



"...[ARNOLD SCHOENBERG'S LIFE] WAS AN IDEAL STORY FOR EXPLORING THE TRICKY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNCOMPROMISING ART AND MASS APPEAL, AND OF WHETHER—AND HOW—ART CAN CHANGE THE WORLD."
- TOD MACHOVER

Tod Machover and Simon Robson during a 2017 piano workshop of Schoenberg in Hollywood.

SIMON ROBSON, LIBRETTIST

It was an irresistible scenario, posited to me by Tod Machover and Braham Murray: Harpo Marx brokers a meeting between Schoenberg and the legendary MGM producer Irving Thalberg, with a view to the composer writing for the movies. That much is fact. Now the fiction: provoked, or intrigued, or at a desperate personal crossroads, Arnold Schoenberg looks back over his life as if it were expressed in the language of his new home—Hollywood. The movies. The ground-breaking, Viennese composer, the writer of allegedly esoteric music, suddenly finds himself in the populist, popcorn playground of 20th-century storytelling. And all this in 1935, as European civilization crumbles; as Arnold, a Jew, finds himself a refugee in the New World.

In telling his story, I first had to consider which cinema conventions to employ. It seemed to make sense to be chronological—to begin with silent movies and see the medium grow older along

with Arnold. Yet to stop at 1935, the present day of the opera, seemed to deny what the medium was about to become. Since Schoenberg's music and influence looked to the future, I felt his imagination should look forward also—to the thrillers and musicals of the 1940s, and the Westerns of the '50s.

Some events in the composer's life seemed best related through conventions that obviously mirrored his mental state—such as the Raymond Chandler thriller sequence as he follows the trail of his wife's affair. At other times, I felt that the sheer inappropriateness of a certain style or genre, be it Marx Brothers or animated films, might best relay the shock and indeed the impossibility of any narrative to portray the worst atrocities of that time. Some mini-movies ended up on the cutting room floor or morphed as we refined our approach—what was once a Boris Karloff style horror sequence is now a Hollywood musical dance. **CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE ►**

But where was Arnold's "reality" in all this? In very early drafts, I had him returning to his comfortable LA home after his meeting with Thalberg. But this rooted the action in a very specific, naturalistic setting, from which there was no obvious springboard into his imaginative journey. Then, in a discussion about Schoenberg's role as a teacher, Tod suggested we reference his students—and that provided a crucial frame for the whole opera. I shifted the "action" to the neutrality of the lecture room, with his pupils able to engage with him in the notion of *play*, giving Arnold a sense of power over his past and, by implication, his future—something which he lacks at the start, as a refugee in crisis. So I was able to deploy the Boy and Girl as his willing muses, educating and being educated all at once.

Telling this story, of course, involves a contradiction—to see a composer so reviled for being difficult and inaccessible seeking to express himself in such populist terms. But that was Schoenberg's

contradiction, too. As he says to Thalberg, he's "short of an ending" to his opera, *Moses und Aron*, in which he attempted to articulate just that conflict. The difficulty of expressing the specific in the language of the universal never goes away. But every attempt brings out the best in people. Otherwise art would be pointless.

Collaborating with Tod and Braham has been truly thrilling; Tod has found a musical language that is both faithful to our story's media, its historical context and yet always of the present—the difficult present we all occupy. It is inestimably sad that Braham Murray is not here with us to see the opera realized. He believed passionately in the role of artists to signal and generate change, to challenge and to express. And to, as Arnold says, "play, play, play!" But I know he would bless the contribution of the wonderful Karole Armitage, who has embraced so whole-heartedly the spirit of the piece, and found her own, unique vision to convey Tod's magnificent score. ♦



SIMON ROBSON | Librettist

As an actor, Simon Robson has worked extensively with many of the UK's top theatre companies including Shared Experience, Method and Madness, Hampstead Theatre, Bristol Old Vic and the Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre and has appeared in London's West End as Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, (Haymarket Theatre) and *A Busy Day* by Fanny Burney (Lyric Theatre). At the Royal Exchange he has portrayed Almaviva in *The Marriage of Figaro*, Tesman in *Hedda Gabler*, Robert Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*, and Billings in *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, for which he was nominated for a MEN award. He played the title role in *Cyrano de Bergerac* at Southampton's Nuffield Theatre. Recent acting roles have included Prospero in *The Tempest* (Singapore Repertory Theatre), Eliot in *Private Lives* and Professor Higgins in *Pygmalion* (Royal Exchange Theatre). As a writer, his first play *The Ghost Train Tattoo* premiered at the Royal Exchange in 2001, and his collection of short stories *The Separate Heart* was published in 2004 and short-listed for the prestigious Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. His first novel, *Catch*, appeared in 2010. Since then he has adapted Purcell's *The Indian Queen* for Les Arts Florissants and written the narration for Carolyn Samson's *Marie Fel* concerts with Ex Cathedra. In October 2017 he curated and performed a concert of Shakespeare songs and speeches with Anne-Sofie von Otter and Julius Drake for the Oxford Lieder Festival, and was the Narrator in Purcell's *King Arthur* for the Early Music Group Vox Luminis at the Aldeburgh Festival, reprised this winter in Belgium and Holland. *Schoenberg in Hollywood* is his first opera; he is currently working on a second novel.