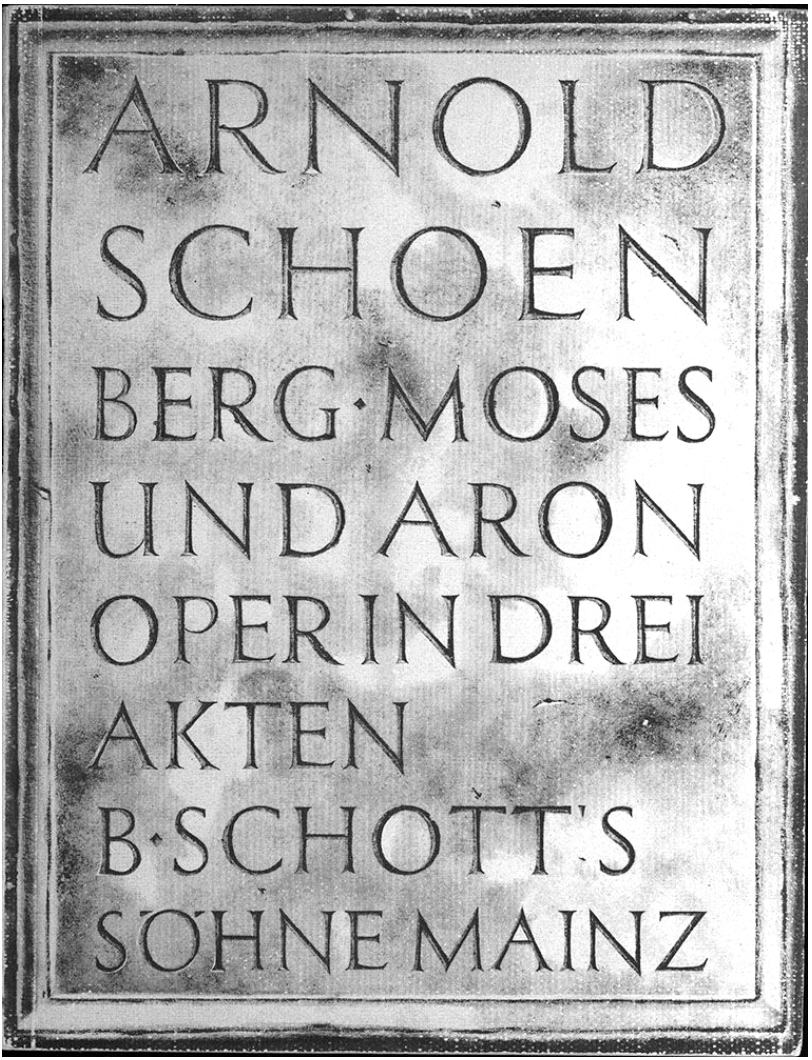
Opera Production



11. The Voice of God

December 1, 2026

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What is God? Nothing that can be represented in images or circumscribed by mere words. In music, certainly nothing so commonplace as a tune, but perhaps a mathematical complexity of such precision that each part interlocks perfectly with every other. **Arnold Schoenberg** had been working towards such musical perfection for some years in his development of **serial music**, so it was no surprise that he should have used it for Moses' concept of the Deity in his opera *Moses und Aron*, begun in 1926 and finished (as far as it was ever going to be) in 1932. But to convey God to the Children of Israel, Moses needed the voice of his half-brother Aron, and to convey the abstract, Aron needed concrete symbols and tangiblr miracles.

Hence the dilemma. *Moses und Aron* is an opera on an unusally serious subject and a work of major historical importance. Yet it is very difficult to absorb in terms of its musical language or theological argument—thus a major challenge for the stage director. Many simply embellish it with striking stage pictures. But **Willy Decker**, in his 2009 production for the *Ruhrtriennale* in **Bochum**, uses the shape-shifting architecture of the theater itself to create a visual equivalent of its underlying dialectic.

A. The Problem

A brief account of the compositional and performance history of the opera, plus a demonstration of **twelve-tone** (serial) music, comparing similar works by Bach and Hanns Jelinek, a Schoenberg disciple.

Bach: *Two-Part Invention #1* (Roger Brunyate, *piano*)

Jelinek: *Two-Part Invention #1* (Roger Brunyate, *piano*)

B. The Decker Solution

We look at three excerpts from Act One of the opera, as indicated in the synopsis below, adapted from Wikipedia. [Passages in square brackets] will not be played.]

Moses, in the presence of the burning bush, reluctantly receives from God the order to become a prophet and free Israel from bondage in Egypt. Moses asks to be spared such a task, he is old and though he can think, he cannot speak. God assures him that he will put words in his heart and orders him to find his brother Aaron.

In the desert Moses greets Aaron, who will serve as his spokesman, explaining his difficult ideas in terms the people can understand. Soon they start misunderstanding each other: Aaron immediately thinks in terms of symbols, but Moses tells him to purify his thinking.

[In the Israelite community there are many who claim to have seen God in different manifestations, but they cannot agree on what this new God might require. Trying to explain how God can be perceived only within oneself, Moses grows frustrated by Aaron's glibness, which seems to weaken his idea.]

Aaron defies Moses, seizing his rod and throwing it down, turning it into a serpent; this, says Aaron, shows how a rigid idea can be made flexible.

[By a series of further manifestations, Aaron convinces the people that an Exodus from Egypt is possible. Promised a land of milk and honey, the people pledge their allegiance to this new God.]

C. The Word, betrayed

[By the start of Act Two, the people have escaped across the Nile and are wandering in the Sinai Desert, while Moses ascends the mountain to receive the Law. At the foot of the mountain, Aaron and a group of elders worry that licentiousness and disorder now prevail among the people. Aron assures them that once Moses has assimilated God's intent, he will present it in a form the people can grasp.]

Seeing them unruly and ready to kill their priests, Aaron tries to calm the people by giving them an image they can worship. A golden calf is set up and offerings are brought, including human sacrifices at the altar. An emaciated youth who protests the false image is killed by tribal leaders. Priests sacrifice four nude virgins, and the people, who have been drinking and dancing, turn wild and orgiastic. When they have worn

themselves out, and many have fallen asleep, a lookout sees Moses returning from the mountain. Destroying the golden calf, Moses demands an accounting from Aron, who justifies his indulgence of the people by saying that no word had come from Moses. While Moses' love is entirely for his idea of God, Aron says, the people too need his love and cannot survive without it. In despair Moses smashes the tablets of the laws he has brought down from the mountain.

[When Moses denounces Aaron as fainthearted, he replies that he keeps Moses' idea alive by trying to explain it. Led by a pillar of fire in the darkness, which turns to a pillar of cloud by day, the people come forth, encouraged once more to follow God's sign to the Promised Land. Moses distrusts the pillar as another vain image, but Aaron calls it a true guide.]

As Aron joins the people in their exodus, Moses feels defeated. By putting words and images to what cannot be expressed, Aron has falsified Moses' absolute perception of God. He ends lamenting that he himself lacks the capability to speak.

Schoenberg: *Moses und Aron,* scenes as above (Bochum 2009*,* Willy Decker, *director;* Michael Boder, *conductor*; Dale Duesing, *Moses*; Andreas Conrad, *Aaron*)