

# **SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF OPERATIC SINGING: KLAUS FLORIAN VOGT**

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“Time is different during opera. You live before and after. During the performance  
itself time stands still.”

“Wenn nicht jetzt, wann denn dann? / If not now, when then?”

– Klaus Florian Vogt

## **Introduction**

The singing of German tenor Klaus Florian Vogt (b. 1970) initially puzzled, and continues to fascinate those who hear his voice on stage and through transmissions and recordings. In this paper I provide a brief biography of Vogt, followed by an account, based on interviews with Vogt (including my own), on how he relates to his major roles, his voice, his acting and experiences with director's theatre, his way of preparing for a role in rehearsals and on a day of performance. The paper also discusses how Vogt relates his experience of singing to that of flying a plane, his political views on the need for opera in the regions, his thoughts on the differences between singing in a fully staged opera and an aria recital, how he experiences singing, and the impact on it of orchestra and conductor, magic moments, and anecdotes of unexpected events in performance. These two sections provide sufficient information to allow the readers to form their own image of Vogt. In the third section, I address the reception of Vogt's voice and singing in the media, and provide a context of spirituality to account further for the exceptional nature of Vogt's voice and singing; here I also relate information provided in the first two sections to the development and expression of spirituality.

## Biography

Klaus Florian Vogt was born in 1970 in Heide, Schleswig Holstein, Germany. He has five siblings. His father had embarked on studies of music before changing courses to study medicine instead. He became a GP, but maintained his keen interest in music, leading all of his six children to appreciate music and play instruments in a way that allowed them to discover the enjoyment of learning to play music. Vogt got his instrument, the horn, on his 10<sup>th</sup> birthday: his father had always wanted to found a wind quintet, but had difficulties finding a suitable hornist.<sup>1</sup> Vogt enjoyed playing the horn so much that in due course he studied it in Hannover and Hamburg. Then he auditioned for the Philharmonisches Staatsorchester Hamburg, which, in addition to symphony concerts, plays for all the opera and ballet performances at the Staatsoper in Hamburg. He was accepted, and after a customary probationary year, he received the official letter from the cultural authorities informing him that his position with the orchestra, as deputy principal horn, was now for life.<sup>2</sup>

At that time, he was not at all interested in singing; he had joined youth orchestras, rather than youth choirs.<sup>3</sup> He was introduced to the world of singing through his girlfriend, later wife, Silvia Krüger, but initially that ability to see behind the curtain alienated rather than attracted him. Vogt was suspicious of the world of singers, especially the distance between stage and orchestra pit, which he considered psychologically or mentally quite vast.<sup>4</sup> He took flying lessons with the first money he earned in the orchestra.

For a family celebration, Vogt and his wife rehearsed the Cat Duet by Rossini (with the male part written for a baritone), and those present suggested that the sound of Vogt's voice was good enough to merit having it checked by a professional singing teacher. The teacher told him that he was a tenor, not a baritone, and that he had considerable potential. His wife maintains that initially she took his singing more seriously than he himself, reminding him of the need to practise.<sup>5</sup> On the side of his

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<sup>1</sup> Bscher 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Vogt 2010b.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Bscher.

full time post in the orchestra, Vogt took up studying singing at the Hochschule für Musik in Lübeck, an hour's drive from Hamburg. He did not tell his colleagues in the orchestra anything about his studies,<sup>6</sup> but one day a decision had to be taken.

In 1997 he made the decision to abandon his career with the Staatsorchester in Hamburg, on the condition that he might return to his post within one year—a deal agreed by the entire orchestra.<sup>7</sup> The decision was a difficult one. On the one hand he has a secure position, for life, and he loved his profession, having worked hard throughout his studies to get there. On the other hand, having reached the position he had, there was not much further he could progress, and the prospect of serving in the orchestra for another 30 odd years was frustrating. Looking for alternatives was one decision; finding the alternative and actually resigning from his post was a different matter altogether.<sup>8</sup> He took up a one year contract with the Landestheater Schleswig Holstein in Flensburg, singing operetta and light opera, including Tamino in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. This move involved a loss in income (from around 8000 DM at the orchestra to 3000 DM at the theatre [4000 Euro to 1500 Euro] per month), and a fundamental risk.<sup>9</sup> It also felt sad, Vogt reports, to leave behind such a major period of his life,<sup>10</sup> and one which he had worked hard for to achieve and thoroughly enjoyed.<sup>11</sup>

From the next season, 1998/99, he was a full time company member of the Staatsoper in Dresden. Since 2003 he has been freelance, making his debuts at major opera houses across the world: the Metropolitan Opera in New York (Lohengrin, 2006), La Scala, Milan, as Lohengrin in 2007, the Vienna State Opera (2007), Bavarian State Opera, Munich (2007), and sang Parsifal in Hamburg (2004), where he was welcomed back warmly by his former colleagues in the orchestra. In 2007 he stepped in at short notice in Katharina Wagner's production of *Die Meistersinger*, at Bayreuth, after the originally cast Robert Dean Smith withdrew due to disagreements with the production concept. He repeated this role there in 2008, 2009 and 2010, followed by Lohengrin in 2011.

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<sup>6</sup> Vogt 2010b

<sup>7</sup> Bscher 2009

<sup>8</sup> Vogt 2010b

<sup>9</sup> Bscher 2009

<sup>10</sup> Vogt 2010b.

<sup>11</sup> Vogt 2011b.

He lives with his family, wife and four sons, in the north of Germany, very close to the North Sea, where he likes to take long walks with his family and their dogs.<sup>12</sup> His sons are developing an interest in the arts, the piano, film and acting.<sup>13</sup>

## **Vogt on Vogt**

### ***The Voice***

Vogt maintains that while there was, by necessity, a certain natural gift for singing, his professional career started with a few high notes, and the rest was sheer determination and hard work. He seeks to develop an appropriate technique that allows him to sing fully with his voice.<sup>14</sup> He still works with a singing teacher, Irmgard Boas, which helped him not to get a hoarse voice within minutes without knowing why, and which now allows him to sustain long parts such as Lohengrin or Stolzing.<sup>15</sup>

When it comes to the challenges of singing Wagner, long parts over many hours, Vogt is able to differentiate, most probably an important condition for success. Whereas in *Lohengrin*, the majority of singing happens in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Act, in *Meistersinger*, Walther sings across all three acts, with much singing already in Act I, culminating in the rejected song. While Act II is relatively brief for Walther, the kind of singing required here is quite dramatic; for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Act he has to return to the very lyrical mode of singing required for the development of the prize song, and the song itself then develops into dramatic singing at its end.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the individual requirements that vary from role to role, the framework of the opera house adds to the challenge. In Bayreuth, for example, Vogt has to take into account the need to maintain alertness and readiness to perform across very lengthy intervals in between acts.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas many singers in the Heldentenor line may have started as baritones, Vogt trained as a tenor from the start, and his first parts, at the Landestheater Flensburg,

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<sup>12</sup> Bscher 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Vogt 2011c.

<sup>14</sup> Vogt 2010b.

<sup>15</sup> Vogt 2010b; Bscher 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Vogt 2010b.

<sup>17</sup> Vogt 2008.

were in the light lyrical line, followed by some operetta. Vogt believes that operetta has been underrated: operetta, too, has big arias, accompanied by a large orchestra, and the tessitura is similar to that of many of the Helden-roles.<sup>18</sup> For Vogt, operetta parts prepared his voice for Heldentenor parts, and he used them as tests to assess where his voice was going.<sup>19</sup> He refers to predecessors who combine singing, Wagner, and operetta (Rene Kollo comes to mind, a singer whom Vogt expressly mentions as a colleague who impresses him considerably).<sup>20</sup> Against this background it is important to note that Vogt expressly seeks to maintain the lyrical qualities that are always part of so-called Helden-roles. For him, singing Wagner is not the same as roaring, yelling, or speaking, but demands beautiful singing.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, for example, Lohengrin is not that far distant from Tamino in Mozart's *Zauberflöte*: Tamino, too, has dramatic passages, such as the scene with the speaker in Act II.<sup>22</sup>

A massive orchestra sound can tempt a singer to do all he can to persist in relation to it. Vogt does not consider this an appropriate attitude. It results in considerable wear and tear of energy, with some notes at the end of a performance sounding not as beautiful as they should. If he encounters conductors intent on a volume that he considers inappropriate for his voice he just won't cooperate—he won't set his volume against that of the orchestra, because in that contest he is bound to fail.<sup>23</sup> In his experience, if he offers a more differentiated approach, or a piano (often in places where it is noted in Wagner's score), orchestras and conductors tend to accept this, possibly not having asked for it in the first place because they did not expect a tenor to be able to offer a more lyrical approach to a given passage.<sup>24</sup> Vogt emphasises that “lyrical” does not mean, as some myth has it, to sing with only half the voice. Singing with a strong voice but with distinct arches is also “lyrical” in his view. The size of the orchestra is not at all a disadvantage: if sixteen violins play piano, the impact is much more beautiful than if that same sound is created by eight violins.<sup>25</sup> This is the essence of this music, its magic, which is ruined by volume.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Vogt 2010b.

<sup>21</sup> Vogt 2010a.

<sup>22</sup> Vogt 2010b.

<sup>23</sup> Vogt 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Vogt 2010b.

<sup>25</sup> Vogt 2008.

Based on the success he had with lyrical parts, Vogt tested his ability for more dramatic parts initially with opera in which the more dramatic tenor part does not cause so much of a stir as in Wagner operas (a new tenor in a major Wagner role, almost in any Wagner role, come to think of it, will cause a stir. A new tenor in a tenor role in an opera that is relatively unknown is much less likely to cause a stir). For example, Vogt sang a part in *Es War Einmal* by Alexander von Zemlinsky, and *Schwanda der Dudelsackpfeifer* by Jaromir Weinberger. Those parts, and others like them, allowed him to explore whether he was able to sing in a sustained composition, with the need to maintain one's readiness all the time, and to preserve an appropriate level of freshness of voice even by the end of the opera—all in contrast to operas that rely on individual arias. Vogt observes how the voice worked in such roles, what it did, how he felt at the end of a performance in such a part, or on the day after that<sup>26</sup> In parallel, he further mastered his singing technique. In due course he sang his first Lohengrin,<sup>27</sup> which he considers a further stage in this learning process, which is ongoing.

He is aware that his body needs sufficient time to regenerate, comparable to a sportsman who cannot engage in competition after competition without breaks. His ideal is 40-50 performances a year, affordable at an evening salary that is more than his monthly salary with the orchestra. He does find it difficult, however, to reject interesting offers over and above this self-set limit.<sup>28</sup> Vogt is aware of the high expectations that any performance brings with it. He tries to keep the pressure of such expectations at bay, just as much as the warnings about the failures of major singers in specific roles or passages of roles (Bscher 2009).

He is also aware that his voice changes, and that in particular the middle range of the voice is improving, adjusting to the needs. As a result, the range of possibility of what he can achieve with his voice in the lower and higher registers also improves, because the middle register represents the link between the other two. As long as he was searching around in the middle register, as was the case for Vogt certainly earlier on

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<sup>26</sup> Vogt 2010a.

<sup>27</sup> Erfurt, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Bscher 2009.

in his career, the more difficult singing becomes, especially in the lower register, but also in the higher one. The middle register is developing further, establishes itself, and becomes more comfortable. As a result, the lower and higher registers are also becoming more comfortable.<sup>29</sup>

The way Vogt experiences his voice is initially and mainly through a process of sensing (*Erfühlungsprozess*), which takes place not limited to the throat as the seat of the vocal cords, but throughout the body. The entire body contributes to a complete sound. Vogt is aware, consequently, that it is very difficult to sing if he is even only a little ill. Then the body does not really want to support the singing. He senses difficulties, or inadequacies of his voice in this way, and then, or thus, also hears them. On many occasions, it feels worse for him than it sounds to others. If such a feeling comes up, Vogt takes note and addresses the issues in his daily practice. He realises what the feeling should be like, and seeks to re-create that feeling on every occasion of singing. As the voice develops, there will always be irritations and the need to reassess and adjust: the process of the development of the voice is a long and arduous one.<sup>30</sup>

For Vogt, playing the horn has links to singing—starting with the idea that wind instrumentalists seek to make their instruments “sing.” In addition, breathing is important in playing wind instruments; thus the body is used to make music, and the player gets used to concepts and related practices related to breath, such as support and phrasing. The main difference is that what the singer hears himself is different from what the others hear. You can learn only what a tone must feel like.<sup>31</sup> In particular, the horn allowed Vogt to get used to the aspects of the instrument and of music in general that are unpredictable. Thus, playing the horn and learning to sing professionally complemented each other for a certain time, before they ruled each other out.<sup>32</sup> These days he plays the horn only occasionally, and while he gets used to it quickly, he admits that he does not have the stamina any more required for playing

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<sup>29</sup> Vogt 2011a.

<sup>30</sup> Vogt 2011a.

<sup>31</sup> Vogt, 2010b, 2011a.

<sup>32</sup> Vogt 2010b.

the horn professionally—a very physical activity that requires regular practice and training that his singing career does not allow him time to engage in.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Impact of Orchestras and Conductors*

The relationship between Vogt and the orchestra can depend to a large extent on the conductor, but can just as well depend on the orchestra itself. There are orchestras that make him feel comfortable and integrated right from the start, and he realises that the colleagues listen to him. On the other hand, there are orchestras where the musicians do not listen when he is singing, where they ignore his singing. On those occasions in particular, the role of the conductor to connect the singer and the orchestra is important. Some conductors are more successful than others. Vogt is impressed that on some occasions a shaky start can lead, mediated by a good conductor, to a sound basis on which the singer and the orchestra find each other. Of the many factors that determine the nature of the orchestra in this respect, Vogt emphasises the constellation of the individual musicians that make up the orchestra, and possible traditions within the orchestra. While it is not possible to generalise, a symphony orchestra might be more geared towards bringing out its own brilliance, and may therefore find it difficult to stand back behind a singer; an opera orchestra might be more likely to be used to listen to and accommodate the singer. A further difference is the orchestra that accompanies a singer on the concert platform as opposed to the orchestra pit in the opera house, because in the pit the musicians hardly hear the singers at all and the role of the conductor becomes even more essential in mediating between them.<sup>34</sup>

The most important qualities that he seeks on a conductor are empathy with the singer, and the ability to lead, and openness, in addition to a sufficient level of respect for the singer but also for the work. He likes conductors most who are not primarily concerned about themselves but about the work, and who create their music from their guts to the same extent that he does.<sup>35</sup>

### *Preparing for a Role – Rehearsals and the Day of Performance*

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<sup>33</sup> Vogt 2010a.

<sup>34</sup> Vogt 2011a.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

During the course of rehearsals, Vogt creates a kind of path through the role from beginning to end, which combines singing, acting, text, and interaction with the other characters. He can walk along that path mentally in preparing for a performance, and in performance he notes that the other people on stage will react differently on each occasion, which he then engages with, leading to changes on the path. To be able to achieve this to the best possible effect, he needs a healthy degree of stage fright.<sup>36</sup>

On days of performance, Vogt tries to avoid travelling, arriving at least the day before, unless he has to step in at short notice. He gets enough, but not too much, sleep, and has as normal a day as possible, with a tendency to take it easy rather than an emphasis on exercise, and to do other things to distract himself, rather than focus all day on the evening ahead. He treats his voice with care—not trying to avoid speaking at all costs, but on many occasions when he is on his own, this is not a problem, but not all that intentional. He has a good lunch, at least three hours before even an early start performance—to be able to get over the natural tiredness that follows a meal by the time he has to perform. His lunch is followed by a rest. Then he walks through the path of the role mentally, makes his way to the performance venue for the make up session, and then the performance begins. If a performance lasts for five to six hours, then he will not have had anything to eat for up to eight hours after lunch, and this aspect has implications for the foods Vogt chooses to eat on days of performances.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Major Roles***

The key role in his career to date has been Wagner's Lohengrin in the opera of the same name. It is Vogt's favourite part, he can identify personally with many things the hero does in the course of the opera. He likes the qualities of love, trust, honesty, noble-mindedness<sup>38</sup> Even after nine years of having sung the part regularly, Vogt still discovers new dimensions of it, especially in the Grail narration. For example, Vogt thinks that he was probably not able to start it as softly in earlier years as he is able to now. He experiments with this, for example, exploring how soft it can go and remain

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<sup>36</sup> Vogt 2011c.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Vogt 2010b.

good, when it starts getting not so good any more<sup>39</sup> Another example is the range of the voice: how far he can expand to the dramatic dimension without hurting himself, and without losing the ability to return to the lyrical dimension.<sup>40</sup> Every evening, the music (particularly with reference to Wagner's *Lohengrin*) is so strong that it is irresistible.

Interviews with Vogt demonstrate the depth of understanding he develops for the characters he portrays. Thus he considers Walther von Stolzing in Wagner's *Meistersinger* as a multi-layered character: he is naïve, rebellious, in parts insecure, and those facets serve to stir the set and conservative world he enters. He does not come with the intention to stir, to change the conditions, or even to destroy the traditions. However, he represents his mind-set, and thus causes upheaval in the gridlocked society he enters. He realises that he has this impact on this society, and that in turn changes him. In addition, he is in love with Eva and wants to win her for himself, and to achieve this means that he has to comply with the new society to some extent.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Acting and "Director's Theatre"***

Acting was part of the training as a singer, but Vogt has also learnt a lot from observing more experienced colleagues, by taking advice from those directors who are capable of explaining how to put ideas into practice, and by listening to suggestions from his wife during the rehearsal period.<sup>42</sup>

In the 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 seasons in Dresden, he was part of the controversial production (by Peter Konwitschny) of Kalman's operetta *The Czardasfürstin*, and in 2005 sang Florestan in a controversial production (by Günter Krämer) of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. In both productions, audience protest brought the performances almost to a premature end. Katharina Wagner's controversial Bayreuth production of *Die Meistersinger* (from 2007) also received considerable booing at curtain call. Not only in such circumstances, does Vogt note the mood of an audience. He considers it

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<sup>39</sup> Vogt 2011c.

<sup>40</sup> Vogt 2011b.

<sup>41</sup> Vogt 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Vogt 2010b.

important to sense the audience's mood at the beginning of a performance, and if the mood is good he considers this immensely helpful for the performance.<sup>43</sup> Even if the boos are not directed at himself, he maintains that any booing, no matter for whom, is felt deeply by the entire team working on a production, and all suffer from it.<sup>44</sup>

On the basis of such experiences, Vogt, who works predominantly in Europe, might be hesitant about European, in particular German, "director's theatre." His position is sophisticated. On the one hand, he is aware that director's theatre can be taken to unnecessary extremes. On the other hand, he realises and appreciates if directors representing "director's theatre" work at markedly high levels of technical competence and craft. They are able to support the singer in transforming directorial ideas on stage, in contrast to other directors with possibly equally brilliant ideas.<sup>45</sup> In 2010 he stepped in at short notice to replace Jonas Kaufmann as Lohengrin in Bayreuth, in the controversial new production by Hans Neuenfels. He considered the production ultimately as conventional: there are new and different ideas, but the character of Lohengrin follows Wagner's views and has not been turned upside down completely.<sup>46</sup>

### *Opera in the Regions*

Vogt returned to Flensburg in 2010 for an event to help save the theatre in times of financial difficulties resulting from funding cuts. He maintains that it is essential for rural areas such as the one served by the theatre in Flensburg to have access to the wonderful art of opera just as much as people in more urban areas. It is also essential for the new blood of artists to find available to them an appropriate infrastructure, where newcomers can join smaller theatres to come to terms with the system and its requirements and build their careers. This infrastructure has been built up over many decades and is the object of envy from many other countries in the world. It would be irresponsible to neglect this infrastructure, because once lost it will be lost forever.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Vogt 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Rausch 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Vogt 2008.

<sup>46</sup> Martens, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Vogt 2010b.

## *The Critics*

Vogt cannot pretend that he is not interested in reading reviews, but he is reserved. He considers it disrespectful if he pours all his heart and soul into a five-hour evening and then receives, if he is lucky, one good, and if he is unlucky, one bad adjective. This does not do justice to such an evening. He considers himself his own harshest critic, and he will know if something did not work out as intended.<sup>48</sup>

## **Critical Views**

Critical comment on Vogt in individual, single reviews is indeed neither very detailed nor varied, independent of whether it is voiced in blogs or by newspaper critics. However, the range of words the critics have used to describe his voice come together to form an interestingly complex image. Here are a few representative examples. His voice is wondrous,<sup>49</sup> without baritonal base,<sup>50</sup> the highest tenor timbre among Heldentenors,<sup>51</sup> like that of a chorister or boy,<sup>52</sup> achieved though the strangely constant maintenance or admixture of the head register,<sup>53</sup> bright, small but sonically very strong,<sup>54</sup> free-moving and silvery,<sup>55</sup> androgynous,<sup>56</sup> and hard as a laser beam.<sup>57</sup> Critics have mentioned his disarming *mezza voce* and beguiling cantilenas, powerful top notes, and exemplary articulation.<sup>58</sup> His singing has been described as straight-line (rather than baroque),<sup>59</sup> effortless,<sup>60</sup> of finest lyricism<sup>61</sup> and lyrical gracefulness,<sup>62</sup> heartfelt and free from lubricating grease,<sup>63</sup> ethereal and devoid of body<sup>64</sup> and radiant.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Vogt 2011b.

<sup>49</sup> Vogt 2011c.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Luehrs-Kaiser 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Sinkovicz 2008.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> dpa 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Krause 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Brug 2009a.

<sup>57</sup> Spahn 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Clarke 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Sinkovicz 2010.

<sup>60</sup> dpa 2010a.

<sup>61</sup> dpa 2010a.

<sup>62</sup> dpa 2010b.

<sup>63</sup> Brug 2009b.

<sup>64</sup> Brug 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Lange 2011.

Longer descriptions can be found in blogs, which are not restricted in the space allowed for the review, for example:

For starters he *sings* Wagner. His performance might have been as surprising and unusual to the audience as when Wolfgang Windgassen first hit the stage with what was then considered a confoundingly light voice. Vogt, at home in everything lyrical in Wagner, hits the high notes with shameless (vertical) ease; his clarion voice (with that aforementioned element of choir-boy) ringing delightfully. Especially for Lohengrin, whose otherworldliness and naïveté set him apart from the other characters, this is particularly suitable. (I imagine Vogt's would be a very fine *Parsifal*, too.)<sup>66</sup>

Some reviews early on in his career, when he was “new,” also use more words:

He has got a bright, very lyrical tone, and starts off as if he were singing old music, can boost his tenor smoothly to the heroic, commands a large volume. He can still gain in colours, he remains too much on one single track, but one that he masters perfectly.<sup>67</sup>

Comments following the immense success of his official Bayreuth debut as Lohengrin on 27 July 2011 were longer, with similar descriptions of his singing as weightlessly high, bright, solid, gleaming, effortless, powerful, sweeping, and evenness, with beautifully-heartfelt piano passages, which nevertheless reach all remote corners of the opera house; critics also commended his clear diction, which allows audiences to hear and understand every word.<sup>68</sup>

The various short descriptions of Vogt’s voice and his singing are all accurate on their own, and taken together they provide an attempt at expressing in words the range of experiences of listening to that voice. The extraordinary number of interviews with

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<sup>66</sup> jfl 2007

<sup>67</sup> Keim 2006.

<sup>68</sup> Zibulski 2011; Döring 2011; Schreiber 2011; Anon. 2011.

Vogt over the past few years, serving as the basis of portrait articles, or printed on their own, or broadcast on radio and TV, demonstrates the public fascination with that voice. The questions Vogt is asked to address naturally focus on the exceptions: they relate to his career path—because he was a professional horn player at the highest possible level of employment and job satisfaction before he trained as a singer; they relate to the repertory he sings—because it is not easy to pin down in terms of *Fach* (a concept Vogt explicitly does not consider helpful in his case); finally, interview questions relate to the quality of his voice—because it is fascinating to find out more about how precisely he achieves this sound, and how much is due to natural gift and how much to hard work.

### **The Spiritual Context**

It is here that reference to spirituality comes in meaningfully to explore Vogt's voice, and the appeal of that voice, further. Spirituality is understood for the purposes of this essay as a concept that is in principle not exclusively religious, but may encompass religion. It is used in terms of the development of higher states of consciousness as conceptualised, for example, in the Vedic literature of India. In this context, higher states of consciousness, as states of increasing spirituality, are characterised by the coexistence of either the waking state, or the dream state or the sleep state of consciousness with the state that is transcendent to them all, at their basis, pure consciousness (also termed *samadhi* in the Vedic literature, or *nirvana* in Buddhism).

### ***Hearing Versus Seeing***

It is striking how many terms used to describe the experience of listening, and to describe the nature of the sounds heard, are taken from descriptions relating to a different sense altogether, especially that of sight, and how few terms are specific to the sense of hearing. The difficulty that critics and listeners have in putting that experience into words is at least twofold. Firstly, we are still living in a world that has been dominated by the sense of sight for as far as we can think back ourselves, or trace experience back through history.

This phenomenon has been explored in depth by Berendt (1987). The result is the dominance of sight-related terminology to describe auditory experience. In some cases terms relating to other senses, still not specific to hearing, are used to describe sounds, such as “velvety.” Berendt explores the dominance of the eye as related to the Chinese *yang*, “male, aggressive, dominating, rational, surface-oriented, analysing things,” while the sense of hearing corresponds to *yin*, “female, receptive, careful, intuitive and spiritual, depth-oriented, perceiving the whole as one.”<sup>69</sup> According to St. Germain, one of the Ascended Masters in theosophy and other esoteric traditions, the purpose for souls to be incarnated as humans on the planet earth is for them to be able to develop the feminine side of their nature, irrespective of whether they are born as man or woman.<sup>70</sup> This position supports Berendt’s argument that humans need to develop from a seeing to a hearing being. I have explored elsewhere the spiritual nature of opera and the appeal of opera as a feminine art form against the background of St. Germain’s views.<sup>71</sup> Vogt’s voice and singing fit this context ideally as they are suffused with feminine qualities, as I will explore further in the next section.

### *Spirituality of Voice*

Both Vogt’s voice and his singing operate in ways that appear new and therefore unfamiliar, challenging critics and lay listeners to engage with them at a level of depth that is not considered necessary for other singers—because their singing is more familiar to listeners’ ears. This striking novelty factor is the reason for the considerable number of interviews with Vogt characterised by an emphasis on questions that focus on that very difference to other singers, on how he achieves his almost unique way of singing. In an attempt to shed further light on Vogt’s voice and singing, I refer to Vedic knowledge about sound, *nada*, as described in the *Sangita Ratnakara (SR)*, the second major classical Indian text about music, dance, drama and theatre besides the *Natyashastra*. This analysis links in with the comments on the feminine source of hearing discussed above, in so far as *nada* emerges from Shakti, the feminine principle in the unity of *Shiva - Shakti*

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<sup>69</sup> Brent, 1987: 5.

<sup>70</sup> Saint Germain 2004.

<sup>71</sup> Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2011.

*Nada* is the Sanskrit term for *sound*. The syllable *na* stands for *prana*, while *da* stands for *Agni* (*SR* I,3:6) *Prana* is life force, while *Agni* represents fire, or the intelligence of the inner dynamics of all transformations at the basis of any evolution.<sup>72</sup> *SR* considers *nada*, thus defined as the combination of infinite life force (*prana*) and pure intelligence of eternal dynamics of consciousness (*Agni*) as the ultimate source of all existence. *SR* differentiates two kinds of *nada*: unmanifest, and not created physically, for example by plucking a string (*Anahata Nada*), and manifest *nada*, created physically (*Ahata Nada*). As Biswas explains, in Western terms, the note “A”, for example, is “a particular rate of vibration,” and that vibration has been determined to be 440 Hz, a parameter that can be measured. In the context of the *SR*, the manifest sound, *nada*, is also referred to as *swara*. However, *swara*, as Biswas explains, does not exist without a musician performing the sound, as a Western *note* does: “When sung it [*swara*] is a function of my particular body and breath, and the space and time in which it occurs. It is the vibration of this embodied moment.”<sup>73</sup> A further development of *swara* comes into existence when *swara* is sung perfectly: then *swara* becomes more and more independent of the singer, ceases to be the singer’s vibration, becomes pure resonance, and the “notion of me or mine becomes vestigial.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, manifest sound, *Ahata Nada*, is traced back to its origin, *Anahata Nada*, and in the process approximates it as far as possible, even if never fully.

Against this background, it is possible to understand Vogt’s voice as capable of expressing a very high degree of *Anahata Nada*, which is the primordial quality of sound. As such it represents an expression of femininity (*Nada* as expression of *Shakti*), which is central, according to St. Germain, for the development of souls on planet earth. These related contexts thus go some way to explain the special nature of Vogt’s voice (its expression of a high level of *Anahata*). The increasingly unanimous critical praise for Vogt’s voice is due both to people getting used to it and learning to appreciate it as a result of repeated exposure. On a subtler level, it can be taken to represent one instance of progress on the global scale development of the feminine side of humanity.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Hartmann 1992, 94.

<sup>73</sup> Biswas 2011, 100.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Saint Germain 2004.

## *Spirituality of Life*

The spiritual dimension of Vogt's voice, which I have discussed in this section so far, is not isolated from Vogt's life and career. I will now address some of the characteristics of Vogt's career, voice and singing in the order I presented them in the first two sections of this essay. This analysis serves to contextualise:

1. All humans are in the process of spiritual development, at different stages according to the Divine Plan.<sup>76</sup> For all humans, their individual paths include the necessity to make decisions, major or minor, at many junctions and crossroads. For Vogt, the major crossroads of his life was the choice he had to make between continuing a safe and well paid career as horn player in a major German orchestra, which represented the goal of his adolescent ambitions and was, to some extent, very fulfilling for him. The choice was to continue in this post until retirement, or to take the risk of jeopardising those qualities of life to start afresh as a singer, with uncertain prospects, given that contracts in opera are never for life, as in the orchestra. His success as a singer suggests that he made the right decision.
2. A further crossroads, not as strongly at the forefront of interviewers' interests as the horn player versus singer one of 1997, came in 2003 when he decided to abandon his full time contract with the Semperoper in Dresden in favour of a freelance career. This decision had further implications, and came with apparent sacrifices, with the need to decide priorities—another characteristic of spiritual development. On the one hand this 2003 decision allowed Vogt to launch his international career, which has by now taken him to almost all the opera houses in the world that he would want to sing in.<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, it meant that he would be away from his family for considerable amounts of time each year. This decision also affected Vogt's wife, Silvia Krüger, who had been a celebrated soprano with a high profile career in opera, operetta and musical, including the German production of the musical *Phantom of the Opera*. She had to give up her career so that she could take care of bringing up their by then three, now four children. In the 2009 TV documentary about Vogt, she recalls

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Vogt 2011d.

this sacrifice with tears in her eyes.<sup>78</sup> Vogt and Krüger have recently taken up singing together on special occasions, with duets from operetta. Interviews suggest that this enforced distance from his family makes that family even more precious to him, as he arranges his working life in such a way that allows him to be with his family as much as possible,<sup>79</sup> returning home in between performances and taking his entire family on extended holidays over the summer to Bayreuth.<sup>80</sup> On the night before the first press performance of *Die Meistersinger* in Bayreuth, in 2007, his wife went into labour. It was Vogt's free day, and he flew back home, was present at his fourth son's birth at around 8.15pm, stayed in hospital with his wife and the other three children until well after midnight, took the children home, got a few hours sleep, went back to the hospital in the morning and then flew back to Bayreuth early the next day. Stronger winds and low cloud delayed his flight, so that he reached the festival house an hour before the rehearsal began, in the presence of 17 camera teams from across the world.<sup>81</sup>

3. The key role in Vogt's repertoire, Lohengrin, is a role with whom Vogt identifies very much; the role is that of a major knight of the holy grail, the son of the grail's ruler, Parsifal. Lohengrin, as created in Wagner's opera, is an ideal embodiment of spiritual development, chosen by the grail due to his purity of mind and spirit. Vogt's primary identification with this character suggests an implicit affinity towards spirituality.
4. Any path of spiritual development, independent of the means or tools employed, such as meditation, or contemplation, or indeed singing, involves hard work—it does not just happen, or come on a silver spoon. This aspect of spirituality fits in with Vogt's insistence that apart from a few high notes, and a natural gift for singing, it was sheer determination and hard work that allowed him to develop his voice.

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<sup>78</sup> Bscher 2009.

<sup>79</sup> Vogt 2011d.

<sup>80</sup> Vogt 2010a.

<sup>81</sup> Bscher 2009

5. The body is essential in any spiritual development, or development of consciousness. It serves as the basis for such development, and its medium. It is essential to achieve balance between the spiritual and the physical; Vogt achieves such balance by alternating his artistic work in rehearsals and performance with considerable engagement in sports, such as football, badminton, wind surfing, skiing, snowboarding, horse riding, jogging, and walking his two dogs.<sup>82</sup>
  
6. Vogt's views on flying his plane mirror and expand on his spiritual experience of being fully and only in the present while singing—for him, “Time is different during opera. You live before and after. During the performance itself time stands still.”<sup>83</sup> Vogt's experience of flying goes even beyond that peculiar and specific experience of time: he is adamant that as a pilot you have to be ahead of the plane at all times. You have to sense what is coming your way, to be aware what will happen now, and to play through it in your head. Thus you live in the present but have the immediate future at the back of your mind all the time.<sup>84</sup>
  
7. On occasions of aria recitals, as in Hamburg in March 2011 or in Berlin, July 2011, Vogt appears on stage as himself and engages in the conventional exchanges with the conductor, orchestra and audience. In the few seconds between the applause ending, the orchestra beginning to play and the moment he has to start singing, Vogt visibly changes into character. This is indeed what he aims at. For him, presenting opera arias from a concert platform sets the challenge of deciding whether to be himself, demonstrating that he can sing the aria in this way, or whether to seek to enter the character. It is possible to get the appropriate access to and expression of the individual arias only if one is ready and prepared to put oneself into the character's position. Otherwise a certain distance will remain between the work and the artist. In that sense there is always an emotional or mental dimension involved, and Vogt makes the conscious effort of achieving the necessary level of involvement. He finds that he is more or less successful in this—more successful for arias of characters he

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<sup>82</sup> Bscher 2009; Vogt 2011d.

<sup>83</sup> Bscher 2009.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

has already performed. If he has not, he tries to get an idea of the character through studying the part and the subject matter. For arias from operas that he has performed on stage, he thinks himself into a scenic image that is part of a production.<sup>85</sup>

8. While Vogt acknowledges the difference between very good performances and exceptional performances, he seeks to achieve an exceptional performance for himself on every occasion. Whether it works or not depends on many factors, including outward factors such as the weather. The highest number of magic moments he has encountered in performances of *Lohengrin*. Others were in relation to the run of performances of *Die Tote Stadt* in Frankfurt, or a concert performance of Dvorak's *Requiem* with Mariss Janssons conducting. What is characteristic of these magic moments is that he feels himself swimming on the same wave as the conductor, the orchestra, the work, and ultimately also the audience.<sup>86</sup> While experiences of spirituality are rare and while people are not accustomed to them, whatever their contexts may be, they will come across, and be described, in terms of magic, of the exceptional. As spirituality develops in human life, loses some of its novelty factor, its exceptional nature in the sense that it happens only briefly and occasionally. Thus it is experienced more and more clearly and more often and for longer periods of time. This is what Vogt aims for in his own terms.
9. The experience of spirituality is deep, but such depth does not imply dry seriousness. A good part of the experience of the depth of spirituality is a deep level of enjoyment: the experience of pure consciousness, or *samadhi*, is one of pure bliss. It is very evident how much Vogt enjoys singing. He emphasises that rendering his experience as "having fun" ("es macht Spass") can give the impression of a superficial experience. It is far from that: it is a deeply felt emotional joy, which is in part also a deep awe, or reverence that one is allowed to do this work. Even after a good many years as a singer, Vogt still considers his singing as a huge godsend. When he realises that he has been able to transmit that joy to the audience, and that he has enabled the audience to share

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<sup>85</sup> Vogt 2011a.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

his experience of joy, the audience's applause is the best reward.<sup>87</sup> In the same context, Vogt is aware of the unpredictable nature of live performance, and is able to see the funny, comical side of unexpected events. He is thus open to the lighter side of spirituality. Two examples may serve to support this argument. When Vogt was at the beginning of his career as a singer, he was involved in a production of the operetta *Gräfin Maritza* in an open air production. Before one particular performance there had been rain. When he sat down in an armchair he realised that the staff had forgotten to dry it, so that he ended up with a wet bottom. He knew that his baritone colleague had to sit down soon, as well, so he managed to whisper a warning to him—"too late" came the reply. On another occasion he had to stand in at short notice as Lohengrin in Madrid, and for his first entrance he had to come up from below stage on a lift. The lift broke down about a metre below the surface of the stage. Vogt had to heave his sword, and then himself in full metal armour, up on stage and then sing his role.<sup>88</sup>

It will be interesting to observe how Vogt's voice develops further, and how he will bring new approaches to the singing of further roles in his repertoire. Will critical attempts of describing his singing in words develop the critical vocabulary? I propose that the Vedic concepts, together with the understanding of sound as a feminine aspect of spirituality, discussed earlier in this article, will provide new ways of analyzing present and future voices in opera. It should be possible, if considered desirable, for empirical studies to operationalise some or all of the argument presented in this article and put them to the test. Will more voices like Vogt's emerge, or are they already among us?

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

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