

MOSES UND ARON

Arnold Schoenberg

Act I. Thirteenth century B.C. In the desert, Moses calls upon God and is answered by voices from the Burning Bush, asking the reluctant man to become a prophet. It is God's intention to free the Jews from bondage in Egypt, and Moses has been chosen to lead them. Moses greets his brother, Aron, who will have to serve as his spokesman, explaining his difficult ideas in terms the people can understand. Moses assures him that love is the key to unlocking this mystery. When Aron praises God for hearing prayers and receiving offerings, Moses cautions that the purification of one's own thinking is the only reward to be expected from paying such tributes.

A young couple discusses Moses' having been chosen to lead the Jews. Because he killed an Egyptian guard, bringing retribution on his people, they are afraid he will get them into further trouble. One man expresses hope that the new idea of a single God will prove stronger than Egypt's multiple gods, stronger than Pharaoh's hold. The people reiterate this hope, looking toward the arriving Moses and Aron, who keep changing roles, so that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. Trying to explain how God can be perceived only within oneself, Moses grows frustrated by Aron's glibness, which seems to weaken his idea. Aron defies Moses, seizing his rod and throwing it down, whereupon it turns into a serpent; this, says Aron, shows how a rigid idea can be made flexible. The people wonder how this new God can help them against Pharaoh. Aron shows them another wonder: Moses' hand, which appears leprous, is healed when he places it over his heart, wherein God dwells. The people now believe God will strengthen their own hands: they will throw off their shackles and escape into the wilderness, where Moses says purity of thought will provide the only sustenance they need. Pouring Nile water, which appears to change into blood, Aron interprets the sign, saying they will no longer sweat blood for the Egyptians but will be free. When the water appears clear again, Aron says Pharaoh will drown in it. Promised a land of milk and honey, the people pledge their allegiance to this new God.

Interlude. Moses has been gone for forty days. Unnerved by his long absence, the people wonder whether God and Moses have abandoned them.

Act II. At the foot of the mountain, Aron, a Priest and a group of elders wonder why Moses is gone so long, as license and disorder prevail among the people. Aron assures them that once Moses has assimilated God's intent, he will present it in a form the people can grasp. To the anxious people who flock to him for advice, however, he admits that Moses may have defected or be in danger. Seeing them unruly and ready to kill their priests, Aron tries to calm them by giving them back their other gods: he will let them have an image they can worship. A golden calf is set up, and offerings are brought, including self-sacrifices at the altar. An emaciated youth who protests the false image is killed by tribal leaders. Priests sacrifice four maidens, and the people, who have been drinking and dancing, turn wild and orgiastic. When they have worn themselves out, and many have fallen asleep, a lookout sees Moses. Destroying the golden calf as the people slink away from him, Moses demands an accounting from Aron, who justifies his indulgence of the people by saying that no word had come from Moses. While Moses' love is entirely for his idea of God, Aron says, the people too need his love and cannot survive without it. In despair Moses smashes the tablets of laws he has brought down from the mountain. Aron denounces him as fainthearted, saying he himself keeps Moses' idea alive by trying to explain it. Led by a pillar of fire in the darkness, which turns to a pillar of cloud by day, the people come forth, encouraged once more to follow God's sign to the Promised Land. Moses distrusts the pillar as another vain image, but Aron says it guides them truly. As Aron joins the people in their exodus, Moses feels defeated. By putting words and images to what cannot be expressed, Aron

has falsified Moses' absolute perception of God. "O word, thou word that I lack!" he cries, sinking in despair.

Act III. (Schoenberg wrote no music for this act.) Moses puts Aron under arrest, accusing him of fostering idle hopes with his imagery, such as that of the Promised Land. Aron insists that Moses' word would mean nothing to the people unless interpreted in terms they can understand. Moses declares that such sophistry has won the people's allegiance to Aron rather than to God: "Images lead and rule this people you have freed, and strange wishes are their gods." By misrepresenting the true nature of God, Aron keeps leading his people back into the wilderness. When Moses tells the soldiers to let Aron go free, Aron falls dead. Even in the wilderness, Moses says, the people will reach their destined goal — unity with God.