

Sacred Music You Can't Consume

-- *A liner note for the 2009 DVD release of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's 1973 cinematic adaptation of Arnold Schoenberg's 1932 Opera, Moses und Aron, released by New Yorker Films.*

In 1963, the German philosopher and essayist Theodor Adorno penned a passionate tribute to Arnold Schoenberg's 1932 opera, *Moses und Aron*. In Adorno's words, the opera asks an essential question about the status of religious faith in the modern age. He put it like this: "How is cultic music possible in the absence of a cult?" In this opera, Schoenberg adapts the well-known story from the Book of Exodus but does not claim to pose religious questions about whether or not to believe in a single God, and how to worship it if we do. If there is still something cultic or sacred in *Moses und Aron*, it is first and foremost a product of a modern historical moment, reworked at an essential distance, safely on the stage (or the screen), in the objective confines of the artwork, beneath the veils of representation. For Adorno, the consequences of this are substantial, for it is precisely the problem of representation—of the idol, of the image, of what can be *sensibly* manifest—that lies at the heart of *Moses und Aron*.

Unlike say, DeMille's later *Ten Commandments* (1956), Schoenberg does not attempt to sell or romanticize the story. His spectacularly atonal setting of Exodus is, by comparison, striking, austere, and overtly modernist. In keeping with his practice at the time, the composer abandons the standard harmonies of the tonal tradition to which we are all accustomed. Instead Schoenberg uses a musical system of his own invention: the twelve-tone method. Between any octave on a piano there are twelve distinct pitches: C, C#, D, E, E flat, F, F#, G, A, A flat, B flat, and B. Schoenberg did away with the traditional ordering of pitches we see in major and minor scales (which only take 7 in an octave—C, D, E, F, G, A, B, in the case of C Major), and instead took *all twelve* chromatic pitches, scrambled them, and reordered them in what he called a tone "row." In *Moses und Aron*, the row he ended up with was this: A, B flat, E, D, E flat, C#, G, F, F#, G#, B, C. Manipulating this row through quasi-mathematical operations of transformation, Schoenberg used it to derive nearly every pitch contained in the score. The sequence in its entirety could be shifted up or down by a half step (transposition); the order of the intervals could be run backwards (retrograde); and finally, the sequence of the intervals could be flipped upside down (inversion). But in each case, the twelve-tone method insured that pitches of the opera unfold without regard to the consonance or dissonance of the result. The system at once helped insure there would be no recognizable tonal harmony, while also giving the work a whole new sense of organic form, since all pitches are derived in one way or another from the row.

As for the text, Schoenberg wrote his own libretto for the opera, and while the plot loosely follows narratives in the Book of Exodus, the composer purposefully distorts the events, drawing out and putting stress on the opera's basic philosophical question: what does it mean to represent something that in itself must remain unrepresentable? For Moses, this is what God is, declaring in the opening scene: "O single, eternal, omnipresent, invisible, and unrepresentable God!" Of all the things of the universe, it is the idea of God that is absolutely unrepresentable, and in being unrepresentable is also absolutely singular, absolutely unique. Schoenberg thus emphasizes not the will of God's anger, or the content of the Ten Commandments, but the struggle to bring the community into organized belief without an image, a concrete representation to latch on to, to sacrifice to. At the very end of Act II, Moses, in melodramatic mode, affirms the image ban, right down to the powers of language itself: "Thus, I am beaten! Thus all was madness that I have thought, and it cannot and dare not be said! O word, you word that I lack!"

For Adorno, the cults of distant history depended on concrete images and idols that have lost their power in the modern age; they have been usurped by the secular auras of administrative rationality and advanced technology. If we agree with him, then what is to be made of a clamoring atonal opera that in its own modernist voice narrates anew the Jewish struggle to erect an unrepresentable God against cultic paganism? Perhaps the costs of Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique are drastic through and through. Far from giving us an easy ride to renew a spiritual relationship with Moses, the strident harmonic language of *Moses und Aron* renders the sacred experience *unconsumable*. This implies, in turn, that modern religious experiences are actually dominated by consumption: the ecstasy of ritual, the sanctity of a service, the peace of meditation, the commitment of an internalized moral law, or the ornamented distinction of cathedral walls—in the modern world each is as much consumption as it is transcendence. From the outset, this jangling atonal opera would say *no* to all this. The sacred will not be consumed. Instead it will be difficult, and bitter. Still following Adorno here, if we want to glimpse what it would be to stand above all commodities, beyond the consumable, thus salvaging something *both* modern and sacred, we have to find it in the unconsumable difficulty of artworks like *Moses und Aron*.

Schoenberg's own spirituality evolved over time. We know he abandoned the Jewish faith for much of his early career, converting to Lutheranism in 1898. As he matured, he formally returned to Judaism in 1933, seeking to reconcile the vitality of his own spiritual life with the waves of anti-Semitism in Austria leading up to the rise of the Third Reich. But alongside the history of his official faith, the composer's writings and correspondence reveal that he consistently developed his own personalized brand of spirituality outside organized religion. Early on, he wrote often about a home brew of expressionist mysticism, fueled by the intellectual and cultural fashions of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. This very private spirituality, an almost burning sense of inner expression, animated much of his musical and creative output. His compositional process is intoxicated with superstition, as he felt the need to store up expression in cryptic forms, numerologies, magical patterns, and indecipherable symbols. Audiences were regularly baffled by the result, and the composer was inevitably afflicted with a melancholic feeling that a musical work could never properly externalize his inner spirituality.

The works he left us are riddled with this neurosis. The fussy particularities of the twelve-tone method were perhaps a refuge for Schoenberg, allowing him to write a score overloaded with detail, leaving a million-fold network of secret musical correspondences, row partitions, inversions, transpositions, and canons in miniature, opening an infinity of encoded messages. In this sense, the unconsumable atonality of the score forms strong alliances with the opera's opening gambit: Moses is afraid to speak for God, for words fail him. Impossible communications back the content of *Moses und Aron*, whether in the glittering density of the orchestra's twelve-tone assemblages, or in a libretto that philosophizes Exodus for a modern age. Perhaps in Adorno's eyes, a musical work that attempts to communicate incommunicability by way of the figure of an unrepresentable God also struggles to renew a modern imperative that perfect communion is impossible in a fractured, rationalized world.

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