13 Immanence and transcendence in *Moses und Aron*

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Schoenberg's opera *Moses und Aron* dramatizes – along philosophical, theological, and psychological lines – the predicament of the prophet, who grasps the essential unrepresentability (*Unvorstellbarkeit*) of the Divine, but cannot communicate an understanding that supersedes language and concepts. Although Schoenberg may resemble his protagonist Moses in some respects, the opera cannot be reduced to an allegory on the modern artist's intractable position. Rather, it examines the human condition from multiple perspectives, by exploring the distinct spiritual and psychological experiences of Moses, Aron, and the Jewish *Volk*, through their diverse capacities for awareness, insight, expression, and belief. The opera is fundamentally concerned with the limits of perception and knowledge, and with the potential for human spirit and intellect (*Geist*) to supersede those limits. The music's fabric of sound, more than the events portrayed or the ideas articulated by the words, conveys the experience and import of those epistemological limits.

In his book *Metaphysical Song*, Gary Tomlinson elucidates how opera has always echoed contemporaneous systems of epistemology and metaphysics, using the sonorous presence of the human voice to point toward the supersensible realm – as each philosophical (and operatic) age conceived it.[1] The philosophical ground for modern opera is given by Kantian epistemology, in which human intuition and thought are fundamentally limited to immanent and sensible phenomena, and cannot access the transcendental realm of noumena. In modern opera, Tomlinson writes, "The noumenon becomes the modern cipher of the supersensible world."[2] No opera articulates the quest for the noumenal more explicitly than Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*.

In an influential commentary on *Moses und Aron*, Theodor Adorno claimed that its music is representational, and that the totalizing capacities of the twelve-tone method invoke a fatal tension in the work. Tomlinson encapsulates the crucial inferences in Adorno's critique, laying bare their vertiginous circularity, when he writes: "In the process of representing metaphysics through an integrated musical totality . . . Schoenberg loses *the possibility of representing the impossibility of representing metaphysics* – the most basic premise on which the whole endeavor of *Moses und Aron* was predicated."[3]

This chapter offers a counterpoise to the Adornian polemic, by questioning some of its fundamental assumptions, and by contextualizing and reinterpreting others. Attending to the music's most elemental components, and to Schoenberg's own statements, I will argue that the music's function is not to represent metaphysical or theological conundrums (as Adorno thinks), but to enact epistemological ones: the music indicates and performs the limits of sensible phenomena and immanence, to reach the boundary that is superseded by noumena and transcended by the pure Divine idea.

The chapter begins with a critique of Adorno's commentary on the opera, then sketches Schoenberg's own notions of higher meaning in artworks, and concludes with short analyses that show how the music in *Moses und Aron* exemplifies his artistic beliefs.

Opera as sacred art? *Moses und Aron*, Schoenberg and Adorno

Theodor Adorno's 1963 lecture on *Moses und Aron*, published under the title "Sakrales Fragment" (Sacred Fragment), is a cornerstone in the opera's reception history.[4] Adorno's influential critique has resonated throughout subsequent discussions of the opera, especially in the more recent commentaries by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Gary Tomlinson.[5] As a pupil of Alban Berg and member of the Schoenberg circle, Adorno was generally an insightful champion of Schoenberg's work. But some tensions developed between the two men in the later years, partly in connection with Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*.[6] And Schoenberg's resolute personality and confident directness sometimes grated on Adorno, whose virtuosic philosophical prolixity could in turn irritate the composer. In striking ways, their personalities and relationship ironically replicate the tension between Moses and Aron in the opera, and this analogy may have had a subliminal effect on Adorno's response to the opera. Although the final paragraphs of "Sakrales Fragment" praise aspects of the opera, the essay conducts an extended *agon* against Schoenberg. Despite some powerful insights, Adorno's polemic misrepresents some fundamental aspects of the opera. Contradictions lie beneath its polished discourse, and it distorts Schoenberg's aesthetic intentions and attitudes.

Adorno's critique hinges on two main accusations, the first being that Schoenberg aimed to write a belated "sacred" work, unaware that (in Adorno's opinion) such products of bourgeois ideology and nostalgic theology are untenable after Kant and Hegel; as Adorno writes: "The impossibility is historical, that of sacred art today."[7] Adorno accuses

Schoenberg of "a residue of naiveté" and assumes that *Moses und Aron* was innocently intended as a sacred work, a sort of Old Testament riposte to Wagner's *Parsifal*.[8] Adorno argued that "the fact that *Moses und Aron* was written as an opera does not disqualify it" from being a "sacred work of art."[9] But in fact Schoenberg had rejected and abandoned treatments of the material using two traditionally sacred genres: a cantata *Moses am brennenden Dornbusch*, of March 1926; and an oratorio prose text *Moses und Aron: ein Oratorium*, of October 1928. Between these, Schoenberg wrote the agitprop stage play *Der biblische Weg* (The Biblical Way, completed July 12, 1927), in which the protagonist Max Aruns tries – but fails – to establish a modern Jewish state in Africa. Aruns passionately expresses some distinctive religious positions, but he is principally a man of action and a political prophet, not a religious one. Despite its title, the play focuses on psychological, political, and social dynamics, and Schoenberg continued in that vein by ultimately deciding to cast *Moses und Aron* as music drama. By April 1930, he was describing the *Moses und Aron* project as an opera, and on the "Kompositionsvorlage" (the working copy of the libretto) dated July 17, 1930 he crossed out the word "Oratorium" and definitively wrote "Oper" in its place.[10] Even if he first considered a sacred work, Schoenberg eventually shaped the material as tragic *opera seria*.

Der biblische Weg and *Moses und Aron* differ in many ways, but they share underlying content and themes.[11] The play's contemporary setting points to timely and urgent issues for the present and future, but the focus is also on human psychology and behavior. Although Schoenberg based his opera on biblical sources, his libretto adapts and alters the biblical narrative significantly, to portray also the forces of human psychology and behavior that pose ineluctable obstacles to spiritual evolution.[12] Opera requires dramatic situations, actions, and pacing that permit sung expression in solos and ensembles and that allow instrumental music to be a fundamental agency for the projection of meaning; contrasts between Moses and Aron propel the opera's tragic narrative, and are musically supported by the opposition of speech (Moses) and melos (Aron), and by concomitant differences in the instrumental and choral parts. In the play, Max Aruns combines aspects of both Moses and Aron in one persona, but in both works prophets and political leaders meet with tragic failure: humanity is unready for their higher vision, and is too divided even to form a viable polity.

Adorno's prejudice about sacred art leads him to misunderstand not only the dramatic emphasis on human psychology and behavior, but also the basic character of the many choral textures in the opera: "the pathos of the music ... at every moment embodies a communal 'we,' a single

impulse of a predetermined collective consciousness, something like the unanimity of a congregation. Otherwise, the predominance of choral writing would be unthinkable."[13] But the *Volk* in the opera are disorderly and factionalized; they rarely show collective agreement or communal worship – except, ironically, in the Dionysian orgy around the Golden Calf. *Der biblische Weg* likewise portrays, as Bluma Goldstein notes, a "diverse and contentious population of socialists, capitalists, intellectuals, Zionists, assimilationists, and orthodox Jews."[14] The opera's choral textures are densely polyphonic, displaying the *disunity* of the *Volk*. We repeatedly witness an isolated Moses, and an uncomprehending, quarrelsome, and unsympathetic *Volk*. The audience has no sense of a congregational "we," only of a divided "them" and an isolated "him." Moses stands alone at the beginning, and at the end. In fact, Adorno also misrepresents the concept of individual genius, as it applies to both Schoenberg and the Moses of the opera: "The belief in genius, that metaphysical transfiguration of bourgeois individualism, allows no doubt that everything is open to the great ones at any moment, and that they can constantly achieve the greatest things."[15] But Adorno forgets that Schoenberg had portrayed the genius as doomed to a cycle of rejection and failure in *Die glückliche Hand* (1910–13), which Michael Mäckelmann calls a "*conceptual* precursor" of *Moses und Aron*.[16] The opera likewise narrates the opposite of what Adorno claims: the great Moses fails. The opera is not a sacred work; it is a tragedy – for Moses, and for Aron and the *Volk*. Schoenberg also failed, since he was unable to complete Act III, although many agree that Acts I and II together constitute a compelling artistic whole.

To be sure, in the ensuing years Schoenberg did write compositions that are unquestionably intended as "sacred" works, either devotional or congregational: *Kol Nidre*, Op. 39 (1938), *Dreimal Tausend Jahre*, Op. 50a (1949), *Psalm 130* (De Profundis), Op. 50b (1950), and his incomplete last work, the *Moderner Psalm*, Op. 50c (1950). The latter bears obvious similarities with the opening scene of *Moses und Aron*, but these also underscore how different is the rest of the opera. The question is not whether Schoenberg held religious beliefs or wrote "sacred" works, but whether *Moses und Aron* is such a work. Moses does articulate Schoenberg's most fundamental religious belief, that the sacred is inexpressible and beyond imagination. But contra Adorno, the opera is a sacred work only in being an extended demonstration of the *impossibility* of conveying the sacred. By thinking Schoenberg to be naive, Adorno himself failed to perceive that Schoenberg made this impossibility the opera's fundamental axiom. To counter Adorno's claim that *Moses und Aron* is sacred art, one need only observe that few audience members will leave a performance with any sense of renewed religious devotion.

The second axis of Adorno's attack on the opera is his claim that its twelve-tone idiom is totalizing and authoritarian in character. But Adorno often ascribes his own grandiose claims to Schoenberg's music, then censures the composer for not heeding them; for example, "Every music that aims at totality, as a simile of the absolute, has its theological dimension, even if it is unaware of it."[17] The idea that the opera's music "aims at totality, as a simile of the absolute" is Adorno's, and does not comport with the composer's perspective (as will be shown later). Adorno prized Schoenberg's earlier Expressionist "atonal" works as authentic artistic reflections of post-Enlightenment modernity, especially for their departure from the obsolete values of tonality. The Expressionist works reflect a late phase of individualistic society: "the spiritual content available at such a stage of consciousness cannot be anything else but that of the individual expressing himself. Hence the definition of Schoenberg's music as extreme expression, which accompanied it to the threshold of the twelve-tone technique."[18]

Schoenberg's own conception of the twelve-tone technique notwithstanding, Adorno viewed it as a regressive ideology of totalization and domination over the compositional material. He claims that because of "the sovereignty that Schoenberg commands over his music" in *Moses und Aron*, "the eruptive, expressive passages become images, metaphors of expression in a double sense. The overall plan . . . domesticates them and renders them inauthentic."[19] But Adorno's own concepts would more cogently argue that the expressive and "eruptive" moments must be authentic precisely by virtue of wrenching themselves from the putative oppressive grip of the system. By typecasting Schoenberg's twelve-tone practice as authoritarian, and as a shift in expressive attitude, Adorno overlooks how the opera narrates a crisis of expression, exemplified in the tragic positions of both Moses and Aron, whose problem is not to represent God, but to communicate the idea of an unrepresentable God.[20] Contra Adorno, the drama – and the music, as we will see later – continually remind us that unrepresentable totalities cannot be illustrated.

Adorno dwells at length on the Second Commandment, which is clearly one of the opera's underlying concerns, but he slights Schoenberg's understanding of it: "The prohibition on graven images [*Bilderverbot*], which Schoenberg heeded as few others, nevertheless extends further than even he imagined."[21] Because the *Bilderverbot* dominates his focus, Adorno cleaves to the idea that the music must be pictorial. He fixates on the visual, repeatedly insisting that the music tries to illustrate the Absolute, and that it naively contravenes the *Bilderverbot*, and "verges on heresy."[22] Preoccupied with images, Adorno asserts what he calls "the pictorial essence [*Bilderwesen*] of the music"[23] and claims that it is "the intractable duty of the music[,] to be an

image of the imageless [*Bild des Bilderlosen*]."[24] So preoccupied is Adorno with the pictorial, rather than the sonorous, that he grandly credits Schoenberg with having "actually rendered visible one of the antinomies of art itself."[25] But Adorno's fixation on image rather than sound goes against an aesthetic imperative that Schoenberg had already expressed in 1912: "The assumption that a piece of music must summon up images of one sort or another . . . is as widespread as only the false and banal can be."[26] Aside from the Divine voice emanating from the Burning Bush in the first scene, and again briefly in the fourth scene, there is no place in the opera where the Divine is represented.[27] Jewish law prohibits pronunciation of the Divine Name, but to imagine the holy voice is no heresy. As Bluma Goldstein notes, Jewish tradition grants special immediacy to the auditory, and Deuteronomy 4: 12–15 prohibits visual but not aural representations: "The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape – nothing but a voice . . . therefore, be most careful . . . not to act wickedly and make for yourself a sculptured image in any likeness whatever."[28] The breathtaking vocal/instrumental sonority that Schoenberg conceived and created in the Burning Bush scene is extraordinary precisely because it is so purely – and blindingly – aural and oracular.

The aesthetics of incomprehensibility

The opera's music is not a naive attempt to depict and manifest the ineffable or the Divine. Instead, it exemplifies the Kantian sublime.[29] Its aim is to sound the limits of immanence, of the phenomenal, and of human comprehension. That perspective on the music will now be anchored in some of Schoenberg's own statements.

Schoenberg's religious and aesthetic convictions converge on the notion that inspired insight can sometimes exceed the limits of human perception and understanding, and burst through to the noumenal. Artworks must explore the margins of comprehensibility, in order to stimulate intuition and spirit to higher awareness.

It was noted above that Schoenberg's libretto alters the Old Testament narrative. Already in the 1912 essay "The Relationship to the Text," Schoenberg had noted that "no one doubts that a poet who works with historical material may move with the greatest freedom."[30] Earlier in that essay, Schoenberg describes how opera librettos relate to music – at least for composers who write their own librettos:

> in the case of Wagner it is as follows: the impression of the "essence of the world" *received through music* becomes productive in him and stimulates

> him to a poetic rendering [*Nachdichtung*] in the material of another art. But the events and feelings which appear in this rendering were not contained in the music, but are merely the material which the poet uses only because so direct, unpolluted and pure a mode of expression is denied to poetry, an art still bound to subject-matter.[31]

If this tells us anything about Schoenberg's own approach, then we must invert Adorno's claim that the music provides "an image of the imageless": just the opposite, the dramatic action provides a secondary transmutation of the music, which is the primary creative impulse and the imageless art par excellence. The characters and events in Schoenberg's opera must be understood as a visible and comprehensible supplement to the non-verbal experience and understanding that the music transmits directly in its own way. But what exactly does Schoenberg's music signify?

Schoenberg begins "The Relationship to the Text" by refuting the notion – nonetheless belabored by Adorno – that music must conjure images. He then formulates an axiom, fundamental to his aesthetic canon, on the relation between music and reason (*Vernunft*):

> There are relatively few people who are capable of understanding, purely in terms of music, what music has to say. The assumption that a piece of music must summon up images of one sort or another . . . is as widespread as only the false and banal can be . . . Even Schopenhauer, who at first says something really exhaustive about the essence of music – in his wonderful thought, "The composer reveals the inmost essence of the world and utters the most profound wisdom in a language which his reason does not understand" – even he loses himself later when he tries to translate details of this language which reason [*Vernunft*] does not understand into our terms. It must, however, be clear to him that in this translation into the terms of human language – which is abstraction, reduction to the recognizable – the essential [*Wesentlich*], the language of the world, *which ought to remain incomprehensible and only perceptible* [*nur fühlbar*], is lost.[32]

Here Schoenberg adopts Schopenhauerian thought, at least to the extent that "the essential" (*das Wesentlich*) is inaccessible to reason (*Vernunft*). It is at best "*only perceptible*," and music is therefore its most direct artistic medium. It should also remain incomprehensible – at least to human cognition – and this is a fundamental feature of artworks that must be embraced. Already in 1909 Schoenberg had pronounced: "the artwork is a labyrinth."[33]

In an important letter to Kandinsky from August 19, 1912, Schoenberg characterizes artworks as puzzles or enigmas that bring us in contact with the "incomprehensible":

> We must become conscious that there are puzzles [*Rätseln*] around us. And we must find the courage to look these puzzles in the eye without timidly

> asking about "the solution" [*Lösung*]. It is important that our power to create such puzzles [that is, artworks] mirrors [*nachbildet*] the puzzles with which we are surrounded, so that our soul may endeavor – not to solve them – but to decipher [*dechiffrieren*] them. What we gain thereby should not be the solution, but a new method of coding or decoding [*Chiffrier- oder Dechiffrier-Methode*]. The material, worthless in itself, serves in the creation of new puzzles. For the puzzles are an image [*Abbild*] of the incomprehensible [*Unfaßbaren*]. And imperfect, that is, a human image [*Abbild*]. But if we can only learn from them to consider the incomprehensible [*das Unfaßbare*] as possible, we get nearer to God, because we no longer demand to understand him. Because then we no longer measure him with our intelligence [*Verstand*], criticize him, deny him, because we cannot reduce [*auflösen*] him to that human inadequacy [*Unzulänglichkeit*] which is our clarity.[34]

For Schoenberg, the artwork-*Rätsel* provides an "imperfect, that is, human image" of *das Unfaßbare* (the incomprehensible); it shows *Unfaßbarkeit* (incomprehensibility), and indicates the human inability to grasp the ineffable. Understood in this way, the music in *Moses und Aron* does not contravene the *Bilderverbot*: it does not represent God, but only the associated qualities of *Unfaßbarkeit* and *Unvorstellbarkeit*, and it does so with a *Rätsel*, not a *Bild*. Such an artwork nevertheless brings us "nearer to God" because it shows us the membrane between phenomena and noumena, between immanence and transcendence – a boundary where we can recognize the limits of human reason, realize that what we call "clarity" is merely "inadequacy," and conclude that we must accept a fundamental *Unlösbarkeit* (insolubility, irreducibility) in the artwork and also the higher *geistliche* (spiritual) essence that it signifies. Adorno's assumption that Schoenberg tried to represent the unrepresentable clashes badly with Schoenberg's declared aesthetic position, which aimed instead to enact the human limits of incomprehensibility (*Unfaßbarkeit*) and unrepresentability (*Unvorstellbarkeit*). For Schoenberg, the artwork is the modern, quasi-secular medium for contemplating the *Unfaßbare*, and it supersedes traditional concepts and approaches to the "sacred." Later we will see how Schoenberg adheres to this approach in his twelve-tone idiom, which helps him produce artistic puzzles that enact *Unfaßbarkeit*.

Schoenberg's artistic credo alters radically the relation of the artwork to its public. In a March 1930 essay Schoenberg wrote: "Called upon to say something about my public, I have to confess: I do not believe I have one."[35] Already in February 1928 Schoenberg had noted: "Surely I have said it often enough. I do not believe that the artist creates for others."[36] These remarks totally undermine Adorno's notion of a communal "we" in the opera. The greatest tension in the work is not some contravention of

the *Bilderverbot*, but the bold gesture of writing an opera – the most public of musical genres – that puts *Unfaßbarkeit* and *Unvorstellbarkeit* at its very center, and whose narrative and compositional means perform the rupture between the visionary artist and a puzzled, uncomprehending public.

As an "anti-*Parsifal*," Schoenberg's opera destroys the Wagnerian fantasy of redemption – individual or collective. By returning to an earlier stage in religious history, the biblical setting undercuts Wagner's medieval Grail fantasy and the illusions of the bourgeois age to assert a fundamental *Unerlösbarkeit* in the human spiritual condition. In *Moses und Aron* there is no *reine Tor* to reclaim the spear, heal the wound, and give the audience the illusion and catharsis it craves. Instead there is Moses's exhortation to purify thinking ("reinige dein Denken!"), although a *reine Gedanke* (pure idea) will always remain *unvorstellbar*, *unfaßbar*, inexpressible. The opera is not directed to a public, but at the epistemological limit, at *reine Geist* (pure spirit). Schoenberg gives us no catharsis, makes no concession to the public. He offers *Unlösbarkeit* in place of Wagnerian *Erlösung* (redemption).

The limits of musical immanence

How does Schoenberg's music signify *Unfaßbarkeit*?

In an unpublished manuscript dated July 23, 1927, just eleven days after completing *Der biblische Weg*, Schoenberg describes the ineffable quality of certain ideas:

> For there are thoughts (as I well know) that one can think hundredfold with perfect clarity, but that dissipate [*zerflattern*], often as soon as one wants to articulate them, and always when one wants to write them down. The presentation of a thought is in most cases a reduction to the comprehensible [*Faßliche*]; fewer can be presented than can be thought: even among the comprehensible ones.
>
> But it appears there are ideas that may indeed be thought, but not articulated, not further extended. There appears to be a knowledge [*Wissen*] which remains reserved only for those minds which are chosen for it; a secret knowledge [*Geheimwissenschaft*] that cannot be disseminated; for which our language has no words; that one can think, but cannot – and may not – reproduce [*wiedergeben*]!![37]

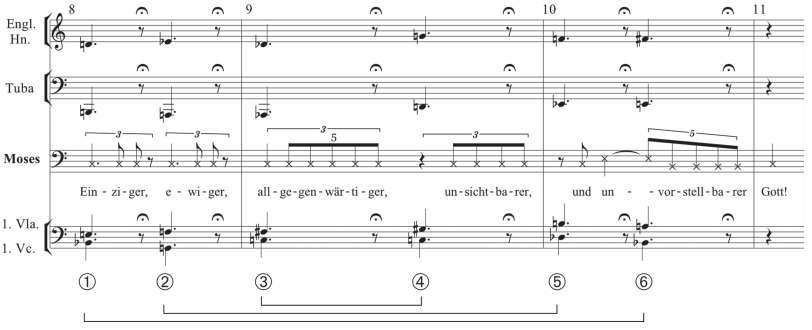
Schoenberg articulates here a new form of the *Bilderverbot*: what cannot and may not be expressed is not necessarily the traditional notion of the Divine, but is nonetheless a window toward the *Unfaßbare* or *Unvorstellbare*, a glimpse of a hidden knowledge of the noumenal. The secret knowledge described here seems closer to esoteric *gnosis* than to

scientia; it is experienced by a select few, not acquired through the application of logic and reason. These are also the kind of inexpressible thoughts that motivate Moses's expressions of verbal inadequacy: "Ich kann denken, aber nicht Reden" (I can think, but not express) and "O Wort, du Wort, das mir fehlt" (O word, you word, that fails me). But the capacity Moses lacks is one he could never possess, because transcendental ideas are not commensurable with language. Despite their clarity, they are cognitively unstable and are evaporated by the impulses and mechanisms of expression. They are suspended at the boundary between immanence and transcendence. In other words, they have the quality of musical tones and musical ideas – which decay and dissipate once sounded, can be produced in the musical imagination and retained by force of concentration, even notated, but their meaning cannot be fully captured by language or reason.

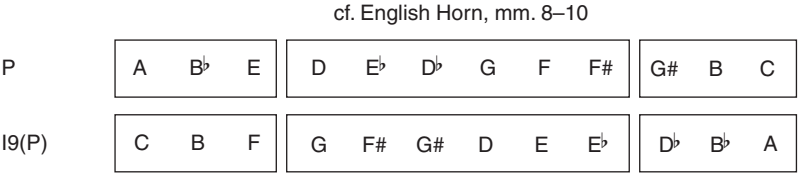
The music of *Moses und Aron* enacts in aural experience these limits of non-verbal thinking and perception. The twelve-tone idiom is ideally suited for this task, *pace* Adorno's claims about its totalizing tendencies, because it creates tone-configurations that probe the limits of musical cognition and memory. Schoenberg's music does not *communicate the content* of the kinds of thoughts described above; but as a labyrinth or puzzle, the musical artwork does *enact the experience* of such a thought, as a blend of clarity, irreducibility, and incomprehensibility. Two short excerpts from the opera will indicate how the music does this.

Moses's first words in the opera (mm. 8–11) address the Divine presence emanating from the Burning Bush by listing God's essential properties: "Einziger, ewiger, allgegenwärtiger, unsichtbarer, und unvorstellbarer Gott!" (Unique, eternal, omnipresent, invisible, and unrepresentable God!). These words are accompanied by instrumental music that seems to suspend the flow of time (see Example 13.1a). The music preceding and following this critical passage uses the row forms labeled **P** and **I**9(**P**) on Example 13.1b, subdivided into the segments enclosed in boxes. These row forms are hexachordally combinatorial, as is Schoenberg's normal twelve-tone practice.[38] But for the list of Divine attributes, Schoenberg deploys row forms that are *not* hexachordally combinatorial, **I**10(**P**) and **T**10(**P**), shown on Example 13.1c. In mm. 8–10, the sonic frame for Moses's declamation is given by four solo instruments playing six tetrachords, interrupted by fermatas. Boxes and circled numbers on Example 13.1c indicate how the tetrachords are derived from the two row forms. Bold type highlights the pitch classes (one per tetrachord) played by the English horn, as the highest voice in each chord. These declaim the six-note motive D–E flat–D flat–G–F–F sharp, which is partly concealed in the dark and mysterious chords, but which is a prominent leitmotiv in the

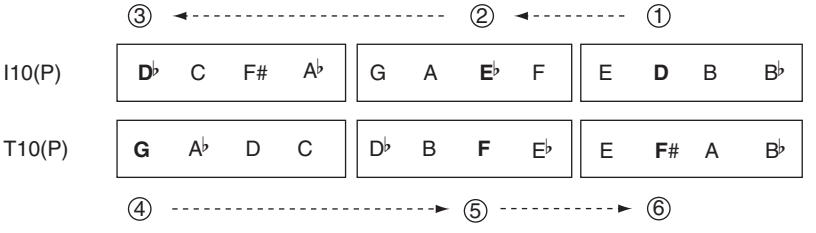
Example 13.1a Schoenberg, *Moses und Aron*, mm. 8–11



Example 13.1b Combinatorial row forms **P** and **I**9(**P**), as segmented in mm. 1–7 and 11–15



Example 13.1c Row forms **I**10(**P**) and **T**10(**P**) as segmented in mm. 8–10



surrounding measures and throughout the opera; its original derivation from row form **P** is indicated on Example 13.1b.[39]

These features have been widely recognized, but the unusual row pairing in mm. 8–10 has puzzled analysts.[40] This passage constitutes a compact musical labyrinth in several ways. Horizontal brackets beneath Example 13.1a link inversionally related chords, indicating a palindrome under the relevant inversion operation, to show that the music is its own mirror image in both its temporal and its harmonic-intervallic dimensions (in tandem). The English horn motive signals this mirroring by projecting an interval palindrome, <+1,–2,+6,–2,+1>, but the other instrumental lines are not palindromic individually. The enigmatic, labyrinthine quality of this music arises from its double inward-folding, which figuratively reverses-and-suspends the flow of time and the extension of (musical) space. Michael Cherlin has discussed other inversional palindromes in Act

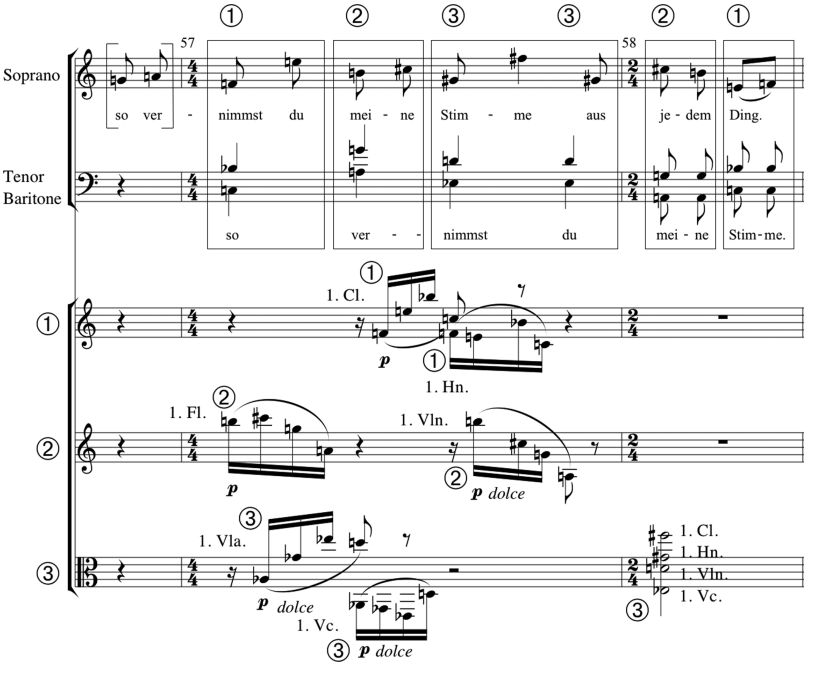
I, and his two principal examples each "portray a central mystery of the drama"; he notes that palindromes of this type are "esoteric" and difficult to perceive, in part due to "wonderfully Hegelian" aspects of their coming-into-unity.[41] The double reflexivity of the palindromic scheme in mm. 8–10 is almost self-negating, for it neutralizes both temporal immanence and spatial immanence. This musical *Rätsel* makes the listener experience *Unfaßbarkeit*, precisely while Moses is acknowledging the *Unvorstellbarkeit* of the Divine. The palindromic design can be partially perceived, but not completely comprehended. The English horn motive gives the listener an inkling, but the timbre and dissonance of the chords otherwise obscure the full extent of the palindrome. Adorno viewed the twelve-tone technique as *ideology*; but for Schoenberg its task was to stimulate aural *ideation*, and to probe the limits of perception and comprehension.

The doctrine in "The Relationship to the Text" suggests that Moses's words here are a "*Nachdichtung*" of this enigmatic music: while the music performs its own *Unfaßbarkeit*, Moses refers in parallel to invisibility and *Unvorstellbarkeit*. But Moses is also naming God, and the musical construction observes a traditional Jewish precaution in this regard. I suspect that Schoenberg's use of tetrachords refers to the *Tetragrammaton*: the manner of writing the holy Name as YHWH, omitting the vowels so that the sacred sonic aspect of the Name – the Divine vowel sound – is not represented graphically and the *Bilderverbot* is not transgressed. The music's tetrachordal *Klangfarbenmelodie* also has a sublime and supernatural vowel quality – created by the unique combination of wind, string, and low brass instruments – and it thereby breathes life into its own manner of manifesting the Divine Name. Moses himself does not pronounce the Name, but Michael Cherlin has noted that the vowel sounds in Moses's list of Divine attributes form a powerful progression, becoming successively longer, darker, and more open; they culminate on the "o" of "Gott," to echo the pure, infinite "O" that emerges from the Burning Bush in mm. 1–3 and 5–7.[42] Even though the instrumental *tetragrammata* intone vowel-like sounds, the music respects the *Bilderverbot* and the traditions that govern writing the Name. Perhaps Adorno sensed all this when he remarked (about Schoenberg's music in general) that "Schoenberg's expressive urge . . . has as its secret model the revelation of the Name,"[43] echoing an earlier essay in which he had written that "what [music] says is as appearance simultaneously determined and concealed. Its idea is the form of the Divine Name. It is demythologized prayer, freed from magical effects; the ever-futile human attempt to name the Name, not to communicate meanings."[44] Schoenberg was apparently aware that he had found the *only* row forms from which he

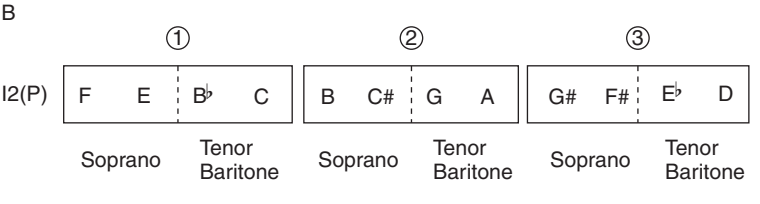
could construct the passage by extracting the six-note motive from the *tetragrammata* of two inversionally palindromic row forms.[45] This explains why he departed from his normal combinatorial procedures for this passage. The passage is both a *Rätsel*, and also a brilliant solution to the problems invoked by the *Bilderverbot*. Evidently, Schoenberg's ability to observe the *Bilderverbot* extended much further than Adorno imagined.[46]

Many passages in the opera are like this – miniature musical puzzle-labyrinths, complete in themselves and yet nothing but hermetic fragments. In mm. 57–8, for instance, Schoenberg creates another short enigmatic musical unit that is effectively described by the words emerging from the Burning Bush, "so vernimmst du meine Stimme aus jedem Ding" (so shall you perceive my voice in all things). (See Example 13.2a.) This passage is derived from a single row form (Example 13.2b), and again

Example 13.2a Schoenberg, *Moses und Aron*, mm. 57–8



Example 13.2b Row form **I2(P)** as segmented in mm. 57–8



tetrachords are associated with the Divine voice. Example 13.2a uses a short-score format to show how each tetrachord (again labeled by a circled number) appears in the orchestra as an independent instrumental gesture, and is soon echoed with a new contour and instrumental timbre. These instrumental echoes can be heard piecemeal with careful attention, but the total effect is purposefully fleeting and difficult to grasp. Meanwhile, three solo singers project two simple palindromes: each tetrachord is subdivided into dyads, assigned in alternation to the soprano or to the tenor-baritone duet; the soprano (excluding the anacrusis) presents a melodic palindrome (with register slightly varied at the end), while the male voices present a palindrome of simultaneous dyads (with simple rhythmic elaboration). The vocal palindromes are quite easy to notice individually, but harder to perceive in combination, and become nearly inscrutable when surrounded by the fleeting orchestral accompaniment. Moreover, the listener's attention here is actually commanded by the otherworldly *Sprechchor*, which is not shown on the example. The musical construction again signifies the hermetic density of phenomenal immanence in space and time, and takes the listener to the limits of comprehension; the words ironically reinforce the point, for the Divine voice may be omnipresent, but our human capacity to perceive it is limited. It is not expected that the listener will cut through the music's immanent *Unfaßbarkeit*, and apprehend its structures. Such things, as Schoenberg said in "The Relationship to the Text," should remain "incomprehensible and only perceptible."[47] They will nonetheless subconsciously work their mystery on the receptive listener.

The opera's music is effectively a succession of enigmatic and paradoxical shards of musical *Unfaßbarkeit*.[48] The characters, words, and events on stage are a poetic-dramatic rendering of Schoenberg's belief that the margins of comprehensibility are the essential realm of both art and spirit. The fragmentary, enigmatic, and hermetic shards of sounding creation emerge and then dissipate, so concentrated in their layered combination, so replete with immanent tone-relations and self-reflective musical phenomenality, that they immediately reach the limits of aural comprehensibility. The sounds are experienced on the membrane of our eardrums, but their realm is also the tympanum between the phenomenal and the noumenal, between immanence and transcendence. The artwork cannot cross that boundary, but it can sustain the limits of *Unfaßbarkeit* in order to point beyond. *Moses und Aron* transcends Adorno's category of sacred art, and it achieves – in a necessarily fragmentary and immanent way – the sublime.