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CUBE Calendar,

Janice Misurell-Mitchell, "Berlin Diary I"

Janice Misurell-Mitchell: Berlin Diary

This is a Berlin music diary from September 30 to October 10, 2004. So far we've gone to three concerts—a new music concert, an opera, and jazz. They represent only a part of the rich musical tradition here, but for this "installment" I'd like to focus on the most unusual of what we've seen so far: Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*. This production was given at the Staatsoper in February and in two performances just recently. Daniel Barenboim had conducted the earlier performance but due to health reasons was replaced by Julien Salemkour. Siegfried Vogel sang the role of Moses and Thomas Moser performed as Aaron.

The opera, its first two acts completed in 1932, is from the story of Exodus. (The third act contains a text but no music, and it is frequently omitted, as it was in this production.) In the story God chooses Moses as the one who understands the idea of an unseen deity, and his brother Aaron as a translator of the idea of God into terms the Israelites can understand. The music employs *sprechstimme* (speechsong) in Moses' part and sung tones in Aaron's. There are significant times where Moses speaks a thought that is hard to grasp and Aaron sings about the same idea, only more concretely and poetically. Similarly, the chorus is often divided between the two timbres, and its music creates dialogue, arguments and agreements.

What made this performance particularly striking, and also controversial, was the staging and direction by Peter Mussbach, known for his socially-oriented work in previous operatic and stage productions here. The production created a tension between the story as Schoenberg tells it in the libretto and the visual elements onstage. Clearly one viewing wasn't enough to grasp it all—though several friends I spoke with who saw it said that once was too much (!)—a musicologist friend said that she had to see it twice before it made sense.

Mussbach set the story in a dark, East Berlin (pre-1989) parking garage, and the visual themes were related to the Soviet occupation of East Germany as well as to fascism, with ideas of uniformity, following blindly, being caught up in mass spectacles. In this production efforts were made to minimize the difference between the two men. Vogel's Moses made use of more pitched tones than those we normally find in *sprechstimme*, so there was more similarity of sound and less contrast in the dialogues. The idea of creating sameness, or perhaps a sense of "the common man" extended to the appearance of the chorus members: each person, male and female,

wore a dark padded suit, white shirt and tie, half-masks with identical features, sunglasses and hairpiece. Although there were solo lines, one didn't distinguish between characters in the opera by anything but their voices.

Tom Mitchell continues, "The overall effect of the staging was to radically modernize the story of Moses and Aaron. The choreography of the multitude of Israelites is especially striking, and the uniformity of the costumes enhances the effect of having the crowd assume shapes, volumes, and masses in motion. When the Israelites turn on their priests, for instance, they heap them in the center of the stage, and subject them to mockery and torture. The impassive sunglassed faces were reminiscent of a Situationist icon: the cover of Guy Debord's classic *Society of the Spectacle*, written in 1967 (see Note 1). This association is made literal when the chorus dons TV monitors that turn them into passive receivers of the spectacle."

The golden calf was replaced by a huge gold statue of the "common man" figure. It appears intact at end of first act and at the beginning of the second is decapitated, causing its body to become an icon during following scenes of lust, orgy, sacrifice, etc. Continuing to represent the idea of worshipping the material and being unable to see beyond, the chorus later appears with florescent light canes, using them as if they were blind.

The performance was beautifully done, with outstanding work by the soloists and especially the chorus. The orchestra, which I've heard previously in Verdi's *Macbeth*, showed a real sensitivity to Schoenberg's complex score. For further information on this production you may check out the websites below (see Note 2).

Notes:

1. "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation." Quotation from summaries of major ideas in *Society of the Spectacle*.

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>

2. As of this publication, in 2015, the photos from this performance are no longer available. However, there are relevant photos at several sites of Peter Mussbach's work.