

Werktitel Moses und Aron. Opera in three acts

Entstehung 1923 – 1937

UA 12 March 1954, Hamburg, Musikhalle

Dauer ca. 95 min.

“Moses und Aron” – The Composition

The opera “Moses und Aron” is based on one single twelve-tone row:

The utilization of the row in the forms of inversion, retrograde and retrograde inversion, as well as the possibility of transposition on all twelve pitches, puts an enormous musical choice at the composer’s disposal.

The possibilities of vertical and horizontal use allow for further expansion, as does the simultaneous combination of the row-forms.

“The initial idea for a row always appears in a form that is of thematic character.” (Arnold Schönberg)

The row in itself represents an abstraction of the primary musical idea and develops out of the composer’s thematic inspirations.

### **Act I, Scene 1: “MOSES’ calling”**

In 1926, Schönberg planned a cantata entitled “Moses and the Burning Bush,” the text of which, and presumably some musical material as well, he blended into the first scene of Act I. In its division into several sections, and given the presence of a Narrator (MOSES), a solo vocal ensemble and a speaking chorus (as the Voice of God), this scene exhibits thoroughly cantata-like characteristics. In addition, there is no stage action whatsoever. Musically, the scene is divided into four sections and a coda: initially (1) the Voice of God – at first with chordally-set vocalises, then with text – alternates with that of MOSES, whose mission is revealed: “Set your people free!” Thereupon, (2) with three questions, the skeptical MOSES interjects commentary on God’s statements? Upon his fourth objection, “I can think, but not speak” there follows a brief orchestral interlude, which makes the answer that God is about to pronounce: (3) – “Aron shall be your mouth” – even more momentous. By establishing its own form, this pronouncement, containing the substance of the conflict that is the crux of the opera, is raised to a higher level of significance than the previous answers. The vocal ensemble and speaking chorus announce God’s decision (4) to choose a people and to promise them a new future. The Coda brings a return to the defined course of the plot: MOSES is to meet ARON in the desert. Thus the first scene serves as an introduction to the situation, sets forth the conflict between MOSES and ARON and offers a view of the further progress of the opera: MOSES’ mission – on the one hand, freedom from false gods, and on the other, the liberation of the Israelites – and the three miracles.

## **Scene 2: "Moses meets Aron in the desert"**

The second scene immediately follows the introduction, both musically and dramatically: the brothers MOSES and ARON encounter each other in the desert. Although there are now two personages onstage, the plot here is again limited to verbal "actions." In the course of the scene, it becomes clear what very different positions MOSES and ARON take toward God: theirs is not a real dialogue, but rather, because of differing interpretations, a case of "talking at cross-purposes." Schönberg gives this musical form through extensive simultaneity of the vocal lines.

With the arrival of ARON on the scene, the complete development of the twelve-tone row is heard for the first time, in all four row-forms consecutively: basic set, inversion, retrograde and retrograde inversion.

It is particularly important to emphasize MOSES' exhortation to ARON and the general populace: "Purify your thoughts": it is the only point in the opera in which MOSES (speaking role) is given the opportunity to sing. His twelve-tone theme consists of the inversion of the row.

## **Scenes 3 and 4: "Moses and Aron proclaim to the people the message of God"**

The third scene is divided both dramatically and musically into two sections: the proclamation of the new God and the people's anticipation of the arrival of MOSES and ARON.

In the first section, the three believers, who embrace the "new God," and the PRIEST, who clings to the old gods, are in direct opposition to each other; the people take a passive, emotional attitude. The three interrelated "believers" sections form the framework, alternating with choral sections and solos by the PRIEST. In the exposition, A YOUNG GIRL (1), A YOUTH (2) and A MAN (3) introduce their themes in successive order. One unusual aspect of the first theme is worthy of note: – it is constructed from the retrograde version of the row, according to the principle of progressive repetition?

The second theme (A YOUTH) is the inversion of this form.

The theme of the MAN (3), on the other hand, is relatively freely constructed, with a view toward the later combinations of themes.

When the "believers" sections are reprised, there is ever-increasing contrapuntal compression: the first reprise combines the opening of themes 3 (in inversion) and 2, then of 3 and 1, although the relation of the themes to the personages does not correspond to the exposition.

In the second reprise, the themes are associated with the "right" personages; all three are now combined simultaneously.

The first and second reprises are followed by fugally-constructed choral sections that develop the musical material of the believers and incorporate the sections of the PRIEST. As the action proceeds, the Israelites become split as either skeptics or supporters; toward the end, the former seem to have been pushed off into the orchestra. In the Coda, nonetheless, there is ultimately a definitive polarization of the people of Israel into two groups: structurally, this is achieved through dividing the chorus.

In the second part of the scene, the growing anticipation of the people observing the

approach of MOSES and ARON is fully represented in the music. Increasing structural compression, acceleration of the tempo and the manner of grouping the sonorities create a powerful intensification that reaches its culmination in the final three measures: "And [They] have arrived!"

In the large-scale fourth scene, all the figures who have appeared so far come together for the first time; only now is the title: "Moses and Aron proclaim to the people the message of God" realized. The chorus begins a double fugue: both subjects, which appear in the alto and soprano lines, use retrograde and inversion forms of the row. In the next segment, in which ARON attempts to persuade the people of the existence of God, the many personages communicate by using musical material that has already been heard in other sections. Thus, the short segment in which MOSES and ARON appear together before the people harks back to the music of Act II. ARON fails initially in the face of the irredeemable demand of the people to see God. The immediate reaction of the people to this is decisively negative: "We do not want to be set free by him!" In no other section of the opera does the composer employ the triad so trenchantly, which leads to the suspicion that Schönberg is applying it symbolically to the skeptics.

MOSES gives up: "My thought is powerless in Aron's words!" These measures quote the music for MOSES' protest before God (Scene 1: "My tongue is awkward"). But now ARON takes the initiative: "I am both word and deed!" and snatches the staff from MOSES' hand. The first miracle, the transformation of the staff – as symbol of rigid law and of ruling power – into a serpent –, symbol of eloquence and of ARON'S intellectual superiority – convinces the people of the power of the new God and inspires them to join in a hymn in the form of a choral treatment with cantus firmus in the baritone line.

After an objection by the PRIEST, ARON performs the second miracle: MOSES' hand is first infected with leprosy and then healed. As a parallel to the first miracle, the people join forces again in a hymn of praise: the cantus firmus, now with the text: "Through Aron, Moses shows us" lies in the mezzo-soprano line of the Chorus.

Incited by the MAN, who briefly assumes leadership, the People want to head into the desert. To the protestation of the PRIEST: "And how should the desert nourish you?", MOSES counters: "Purity of thought." ARON, instead, promises the people more: the sand shall be transformed into fruit, the fruit into gold, the gold into rapture and ultimately, rapture into soul. The third miracle, the transformation of the water of the Nile into blood, demonstrating the urgent need to be set free from the Pharaoh, totally convinces the people. From the mouth of ARON, they learn of God's promise for the first time, and they repeat it in awestruck amazement. Once again, the Hymn of the people sounds, now with stricter imitation of the cantus firmus, and intensifies until it reaches the apotheosis: "We shall be free!", the end of Act I.

Interlude

The Interlude serves as a Prologue to Act II: it introduces the change of mood that has taken place among the people of Israel during the 40 days since the departure of MOSES. Mezzo-soprano and tenor bring out the two themes of the double fugue (Dux I and II) that is heard even before the curtain opens. The Comes of both themes, performed

subsequently by alto and bass, is not the simple transposition but rather the retrograde form of the themes in the sense of a fuga in contrario motu.

## **Act II**

### **Scenes 1 and 2: "Aron and the seventy Elders before the Mountain of Revelation"**

In the first scene of Act II, the PRIEST and the 70 ELDERS describe the state of anarchy that has prevailed during MOSES' absence. Solo interjections by the ELDERS give specific examples of the deplorable situation, and from the background, the PRIEST hints at the origins of the disturbances: "Unrepresentable law of the unrepresentable God!" ARON admonishes: "Do not expect form before idea!" From offstage comes the noise of the agitated Israelites, which establishes the connection to the second scene. This is the only time in the opera that the masses are given a chance to propel the action forward: they make conditions extremely difficult for the 70 ELDERS and ARON, demanding the return to the old gods; they are not afraid to engage in physical violence. The frightened ELDERS relinquish the floor to ARON. His confidence soon disappears and he himself expresses doubt: "Perhaps he has destroyed him!" Hearing this, the people feel that they have been validated in their demand. Musically, this choral section, extremely complex in its counterpoint, refers back to the Interlude. ARON, for whom the good of the people is more important than God, gives in: "You shall then be happy!", and in so doing, regains his authority. There is a marked difference between the two "People of Israel!", with which both of ARON'S speeches begin: while in the first, there was still the rising sixth as symbol of the Chosen People, the second gives the heathen gods back to the people – in the music as well.

The people celebrate ARON'S decision with cheers and shouts; the enormous intensification leads to the Hymn of the People, which is built on an alternation of refrains – also described by Schönberg as a "rounds" – and couplets. The refrain makes use of a comparatively simple pattern; its melody is played by the flute, while at the same time, a variation is heard from the chorus, sung by the altos and tenors.

Both of these melodic and rhythmic models return in varied form in all four subsequent refrain-sections. While the first couplet, which is heard twice, owes something to the melodic structure and dimension of the refrain, the second couplet shapes a part of its own. Following introductory cheering and shouting, a six-measure movement is presented, which is given three variations. The main voice wanders through all the other voices. With the fifth entry of the refrain, to the text "Rejoice, Israel!", the scene ends.

### **Scene 3: "The Golden Calf and the Altar"**

The third scene of Act II forms the most extensive section of the opera. Not until this point are the dramatic possibilities of the stage used to full advantage, and action in itself gains in significance. In this scene, the people stay among themselves; neither MOSES nor ARON is present – with the exception of the first brief recitative, which is actually part of the previous scene, both musically and textually.

Out of the anonymous masses of people, individual groups step forth, such as INVALIDS, male and female BEGGARS and OLD MEN. The theme of the entire scene, – in antithesis

to MOSES' idea of God – is heathen ritual worship: in eight musical sections, an extraordinary array of sacrifices, destruction, killing and, ultimately, fertility rituals, reaches ecstatic proportions. Woven among these are the transformations of the three Believers (Act I): the YOUTH ends up a martyr, the YOUNG GIRL becomes a fanatic sacrificial virgin and the MAN (EPHRAIMITE) is now the leader of the 12 TRIBAL CHIEFTAINS.

“Revere yourselves in this image!” – ARON indicates the Golden Calf as God's image, in his introductory recitative (1) under pressure from the skeptical people. Now nothing stands in the way of the worship of idols. Drumbeats and fanfares announce sacrificial offerings, hurriedly rounded up, as an instrumental phrase (2) sounds, accelerating to double its original tempo. After a brief transition, in which the full-orchestra phrase is cleverly reduced, voices join in as part of the third section, which is in chamber-music style. For this episode, dedicated to representing the pathological, Schönberg wrote a movement laid out in strict three- and four-voice polyphony, described by Karl-Heinrich Wörner as “Music of tormented subjectivity. The alto solo of the INVALID whose lameness is healed by a miracle is accompanied only by oboe and English horn. The range of barely an octave (a# to g') symbolizes confinement to the sickbed – the subsequent spinning-out of the solo, with its broadening up to f', is the transition to movement.

After an instrumental interlude, the theme of the invalid rambles as an accompanying layer for the song of the beggar in the bass voice. The sacrificial death of the old man makes up the coda of this part. The following section (4) is introduced by the trombone signal from Section 2, which announces the worldly ruling class. Musically, this section is clearly divided into three parts, although the last represents the reprise of the first – with a repeat of the trombone fanfare, and a composite of the most important thematic material that was in Scene 3 of Act I. The following section (5), entitled “Orgy of Drunkenness and Dance,” is given relaxed waltzlike shape by Schönberg, in choice of tempo and measure.

The “Orgy of Destruction and Suicide” (6), in particular the sacrifice of the virgins, reaches its culminating point in the Dance around the Golden Calf. The young girl, now a fanatic follower of the odd gods, is among those sacrificed: her solo refers back, appropriately, to the third scene of Act I. The homophonic freely-tonal solo quartet of the four VIRGINS takes a unique position in the opera. Of the eight segments of the quartet, which are separated from each other by short pauses, the second and fourth correspond to each other by means of the same melody of the FIRST VIRGIN (the YOUNG GIRL). In the seventh segment, this melody is repeated in retrograde form:

The modified version of the waltz-theme from the previous segment underlies the sigh of death of the VIRGINS.

In the seventh section devastation and suicide vye with another, accompanied by a rhythmically pregnant orchestral movement. After a contrasting middle section that presents two short thematic ideas, the first part is repeated in double time. This strengthens the speeding up that was already prepared in the opening section.

The scene closes with the “Erotic Orgy” (8), which appears as a texture made up of short groups of measures but without its own thematic shape. Through the sequence, one after

another, of various motivic-thematic elements from previous sections, it presents a synopsis of the entire scene. Thus the round theme from the second scene is heard, as well as the basic motive of the Believers from Act I and from the fourth and sixth sections, along with the waltz-theme from the fifth section.

#### **Scene 4:**

With a mere 18 measures, this is the shortest scene in the opera. Nonetheless, in the action that takes place in it, this scene represents a significant turning point in the plot: MOSES descends from the Mountain of Revelation, sees the Golden Calf and destroys it with his words. The music proceeds without motivic-thematic elements; instead, it conveys much more a sonority that is at first fragmented, but which develops, however, into an expanse of sound.

#### **Scene 5: "Moses and Aron"**

Analogously to the second scene of Act I, there is now another encounter between MOSES and ARON. Moreover, it refers back to the fourth scene of Act I, in which Aron convinces the people through his words; here, he uses his rhetoric to win the upper hand over MOSES. This is also reflected in the music. ARON'S thematic material takes on increasing significance. In contrast to the parallel section, to be sure, a true dialogue takes place here, made up of three sections. At first, there are the reciprocal reproaches and ARON'S justifications; then the argument about the proper method of conveying religious belief. Here, the two opinions are in direct opposition: "I love this people" (ARON) – "I love my ideas" (MOSES). ARON'S confidence increases: he points out that MOSES' Tables of the Law are also images, at which MOSES smashes them and becomes silent. Thereupon, ARON explains his method of conveying belief and, to the music of the hymn-like song of Act I, goes back. The choral song that follows this quotes text and music from the end of Act I.

MOSES' embittered monolog creates a reference back to the conversational situation of the first scene, but this time God is silent. With the cry: "O Word, thou Word that I lack!", MOSES sinks to the ground.

With the reprise of sections from Act I at the end of Act II, Schönberg succeeds in creating an arc from the opening, thus securing the cohesiveness between the two acts.

#### **Act III: "THE DEATH OF ARON"**

"Moses und Aron" remained unfinished: music for Act III exists only in the form of a few sketches; the text, on the other hand, was completed, but the composer did not consider it a final version. There was no shortage in his attempts to complete Act III, as the following excerpts from letters confirm:

"I want to complete my opera as quickly as possible (in three months, I hope)" (to Universal Edition, 11 July 1932)

"Now I want to work: 'Moses und Aron,' Act III ..." (to Alban Berg, 16 August 1934)

"Then, however, I plan [...] finally to finish composing 'MOSES und ARON'" (to Peter Lafite, 27 March 1946)

"If I were capable of working, [...] best of all [would be] the 'Jakobsleiter' and 'MOSES und ARON'." (to René Leibowitz, 5 November 1948)

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