

Schönberg
A Play by John Fisher

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Characters:

ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG, seventy
OSCAR LEVAT, forty

The action takes place in Schönberg's bungalow in Los Angeles in 1944. There is modern furniture, a record player and a piano. There are two doors, one is the front door, the other leads to the bedroom. Projections can be put onto a screen or a convenient wall.

Schönberg was originally presented as a workshop in The Studio at Theatre Rhinoceros in the April 2006. Matthew Martin played Oscar Levant, John Fisher played Arnold Schönberg and directed/produced; Costumes/Stage Management, Lara Rempel; Scenic Design, Erik Flatmo.

Prologue

(We hear the Schönberg Piano Concerto – briefly. Lights up on OSCAR LEVANT, sixty-five and seated at the piano. He’s a real card.)

OSCAR (To us)

That was a little gem by Arnold Schönberg, radical innovator who fled Nazi Germany because he was Jewish. He ended up out here, in Hollywood, with a bunch of other Kraut rads like Tommy Mann, Otto Dix, Bertie Brecht, Ernie Lubitsch, and Joey VonSternberg. SCHOENBERG’s music is atonal or twelve tone. It’s dissonant, puts us on edge. He thought music was trapped in the tonal system, held back by melody, harmony and consonance, uptight. He believed in disharmony. Is it nice music? He’d say, “You’re askin’ the wrong question.” It’s a reflection of this screwed up world we’re livin’ in. Hey, it’s 1942. Could the world be any more screwed up? If his music’s ugly it’s because this world is ugly. That’s the way he saw it so that’s the way he played it. (He plays an “ugly” SCHOENBERGian chord.) The irony is he ended up in a place like Hollywood where entertainment follows strict rules of beauty and accessibility. Like me, I’m beautiful and accessible. Which in this town means fun at a party and promiscuous. (He pops a pill in his mouth and laughs.) My name is Oscar Levant. I’m a show-off, I mean an actor. A long time ago I was a composer, classically trained. (He shows off a bit on the piano, some Tchaikovsky.) That’s a little piece I wrote, I mean that’s a little piece Tchaikovsky wrote. I wanted to be Tchaikovsky, I mean I wanted to be Levant. Levant, le composer moderne! (He shows off a bit more.) I was serious too. I’d been a song-writer, a hack. But I wanted to be better. First I studied with George Gershwin, buddy of mine. And then I heard SCHOENBERG was in town. Arnold SCHOENBERG. Fresh form Europe. Full of dissonance. So I arranged a meeting. I was going to study with SCHOENBERG. A shlub like me. Well that’s what America’s all about.

(Blackout. We see projected an article from the *Los Angeles Times* – “SCHOENBERG, Noted German Composer, Arrives in Hollywood, Fleeing Nazis.” Lights up on SCHOENBERG, seventy years old, at the piano. He is wearing black dinner jacket and tie. He plucks out a brief tune on the piano, looks at this watch, and then exits through the front door. Blackout. A projection of a swank Hollywood party, everyone in dinner jackets, holding cocktails, jazz music. Image fades. Lights up.)

Scene One

(We hear Schubert’s “Trout.” SCHOENBERG enters with a cup of coffee and sits in sofa listening to the Schubert. He wears a suit and tie. Though seventy, he is not worn out or old seeming. He actually looks excited about what the day will bring. That each day inevitably disappoints him is beside the point at the beginning of the day. Or maybe he’s just excited about Schubert. At any event he sits and listens enraptured. There is a doorbell. SCHOENBERG does not hear it. Then another. He looks confused. He crosses to the record player and looks at it as if something might be wrong with it and the sound of the doorbell was coming from the mechanism. Another doorbell and then knocking. Finally he gets it. He turns off the music and answers the door.)

OSCAR (Off)

Mr. SCHOENBERG.

SCHOENBERG

Come in, Mr. Levant. (French pronunciation.)

OSCAR (Off)

Levant. (American.) Oscar Levant. It's not Levant. I'm not French. I'm American.

SCHOENBERG

Very well, Mr. Levant. (His way.) Come in.

(OSCAR LEVANT enters. He is as we remember him – wry, intelligent, sarcastic. He wears a blazer, slacks, tie and penny loafers. He is very much the Hollywood player, a sharp contrast to SCHOENBERG's formal European.)

OSCAR (Looking around.)

Nice place.

SCHOENBERG

It's not.

OSCAR

No it's not. You liking Hollywood?

SCHOENBERG

I like the climate. It's more temperate than Massachusetts.

OSCAR

Or Germany for that matter, huh? (SCHOENBERG does not respond.) It was an honor to finally meet you at that party.

SCHOENBERG

I was very honored to be invited.

OSCAR

Well, I got you invited.

SCHOENBERG

You got me invited?

OSCAR

Yeah, sure. They're making a movie about Gershwin and I think they should have some real composers around. Especially ground breaking man like yourself. Forgive me, I'm a little nervous. I'm not used to being around such musical class.

SCHOENBERG

Musical class. I don't understand what you're saying.

OSCAR

Here in the United States we don't have any royalty. No dukes, earls and barons, things like that, so, uh, we have artistic class... You have to achieve something in the arts. Well, you have. You're an impressive figure. So I invite you to that party.

SCHOENBERG

Well, thank you for getting me invited.

OSCAR

My pleasure.

SCHOENBERG

I've never seen so many ex-patriots in my life. Seems have of Europe was there.

OSCAR

Well, that's the great thing Hitler did for American entertainment. Cleared out Europe.

SCHOENBERG

I suppose you could say that. Hitler for American entertainment. (He laughs.) Sounds like a studio. American Entertainment and Hitler is, what do you say? Talent scout?

OSCAR (Laughing also, a hearty guffaw)

Very good. Anyway, it was nice talking to you.

SCHOENBERG

I'm surprised you remember.

OSCAR

What do you mean?

SCHOENBERG

You were very drunk.

OSCAR

Was I?

SCHOENBERG

Yes and very flirtatious.

OSCAR

With you?

SCHOENBERG

With everybody *but* me.

OSCAR

Really?

SCHOENBERG

Yes. You seemed to be making a lot of progress. Are you always so... promiscuous?
With your eyes?

OSCAR (Sitting on the sofa)

Well, it's a party. I have a lot of things to get done.

SCHOENBERG

I suppose you do.

OSCAR

Anyway, I wasn't drunk. I'll let you in on a secret. I don't drink.

(OSCAR laughs uproariously. SCHOENBERG only stares.)

OSCAR

My friends say there's nothing wrong with me that a miracle can't cure.

(He laughs some more.)

SCHOENBERG

Your *friends* say that?

(Pause.)

OSCAR

Anyway, they're making this picture about Gershwin and um... Well, I've been brought in as "musical advisor" which of course means that they ignore everything I say. So, um, it's going to be one hell of a picture.

SCHOENBERG

It must be exciting to be working. It is very difficult for me to get work.

OSCAR

You don't want to work on this picture. They're making a mess of Gershwin. You know his music, of course.

SCHOENBERG

Somewhat.

OSCAR

Somewhat?

SCHOENBERG

He wanted to study with me. I said "no." So he painted my portrait.

(OSCAR laughs.)

OSCAR

That's George. (He laughs some more.) One time, in New York, he-

SCHOENBERG

How can I help you, Mr. Levant?

OSCAR

Well, I um, I gotta lot of time on my hands. They're paying me twenty-five grand to work on this movie but like I say they ignore me, they don't give a shit what I think. So, uh, I like to, you know, keep my hand in.

SCHOENBERG

Your hand in what?

OSCAR

I like to stay on top of things. I figure it's a good thing you're here. I'd like to learn about your music. Your stuff. You don't give many concerts.

SCHOENBERG

Not many are offered to me.

OSCAR

Ok, not many are offered to you.

SCHOENBERG

Almost none in fact. Nobody's interested in my music. As a matter of fact the conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Leopold Stokoski was fired for putting me on his program. Most disconcerting.

OSCAR

So I mean, you'll, uh, you'll teach me... composition?

SCHOENBERG

You mean give you a lesson?

OSCAR

Well, I'd like to uh... I'd like to learn.

SCHOENBERG

There are some records I think of my... stuff, as you say.

OSCAR

No, no, I don't want to listen to records. I'd like to hear you play.

SCHOENBERG

Really?

OSCAR

Well that's how I fell in love with George's music. That's how I fall in love with everybody's music. That's why I go to parties. I mean, you put enough drinks in somebody and they'll play for you. Duke Ellington. Benny. All of 'em. I've even heard Chuck Ives. But uh, you didn't play at that party. You don't get drunk.

SCHOENBERG

Not from alcohol.

OSCAR

You smoke something? Pills? (He laughs.)

SCHOENBERG

No . No, I don't know... I am... Hm... Forgive me... Um, you want to learn. Are you a composer yourself?

OSCAR

Oh well, yeah.

SCHOENBERG

Can you play something for me?

OSCAR

Well, sure, what do you wanna hear?

SCHOENBERG

What exactly do you do on these films?

OSCAR

Well, um, mostly I'm a composer. Well that's sort of embarrassing saying that to you. But, well you know, I compose. I'm a,, (He laughs.) I'm a song writer.

SCHOENBERG

Would you like to play me one of these songs?

OSCAR

Well that's not why I came.

SCHOENBERG

I know. I'd like to hear what you compose.

OSCAR (Hurrying to the piano)

How's about my Tchaikovsky 1st. You just have to imagine the orchestra. (He begins banging out the piano opening of Tchaikovsky's 1st Piano Concerto and humming the orchestral accompaniment - he is quite a character. He stops and laughs wildly at his antics. SCHOENBERG just stares.)

OSCAR

One of *your* compositions. Play what is, um... most typical of you.

(OSCAR quickly shoves a pill in his mouth and swallows. Then he launches into "Steamboat Round the Bend." It is a lively rendition of an insipid, noisy, cloying song – Tin Pan Alley at its worst. At the end of it he sits and catches his breath. He was obviously very nervous. He looks at SCHOENBERG like a child looking for approval. SCHOENBERG only stares. OSCAR finally laughs. He looks a little ashamed.)

OSCAR

I wish I *did* drink. Then I'd have something to blame my problems on.

SCHOENBERG

Why on earth do you want to study composition with me?

OSCAR

Well, you see what I get paid to compose.

SCHOENBERG

Yes.

OSCAR

I want to write a concerto, not a song.

SCHOENBERG

You don't like that song.

OSCAR

Did you? (Silence.) I think writing shit like this killed George.

SCHOENBERG

Gershwin wrote a concerto.

OSCAR

One. It wasn't enough. Not for George.

(Pause.)

SCHOENBERG

It would be my pleasure to teach you, Mr. Levant.

(OSCAR looks surprised.)

OSCAR

Yeah?

SCHOENBERG

Yes.

OSCAR

Well, that *is* news.

SCHOENBERG

I'm not sure it's news. But I think you will make a good student. You have the truth of eagerness in you and you have ability and I see in your music and in your playing more optimism than I see in you. That's a good sign. It's good when a personality is suspicious, but the creativity believes.

OSCAR

Believes?

SCHOENBERG

Yes. It's all about belief, Mr. Levant. You must believe.

OSCAR

You have to call me Oscar.

SCHOENBERG

Oscar's a difficult name for me. But I shall call you Oscar.

OSCAR

Can I call you-

SCHOENBERG

You will call me Mr. SCHOENBERG.

OSCAR

Mr. SCHOENBERG. Ok. Well, uh...

SCHOENBERG

We shall meet next week. Same day. Same time.

OSCAR

Ok, it was a pleasure. I'll see you next week. If there is a next week.

SCHOENBERG

Oh, there will be a next week. There's always a next week.

OSCAR

Say, how's about that MacArthur?

SCHOENBERG

Mr. Levant-

OSCAR

Oscar.

SCHOENBERG

Oscar.

OSCAR

Talk to me, baby. I gotta come down. Playin' "Steamboat Round the Bend" for you just about crapped my pants. I got performance anxiety. You're like Beethoven in my book, baby. Let me come down.

(Pause.)

SCHOENBERG

Can I offer you some coffee?

OSCAR

Do you have any?

SCHOENBERG

No.

OSCAR

Then, no thanks. (He strides back into the room.) So what do you think about MacArthur?

SCHOENBERG

What do you mean, what do I think about MacArthur?

OSCAR

I mean, uh, you read the newspapers, don't you?

SCHOENBERG

I find newspapers insufferable.

OSCAR

Well he went back. You knew that.

SCHOENBERG

Back where?

OSCAR

The Philippines.

SCHOENBERG

A man named MacArthur from the Philippines... I *am* confused.

OSCAR

General MacArthur.

SCHOENBERG

Hmm, I try not to follow generals. They are creative artists in a different medium. I feel like they are competing for the audience's attention.

OSCAR

That's an interesting concept. You don't think MacArthur's a good general?

SCHOENBERG

A good general. *That's* an interesting concept. Apparently he's a famous general. Is that the same thing?

OSCAR

Well who do *you* like in generals?

SCHOENBERG

I'm at a loss to answer that question.

OSCAR

Eisenhower? Patton? Patton's a good guy. Montgomery? He's European, Good European general.

SCHOENBERG

I don't know. Names are escaping me.

OSCAR

You must know a general.

SCHOENBERG

You're very insistent.

OSCAR

Come on, everybody talks about generals these days. Come on. Who's your favorite general? You like Russians. Zhukov? Rokossovsky? Konev? Konev's a good guy.

SCHOENBERG

I don't know. Are there any Jewish generals?

OSCAR

Jewish Generals. Hmmm... You got me there. Jewish Generals I don't... I can't think of any. Jewish generals. Now that's an interesting concept.

SCHOENBERG

I'd like to know about the Jewish generals. The Old Testament is full of them. They were very successful. I suppose now it's not a good thing to be Jewish if you want to be a general. Can't think of an army where that would be an impressive point on a resume.

OSCAR

Hey, I'd make a good Jewish general. I'm generally Jewish.

(Silence.)

SCHOENBERG

I'm very pleased for your MacArthur. And I suppose if he's a good American general it is somehow good for me.

OSCAR

Yeah, he's a good American general.

SCHOENBERG

Very interesting America. American general named MacArthur. Very interesting.

OSCAR

Hmmm...The funny thing is his father's name was Arthur MacArthur. Get that. Kookie.

SCHOENBERG

Yes, kookie. I wonder

OSCAR

What?

SCHOENBERG

This war that everybody's obsessed with...

OSCAR

Well, it's headed in the right direction...

SCHOENBERG

Yes, I suppose. Seems to me there will be much destruction and much unhappiness. Course that's why I left Europe. I left but still people were civilized about the war. Now there's so much bombing. Bombing, bombing, bombing... This is why I can't read anything. I think of the buildings, the architecture. Even the music... all being bombed. It is very sad.

OSCAR

Well, mostly it's Germany that's getting bombed.

SCHOENBERG

Yes, that is what's so sad to me...

OSCAR

You don't want the Nazis to succeed. Not you.

SCHOENBERG

No. One day there will be a bomb that will kill the people but not the buildings, the objects... And then what is most important about the people will survive.

OSCAR

What's that?

SCHOENBERG

Their culture. What they've written down. What they've painted. What they've built. (He withdraws into himself, speaking as if OSCAR were not in the room) People are awful. Awful. Fortunately, they are expendable. But, unfortunately, too many people think that way. Anyway, it is sad to see that so many people die and that at the same time not only them but their past and their future die as well. Destroyed by bombs, their buildings, everything. So sad. I think as Jews, we've never felt like we could exist in the here and now and the present on the planet. So maybe for us we can understand destruction. Since the destruction of the temple and so much else, maybe destruction is understandable. But it is such tragedy. It happens... plagues, wars. But I think of cities like Weimer, Dresden, Berlin, Vienna, bombed. Everybody's at fault: Hitler, Eisenhower, MacArthur, everybody. Culture is so frail... (He snaps out of it, to OSCAR) I'll see you next week.

OSCAR

Yes.

(OSCAR exits. SCHOENBERG stands looking after him. He plucks out the simple melody of OSCAR's song on the piano. Blackout. Projection of bombers - German, American, British - bombing European cities, an orgy of destruction. The image fades. Lights up. Doorbell.)

Scene Two

(SCHOENBERG enters from bedroom and crosses to the front door, which he opens.)

OSCAR (Off)

Hiya.

SCHOENBERG

Come in and sit at the piano.

OSCAR (Off)

Ok.

(He enters and crosses into the middle of the room.)

SCHOENBERG

At the piano.

OSCAR (Crossing to the piano)

Sure. I like to be bossed around. (He laughs.) I know this dominatrix, the best in Hollywood, and nobody, I swear nobody knows if she's a man or woman-

SCHOENBERG

Oscar-

OSCAR

Not that that matters, mind you-

SCHOENBERG (Joining him)

Last time we gossiped, this time we work.

OSCAR

No chit, chat?

SCHOENBERG

Chit, chat?

OSCAR

No blah, blah, blah?

SCHOENBERG

No blah, blah, blah. Sit. Play. (Indicating music on piano) This piece.

(OSCAR plays the second movement of SCHOENBERG's "Six Little Piano Pieces, op. 19.")

OSCAR

Is it atonal?

SCHOENBERG

What are you talking about?

OSCAR

Well, if I did an analysis of this would it be tonal or atonal?

SCHOENBERG

Tonal. Atonal. Not terms I've ever used. I've never used those terms. Awful, awful terms. Of course it's tonal, everything written for music is tonal if it respects tone. It's modern. It's new. It's at the edge. Atonal. All my music, all my life has been accused of being atonal. Wagner they said was atonal. Everything is tonal. The wind is tonal, the sea is tonal. Do you know what it is? It's pantonal. It's freedom. That's all it is. It's trying something new. Listen to this piece. Listen to it carefully. It's very simple. (He plays.) Now what did that tell you? What story? What was the story? It's aphoristic. What was the story of that aphorism?

OSCAR

You started with a major third which repeated and it sounded like bits of melody tried to interrupt but kept getting sucked back into the major third.

SCHOENBERG

Yes, a melody. A melody tried to break in on it. I established very quickly a major third, it reasserted itself, but always this melody. Different melodies really trying to break in, trying to use the major third as a launch pad, not to destroy the major third but to embrace it, move forward, but it doesn't succeed. It's too radical. It's too different. It's too outrageous. So the major third persists. It lives. Now, someone tells you this is atonal music, it's not atonal, nor is it abstract or absolute-

OSCAR

So it's programmatic.

SCHOENBERG

No, it's not programmatic. Another term. Tonal, atonal, abstract, absolute, programmatic- it doesn't necessarily have to tell a story but it can and if it can tell a story the story it tells is of an attempt, not to break away, not to destroy but to launch off into outer space, to take what exists and enhance it. That is all that I've done. Enhanced. Do you think it's ugly?

OSCAR

No, it's different.

SCHOENBERG

But is it ugly?

OSCAR

Well, it's not... What's the word? Comfortable? It's not relaxing. It's not...

SCHOENBERG

Reassuring. Yes, it doesn't reassure. You don't know where it's going to go. Yes, like life. It's not an... abstraction, an escape, it's a confrontation, it leads where life leads, to the unknown. Always we think our lives are so set, so simple. Arbitrariness, much, much arbitrariness and this music embraces it.

OSCAR

Well, you say you don't like music that's predictable, that's, uh... tonal, say?

SCHOENBERG

I do. There is a piece I heard in Berlin the night before I left. The most beautiful piece of music... ever composed. The Violin Concerto by Beethoven. Beautiful. Furtwängler, he conducted it. Furtwängler... (He laughs.) A good conductor but he believes in Hindemith. Do you know what Hindemith wants to do with music?

OSCAR

No.

SCHOENBERG

Something much more radical. But more practical. He asks, "What do you compose for? Don't be so elitist. Do you compose for people to work? Do you compose for people to play? Do you compose for people to shop? Do you compose for people to go boating? Do you compose to calm people down on airplanes?" It's not music. I don't know what it is but it's not music. It's... it's background. It's environment. This is what Hindemith wants. Scary. They say I'm crazy. I listen to a man like Hindemith, insane.

OSCAR

We have stuff like that.

SCHOENBERG

Background music?

OSCAR

Yes.

SCHOENBERG

Of course you do. Most of Gershwin. (He stares at OSCAR) Music like that. It must be used to lie. It seems to me the place you'd want background music most is in court rooms, prisons, concentration camps, distract people from the terror. It is the kind of thing a man who is about to be hung would want to hear. Awful. It lies, music like that. Escapist. If that's tonal music, than I *am* atonal. People need to be awake. Always. Awake and careful. Come. Sit down. So, we teach you. This hand will play the simple

piece. It will play the very simple little major third. And this hand will always struggle to interrupt. To blend in. To take the major third, and to... do something with it. Something too radical. Not like your Gershwin. It would be pleasant, it would be complimentary, it would be appropriate but not to the major third which has the power behind it: tradition, beauty, predictability. A good thing when it's combined with ambition and a vision for the future and the unpredictability of life.

(OSCAR plays the piece. The lights fade but OSCAR and SCHOENBERG remain visible. Projections of tanks, warships, submarines, an oddly beautiful image of mechanized war, everything moving fast and efficiently, no people visible. OSCAR's playing accompanies these images. The projection fades as OSCAR finishes the piece. Lights restore.)

SCHOENBERG

I will drop off music for you. At your address. You will study it and learn it till you can play it with confidence. Then we will meet again.

OSCAR

You'll drop off music?

SCHOENBERG

Yes, write your address down.

OSCAR

We're finished?

SCHOENBERG

For today. There's nothing more we can do today. The next step we must take separately.

(OSCAR hands him the address.)

OSCAR

Thank you.

SCHOENBERG

Good morning. (Blackout.)

Scene Three

(Lights immediately back up on SCHOENBERG and OSCAR. SCHOENBERG stands and OSCAR is pacing, nervously. SCHOENBERG only watches him.)

SCHOENBERG

I heard you on the radio.

(OSCAR stops pacing. He looks excited that SCHOENBERG has heard his show.)

OSCAR

Yeah?

SCHOENBERG

Most amusing.

OSCAR

It was a good show. We were supposed to have Clark Gable on-

SCHOENBERG

You said something. It was most telling.

OSCAR

Oh yeah. "The only difference between Democrats and Republicans is that the Democrats allow the poor to be corrupt, too." (He guffaws at this one.) Clever that line. Poetry.

(SCHOENBERG doesn't laugh.)

SCHOENBERG

No, you said: "What the world needs is more geniuses with humility, there are so few of us left." (They regard one another.)

OSCAR

Yeah.

SCHOENBERG

You have something for me?

OSCAR

Huh?

SCHOENBERG

You have something to play for me.

OSCAR

Oh, you mean that stuff, that thing you dropped off.

SCHOENBERG

Yes, that stuff, that thing.

(OSCAR crosses nervously to the piano. He is almost shaking. SCHOENBERG sits.)

OSCAR

Ok, ok, I can just barely get through this.

SCHOENBERG

Play.

OSCAR

It takes all my concentration.

SCHOENBERG

Please play.

OSCAR

I mean, I just barely get through it.

SCHOENBERG

Yes, yes, yes, of course.

OSCAR

I've been up all night.

SCHOENBERG

Play.

OSCAR

I mean, I been up all night at the piano.

SCHOENBERG

Mr. Levant. We've had our "blah,blah." Now we play. Play!

(OSCAR starts to play, with great concentration and focus. Lights fade a bit. Projection of the Holocaust – grisly, uncompromising images. The images come in time to the dissonant music. Near the end of the piece the projections fade. Lights restore. We see OSCAR play the last few measures of the Piano Concerto in full light. OSCAR is very demonstrative in his playing of the finale, very showy. He finishes the concerto with a huge confident flourish. He looks exhausted.)

SCHOENBERG

You play well. You play very well.

OSCAR

Thank you.

SCHOENBERG

I'm surprised.

OSCAR

Hey, hey, I'm a performer.

SCHOENBERG

Yes, that's what surprises me. I didn't say you *performed* well, I said you *played* well. Your performance almost ruined it.

OSCAR

What are you talking about?

SCHOENBERG

You're trying to sell it. A performer sells things. It doesn't need to be sold. It's not some dying puppy on the corner that you're trying to get rid of, that you want to make a buck off of. It is its own thing. It just needs to be played. The performer presents. He does not perform. If a performer performs he is being redundant. That is how I would characterize your music: redundant. At the beginning of the piece, when you were nervous, you didn't have the energy, the excess energy to perform it, so you just played it. You were a performer who played, that is why it was successful.

OSCAR

I take that as a compliment.

SCHOENBERG

It is an extreme compliment. You play the piece that I wrote for you very well.

OSCAR

That you wrote for me?

SCHOENBERG

Yes. The best way to teach is to write a piece for a student.

OSCAR

Really?

SCHOENBERG

Yes. Yes, that's what I did after our diagnostic. I realized that that is the best way for you to learn this music.

OSCAR

So, um, I'm flattered.

SCHOENBERG

You shouldn't be. I'm a good teacher. A good teacher doesn't flatter his students. He teaches them well. I take it very seriously.

OSCAR

I see.

SCHOENBERG

Bela Bartok: he would not teach. Because he knew it requires a lot. He wanted to be a composer so he left teaching. I respect teaching still. So I respect you.

OSCAR

Well, thank you.

SCHOENBERG

But don't perform this music. Don't add to it. You want to make it more neurotic than it is. It's already neurotic. Listen to it. (He plays a passage.) Just let it be. Let it be neurotic. You're a very neurotic man. So when a neurotic man plays neurotic music it will be neurotic enough.

OSCAR

You're saying something along the lines of "Less is more?"

SCHOENBERG

Less is more? I suppose by that equation nothing would be most. Yes. Perhaps. I've written an opera. Its called *Moses und Aron*. At the climax, when Moses is confronted with the diabolical nature of Aron and the cheapness of the God that he worships and sells to the people of Israel, he says nothing. He has no response. In that case, you're right, nothing is most, therefore less must be more.

OSCAR

Would you let me see this opera?

SCHOENBERG

No, it's not finished.

OSCAR

Do you intend to finish it?

SCHOENBERG

I applied to the Guggenheims for a grant to finish it. It was declined.

OSCAR

You could finish it on your own.

SCHOENBERG

I don't believe in creating things on my own. Just as a student deserves respect, so does a composer.

OSCAR

So you'll never finish it unless you get some sort of grant or subsidy?

SCHOENBERG

I don't know. I'm not sure it should be finished. My opera is about the people, the volk and the feurher, Moses. The feuhrer leading the volk. Unfortunately I started writing it in 1931. In 1933 the terms feuhrer and volk were taken over by a million people in Nuremberg. They mean different things now. They certainly don't mean Moses and the people of Israel. I'm afraid my opera is already dated.

OSCAR

Sounds like an important work. Sounds like exactly the kind of opera that needs to be performed.

SCHOENBERG

Perhaps. Or perhaps it is the last opera. Anyway, there is something wrong with a Jew writing an opera. It is a form that belongs to the Master Race, the fascists. It is the music, the theatre of Italy and Germany, the dictatorships. For a Jew to write it... It is too great a challenge. Our voice has been excluded from it for too long. Certainly for Moses to speak up in a Jewish opera... no. That truly is the end of opera. The death of it. I've written two acts. There was to be third. But I think two acts is enough.

OSCAR

That's a kind of tragedy right there. Isn't the destruction of a people tragic, but the destruction of their culture worse?

SCHOENBERG

That sounds familiar.

OSCAR

You're destroying your own culture. You're internalizing the tragedy.

SCHOENBERG

Please. I don't need a neurotic to explain something to a paranoid. I have my own fears about my artistic creation. I'm too far... out here in too many ways. I always was. Artistically. And then I declared myself a Jew. (He laughs.) Perfect. I almost wasn't let into your country. Too radical in too many different ways. But I had a job. That really is the only requirement for immigration to this country. A job. And some famous people who will vouch for you. So I am here. In Los Angeles. The City of Angles. So funny. Angels. Catholic Angles. Here I am amongst the angels, with all the other exiled Jews. Something so funny. When I had my books shipped to me from Berlin, they arrived here in a big box. They arrived in April. Stamped all over the box was "Happy Easter." "Happy Easter." "Happy Easter." I don't consider Christ the enemy of the Jews. But the Jewish denial of Christ, it's a scary thing. In many ways it's the Jew denying the future. Denying the transition, denying progress. It has been so offensive to Christians ever since. That a people could deny an advancement, the next step. It's a sort of superiority. It's a way of saying, "No, it is not an improvement. It's good enough as it is. Don't move forward. Stay where we are." It denies everything: evolution. Darwin. We've never been

forgiven. We refused Christ's forgiveness and we've never been forgiven. We've had to grow in other ways. Internally. Through things like Psychology. We've had to discover ourselves. Freud had the answer. Perhaps Einstein. The inner world or outer space, these are the only places for us. There is no place for us in this world.

OSCAR

What about a State of Israel?

SCHOENBERG

Oh, a state of Israel... You mean in the Levant, Oscar? I don't know. Maybe. It seems precarious. There we are surrounded not by Christians but by Muslims. Another people who have advanced. Moved on. Made the best possible world in this world. To not look in, to not look out, but to live for now. To embrace forgiveness and a benevolent god essentially. The Jewish God is very cruel, very exacting. You've read the Old Testament.

OSCAR

Of course. In Hebrew school. I'm a good Hebrew. Well, a decent one.

SCHOENBERG

Scary book. Very scary. People think we're living through a vile, evil time now. People who've read the Old Testament... My God. Hitler must have read it. It is an inspiration for... for darkness. That is why the Jewish God is such a miracle. He keeps... he keeps coming back. As you would say, "He keeps showing up for work." He's surprising that way. He doesn't give up. Well... The Christians got so frustrated. This man keeps making demands of them, he keeps wanting them to be better, to try harder, and there's no forgiveness, there's no heaven, there's no hell, there's no apocalypse, there's no deliverance. There's just this demanding angry god. They gave up. They created Christ. Forgiveness. A man who will suffer for us all. A Jew? Nah. He likes suffering. He craves it. He seeks it. Because he understands it. It holds no promises. It doesn't lie. It's palpable. Paranoia. It makes your heart burn. It makes you feel alive. It's scary. You don't understand paranoia. Neurotics never do. (He laughs.) You should try it sometime.

OSCAR

I'm the most paranoid person I know.

SCHOENBERG

Yes, but you're suspicious of small things. Essentially you understand that everything's going to be fine. You're confident. I've never been that way. I've always had to make it *not* all right. I couldn't leave it alone. That's what I mean by nothing. Sometimes nothing is best. The simplest. Never satisfied. Wasn't satisfied in Vienna. So I went to Berlin. Then I wasn't satisfied just being a good teacher, I had to be a revolutionary. I couldn't teach, too good at that, I had to be a composer, I had to be a creative artist. And then I couldn't just be a creative artist, I had to be *the* creative artist, the *next* creative artist, the *next best thing*. The future of music. And when that wasn't enough, I had to be a Jew. I couldn't be a Christian anymore. I had to be a Jew. And then of course I fled. France. Not good enough. Massachusetts. Too cold. Los Angeles. The angels. And even here I'm

unhappy. I sit in this room... God it's dark. Dark rooms in Los Angeles. What a despicable notion. I sit in here with my piano... And I wait to be invited to things. I wait for people like you to come by and treat me like a great man.

OSCAR

Well...

SCHOENBERG

Oh please.... Don't say I'm a great man. It would just make me nervous. This notion of less, of nothing. (He sighs.) To be in peace. Sometimes I think I should have just stayed in Vienna.

OSCAR

Probably be dead now if you were in Vienna.

SCHOENBERG

I know. But, it would have fulfilled my belief in my destiny. To be dead. To be the victim of the ultimate crime. Do you know about the concentration camps? I have read. I'm not as ignorant as your government or, I should say, I don't ignore things like your government does. No, my culture is systematically dismantling culture. Germans are the greatest thinkers, writers, philosophers, musicians... the best. Goethe, Schiller, Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, Nietzsche, Mahler, the best. And they're destroying everything. They go into Poland and destroy. Russia, France. Everything. But I suppose Germans, like myself, feel that is our privilege. We created culture so we get to destroy it. Do you see? There is logic. Even in destruction. The right to destroy. That I understand as a German.

OSCAR

Well, I don't know anything about being a German. I know about being an American though.

SCHOENBERG

Oh, Americans destroy.

OSCAR

Well...

SCHOENBERG

MacArthur destroys, Eisenhower destroys, Patton destroys.

OSCAR

But they destroy for freedom, for democracy.

SCHOENBERG

Oh, you believe that?

OSCAR

Why else?

SCHOENBERG

World markets? Seems to me Mr. Roosevelt is creating quite an economic sphere of activity for the United States.

OSCAR

Maybe for a future generation. No, I really believe we're fighting the good fight. I do. It may sound silly but why else would we go to war? I mean, can you think of any reason for us to go to war? There's none. We could have drawn in on ourselves, like you said. We could have retreated to nothing, just let it happen to ourselves, accept our destiny. But we really are a liberal democracy. We feel like it's our right. We didn't disturb anybody. We sat here. We sat here from the end of the Great War to 1941 and we didn't disturb anybody.

SCHOENBERG

Santo Domingo? Nicaragua? Haiti? You disturbed a few times.

OSCAR

Yeah, well little places. Incidents. But seriously, we didn't. And now we've been attacked and... I think we recognize that... other people have been attacked. Innocent people.

SCHOENBERG

The British Empire, innocent?

OSCAR

Not the British Empire. But the Burmese. The people of Singapore, Malaysia, India, these might be British subjects but they're not British people and they were attacked... by the Japanese. There are a lot of countries that were attacked that weren't Great Britain or France. Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Poland, weak. Young countries: Czechoslovakia, young democracies. You know, somebody's got to protect them. The Russians haven't done a very good job. We should. We should.

SCHOENBERG

You believe that?

OSCAR

You're right, I'm neurotic, but I do have beliefs, there are things I don't question. A belief is something you don't question. I don't question our commitment. This war is a good thing. Well, I don't think any war's a good thing, but... it's a necessary thing.

SCHOENBERG

You think MacArthur is the man for the job?

OSCAR

MacArthur? (He laughs.) MacArthur. I don't know. He's so silly. But he's a leader.

SCHOENBERG

Germany's has many good leaders. For the wrong cause. Does he believe in what he's doing? As you do?

OSCAR

I don't know. It's hard to say. He really has a belief in the Philippines. And a weird belief in Asia. He's lived there. I don't know. I guess future generations will think we were very parental about these countries. But not like the British. I think... I think we want to go and we want to liberate and we want to leave. And whatever anybody makes of that in the future, and it might be something despicable, maybe terrible, but what we want, today, as Americans, I think is good. I do. I really think we want for all of these countries what we have for our own.

SCHOENBERG

Such an idealist. (He laughs.) I suppose even Hitler could persuade himself that he's doing that for Poland.

OSCAR

Well, he's not. He's populating it. He moved Germans into Poland. He gasses the Poles. He machine-guns the Jews. No, he's not doing it for the Poles. (Pause.)

SCHOENBERG

You must compose your own concerto. That is your next step. As a student. You have deep wells of understanding. Of this music. You must practice it. But you must not perform. It's not right. Music is simple. You came here, you wanted to learn the music. I'm going to teach you the music. This is how I teach. But play it simple. It is a toy that I created for you. If you break it... there are no others. It is your hands, your piece. You must make it be. Existence. Remember, this is not analysis. This is very important. I am not interested in the science of how something is made. I am interested in what it is. You must let it be. Don't show us the process, the analysis, the interpretation. Let it be itself. When you come back you will play for me your own concerto and you will let it be itself, nothing else. Nothing. (Blackout. We hear Levant's "Piano Concerto" in the dark – some Schoenbergian elements, but dynamic and exciting in its own right. Projection of destroyed European cities – Warsaw, Rotterdam, London, Berlin. As the piece ends the projection fades. Lights up.)

Scene Four

(OSCAR, now sitting at the piano as if he's just played what we've heard, and SCHOENBERG, on the opposite side of the room, watching. OSCAR looks exhausted from what he's played. He quickly shoves a pill in his mouth, catches his breath and looks to SCHOENBERG for approval.)

OSCAR

Is it good?

SCHOENBERG

Of course it's good. It sounds like Schoenberg. It's derivative.

OSCAR

How do I make it not derivative?

SCHOENBERG

By writing another. Brahms wrote a perfect piano concert. It sounded exactly like Beethoven. So he wrote a second. *That* one sounded like Brahms.

OSCAR

Another one? I don't it got it in me.

SCHOENBERG

You got it in you.

OSCAR

That was exhausting.

SCHOENBERG

Art is exhausting.

OSCAR

This is too much. Composing it, playing it for you. I feel like I'm going to die.

SCHOENBERG

Art is richest in its proximity to death.

OSCAR

I only wanna die once, not every time I sit down at the piano.

SCHOENBERG

The first step as a student is difficult. The next one is almost impossible.

OSCAR

Why's that?

SCHOENBERG

Because it requires discipline.

OSCAR

I don't got the time.

SCHOENBERG

You don't got the discipline.

OSCAR

Hey, call me crazy.

SCHOENBERG

I heard a man say on the radio: "There's a fine line between genius and insanity - I have erased this line."

OSCAR

You listened to my show again.

SCHOENBERG

Clever. Very clever.

OSCAR

Hey, I'm a genius. (He reaches for another pill.)

SCHOENBERG

I didn't say the line was genius. I said it was clever. There's a fine line between clever and genius. Just as there's a fine line between insanity and dependency.

(Pause.)

OSCAR (Standing and crossing the room.)

Anyway, I'm giving up radio.

SCHOENBERG

To do what?

OSCAR

Acting. I'm appearing in the next Gene Kelly picture.

SCHOENBERG

You're playing a role.

OSCAR

I play an unsympathetic part - myself.

SCHOENBERG

And what of your music?

OSCAR

I have a family. I can't live off my music.

SCHOENBERG

You have a *habit*. *That* can't live off your music.

(Pause.)

OSCAR

So Arthur Freed's offered me a position. As his assistant.

SCHOENBERG

I thought you were an actor now.

OSCAR

Well, assistant pays better. And I don't have to actually *do* anything. Actors have to act. (He laughs. Pause.) But maybe I could keep coming. Coming here.

SCHOENBERG

Why?

OSCAR

To study. Maybe someday...

SCHOENBERG

Someday. Someday what? You want to be a composer, you want me to inspire you, to make you a modern, somebody like myself? Perhaps a successor to myself? But you're too wrapped up in your parties Oscar, the drugs, the sickness, the job of being neurotic. It's a position, Oscar, being a neurotic. It's a situation. You've turned it into a lifetime ambition. All that is in my life. The paranoia, the neurosis. But it goes into my music. I get up in the morning, I put on a suit, I comb my hair, and I go to work. And so much of my work has nothing to do with my music, but my music is my reward. With you Oscar: you act, you write a song here and there, you go down to the studio and play assistant to a great man like Arthur Freed and your reward is to be neurotic, to fuck every starlet you can get your hands on, even if you have to pay for them, to take drugs and sleeping pills even if you have to beg; you abuse your wife, you abuse your children. Perhaps I'm wrong in the details, but I'm right in many of them.

OSCAR

Yes.

SCHOENBERG

There are so many people like you in Hollywood. You want to be things. You dream of being things. But deep down... You just want attention. You just want to act crazy and have people like you for that. I suppose it makes for a more interesting life in the here and now but in space, in the great beyond, you will have left nothing behind.

OSCAR

I made a few movies. People seem to like me in those.

SCHOENBERG

Yes, as a clown. Somebody to feel sorry for. Somebody who had to pay for sex. Somebody who had to take pills to keep him as neurotic as he thought he had to be. You're a smart man, Oscar. Like so many smart men you've chosen the day to day route, anything that will get you through. What disgusts me about you is, you know better.

OSCAR

Say, uh... Maestro. Could I have a glass of water?

SCHOENBERG

Of course. (He exits. OSCAR quickly pops a pill, steadies himself. SCHOENBERG returns wheeling a ping pong table and holding a glass of water. He parks the ping pong table in the center of the room and hands OSCAR the water.)

OSCAR

What's this?

SCHOENBERG

Ping pong. (SCHOENBERG begins to set you the table.) Gershwin and I had much in common. One thing was tennis and when we begin to argue, to disagree, we would simply play tennis. It saved us many ugly incidents.

OSCAR

What did you two disagree about?

SCHOENBERG

Many things. Gershwin never orchestrated his work, as you know. I thought he should. He said. "If so many people can orchestrate, why is it considered such a skill?" This is why I would not teach him. He had nothing to learn.

OSCAR

What else did you disagree about?

SCHOENBERG

George came to one concert of mine. A concerto. Afterwards he said only this, "I'm thinking of writing a concerto myself. But it will be something simple, like Mozart." I pointed out to him that Mozart was not considered simple in his day.

OSCAR

George usually wasn't that rude.

SCHOENBERG

That is not what I objected to in the comment. Or in him. More than anything, I thought he was lazy.

(Pause.)

SCHOENBERG

So rather than argue we would play tennis.

OSCAR

Tennis?

SCHOENBERG

George owned a tennis court. I own a ping pong table. Join me.

(They play ping pong for a bit. Finally OSCAR aces SCHOENBERG. OSCAR talks to the audience.)

OSCAR (To audience)

SCHOENBERG was the most important composer of the twentieth century. The fact that nobody likes his music is evidence of that. His influence though was enormous. He freed music from so much that had constrained it for so long. And whatever we hear in pop music now, in the sound of the sixties, can be traced to SCHOENBERG. He was also a good friend. I saw him one last time, at a party. He was still trying to get me to promote myself, my music. He knew I wanted to be a serious composer more than anything else.

SCHOENBERG

Oscar.

OSCAR

Arnie, baby, how are you?

SCHOENBERG

Terrific, baby. Do you know who's here tonight?

OSCAR

Oh, no, come on...

SCHOENBERG

Otto Klemperer. If he heard a wonderful concerto at a party, he might just present it at the symphony.

OSCAR

Give me a break, yeah?

SCHOENBERG (Indicating the piano)

Some one has given the pianist a break. This could be your big break.

OSCAR

He's the conductor of the L.A. Symphony, come on.

SCHOENBERG

You always get a lot done at parties, Oscar. If they don't like it we can say I wrote it. He already hates my music.

(OSCAR crosses nervously to the piano and sits. SCHOENBERG is looking at OSCAR. OSCAR is nervous. He looks around. To audience) Ladies and gentlemen, here's a little composition I've been working on. With my mentor, Herr Maestro SCHOENBERG. (He takes a deep breath and plays the opening bars of his Piano Concerto. But suddenly he makes a joke of it and launches into "Steam Boat 'Round the Bend," selling it in his inimitable style. We hear laughter from the party guests. All around. The laughter builds. OSCAR begins laughing himself, stands and takes a bow. SCHOENBERG laughs as well. The lights fade to black. Projection of the real OSCAR and SCHOENBERG at a party surrounded by celebrities. The shot zeros in on them. Projection fades.)

End of Play