

Michael Caplan's House of ShAkE presents the 3rd Annual

Schoenberg's Return

Commemorating the 90th Anniversary of Arnold Schoenberg's
July 24, 1933 "Re-Entry into the Community of Israel"

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Michael Caplan's House of ShAkE for the third annual presentation of *Schoenberg's Return*. The reading commemorates the 90th anniversary of the composer's July 24th, 1933 "Re-Entry into the Community of Israel" – as officiated by Rabbi Lévy and witnessed by Marc Chagall.

In 2021, I decided to mark Schoenberg's action yearly, to repeat it in my own small, aesthetic way, in the face of today's rising tide of global antisemitism. (His concerns about Jewish unity are also particularly timely, given the toxic divisiveness in recent Israeli politics – with highly contentious decisions about judicial reform being made there on this very day.)

This introduction provides some historical context to what follows, and a few notes about the form. The script is attached in the chat, and it'll be posted on the House of ShAkE website. Another Zoom link is also in the chat, in case we want to continue with some discussion after our 40 minutes (you might want to copy it to your clipboard now, just in case). The presentation is about half an hour long, and is being recorded.

Like many Jews of his time, Schoenberg had converted to Christianity as a youth. But he was shocked to nonetheless experience anti-Jewish prejudice from colleagues, and especially, in 1923, from his friend, the painter Wassily Kandinsky. Schoenberg's family had been excluded from the Mattsee Resort in 1921, and after a brief stay in Paris, emigrated to the US in 1934.

Hitler had been appointed Chancellor of Germany in January. Schoenberg's "Re-Entry into the Community of Israel" later that year was not *necessary*, from the point of view of Jewish law, but was instead a personal, yet also very public gesture. But then, his art had long reflected his own questions about faith and atheism, individuality and the collective, new and old.

In fact, it was the sound of the choral *Sprechstimme* – a kind of "speaking-singing" – in his opera *Moses and Aaron* that first captivated me, as a singer and theatre artist interested in the human voice. (Some remixed fragments of it are included in the soundtrack.)

I'm still the furthest thing from an expert on Schoenberg's work, but as a non-religious (although not anti-religious) patrilineal Jew and an unequivocal Zionist, I feel I can relate to his struggles and to his dedication. And I find his meditations on language, image, truth, religion, and politics not only eloquent, but frank and courageous.

I'd like to thank Leo Lepiano for his help with this project. I'd been very much hoping to integrate readers again this year, as I did in 2022, but I haven't quite figured out the technical issues yet. *Next year!*

I'm Michael R. Caplan, Toronto-based writer, designer, singer, and theatre-maker, and "Renaissance Man" of the House of ShAkE, my production and publishing company. Please visit us online – we have many interesting projects in the works.

www.houseofshake.ca

SCHOENBERG SOURCES

All the visual art is Schoenberg's own, except the photography. I've combined texts from the following sources into a collage:

Letters to Alma Mahler (October 7, 1910), Alban Berg (July 16, 1921), Wassily Kandinsky (April 19 & May 4, 1923), Anton Webern (August 26, 1933), Oedoen Partosh, Director of the Israel Academy of Music (April 26, 1951)

The following characters appear (they're indicated in the presentation) from his artistic works,: "THE ARCHANGEL GABRIEL" from his oratorio, *Jacob's Ladder*, "MAX ARUNS" from his play *The Biblical Way*, the figures of "MOSES", the "PRIEST" and the "CHORUS" from his unfinished *Moses and Aaron*, the "RABBI" from *Kol Nidre*, and "THE SURVIVOR" from *A Survivor from Warsaw* (although the experience described in the text had been related to him by a survivor). There are also texts from *Modern Psalms*, Opus 50C and the unnumbered, "Why for Children?"

From his political writings, I've taken excerpts from his "Position on Zionism", "Notes on Jewish Politics", "The Jewish Situation", "A Four-Point Program for Jewry".

The words not written by Schoenberg are in a newspaper report from the *Wiener Morgen-Zeitung* (*Vienna Morning News*), and the actual text of his "Re-Entry" letter.

RELEVANT CHRONOLOGY

1874: Born, circumcised eight days later according to Jewish rite; 1898: Baptized into Lutheranism at age 24; 1933: Hitler takes power in January, and Schoenberg's "Re-Entry into the Community of Israel" in July; 1934: Schoenberg's family moves to the US; 1951: he is offered the Honorary Chairmanship of Jerusalem Music Academy, but dies before he can move to Israel.

And with that, let's begin *Schoenberg's Return*. Thank you for joining me!

Schoenberg's Return

PROLOGUE: “ ... a magic theatre”

“Dear Alma Mahler”

SCHOENBERG

... I would most prefer to write for a magic theater.

ACTION

Extinguish candle

SC. 1 “The people there seemed to despise me”

Wiener Morgen-Zeitung: “A reader writes to us: ‘As to your report that the composer Arnold Schoenberg had abandoned his summer holiday on the Mattsee near Salzburg – where Jews are not welcome – although he is Protestant, one could counter that Mr. Schoenberg’s Protestantism is not very old. He was actually born a Jew and was baptized when he was a young student. Since he thus is a non-Aryan, he preferred to leave the “Aryan” Mattsee to avoid further trouble.’”

“Dear Alban Berg”

SCHOENBERG

Toward the end it got very ugly in Mattsee. The people there seemed to despise me as much as if they knew my music.

SC. 2 “Today I no longer wish to be an exception”

“My dear Kandinsky”

SCHOENBERG

If I had received your letter a year ago I should have let all my principles go hang Indeed I confess: even today I wavered for a moment: so great is my taste for teaching, so easily is my enthusiasm still inflamed. But it cannot be.

Slide show of self-portraits

SCHOENBERG

For I have at last learnt the lesson that has been forced upon me during this year, and I shall not ever forget it. It is that I am not a German, not a European, indeed perhaps scarcely even a human being (at least, the Europeans prefer the worst of their race to me), but I am a Jew.

I am content that it should be so! Today I no longer wish to be an exception; I have no objection at all to being lumped together with all the rest. For I have seen that on the other side ... everything is also just one lump. I have seen that someone with whom I thought myself on a level preferred to seek the community of the lump; I have heard that even a Kandinsky sees only evil in the actions of Jews, and in their evil actions only the Jewishness, and at this point I give up hope of reaching any understanding.

It was a dream. We are two kinds of people. Definitely! ...

I have made a very great moral and tactical mistake. I have accepted the discussion, I have entered into a polemic, I have defended myself. In doing so, I have forgotten that it is a matter neither of law nor of absence of law, nor of truth, nor of falsehood, nor of knowledge, nor of ignorance, but of power relationships ... I forgot that the discussion had no sense since in any case I shall not be heard, that there is no wish to understand...

So you will realize that I only do whatever is necessary to keep alive. Perhaps some day a later generation will be in a position to indulge in dreams. I wish it neither for them nor for myself. On the contrary, indeed, I would give much that it might be granted to me to bring about an awakening.

Slide of Schoenberg walking away

SCHOENBERG

Could not Kandinsky foresee all that, could he not sense what was going to happen?

SC. 3 “Why today do we all stand up?”

ACTION

Hold up index finger as if to admonish

SCHOENBERG

Every keen and realistic observer should have known this beforehand, as I knew it almost twenty years ago.

ACTION

Grabbing gesture, make fist with palm facing camera

Once the fiend has stormed, entered the fortress and started to plunder, there is no chance of negotiation and offer to surrender.

ACTION

Tighten fist and turn so back of hand faces camera

There remains either to abandon resistance in despair or to fight the fiend to the bitter end.

ACTION

Pound down once

MAX ARUNS:

“MAX ARUNS”

What is this festival? Is it a sports event? A parade? A party convention? A people’s assembly?

Is *not* this day like all others? No, it is not; it is one that will be commemorated for all time among Jews. Just like that day on which the youngest male asks:

“Why today do we sit reclining?”

ACTION

Rise slowly until standing; chest in camera frame

But here you will have to ask instead: “Why today do we all stand up? Why did we rise? Why don’t we remain seated on the floor, low, like in all those days past?” We got up, we rose and rose to a size that nobody could have foreseen.

RABBI:

ACTION

Extend hands palms up, then prayer position

“RABBI”

We solemnly proclaim that every transgressor, be it that he was unfaithful to Our People because of fear, or misled by false doctrines of any kind, out of weakness or greed: we give him leave to be one with us in prayer tonight.

SC. 4 “But the Jewish body is divided”

SCHOENBERG

But the Jewish body is divided in a very complex way.

Primarily, the whole body is divided into three principal sections, hostile to each other, according to religion: orthodox, reformist, atheist;

Sketch of Jewish divisions

SCHOENBERG

... then each of these groups is broken according to socio-political principles into conservatives, liberals, socialists.

Further, the origin of the Jews, as Western, Eastern, Oriental, again subdivides every group. And finally, each one of these geographic groups includes “nationalities” eager to preserve their respective peculiarities, proud of them, hostile toward all the others, and increasing the tendency to splinter into an almost unlimited number of “isms”.

This is bad enough ... but in fact it is still worse.

“Jews are individualists. Educated during thousands of years by their teachers in exegesis of the secrets of the Bible, they are accustomed to finding individual resolutions of their problems. They are now applying the same individualism in the field of politics. Probably every Jew will apply his own way of thinking, a home-made theory, a personal attitude to every problem he faces.”

SCHOENBERG

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Probably every Jew will apply his own way of thinking, a home-made theory, a personal attitude to every problem he faces.

Changing camera locations on screen

Never enter into discussion,
because every Jew is superior to every other Jew,
and will apply logic better than every other Jew, and he will win
or at least the other will lose. At least, time will be lost. ...

Never enter into discussion!

SCHOENBERG

In spite of its antagonism to unanimity, one will understand that it is not by accident that we are thus constituted. It is my belief that this astonishing mentality is a divine gift, destined to protect us, to enable us to outlast the diaspora with its persecutions and its dangers to personal life and to the existence of our people.

But we possess one quality which seems remarkable if not unique – whilst other peoples have been converted, it has been impossible to convert Israel. It is our devotion to an idea, to an ideal, and it springs from our deep devotion to our inherited faith.

MAX ARUNS:

“MAX ARUNS”

We are an old people. What would a God mean to us whom we could understand, of whom we could form an image, on whom we might prevail? We don't need miracles: persecution and contempt have made us strong, have multiplied our tenacity and resilience, generated and improved organs that enhance our ability to resist. We are an old people.

“We are an old people.”

SC. 5 “I regard it as more important for me than my art”

“Dear Anton Webern”

SCHOENBERG

I regard it as more important for me than my art, and I am decided – if I am fitted for such activity – only to work in future for the national state of Jewry.

MAX ARUNS:

“MAX ARUNS”

Today you bring your people the sacrifice of all your former striving after those intellectual goods that served the Diaspora. And today you affirm with all your strength that you are ready to serve a knowledge higher than all human wisdom:

That you want to make it possible for your people to live out its God-idea, to dream it to the very end.

MOSES:

*“Einziger, ewiger, allgegenwartiger,
unsichtbarer und unvorstellbarer Gott!”*

*“Only one, infinite, omnipresent,
unperceived and inconceivable God!”*

CHORUS:

“CHORUS”

We are his chosen folk before all others,

We are the chosen ones, him alone to worship,
him alone to serve.

We shall be free then from toil and misery!

This is his promise: He will then lead us to a land
where milk and honey flow.

And we shall enjoy then what he once did promise our fathers.

SC. 6 “But then where is he? Point him out!”

THE ARCHANGEL GABRIEL:

*“Do not ask what lies in front or behind. It must be hidden; you
ought to forget, you must forget, so that you can fulfill your
task!”*

“ARCHANGEL GABRIEL”

Right or left, forward or backward, uphill or downhill – you
must go on. Do not ask what lies in front or behind. It must be
hidden; you ought to forget, you must forget, so that you can
fulfill your task!

CHORUS:

“CHORUS”

Are we then to love him or to fear him? Where is he? Point him
out!

We want to kneel down. We want to bring beasts forth to him,
and gold, wheat and barley, and wine!

All will go to your God almighty, if we’re his people, if he is our
god now and if he guards us well!

But then where is he? Point him out!

PRIEST:

“PRIEST”

How long is this to continue? Forty days now we have awaited
Moses, and still no one knows either law or command!

Unperceivable command from one who’s yet unperceived.

Unperceivable command from one who’s yet unperceived.

*“Moses and Aaron” Act II, Scene 3: Everywhere now wine is
given out in streams. A wild drunkenness overtakes everyone.*

Heavy stone jars are thrown about. The people shower wine and implements upon each other during extravagant dancing, whereupon quarrelling and fighting break out here and there.

MOSES:

“MOSES”

Thus am I defeated! Thus, all was but madness that I believed before O word, thou word, that I lack!

“O word, thou word, that I lack”

SCHOENBERG

It must be said: As long as we remain in discord, just as long shall anti-Semitism be able to make us suffer and to trouble the security of our life, of our property, or our religious culture, and our national sciences. Everybody, who was yesterday your friend, brother, and admirer – there is no reliance to be placed on him in general: tomorrow he can be your enemy, can deliver you, can detest you. There are exceptions, but they are rare, as we have seen a thousand times: rare, just as every good thing. ... Only a real and incontestable unity can grant a nation the power needed for such decisions as to save the future of a nation.

The re-establishment of a Jewish State could come into being only in the way similar events have always occurred in history: not through words and morality, but through successful military might and a fortunate commonality of interests.

SC. 7 “... the forgotten creed!”

THE SURVIVOR FROM WARSAW:

“I must have been unconscious most of the time. I remember only the grandiose moment when they all started to sing, as if prearranged, the old prayer they had neglected for so many years – the forgotten creed!”

“THE SURVIVOR”

I must have been unconscious most of the time. I remember only the grandiose moment when they all started to sing, as if prearranged, the old prayer they had neglected for so many years – the forgotten creed!

But I have no recollection how I got underground to live in the sewers of Warsaw for so long a time.

Slide show

The day began as usual: Reveille when it still was dark. ...

“Get out!” Whether you slept or whether worries kept you awake the whole night. You had been separated from your children, from your wife, from your parents. You don’t know what happened to them ... *How could you sleep?*

The trumpets again – “Get out! The sergeant will be furious!”

They came out; some very slowly, the old ones, the sick ones; some with nervous agility. They fear the sergeant. They hurry as much as they can. In vain! Much too much noise, much too much commotion! ...

The sergeant and his subordinates hit everyone: young or old, strong or sick, quiet, guilty or innocent ...

I must have been unconscious. The next thing I heard was a soldier saying: “They are all dead!” Whereupon the sergeant ordered to do away with us.

There I lay aside half conscious. I had become very still – fear and pain. Then I heard the sergeant shouting: “*Abzählen!*”

They start slowly and irregularly: one, two, three, four – ... became faster and faster, so fast that it finally sounded like a stampede of wild horses, and all of a sudden, in the middle of it, they began singing the Shema Yisrael.

Sh'ma: literally means listen, heed, or hear and do

Yisrael: Israel, the people or congregation of Israel

Adonai: “LORD”, read in place of the YHWH written in the Hebrew text

Eloheinu: the plural 1st person possessive of Elohim, meaning “our God”

Echad: the unified and cardinal number One

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And as for you, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

SC. 8 “We are faced with fantastic necessities”

SCHOENBERG

We are faced with facts that most of you – *not I* – would probably have called fantastic only a short while ago. We are faced with fantastic necessities and that means making decisions that one would normally consider fantastic.

MOSES:

“MOSES”

Law of thought irresistible forces fulfilment.

“Law of thought irresistible forces fulfilment.”

THE CHOSEN ONE:

“THE CHOSEN ONE”

My word I leave here, / Make what you can of it!
My form I take with me, but it will remain in front of you, until
it shows up in your midst with new words – again the old ones –
to be misunderstood anew.

“Modern Psalms”

SCHOENBERG

What truly moves us in superstition is the faith of the
superstitious, his faith in mysteries. His is a true and profound
faith. And it is so closely related to faith, in all that is true and
profound, that *one* is often accompanied by *the other*.

*“The learned Philistine abhors mysteries, because they reveal
that which can never be proven.”*

SCHOENBERG

The learned Philistine abhors mysteries, because they reveal that
which can never be proven.

“Why for Children?”

SCHOENBERG

The child’s faith is a fragment of the consciousness of eternity
and infinity, which they should protect if they descend into the
world of our problems and doubts.

*“It is the adults whose imagination’s capacity fails to
understand the fact of eternity and infinity. They are the ones
who require the assistance, to whom one would have to provide
the spiritual power through stirring examples and tales to make
their imagination’s capacity productive. In their own language,
in the language of the Enlightenment of which they are so proud,
one must show them the insufficiency of such Enlightenment;
Enlightenment that only darkens what in itself is full of light
enough.”*

SCHOENBERG

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must show them the insufficiency of such Enlightenment;
Enlightenment that only darkens what in itself is full of light
enough.

SC. 9 “I intend to complete the third act”

1932

SCHOENBERG

I would like to finish the third act of my opera *Moses and Aaron*.

1933

I intend to complete the third act the moment I go on leave – in six to eight weeks at the latest.

1949

I have already a very good idea of the music of the third act, and I believe I could write it in a few months ...

1950

It is not quite impossible that I shall complete the third act within a year.

1951

I agree that the third act may be performed as a spoken drama, without music, in case I should not be able to complete the composition.

“Dear Director Partosh, Israel Academy of Music, Jerusalem”

SCHOENBERG

I told your friends, who visited me recently here in Los Angeles, as I told you, esteemed Director Partosh, how for over four decades it was my most ardent wish to witness the creation of an independent Israeli state. And more than that: to become a resident citizen of that state. Whether my health will grant me fulfillment of this second wish, I cannot say at the moment.

1951

“Harmony”

Schoenberg’s last word, according to his wife Gertrud

EPILOGUE: “... to return to the community of Israel”

RABBI LÉVY

On the twenty-fourth of July 1933, M. Arnold Schoenberg, born in Vienna on September 13, 1874, presented himself before us (Louis-Germain Lévy, Rabbi of the *Union libérale Israélite*, 24 rue Copernic in Paris), in order to express his formal desire to return to the community of Israel. After having been given this present declaration to read, M. Arnold Schoenberg stated that it truly expressed his thought and intentions. Written in Paris in my study, 24 rue Copernic, the twenty-fourth of July 1933. Read and approved: Arnold Schoenberg, Louis-Germain Levy, Rabbi. Witnesses: Dr. Marianoff, Marc Chagall

ACTION

Light candle

FURTHER READING

Joseph Auner, *A Schoenberg Reader: Documents of a Life* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003)

André Neher, *They Made Their Souls Anew* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990)

Alexander L. Ringer, *Arnold Schoenberg: The Composer as Jew* (Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford University Press, 1990)

H.H. Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg: His Life, World and Work* (New York: Schirmer Books/Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977)

Karl H. Wörner, *Schoenberg's 'Moses and Aaron'* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1963)