Arnold Schoenberg’s opera *Moses und Aron* is a case study in the interaction between speech and singing: that very interaction is given a central dramatic function. Moses, who follows an unknowable, “unvorstellbarer” (unimaginable, unportrayable) God, only speaks (or rather, uses “Sprechstimme”); whereas his brother Aron, who sympathizes with Moses’ philosophical / spiritual predicament but argues (and has evidence to prove it) that people will not follow a god they cannot see or know, only sings.

A word about Sprechstimme: the performer is given pitches and rhythms, just like notated singing, but with the added instruction not to sustain the pitches, but rather to glance off of them and glide to the next pitch. As a result, the voice is always in mid-glissando. There is nothing about this which necessarily resembles speech, but if the composer chooses pitches and rhythms which approximate characteristic speech inflections and rhythms, the effect is similar to a kind of “heightened” or “stretched” speech, or a kind of “unmoored” singing. (Brecht, in one of his journals, writes that it sounds more like horses whinnying, and wishes that Eisler would stop assuring him this sound is historically necessary.) To say that Moses represents “speech” is therefore not quite right — Moses represents the casting away of sustained pitches (singing) in favor of a perpetual state of nomadically exploring the field between speech and singing — between the human and the divine ideal? — which must forever remain unresolved (in the sense that the human must never cease attempting, but must always fail, to grasp the divine ideal). Sprechstimme represents this state surprisingly well, precisely because it points toward both speech and singing but is neither; it treats both speech and singing as existential others. (To my ear, Sprechstimme always sounds like it’s moving away from, or refusing, whichever category one tries to put it in — when compared with singing, it sounds more like speech, but when compared to speech, it sounds more like singing. And yet it never becomes an independent third category — its audible ties to speech and singing are always too strong.)

Schoenberg does not, however, give Moses ambiguous music anywhere at all. The “neither here nor there” quality of Sprechstimme (which made other famous Sprechstimme pieces like *Pierrot Lunaire* seem devious and impish) takes on an entirely different quality
when sung by a slow, ponderous bass. Moses carves out an unusual space for himself in the register and stays there, moving in strange circles with stubborn, methodical insistence. Often, Schoenberg’s use of slow, clumsy, speechlike irregular rhythms for Moses makes his text seem especially poignant, especially sincere and urgent, because of the apparent struggle with which it is being produced. When the pitch glissandi in Moses’ vocal part crest on a low note, then crest again on another low note, then crest again on another low note, the effect is of despair but also of patience, diligence, and persistence. (Moses’ spiritual path is based on conviction, not on hope.) Thus Schoenberg creates a paradox in Moses: the irregular rhythms and curving, perpetually cresting pitch glissandi don’t allow for any resolution or arrival point, but his churning variations of motives within the same low registral space produce an overall sense of profound rootedness. (Yes Moses is a nomad, but a centered one: he goes to the desert and stays there, he goes to the mountain and stays there — so long, in fact, that his nomadic followers rebel.)

Aron is a different story entirely. Schoenberg has written for him not just pitches to sing, but glorious soaring tenor melodies. Aron argues not that Moses’ philosophy of the unknowable God is wrong, but that it’s too hard; people won’t follow it. Aron is a pragmatist. Aron is not a hypocrite or a snakeoil peddler, he is a genuine miracle worker, and what makes this clear is his singing. His singing is stratospheric, otherworldly, beautiful, effortless. His sincerity, unlike Moses’, is a form of transport. The allure of the promised land, of eternal grace, is embodied in his astonishingly high melodies, his epically extended pure tones. In these tones, with these tones, he asks Moses in effect “can’t we give our followers just a little idea of what God looks like?” — and with melodies like that, Aron persuades the listener that he could do it. Even if it wasn’t a picture of the divine as Moses wants the divine to be, surely it would be divine enough.

(Incidentally the miracle which Aron works is to turn a stick into a snake. What could be a better metaphor for the miracle of melody? You take a bunch of fixed pitches, stiff, brittle and lifeless, stir them together, do something nobody really understands, and suddenly they’ve become a twisting, elusive, serpentine motion with its own direction and life.)
But Moses’ voice, slogging through the mud, makes it clear why an image of divinity as Aron could produce would be unacceptable: it’s too easy. Yes, melody is magical, but compared with Moses’ constrained, searching Sprechstimme, Aron’s beautiful earnest melodies sound airy and rootless. It’s no wonder they’re rootless: the registral space where their roots should be is occupied by Moses’ wandering glissandi and stumbling rhythms. When Moses’ insistent growling and Aron’s glorious, untethered soaring are layered together in counterpoint, the distance between them seems vast and unbridgeable, and the sense of two characters “talking past each other” couldn’t be stronger. They’ve missed each other’s points. Thus the persuasiveness of Aron is exposed as a danger to Moses: Aron, ultimately, doesn’t have a point, just a mode of behavior — he works miracles / melodies. His miracles need Moses as a philosophical fundament, just as his melodies need some sort of low register fundamental for support and direction, whereas Moses (and Moses’ music) might be better off alone.

Looking at it from Aron’s point of view (or to carry the metaphor further, looking at it from melody’s point of view), Moses makes a big mistake. Moses wants to embrace the unknowable (Sprechstimme), but he’s brought hundreds of followers out into the desert, and the more they wait, the more they want something they can sink their teeth into. They want the unknowable to hurry up and become knowable, and if it won’t, they’ll grab for the most knowable, predictable, dependable thing they can find: rhythm.

Anybody who knows the story of Moses and Aron knows that it leads to the dance around the Golden Calf. In writing this opera, Schoenberg was sitting on a narrative nest egg: the whole audience knows, from moment one, that at some point we’ll hear the dance around the Golden Calf. And just about anyone can guess what the dance will sound like: thump! thump! thump! thump! thump! thump! thump! (This is *pagan idol worship* after all.) Thus Schoenberg is in the enviable position of being able to make musical reference to a part of his piece which hasn’t taken place yet. Throughout the piece, when Moses and Aron argue, a third presence lurks malevolently within the texture (sometimes surfacing when the conversation goes badly for Moses): the presence of regular rhythms.

So, from Aron’s point of view, melody is not the real danger. Melody is an attempt to
compromise between the unknowable (Sprechstimme) and the completely knowable (thump thump thump). When Aron performs a miracle / melody, he’s trying to ward off the hierarchical regular rhythm from which nothing (and certainly nothing so subtle as that which Moses wishes to preserve) escapes. The fact that Aron will ultimately fail to ward off the rhythm is foreshadowed in the bursts of motoric pulse which disrupt and agitate the counterpoint between Moses’ Sprechstimme and Aron’s melodies.

The prelude to the second act demonstrates how far afield these disruptions can stray. Moses has gone up to the mountain and has been gone too long. His followers are restless. Their text, the only text in the prelude, is “wo ist Moses?” (“where is Moses?”), set in the music as four straight staccato eighth-notes. That motive is treated, somewhat absurdly, as canonic material, bouncing through the voices of the choir as a relentless pulse. Furthermore, the text is not spoken or sung, but whispered. Whispering is antithetical to Sprechstimme and inimical to melody. As the prelude progresses, the melodies in the orchestra (which due to their adherence to the prevailing choppy pulse are already many levels less divine than Aron’s melodies) are almost drowned out by the choir’s whisper, which comes to sound like a massive percussion orchestra of sharply hissed “s”s. Inexorably, Moses’ own name becomes a percussion cadenza, with “s” sounds on every other beat.

Given these three poles (Sprechstimme, melody, and pulse), Schoenberg has all bases covered but one: the voice of God. God has a fairly minor role in the opera, appearing only in the first scene as the burning bush. In order to portray the unportrayable, Schoenberg sets the burning bush with four singing voices (SATB) and a small speaking choir. With the first words of the opera, Moses calls out in Sprechstimme to the “unvorstellbar” God, and indeed, the sound that responds is a sound Moses’ voice, constrained to Sprechstimme in the low register, could never portray (or imagine). The burning bush speaks and sings the same words at once, but not in perfect unison, so that speech always seems to be splitting open to reveal singing inside it, and vice versa. Sometimes the singers form a repeating block chord, sometimes they sing in contrapuntal melodies; sometimes the speakers speak in unison and sometimes in irregular canons, sometimes imitating speech rhythms, sometimes pulsed rhythms. Sometimes everybody begins in a unison which collapses by the end of the sentence;
sometimes the voices enter quasi-canonically and move toward unison to punctuate the end of a sentence, or a key word in the middle of a sentence. One has the sense that the bush is rearranging itself according to all possible permutations. And what’s more, this perpetually churning rearrangement moves disorientingly faster than the speed of syntax. No sentence ends the same way it began — a new arrangement is always being revealed in mid thought.

The bush’s perpetual permutation has the character and the force of logic. Interestingly, though, the fact that the permutation moves at a faster speed than the sentence structure makes the logic seem somehow irrational, or perhaps a better word would be disinterested (though not arbitrary: the words which these permutations emphasize via unisons and dynamic punctuation are key words, not random words). So it’s terribly important that the bush speaks in dialogue with Moses, that the bush’s nonstop almost casual explosion of possibilities is heard in contrast to Moses’ urgent, ultra-constrained vocabulary. If Moses’ Sprechstimme conveys the “neither-here-nor-there” of speech and singing, the bush’s sound conveys the “here-there-and-everywhere” of speech and singing. The bush’s variety is constrained, ultimately, by the fact that its full, kaleidoscopic lines must be compressed into small time frames to alternate with Moses’ empty, arid lines. This compression gives the bush’s utterances an intense weight; and as each utterance disappears, we feel the emptiness of the desert in which Moses wanders. We have the sense that the bush is not constrained in and of itself; it is constrained by Moses’ attempt, Moses’ need, to comprehend it.

When finally, at the end of the scene, the bush makes a lengthier speech, its lines not in alternation with Moses, we hear how constrained it really was. The instrumentation fills out to the very edges of the orchestra, the registral and harmonic language expand into unprecedented territories, and broad melodies arc through the texture and across the register like lightning bolts, abruptly cutting off to expose other orchestral groups in a gesture that recalls the earlier alternation between the bush and Moses. Also recalling that earlier alternation, the abruptness with which the melodies cut off lends them added weight — one feels they could have gone on much longer. So the hugeness of this texture still sounds compressed. Thus Schoenberg manages to produce a music, with text, which displays itself in all its glory and yet still sounds “unportrayable.”