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THE THIRD ACT OF SCHOENBERG'S "MOSES UND ARON"

Why did Schoenberg not compose the music to the third act of Moses und Aron? This problem has usually been answered by giving practical excuses for Schoenberg: that events in Germany in the Thirties, and his exile, created such a traumatic experience that the creative thread was lost, or that he simply became more interested in other works. These may be factors of importance, but Zillig's remark that Schoenberg was "too humble" to complete the work is of rather more interest, since it hints that the third act remained unfinished for internal reasons rather than because of external pressures. From our wider knowledge of Schoenberg's personality, we would not expect him to be primarily influenced by outside events, and we know that the work was for him a testament of spiritual faith.

It is my belief that Moses und Aron shows Schoenberg wrestling with the central problem of his creative life, and that he found it aesthetically impossible to provide music to his own text of the third act. The very incompleteness of the opera is an important factor in any assessment of the worth and value of the twelve-note system. In order to see why this might be so, we must analyse the aesthetic and spiritual developments which led up to the work.

The months of December 1914 and January 1915 were evidently a period of psychological and spiritual crisis in Schoenberg's life. At this time he wrote two important texts: the Totentanz der Prinzipien (Death-dance of Principles), which may have been a verbal contribution to the symphony he was planning at the time and which led him to investigate the structural nature of his music, and Die Jakobsleiter (Jacob's Ladder). The Totentanz shows Schoenberg in despair, realising L'Absurde, the meaninglessness and aimlessness of life and human activity. Out of this shattering experience comes Die Jakobsleiter, which offers a possible solution: first of all an acceptance of the situation, and secondly an appreciation that human actions are the path to identification with God. (The influence of the mystical Jewish Qabalah is profoundly significant here). What Jacob's Ladder provides is a form to life, a structure of human existence which enables man to reach from the depths up to the heights, according to laws of transmigration, reward and reincarnation.

Psychologically this crisis can be regarded as following authentic lines: depth-analysis (in the Totentanz), and psychosynthesis, the process of reconstruction based upon new or renewed beliefs (in Die Jakobsleiter). It is caused by the emergence into the

consciousness of unconscious contents of great energy, which must be brought under control if psychic stability is to be reasserted. Zillig underlines this by stressing the passage in Die Jakobsleiter about "the dissolution of the ego". This polarity between unconscious forces and conscious controls lies at the centre of Schoenberg's aesthetic beliefs.

The setting of Die Jakobsleiter to music was broken off at bar 603; Schoenberg turned to an investigation of how to write music, a process which led to the formulation of twelve-note technique. In a famous letter of 1937 to Slonimsky, Schoenberg makes it clear that the new technique arose out of a desire "to base the structure of my music consciously in a unifying idea". The process of renewal by means of conscious control which had begun in Die Jakobsleiter was continued in terms of musical technique. In his essay Style and Idea Schoenberg extended the process into the field of direct aesthetic statement, bringing together his spiritual beliefs and his structural discoveries, maintaining a distinction between Idea - the idea the composer wishes to represent, and therefore in a sense precompositional, like a note-row - and Style - the way in which the Idea is represented, what we may call a series of images.

Moses und Aron is a religious-cum-aesthetic discussion of the relationship between idea and image, and is therefore not only a further contribution to our understanding of Schoenberg himself, but is "about" the twelve-note method itself. Schoenberg stated that there are three characters in the opera: God, the People of Israel, and the Leader of the People (letter to Eidlitz, 1933). However, it is clear that there are two Leaders: Moses and his "brother" Aron. In their common task - to communicate the Idea of the Only God to the People - they take very different approaches, which in fact together create a balance. There are in fact good internal reasons for regarding them as two sides of a single personality; Schoenberg himself.

It is to Moses that God presents the Idea of monotheism, but, although Moses thus possesses knowledge, he does not have the power to communicate it (the role is a Sprechstimme one). Aron, on the other hand, has no direct comprehension of the Idea, only an image of it, but is by nature a communicator, able to create verbal and visual images to which the People can respond - if not intellectually, at least emotionally. God's announced intention is that Moses shall govern and control Aron's images, and thereby communicate the Idea through Aron to the People.

Aesthetically, we can draw an analogy here with Wagner's Gefühlsverständnis, "understanding through feeling", for it is clear that Aron is a symbol for this function of music. His miracles (works of art) appeal to the People's sensory and sensual perception. However, as the history of nineteenth century music tells us, images tend to get out of hand; emotional contents can too easily obscure, distort or move outside the Ideas which lie behind them. Moses quickly discovers that he cannot control Aron: The God-Moses-Aron-People chain of communication breaks down and Aron gains his independence while Moses retired to the wilderness.

Clearly the Moses-Aron psyche is becoming unbalanced, and although the People are able to apprehend Aron's images, they are little nearer to a full comprehension of the Idea of the Only God. Indeed, in Moses' absence, Aron allows and encourages the setting up of an idol, the Golden Calf, as an image of God which the People can worship. Since he has communicated to the People through their sensory and sensual perception, the worship they offer is a physical, sensual one, an orgy of sacrifice and sexuality that is far removed from the spiritual controls and restraints involved in a true awareness of the Idea. The Gefühlsverständnis has been taken to its post-Tristan, frightening extreme.

Some controls are urgently needed. Schoenberg had realised the necessity of control in the extravagant, sensual expressionism of late-Romantic music, the necessity of controlling the power of music over a listener's unconscious feelings, by introducing a unifying Idea on which to "consciously" base the structure. Thus Moses returns from the wilderness to reassert his authority, armed with the tablets of the Law. These can be comprehended, and by means of them the natural unconscious desires in the psyche may be renounced. A new standard is set up whose aim is to encourage the renunciation of sensual desires and to lead the People to a new spiritual state (see Freud: Moses and Monotheism).

The two brothers confront each other, now representative of contrasting extremes: the sensual imagery of music and the necessary controlling Idea in musical composition. Moses accuses Aron of creating images: Aron produces the shattering reply that even Moses' perception of the Idea is itself an image. The Burning Bush, the Voice of God, the tablets of the Law themselves, are just as much images as are Aron's miracles, speeches and the Golden Calf itself. He is, unfortunately for Moses, absolutely right, and his argument is not without relevance to the Idea of the twelve-note row, in which the row-model is just as much an "image" as the variants of it in which it appears in a twelve-note work. Moses, confused and angry, breaks

the tablets of the Law and collapses, disillusioned, while Aron creates the pillars of cloud and fire to lead the People away.

Here the second act, and Schoenberg's music, end, with Aron victorious, and Moses in despair. A victory for Aron means a victory for Gefühlsverständnis, a triumph for music's sensual power over the "desire to base the structure of music consciously upon a unifying idea."

For Schoenberg the inventor of the twelve-note method this conclusion was intellectually intolerable. In consequence, he wrote the text to a third act, of his own invention. Here Moses, having recast the tablets of the Law, appears from the start as in control, with Aron in chains and on trial, guarded by armed soldiers (a slightly unhappy picture of Moses as tyrant?). This time Aron's arguments about the necessity of images are in vain: Moses has become what Freud calls a super-ego figure, whose role is to control the desires of the unconscious. Images, he says, are no longer of service: the path to eternal life is through the renunciation of images. In their place we have the Ten Commandments, by the pursuit of which, presumably, Jacob's Ladder may be climbed. Aron, now no longer of service either, is released, and falls dead.

The tables have been turned on the second act. If the Golden Calf scene represented the extreme of the Aronic side of the psyche, this third act climax shows the extreme of the Mosaic side. It is no coincidence that Schoenberg regarded the Golden Calf scene (at least while he was composing it) as the most "operatic" moment in the opera, and provided no music to the third act. The text of this act was the necessary intellectual response to Aron's victory, but the implications of that text, that the Gefühlsverständnis side of music must be renounced, and is redundant, was for Schoenberg the composer quite unacceptable. As a creative musician he realised that formal principles, while necessary, cannot and must not be taken to the extreme at which the sounds of music are no longer apprehended directly by the unconscious.

The text of the opera, then, shows a gradual polarisation of the two sides of the Schoenberg personality; while the Aronic extreme of the second act is in essence, and traditionally, musical, the Mosaic extreme of the third act is in essence anti-musical. The fact that Schoenberg seems to have been aware of this on the deepest creative level not only explains why there is no music to the third act, but indicates the stature of his genius, and points a moral to the creative musician of all times.