

Tod Machover

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Machover's *Schoenberg in Hollywood* Offers Hummable Tunes in 12 Tones

By Lloyd Shwartz

BOSTON—The head of MIT's Media Lab (and Musical America's 2016 Composer of the Year) has a new opera—a labor of love, not a response to a commission. After a gestation period of some 20 years, Tod Machover's phantasmagoric 90-minute *Schoenberg in Hollywood*, presented by the Boston Lyric Opera, had its world premiere at the Paramount Center, November 14. With a shapely and often witty libretto by British actor and author Simon Robson, based on a scenario by the late British stage director Braham Murray, and inventively staged by choreographer and former Merce Cunningham dancer Karole Armitage, the opera looks back over Schoenberg's life from the time of his arrival in La-La Land in 1933 as one of the distinguished emigres escaping the Nazis.

Harpo Marx, the libretto informs us, had encouraged MGM wunderkind producer Irving Thalberg to meet with Schoenberg and offer him a major project—writing the score for the movie version of Pearl S. Buck's immensely popular Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Good Earth*. [Actual sketches](#) prove that in real life, though it's hard to imagine, Schoenberg evidently took the offer seriously. But his demands were impossible. The composer wanted complete control of his score (i.e., no editing) and imagined the actors all speaking an annotated *Sprechstimme*. Not to mention a huge fee.



In the style of a Marx Brothers film, a Groucho Marx-esque Arnold Schoenberg (Omar Ebrahim, r.) confronts anti-Semitic discrimination from Harpo- and Chico-like characters (Sarah Womble, l. and Jesse Darden, c.)

In the opera, this opening scene (as *THE END* flashes across a movie screen), like a Proustian madeleine, triggers Schoenberg's remembrance of things past, seen in his mind's eye as a series of scenes from genre films. Schoenberg is Bogart (hints of "You must remember this..." welling up in Machover's score) or Groucho Marx, in an appalling/hilarious Marx Brothers scene at an anti-Semitic spa in Austria (Schoenberg converted to



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Lutheranism in his twenties, then reconverted to Judaism just before he left Europe). When Schoenberg sings "I'm killin' tonal music," we hear 12-tone traces of "Singin' in the Rain." And key moments of Schoenberg's life—his first marriage, the betrayal and then the death of his wife, his second marriage—take their musical form in references to Schoenberg's own music—*Verklärte Nacht*, the Second String Quartet, *Pierrot Lunaire*, *Moses und Aron*.

Machover's score is hardly mere pastiche. Whether energetic or lyrical or even in the realm of parody (the way Stephen Sondheim's parodies include some of his most original music), Machover's music always sounds like his own. Personal conviction, a rarity in much contemporary opera, seems always at the center of this rangy, emotionally engaging score—never more so than at the very end when the music becomes a kaleidoscopic mash-up of lots of Schoenberg all at once. "I hope that audiences are tantalized, challenged, and delighted by this music," the composer writes in his program note, "and go away with some tunes to hum—perhaps some of them in 12 tones."

Opening night, the small orchestra of 15 acoustic instruments (string quartet, bass, winds, brass, percussion, and piano, all subtly amplified) plus electronic keyboard was deftly led by BLO Music Director David Angus, so the densest music never sounded too thick and Machover's lyrical gift was allowed to flow.

As Schoenberg, baritone Omar Ebrahim was impressively convincing. His German accent and his mordantly pained sense of humor were so good, it was a shock to suddenly hear him turn into Bogey or Groucho. There are numerous other characters in the opera, from clueless Irving Thalberg and Schoenberg's two wives to the other Marx Brothers and the master's devoted UCLA students. These were all capably sung and danced by only two performers, tenor Jesse Darden, BLO's principal artist-in-residence, and BLO emerging artist soprano Sara Womble. The opera begins with Armitage turning them into free-spirited Americans, à la Fred and Ginger.

The production itself is impeccable, from Nancy Leary's realistic and surrealistic costumes to Peter Torpey's sparely efficient yet elegant set design and Media Lab doctoral candidate Ben Bloomberg's three-dimensional sound design.

In some ways, the key to *Schoenberg in Hollywood* is *Moses und Aron*, Schoenberg's great unfinished opera in which Moses is the visionary, too tongue-tied and humiliated to express his vision (one moving episode in the new opera, responding to Schoenberg's unrelenting "Bad reviews," has him in a kind of S&M film, being mounted and spanked); and Aron is the interpreter, the fast talker who can explain that vision to an uncomprehending audience, although not without diminishing it. That's why *The Good Earth* was a project both alluring and repugnant to Schoenberg—writing a film score might win him an unimaginably large audience, but at what cost?

Imagine a contemporary opera about artistic integrity!