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It was an irresistible scenario, posed to me by Tod Machover and Bramh 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 exotic 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.

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 Bramh 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 incomprehensible that Bramh 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 wholeheartedly the spirit of the piece, and found her own, unique vision to convey Tod’s magnificent score.