

Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* and the Nineteenth-Century Tradition of Operatic Innovation

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One of the great challenges to Schoenberg scholarship, and ultimately to understanding his music, comes from the conflicting historical perspectives on Schoenberg as both the last of the great central-European Romantic composers and as the pioneer of important 20th-century compositional innovations such as *Sprechstimme*, contextual atonality, and serialism. The extremes of these conflicting perspectives are unfortunate because they have distorted our view of Schoenberg's music and of his development as a composer.

Even so, they do inform us about the underlying polemics of the critical world into which his music was first introduced, polemics which still affect the reception of Schoenberg's music today. But ultimately a contemporary evaluation of Schoenberg must accept the more complex view that he was not one or the other, but at once a great romantic composer and a pioneering artist of the 20th century. Acceptance of this view will lead us toward the conclusion that, despite the polemics still swirling around twelve-tone music and its posterity,

there are more points of contact between the music of the 19th century and modern serialism than there are differences.

When reviewing the technical developments of Schoenberg's career, it is clear that the composition of his full-length opera *Moses und Aron* played a vital role in his own understanding of, and confidence in, twelve-tone serialism.¹ True, he had already used this compositional method for about nine years before he began *Moses und Aron*, but he still questioned in his own mind whether or not the technique could creatively sustain a work of such proportions. Whereas his *Variations for Orchestra* Op. 31 (1926-28) used only one row exclusively, his Third String Quartet Op. 30 (1927) used variant orderings of a principle set in its first and third movements, and his one-act opera *Von Heute auf Morgen* Op. 32 (1929-30) used two different but related rows. At this time, Schoenberg was troubled by the question as to the limits of compositional variety available in a single row:

In the first works in which I employed this method, I was not yet convinced that the exclusive use of one set would not result in monotony. Would it allow the creation of a sufficient number of characteristically differentiated themes, phrases, motives, sentences, and other forms? At this time, I used complicated devices to assure variety. But soon I discovered that my fear was unfounded; I could even base a whole opera, *Moses und Aron*, solely on one set; and I found that, on the contrary, the more familiar I became with this set the more easily I could draw themes from it.²

¹Documents at the Arnold Schoenberg Institute in Los Angeles show that he began working on the libretto for *Moses und Aron* in the late 1920s and that the vast majority of the musical composition took place between May 1930 and March 1932.

²Arnold Schoenberg, "Composition with Twelve Tones (1)," in *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein with trans. by Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 224.

It was precisely this success at drawing out the variety of themes, textures, and compositional expressions for *Moses und Aron* from a single source that made the opera an important work for future twelve-tone composers to study.³ For during the composition of this opera the technical development of twelve-tone serialism became more philosophical. The row itself became more of a background structure, an organic entity for the foundation of a work's formal unity, thus allowing the surface expression to contain more variety.

But what of this need to have both variety and unity? Certainly it would be easier to have one and not the other. It is obvious that the aesthetic that valued this combination of variety and unity in musical works did not originate with twelve-tone music, but one that Schoenberg inherited from European composers of the Classical and Romantic periods. And ultimately, underlying the artistic success of *Moses und Aron* and its technical importance to 20th-century composers is a 19th-century compositional philosophy of musical variety *and* unity. In its most direct form this is Schoenberg's "developing variations," and it was integrated into all levels of his compositional *Idea*.⁴ Furthermore, it was the demands of this fully absorbed 19th-century philosophy of the requirements for music that drove Schoenberg's continued development of the techniques of his own 20th-century approach to composition, demands that for Schoenberg became a guide toward the success or failure of twelve-tone music.

Schoenberg was a self-taught musician who grew up in Vienna at the height of the rivalry between the followers of Wagner and Brahms. While the modern scholar can fully *understand* the influence of these masters on Schoenberg, it is difficult for us, in our pluralistic, electronically-networked world, to truly *appreciate* the effects of such

³Milton Babbitt, "Three Essays on Schoenberg," in *Perspectives on Schoenberg and Stravinsky*, ed. Benjamin Boretz and Edward Cone (New York: Norton, 1972), 47-60.

⁴Schoenberg, *Schoenberg's Musical Idea: The Logic, Technique, and Art of its Presentation*, ed. and trans. by Patricia Carpenter and Severine Neff (New York: Columbia University Press, in press).

a monolithic culture. This is not in any way meant to criticize either the past or the present, but to realize that there are few, if any, living today who have experienced the social and artistic impact behind Schoenberg's simple statement that "when I was twenty-five I had heard operas of Wagner between twenty and thirty times each."⁵ The early influence of Wagner's music on Schoenberg was quite strong, and not until the composition of his *Kammersymphonie* Op. 9 (1926) did Schoenberg feel artistically free of its grasp:

After having finished the composition of the *Kammersymphonie* it was not only the expectation of success which filled me with joy. It was another and a more important matter. I believed I had now found my own personal style of composing and that all problems which had previously troubled a young composer had been solved and that a way had been shown out of the perplexities in which we young composers had been involved thorough the harmonic, formal, orchestral and emotional innovations of Richard Wagner. I believed I had found ways of guiding and carrying out understandable, characteristic, original and expressive themes and melodies, in spite of the enriched harmony which we had inherited from Wagner.⁶

But even as a mature composer, Schoenberg's aesthetic connection to Wagner remained very strong:

In music there is no form without logic, there is no logic without unity. I believe that when Richard Wagner introduced his Leitmotiv—for the same purpose as that for which I introduced my Basic Set—he may have said: "Let

⁵Schoenberg, "Art and the Moving Pictures, in *Style and Idea*, 155.

⁶Schoenberg, "How One Becomes Lonely," in *Style and Idea*, 49.

there be unity.’’⁷

Schoenberg's interpretation of Wagner and the aesthetic of unity was, if anything, understated. For an authoritative conception of unity is at the heart of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*: the uniting of all arts through opera, realized musically through a far more active role for the orchestra and the integration of vocal lines with instrumental textures. Striking orchestral effects, new dissonances, and tension-filled harmonies became part of the dramatic scenario. This concentration on unity of artistic materials aimed for a more continuous flow of music and drama from scene to scene.

This expansive view of operatic structure had been growing for several generations of composers prior to the time of Wagner. Harking back to the finale of Act 2 of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and to Weber's *Euryanthe*, Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and *Der Ring des Nibelungen* can be viewed as the culmination of a drive toward a large, unifying and continuous, dramatic-operatic structure. But the energy behind the unity of each work was variety and musical innovation. From the charms of Papageno's magic bells to the horror of the Witching Hour in the Wolf's Glen to the powerful spell of the Tristan chord, the concept of dramatic and musical uniqueness within formal unity constantly expanded toward a more symphonic representation of actions on stage. Schoenberg clearly understood this 19th-century duality of variety and unity, stating that from Wagner he had learned ‘‘1) The way it is possible to manipulate themes for expressive purposes and the art of formulating them in a way that will serve this end. 2) Relatedness of tones and chords.’’⁸ Consequently Schoenberg's own opera would be internally charged with the need to expand even further the dramatic power of combining expressive innovation and formal unity.

The operatic traditions of the 19th century encouraged composers to develop innovative approaches to musical representation of the

⁷Schoenberg, ‘‘Composition with Twelve Tones (1),’’ in *Style and Idea*, 244.

⁸Schoenberg, ‘‘Folk-Music and Nationalism (2),’’ in *Style and Idea*, 174.

drama. A prominent example, already referred to, is the opening of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, where a series of unresolved phrase endings and a new harmonic entity—the Tristan chord—depict the mystic intoxication of the magic potion. But equally important is how distinct and concise this opening is, for precisely this characteristic gives the materials of the opening their recognizable, dramatic and unifying power throughout the first act. The dramatic structure of the first act demanded an innovative musical representation of the Potion, a representation that could retain its freshness and identity, from the Prelude through numerous secondary appearances in reference to Isolde's and her mother's sorcery, until the Potion is drunk in the last scene. Despite their differences off the opera stage, the dramatic and structural roles of God in *Moses und Aron* and the Potion in *Tristan und Isolde* are quite similar, and the musical depiction of God at the opening of *Moses und Aron* required the same efforts as the representation of the Potion: The musical depiction of God had to be distinct, concise, theatrically appropriate, so musically compelling and so musically innovative that its injections into the drama would always ring clearly and profoundly.

The surface action of *Moses und Aron* is of course the Exodus story, but the underlying, more universal conflict arises from the differing conceptions of God held by the characters, including Moses and Aaron. The more philosophically pure conception of God is Moses's (“... infinite . . . omnipresent . . . inconceivable God!”), and the opera opens with the musical presentation of this vision of God.

To depict the infinite and omnipresent, Schoenberg uses three balanced pairs of musical gestures, each repeated once in variation. The opening three measures of *Moses und Aron* sound two pairs of trichords performed by six solo voices, doubled by six solo orchestral instruments. Though these trichords sound twelve pitches, only eight pitch-classes (pc's) of the total chromatic are present, and although the texture is simple, Schoenberg is immediately developing a complex

Example 1. Arnold Schoenberg, *Moses und Aron*, opening, trichords

The image displays a musical score for the opening of Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, specifically focusing on trichords. The score is written for three staves: a treble clef staff at the top, a bass clef staff in the middle, and a bass clef staff at the bottom. The notation includes various trichord symbols such as A1.0, A2.0, A3.0, A4.0, A1.1, A3.1, A4.1, A2.1, A1.2, B1.1, A1.4, A2.2, B1.3, B1.0, B2.0, A1.3, B1.2, A1.4, and A2.3. These symbols are placed above or below the notes to identify specific trichord structures. The notes are often grouped with slurs and some have fingerings (e.g., 5, 6, 3) indicated. The score is organized into measures, with some measures containing multiple trichord symbols. The overall layout is a standard musical score with a focus on identifying and labeling specific harmonic structures.

interconnection of pitch-class content and intervallic relationships.⁹ The first two trichords (A1.0 and A2.0 on Example 1) sound in the upper voices; they are timbrally connected but have no pitch-class invariance. The third and fourth trichords (A3.0 and A4.0) sound in the lower voices. A3.0 is related to A2.0 by intervallic inversion and to A1.0 by pitch-class invariance, while A4.0 is related to A1.0 by intervallic inversion and to A2.0 by pc-invariance. Instruments play the opening two trichords an octave higher (A1.1 and 2.1), repeating the opening pitch relationships. During this second sounding of the trichords, the piano, with bassoon, flute, and piccolo, plays hexachords B1.0 and B2.0, which complete the 12-note aggregates with A1.1 + A2.1 and A3.1 + A4.1 respectively. In mm. 6-7, trichords formed from the pc's of hexachord B.1, combined with trichords A1 and A2, produce three interlaced 12-note aggregates. Throughout these opening seven measures the melodic contour, rhythmic delineation, and instrumentation help emphasize the evolving internal relationships of the pitch content.

While the musical relationships in these initial seven measures are not literally "infinite" or unfathomable, their complexity does suggest such a concept. The absence of direct melodic statements of the row is quite prophetic: it clearly tells the listener that the row itself is not the "omnipresent," organizing element of twelve-tone music but that internal relationships between pitches and pc's form the ultimate structural element. And this is precisely the principle underlying the partitioning techniques of post-Schoenberg serialists. In this light, there is great dramatic significance in Schoenberg's reserving the first melodic statement of the row for Aaron's entrance in scene 2, for Aaron's view of God is the more pragmatic of the two brothers (see Example 2).

In scene 1 God reveals himself to Moses as a voice from a burning bush. Schoenberg uses both sung and spoken male, female, and children's voices as the timbral representation of God's voice. This

⁹Milton Babbitt, "Large-Scale Harmonic Organization," in *Words about Music*, ed. Stephen Demski and Joseph N. Straus (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 63-84.

Example 2. *Moses und Aron*, Act 1 scene 2, mm. 124-129, Aaron's entrance

P0

row

Aron: m. 124 P4

O - son of my fa - thers,
are you sent - by might - y God?

Detailed description: This block contains musical notation for Example 2. It starts with a piano introduction (P0) for the 'row' instrument, consisting of a single melodic line in treble clef. Below this is the vocal line for Aaron (P4), starting at measure 124. The vocal line is in treble clef and includes lyrics: 'O - son of my fa - thers, are you sent - by might - y God?'. The piano accompaniment for the vocal line is shown in two staves (treble and bass clef) below the vocal line. The piano part features chords and arpeggiated figures that support the vocal melody.

Example 3. *Moses und Aron*, Act 1 scene 2, quasi-major/minor harmonic structures

Cho - sent is this folk; thus to
love one great god

P7 1 3 5 7 9 11 RI7 1 3 2 4

5 7 9 11

6 8 10 12

Detailed description: This block contains musical notation for Example 3, illustrating quasi-major/minor harmonic structures. It features two systems of vocal lines and piano accompaniment. The first system includes the lyrics 'Cho - sent is this folk; thus to' and is marked with 'P7 1 3 5 7 9 11' and 'RI7 1 3 2 4'. The second system includes the lyrics 'love one great god' and is marked with '5 7 9 11' and '6 8 10 12'. The piano accompaniment consists of two staves (treble and bass clef) with chords and arpeggiated figures. The notation includes various accidentals and dynamics, and the overall structure is characterized by complex harmonic relationships between the vocal and piano parts.

gives that voice great universality, and the heterogenous vocal timbres suggest the multi-colored flames leaping from the burning bush. More importantly for the dramatic structure of the opera, the voices establish a direct connection between the representation of God and the chorus of Israelites. The memorable choral sound and harmony in the first scene of the act provides a point toward which the Israelites will later evolve in the last scene of Act 1. The people gradually become more accepting of the power of Moses's God, and the music dramatically presents that evolution of belief. The presence of God within the people themselves is something that Aaron intuitively senses and later acts upon; but this presence is completely missed by Moses, hence setting up the conflict that will occur at the conclusion of Act 2.

The dramatic structure of Act 2 exhibits many direct contrasts to the first act. The first act began with the revelation of God to Moses, moved through a period of doubt in which Aaron argued relentlessly with the people to accept Moses's vision, and finally to acceptance and a hopeful march to freedom. Act 2, by contrast, begins with confusion and with threats against an absent Moses (still on the Mountain of Revelation), continues with the people's eager demands for and Aaron's quick approval of the building of an idol, till finally the Israelites fall into the practice of human sacrifice. The dramatic inversion of Act 1 is completed by Moses's return, bringing to the people the revelation of God's law, which he withholds from them; for now, despite Aaron's plea, he considers them unworthy to receive it.

The musical response to the structural conflict of Act 2 emphasizes the development of variant orderings of the row, though such reorderings had begun as early as scene 2 of Act 1. There, almost simultaneously with Aaron's first linear presentation of the original row, the instrumental accompaniment forms a reordered row that allows the sounding of harmonic structures recognizable as major and minor triads when Aaron refers to the people of Israel (see Example 3). At first these triads merge with the musical background, but they become more prominent in the last scene of the first act, as the people first reject and then accept Moses's vision of God (see Example 4). Act 1 ends with an overt musical statement of the underlying dramatic tension, when the chorus's C minor/E major cry for freedom references

the opera's opening measure (see Example 5).

Throughout Act 2 the development of prominent tonal structures accompanies the Israelites' loss of faith. The ensuing confusion mixes many new row partitions with reprises of first-act melodies, there used to praise Moses and his vision, but here to worship the Golden Calf (see Example 6). Upon Moses's return in scenes 4 and 5 of Act 2, all tonal references are eliminated, but the conflict between differing conceptions of God continues. Thus the return to a direct statement of the row does not occur until Moses smashes the stone tablets, and a linear statement of the row does not sound until the final measures of Act 2 (see Example 7).

The row of *Moses und Aron* is hexachordally combinatorial by inversion, meaning that a certain transposition of the inversion of the row allows the first hexachords of the row and the inversion to be combined to create a 12-note aggregate (Example 8); thus the second hexachords of the row and of that inversion can combine to form a second aggregate. (This relationship is manipulated by Schoenberg in almost all of his twelve-tone works.) While noting that the pitch content of the row's first hexachord and the second hexachord of the inversion are identical, also note that the pitch order is *not* the same. Here, within the combinatorial properties of the row, lies the genesis of 12-tone partitioning: when the combinatorial properties of a row are used compositionally, the listener will hear familiar groupings of pitches, but in different orderings.¹⁰ For Schoenberg, partitionings of the row meant variant, localized reorderings that were acceptable once the basic order became familiar to the listener. It is not hard to imagine that, as Schoenberg began working with variant reorderings, he was often attracted first to those that were immediately evident from combinatorial properties.

In the sketches for *Moses und Aron* one finds row schemes, like that shown in Example 9, where Schoenberg has circled or otherwise marked row segments from different transpositions and/or inversions of the row that share pitch content, but not pitch order. It takes, then, just a small step for the different pitch orderings to become

¹⁰Babbitt, "Questions of Partitioning," in *Words about Music*, 85-120.

Example 7. Schoenberg, *Moses und Aron*, Act 2 finale, linear statement of the row

m. 1059

7 8 9 10 11 12

1 2 3 4 5 6

Example 8. *Moses und Aron*, combinatorial properties of the row

row

aggregate

aggregate

combinatoric inversion

Example 9. Schoenberg, sketchbook, correlation of tetrachords in *Moses und Aron*

P6

P10

P2

* *

* * * *

* *

Example 10. Schoenberg, corresponding sketchbook entry for *Moses und Aron*, Act 2, m. 406

Example 11. Schoenberg, corresponding sketchbook entry for *Moses und Aron*, Act 2, m. 331

Example 12. Schoenberg, corresponding sketchbook entry for *Moses und Aron*, Act 2, m. 372

interchangeable in actual composition. This must be what Schoenberg was referring to when he said about the row for *Moses und Aron*: “the more familiar I became with this set the more easily I could draw themes from it.” In Example 9, tetrachords within each hexachord of the row contain pc's B, C, C#, and D. These were circled by Schoenberg, and then to emphasize their correlation, lines were drawn to connect the circles. Also, on the lowest staff of the example, note the pitch associations in the row transposition and retrograde; both row forms use these same four pc's as their first two and last two pitches.

While composing Act 2 of *Moses und Aron*, Schoenberg compiled a small catalogue of motivic sketches which show his interest in creating musical variety through the expansion of partitioning techniques. Example 10 is from the second entry in his sketch catalogue, and it corresponds to m. 406 of the second act. The row has been parsed into six dyads of consecutive pitches. The first, third, and fifth dyads are used for the melody; the second, fourth, and sixth dyads for the harmony. The pitch pairs give the melody a recognizable connection to the interval sequence of the row, while the movement from the second note of the row to the fifth, and from the sixth note of the row to the seventh, creates two melodic perfect fifths, an interval foreign to a simple melodic statement of the basic row.

Example 11 shows the third entry of the sketch catalogue, which relates to m. 331 of Act 2. Its opening melodic interval, a major 10th, is another interval that cannot be derived from a consecutive pitch ordering of the row. Of more interest is how the partitioning allows for development of unique contextual relationships between consecutive aggregate statements. In Example 11, the last harmonic entity of the first aggregate becomes the last three notes of the second melodic gesture; conversely, the last three notes of the first melodic gesture become the last harmonic entity of the second aggregate.

Example 12, from the fourteenth entry in the catalogue, shows how far from the row's original intervallic flavor these partitioning techniques could take the music while Schoenberg still sensed a connection to his basic set. In Example 12, which relates to m. 372 of Act 2, the five pc's of the string section's open strings have been extracted from the original transposition of the prime form of the row

and used for the harmony. This extraction leaves the seven pc's of the key of G \flat major, which Schoenberg uses to shape a tonal melody over the C-majorish accompaniment. Likely, Schoenberg was thinking of just such a passage in his music, when he referred to Berg's use of tonal materials in *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*:

I have to admit that Alban Berg, who was perhaps the least orthodox of us three – Webern, Berg and I – in his operas mixed pieces or parts of a distinct tonality with those which were distinctly non-tonal. He explained this, apologetically, by contending that as an opera composer he could not, for reasons of dramatic expression and characterization, renounce the contrast furnished by a change from major to minor. Though he was right as a composer, he was wrong theoretically. I have proved in my operas *Von Heute auf Morgen* and *Moses und Aron* that every expression and characterization can be produced with the style of free dissonance.¹¹

Schoenberg's own sketch catalogue shows his conscientious concern that the melodic surface of this opera contain a significant amount of variety. Yet the philosophical need for a single unifying principle – a single unifying row – dominated his approach to composition. This conflict resulted in an expansion of serial techniques that allowed for greater variation in local presentation of pitch while at the same time creating a background structural function for the row. This advancement in compositional technique made *Moses und Aron* a touchstone for a generation of composers interested in further development of partitioning techniques and in the creation of the twelve-tone compositional array. Yet despite its influence on and importance to 20th-century composers, *Moses und Aron* is emotionally and dramatically an extension of a 19th-century operatic tradition – a tradition that demanded musical and theatrical innovations. The irony

¹¹Schoenberg, "Composition with Twelve Tones (1)," in *Style and Idea*, 244-245.

is quite evident in this late 20th-century view of Schoenberg's opera, for the post-Schoenbergian serialists often drew criticism for being polar opposites of the great romantic composers. Yet in fact, by way of Schoenberg and the compositional techniques refined in *Moses und Aron*, their music represents a significant artistic extension of the 19th-century operatic tradition of musical innovation within a philosophical imperative of structural unity.