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## **Opera and Spirituality**

**Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe**

### **Introduction**

The creation and impact of opera rely on four closely interwoven components: the libretto, the *mise-en-scène*, the music, and the singing. Those four combine to create the opera's contents, which cannot be found in any one of the four in isolation. For example, plots in many operas have been described as unrealistic, unlikely, overly dramatic or melodramatic, and very unbelievable. Nevertheless, people who like to attend the opera have a propensity of enjoying opera while ignoring those aspects that would most certainly ruin the prospects of success for a theatre play. The strength of the positive attitude of those who enjoy this art form is expressed aptly in the term used for people who attend opera regularly: they are identified as "opera lovers," which contrasts with the less emphatic terms of identification, "theatre-goers," or "concert-goers." Often opera lovers, theatre goers and concert-goers will also self-identify in those terms, while opera lovers are likely to be less happy to be identified with the less emphatic and less emotionally charged "goer," and theatre and concert goers might tend to be more uncomfortable to be tagged as theatre- or concert-lovers, because the association of "lover" with a predominance of emotion might go against their preference of being associated with the more neutral "goer" as indicative of a predominance of more intellectual-critical faculties, without the risk of being overcome by emotion and losing control.

Research into opera audiences has taken up this predominance of emotion in opera lovers' responses to opera, in particular, and music in general (including opera). For the field of music psychology, there has been increased interest in strong emotions in relation to music, physically manifested as, for example, chills, shivers down or up the spine, or an increase of the heart rate. Spiritual experiences feature among the range of strong emotions thus identified. It is on those that I want to focus in this article. Not only opera audiences report spiritual experiences: opera singers do so as well. Some contextual frameworks have been developed to explain such spiritual experiences, predominantly for audiences, but they are also relevant for singers. While the libretto is in many cases not likely to support the onset and development of spiritual experiences, some opera librettos might be argued to provide such support. In this article, I discuss spiritual experiences reported by singers and review the literature on spiritual experiences reported by audience members in relation to opera, proposing, along the way, relevant additions to the clarification of terminology for, and the explanation of, such experiences. Finally I add a section on the importance of *mise-en-scène* in relation to the potential of a libretto to induce and maintain spiritual experiences in opera.

### **Characteristics of singers' spiritual experiences**

Opera singers' reports of extraordinary, desirable, spiritual experiences in relation to their singing cover several distinct categories. First, there is the experience of uniqueness. Thus, Teresa Berganza (b. 1935) says that "ultimately nothing can compare with the sensation when singing well, and we don't always, but during those rare, near-perfect evenings one almost touches heaven" (Matheopoulos 1991, 255). There are attempts to put those extraordinary experiences into context: Berganza explains, by way of comparison, that the "only thing that could compare with the sensation in terms of ecstasy is the actual moment of childbirth or one of those equally rare moments of rapture in love that

occur once in a lifetime” (ibid.). Janet Baker (b. 1933), too, provides an explanation for which criteria music must fulfil for her to experience it as at its greatest: “music at its greatest is for me an experience of the fourth dimension, that is, all human experience plus the extra one of *time*, past, present and future” (1982, 126). The insight of the uniqueness of such spiritual experiences often coincides with the insight of their short-lived nature. Agnes Baltsa (b. 1944), for example, is filled with “fear and melancholy” because those experiences are “so transient. They are over in a flash and after a few minutes they become just memories . . . sometimes I wish we could hold on to them a little longer. I wish our art were less ephemeral” (Matheopoulos 1991, 235).

There is a tendency among singers to contextualise their extraordinary, spiritual experiences in religious terms. Berganza explains:

We should therefore treat this gift from God [the voice] as sacred. If one thinks about it, there are very few singers in the world. Therefore, having a voice is clearly a gift. A gift to be used only when we feel in a position to give it everything we have and through it heal and put other people in touch with heaven, too. If I do not feel in a position to do this, I don't sing. (Matheopoulos 1991, 255)

This position is mirrored by Baker: “I believe my voice and power of communication through music were given to me by God, to be shared with others” (1982, xii). Tenor Johan Botha (b. 1965) reveals that he felt from a very young age that his voice and his calling were God-given, to make others happy with. A deeply religious person, he talks about his performances in terms of meetings with God, which transform every performance into a prayer (Harmer 2009).

Placido Domingo (b. 1941) takes the religious dimension of singing further when he discusses the way he feels about Wagner's opera *Parsifal*:

As for the finale of this Act, where Parsifal brings back the spear to the knights, heals Amfortas and is able to unveil the grail and once more bestow its blessing on the knights, it is such a mystical moment that I don't know that I can find

words to describe it. I feel as if God is about to come on stage, to bless and lift us all up higher, to a kind of resurrection. I *feel* the presence of God coming down to touch us all for a moment. And at the moment Parsifal bestows this blessing I find myself wishing I could reach out, embrace and bring peace to everyone, the audience and the whole world. It is a profoundly emotional experience [. . .] I must say that participating in this work—one of the greatest, if not the greatest ever written—in any way is a privilege. It brings you so close to God, to our faiths and beliefs. (Matheopoulos 2000, 215-216)

For sopranos and tenors in particular, the high notes, especially the high C, have particular potential for yielding a thrilling experience for both singer and audiences. Luciano Pavarotti (1935-2007) says:

When singing high notes, I feel like a show jumper before a two-metres-plus bar [. . .] Stretched to my limits. Excited and happy, but with a strong undercurrent of fear. The moment I actually hit the note I almost lose consciousness. A physical, animal sensation seizes me. Then after it has been successfully negotiated, I regain control. (Matheopoulos 1989, 123)

An analysis of video and DVD material about achievements of high notes from the opera repertory reveals a range of common characteristics: on the high note itself, singers open not only their mouths wide, but also their eyes, which tend not to blink at least for the duration of the note. After the end of singing the high note, there is a combination of heavy breathing, reflecting both the aftermath of the strain and relief. It may take a while for the singers to close their mouth again, and many also close their eyes. Sometimes they visibly struggle to keep their composure, and on occasion burst into tears (Risi 2010).

Desirable extraordinary experiences extend from one singer to encompass all singers on stage at the time of the experience, and the audience as well. Matheopoulos quotes from, and comments on an interview with Montserrat Caballé (b. 1933):

“I know this may sound strange to many people, an example of what I mean are those extra-special moments that occur from time to time in every artist’s career, moments when you no longer feel you are on a stage making music but in a different dimension, inside, at one with music, and no longer aware of the act of singing or conscious of yourself or your body. The body is a concrete thing made up of physical matter. But when you are in this state of fusion with music, you are totally unaware of it. You feel light, weightless, and afterwards [. . .] you feel so

heavy again.” Sometimes during performances Caballé is aware of colleagues or conductors experiencing the same sensation “this sort of trance when all of us feel we are not wholly here, and suddenly it’s over in a flash, we look into each other’s eyes and know we’ve just woken up and are no longer in another world but down here, on the stage, making theatre. I don’t know why this happens, or how to explain it, but I know that it does and that audiences feel it, too. One of the worst things that can happen at such moments, when you are suspended in a dimension beyond, out of time and space, is applause. (1991, 61)

Anna Tomova Sintov (b. 1941) emphasises the need for opera singers to remember, while they are on stage, that “we are mere instruments in the realisation of a work and that our function is to merge with our colleagues until we are at one with them, the conductor, and through the latter’s imagination with the composer” (Matheopoulos 1991, 221). Sherrill

Milnes (b. 1935) provides this report of the most extraordinary, spiritual, of performances he participated in (a performance of Verdi’s *Otello* at the Vienna State Opera):

Right from the start we felt a sort of electricity in the air, the feeling that tonight the stars are in the right place—a Sternstunde as it’s rightly called in German—and by the end of our Act II *Otello-Iago* duet the place exploded! It went berserk! At the end, we took our bows, the soli, the tutti, and half an hour of forty to fifty curtain calls after, we were still there. By then we were all getting tired of smiling, the way that you do at wedding receptions, and finally, an hour and a half and 101 curtain calls later, we got away! (Matheopoulos 2000, 178-9)

Barbara Bonney (b. 1956) describes the spiritual magic of a performance of *Der*

*Rosenkavalier* by Richard Strauss during the Vienna State Opera’s tour of Japan in 1994:

[I]t took off in such a magical way that we all felt that this is it. Now we can all be run over by a truck because we have done it. This evening we made this work come alive in the way we feel Strauss wanted. Nothing can ever be like this performance. Even the remaining performances of the run under the same near-ideal conditions were a disappointment after what we had experienced on that fourth evening. (Matheopoulos 1998, 7)

The extraordinary, spiritual experiences reported by opera singers affect them profoundly.

Here is a sufficiently long report by Baker to serve as an example.

I believe my voice and power of communication through music were given to me by God, to be shared with others. This I have tried to do, but it has been with a sense of duty rather than of joy. Recently, through the help of close friends [. . .] I myself have come to understand and participate in the joy of performing. This is something new to me, and in the sense that I have been relieved, both of the responsibility for the end result and of the terrible fear, which has dogged me all

my life, it is a miracle. I have reached a point where I feel myself to be an empty vessel. There must always be a personality involved in any human action, but I now stand out there, silent within, and allow the music to speak through me. It used to worry me greatly that there are always people in an audience who are unmoved, unreached by what I do; I have always wanted *everyone* to understand my own particular message. Now, I realise that this is simply not my concern. All I have to do is prepare myself musically, physically and psychologically for a performance, and then stand aside to allow the music to speak for itself. It is interesting to notice from audience reactions in a hall, from people's words to me afterwards, and from letters received through the post, that the reaction I now produce is much more violent than before. Those "for me" are more so, those "against" likewise. I see this as an extremely positive situation. (1982, xii)

### **Explanatory Frameworks**

Conceptual frameworks for making sense of such spiritual experiences have been developed in the context of Transpersonal Psychology and consciousness studies. In Transpersonal Psychology, Abraham Maslow developed the concept of peak experiences, which represent rare and transforming moments in peoples' lives. The qualities of the extraordinary spiritual experiences discussed above are precisely those characteristic of peak experiences: uniqueness (Berganza), the short-lived nature of the experience (Baltsa), the religious connotations (Berganza, Baker, Botha, Domingo), the experience of unity (Caballé, Tomova Sintov, Milnes, Bonney), and the profound impact on the singer (Baker). In the context of consciousness studies, the experiences make sense in terms of the model of consciousness proposed by Indian Vedanta philosophy, which is one of the models of consciousness currently discussed in consciousness studies (Rao 2005, Hameroff 2010). This model proposes that people experience three predominant states of consciousness: waking, dreaming, and sleeping. At their basis, and transcendent in relation to them, is pure consciousness, variously described as pure unitary consciousness in the context of Christian mysticism (Stace 1960), or *nirvana* in Buddhism and *samadhi* in the Indian philosophical context. This fourth state of consciousness can exist on its own, in deep meditation of any kind, and is then experienced as devoid of any sensory or thought contents, but not dull or void, but aware of itself as consciousness. Higher states of consciousness, in this context, are

characterised by pure consciousness co-existing in personal experience with waking or dreaming or sleep. As the frequency of the experience of higher states of consciousness increases, so does the clarity of the experience, and its depth. To a person initially unfamiliar with experiences of higher states of consciousness, they will come across as unique. Initially, at least, they are short-lived. Their very nature is such that they many people experiencing them may be able to do so best in religious terms, as there is currently not much of an alternative. The experience of unity is typical of higher states of consciousness within the Vedanta model, as the highest level of experience is characterised by the very unity of the experiencer with everything and everyone in the world (Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2005).

### **Research into Strong Emotional Responses of Opera Audiences**

Compared with peak experiences or altered, higher states of consciousness as reported by opera singers, more research has been undertaken to explore and explain similar, spiritual experiences of audiences. The following passages will summarize this research, much of which is in the context of the general impact of music, including opera but not exclusive to it. Much of this research is in the context of the impact of music, which includes opera but is not exclusive to it. In 1980, Panzarella published a study based on his PhD dissertation, in which he proposed a phenomenology of aesthetic experiences in the music and visual arts areas on the basis of Maslow's concept of peak experiences. The results are based on 103 responses from among 2,000 subjects initially invited to participate in the study. They were asked to report on "intense joyous experiences" of listening to music or looking at visual art (Panzarella 1980, 71). In addition, they provided information about age, gender, educational background and other items, and completed well-established questionnaires to establish personality traits that could be correlated with the responses to the peak experience question. The ability of music, including opera, to lead to joyous experiences in their listeners has

never been in doubt, but the Panzarella study was one of the first to put such insights into a conceptual framework.

In later years, Csikzentmihalyi's concept of *flow* was added to the characteristics of peak experiences. It is a "state of consciousness where people become totally immersed in an activity, and enjoy it immensely" (Bakker 2005, 26). Bakker studied flow in the context of theories of emotional crossover or emotional contagion—how and why "positive and negative emotions can crossover from one person to another" (29)—and found that the peak experience of flow does indeed cross over from teachers to students. It is likely (a hypothesis, in empirical terms) that the occurrence of flow (or other peak experiences) in opera spectators crosses over to other spectators, and that similar crossovers take place among opera singers and between singers and spectators in both directions. Crossover can thus be related to the experience of unity as described by opera singers, as one possible way in which such unity can emerge.

Most recently, peak experiences or higher states of consciousness in music, including opera, have been discussed in terms of *strong experiences with music* (SEM). This research has been pioneered by Alf Gabrielsson of Uppsala University. Subjects were asked to describe "the strongest, most intense experiences of music that you have ever had. Please describe your experiences and reactions in as much detail as possible" (2010, 551). Supplementary questions were whether this experience occurred only on the first time of listening to the music, or as well on subsequent occasions of listening; how the respondent felt "before and after the experience," "what the experience had meant in a long-term perspective" (551), the cause of the experience, and whether such experiences were encountered in situations that had nothing to do with music. In total, 953 people participated in the project, 250 of those provided more than one report, so that the analysis is based on 1354 reports (552). The analysis takes the shape of a descriptive system for SEM (SEM-DS),



with seven basic categories, each with a different number of sub-categories. The basic categories are: general characteristics, physical reactions and behaviours, perception, cognition, feelings/emotion, existential and transcendental aspects and personal and social aspects.

The experience categories of the singers discussed above fit into the SEM-DS. Uniqueness features among the general characteristics, as does the fact that the SEM are hard to describe. The experience of unity comes under the cognition category, within the sub-category “changed experience of situation, body-mind, time-space, part-whole” (557), religious experience is a sub-category of the basic category of “existential and transcendental aspects,” which also includes spirituality. The impact SEM have on the singers is represented in the “new insights, possibilities, needs” sub-category of the basic category “personal and social aspects.”

While Gabrielsson points out that the number of psychological studies into what he calls SEM is very small, and calls for more work to be done in this important but neglected field (2010, 571), it is useful to highlight some of the other findings and debates. One relates to the study of thrill (also referred to as chill or frisson), defined by Goldstein as “subtle nervous tremor caused by intense emotion or excitement (as pleasure, fear etc.), producing as slight shudder or tingling through the body (1980, 126). He found that thrills are typically described as tingling sensations starting, and spreading out from the neck. A strong thrill spreads to the scalp or via the spine to arms and legs. Some thrills are accompanied by visible goose bumps on the arms, or by weeping, sighing or the feeling of a lump in the throat. Panksepp provides an explanation for the relatively small number of studies into this phenomenon: “Such as enquiry has, no doubt, been neglected because of the subjective nature of the phenomenon and perhaps also from the suspicion that chills will turn out to be quite idiosyncratic and variable from individual to individual” (1995, 173). He noted the

importance of familiarity with the piece of music triggering the chill (his preferred term), and sought to identify aspects of the music itself that may serve as triggers, finding that sad or melancholic music is more likely to lead to chill effects than cheerful music. The relation between expectation (closely related to the aspect of familiarity) and thrills was further analysed by Huron and Margulis (2010) with reference to what they call “frisson.” They summarise Panksepp’s explanation for frisson as follows:

[T]he emotional power of the frisson lies in the receptiveness and receptivity of the auditory system to infant distress calls. Since the principal caregivers in most species are mothers, females would be expected to be more attentive to separation distress calls, and so would be expected to be more reactive to music-induced frisson (2010, 597-8)

A disadvantage of Panksepp’s theory is that it does not account for frisson not induced by music. Huron developed his *contrastive valence* theory to address this issue. He argues that frisson arises when an “initial negative response is superseded by a neutral or positive appraisal” (2010, 599). In the context of opera, this would mean that we perceive the frisson-inducing element, probably most typically a tenor’s or soprano’s high C, initially, for milliseconds, as potentially threatening. However, almost immediately we recognise them as aspects of music, not threatening, and the physiological responses that has been initiated over the first few milliseconds after perceiving the sound, are now perceived as something pleasant rather than unpleasant. Such an effect is likely to happen repeatedly because the initially evoked defensive reaction is resistant to habituation. Huron also argues that “large violations of expectation” can lead not only to chills, thrills or frisson, but also to laughter and awe (2010, 600). Awe, in turn, can be related to spirituality, in so far as awe is a frequent reaction to a spiritual experience, and becomes part of it.

Research suggests that the stronger the emotional arousal described by the subjects in studies, the stronger the physiological arousal (Rickard 2004). However, the causal link between music and emotion is controversial. Thus Konečni et al. sought to establish whether

there is a causal link between music and emotion, and came to doubt the existence of such a link—a finding in opposition to that of Lundquist et al. (2009). It is beyond doubt that music has a strong impact on the listener; the center of the debate is on how to conceptualize that experience. According to Konečni et al., listening to sad music may not induce sadness, but may, instead, lead, in the listener, to imagine sadness. In response to this finding, Konečni developed a theory of *aesthetic trinity*, “involving the responses of thrills/chills, being moved, and aesthetic awe” (2008, 305). Being moved, in this conceptualization of the impact of music on the listener, is the predominant response. Aesthetic awe encompasses being moved, is much less frequent, and is considered “the ultimate human aesthetic state: a response to the sublime stimulus that—among other attributes—includes colossal size” (2008, 305). This is the essence of spiritual experience.

In summary: there has not been much empirical research into the relation of music, including opera, and emotions. What research there has been seems to agree that emotions reported in relation to music go along with specific physiological patterns, and there seems to be a causal relation between the intensity of reported emotional arousal and corresponding intensity of physiological arousal. The causal link between the nature of the music and the nature of the emotion is in doubt, as it may be possible, for example, that the allegedly aroused emotion may in fact be the imagined experience of an emotion rather than the emotion itself. A considerable proportion of the responses reported as allegedly triggered by, or at least related to music, are such that they go beyond conventional categories of emotions: they are spiritual in nature. While some researchers try to keep them under a widened concept of emotions, such as the SEM-DS, others try to move away from reference to emotions in favour of concepts such as “being moved” for the “normal” range of responses to music, and “aesthetic awe” to capture peak experiences. Thus, while there is consensus that there are experiences in relation to music (and that includes opera) that go beyond the norm, that are

extraordinary, strong, exceptional, rare, and spiritual, there is no consensus as to what to call them and how to explain them.

### **Expanding the Explanatory Framework**

It is necessary, based on the findings summarised above, to seek to further enhance ways of understanding the nature and the causes of extraordinary (desirable, enjoyable, blissful, etc.), spiritual experiences while performing in, or receiving opera—the latter can take the forms of attending a performance of opera in an opera house or concert hall, or listening to opera at home on CD, or watching a DVD at home, or attending a live broadcast in the cinema. In this section of the article I want to explore conceptually a range of possibilities to enhance our understanding of the nature of extraordinary experiences in opera performance and reception. A methodological note will help to contextualise my approach in this endeavour.

What follows is in many ways an extended contemplation of the issues raised above, freely tying in interdisciplinary approaches and my own experience as an opera-goer. The end result offers an enhancement of our understanding of spirituality and opera, but is as much a beckoning toward further exploration as a final conclusion.

### ***Vedic Linguistics***

In this section I want to explore how we can understand better opera's spiritual dimension for singers and spectators/listeners alike from a holistic perspective, taking all aspects of opera together: singing, music, *mise-en-scène*, and plot. In terms of spoken language, Indian linguistics proposes that language has four levels. *Vaikhari* is spoken and heard language. *Madhyama* is the language of thought, located in our heads. Its structure is similar to that of spoken language, but you may notice a difference as far as time is concerned: we can think much faster than we can speak or write. Western linguistics almost

exclusively deals with those two levels of language. Indian linguistics describes a further two levels, *pashyanti* and *para*. *Pashyanti* is the finest relative level of language, where the sound and the meaning of a word are identical. An example should serve to illustrate this unity: in Indian medicine, *Ayurveda*, the ideal method of healing implies that the doctor simply tells the patient the name of the herb that is expected to cure the patient, rather than giving the patient some tablets containing a preparation of that herb. *Para*, finally, is the absolute level of language, from where language arises in seed form. This is the level of pure consciousness.

Malekin and Yarrow describe *para* and *pashyanti* as follows:

*Pashyanti* is pre-verbal, marked by unity of subject and object, non-discursive, immediate, devoid of any sense of spacetime, a holistic cognition. *Para* is prior even to *pashyanti*, a first stirring towards speech, a sense of “something to be said,” and arises out of unconditioned mind (non-contingent consciousness).  
(2000)

Communication, according to this model of language, does not work according to the currently accepted sender-receiver scheme, with the receiver obliged to decode the sent code. Rather, when the hearer hears a spoken word, he or she remembers the contents of the word, which has existed already on the level of the hearer’s pure consciousness.

I propose to extend this model for spoken language to the language of opera as a whole. The acts of creation of the component parts of opera, on their own and together (music, singing, libretto, mise-en-scène), arise in specific relation to the level of pure consciousness: more or less of pure consciousness is integrated into the creation, depending on the degree the composer, singer, librettist or director and scenographer is able to create from a higher state of consciousness. The more an opera has been created from its composer and librettist’s higher states of consciousness—that is from the *para* and *pashyanti* levels of consciousness—the more the production team will be able to experience the same higher levels of consciousness that are inherent in the opera when working on a production and when presenting performances of the production. The more of the spiritual levels inherent in

an opera the production team are able to translate into the production, the more the spectators will be able to perceive them, leading in turn to their own spiritual experiences.

Perception of the spiritual potential of opera and production, for production team and spectators, does not depend merely on cognitive recognition of codes, but, as for spoken language, the language of opera triggers in those encountering that language (production team, singers, musicians, conductor, and spectators or listeners) a memory of the contents contained in the language which already existed, and exists beyond any dimension of time, on the level of *para* or pure consciousness. What conventional linguistics refers to in terms of understanding is limited to intellectual, cognitive meaning. In comparison, contents on the level of *para* or pure consciousness is all-encompassing, holistic, thus including not only the meaning that literary criticism of the libretto might elucidate, not only an understanding of the music that is the subject of musicology, and not only the sensual dimension of the *mise-en-scène*. Rather, contents on the level of *para* or pure consciousness includes the entire field of non-conceptual and non-sensual, or even better, trans-conceptual and trans-sensual impact of opera relating to feelings, emotions, intuition, and pure consciousness itself.

### ***Sex, Eros, and Femininity***

With reference to a combination of Lacanian psychoanalysis and neuroscience, Zuccarini argues that the nature of the pleasure experienced by the listener/audience in response to opera is erotic (2008), and that the peak of that experience is an operatic orgasm or *jouissance*, triggered by the voice that in such moments separates from contents and becomes pure sound. This argument conflates eros and sexuality, while more attention to the nuances of those concepts yields better results for the enquiry into the nature of strong emotions and experiences of spirituality triggered by opera. Eros in the Platonic sense is the ultimately unfulfilled and unrealisable yearning for ideal beauty. In this context, sexuality is of a lower order than eros: it can be fulfilled and realised in the physical encounter with

another person's body. The strong emotions and spiritual experiences potentially generated by opera fall within the realm of eros, since all components of opera conventionally strive to combine to create beauty on a grand scale: the impressive environment of the opera house, the size of the stage, the splendour of the set and costume design, and the nature of the music and the singing. Such beauty of form and content together has the power, in Platonic terms, of reminding the soul of, and thus guiding it towards, the ideal of beauty, whose attainment is the ultimate aim of life overall. In terms of Vedanta, the elements of opera on their own and even more so taken together are perceived as beautiful, create the experience of beauty; and that experience serves as a vehicle for consciousness not only to perceive the individual and collective beauty, but to transcend those perceptions so as to allow the experience of pure consciousness.

The principle of beauty in relation to opera, together with a major appeal of opera to the emotions rather than intellect, both as far as music and plot are concerned, lead to a further aspect of understanding the spiritual dimension of opera more comprehensively: opera as a predominantly feminine art form. 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 (2004). Opera thus helps men develop their feminine side in a way that assists their spiritual development. Below, I will return to this point and tie it into the overall discussion.

### ***Mise-en-scène***

Opera is sometimes presented in concert format, with only orchestra and singers (often using the score). While still impressive, it is not the "real thing": it lacks the production aspect comprising set, costume, light and sound design, and the singers performing their parts in an arrangement on stage developed by the director. In most operas, the orchestral score and

the music for the singers have been written to support the plot, and vice versa. Music, singing and plot thus form a unity, carrying the range of emotions characteristic of any given opera, and aiming to convey those emotions to the audience. This insight might suggest that a production is most likely to achieve the aim of deepest impact on the audience if it manages to tell the opera's story at the opera's own level. Take, for example, a production of Wagner's romantic opera *Lohengrin*. Here is a plot summary, provided by the Metropolitan Opera (New York) website:

**ACT I.** Antwerp, c. 900s. On the banks of the Scheldt, a Herald announces King Heinrich, who asks Count Telramund to explain why the Duchy of Brabant is torn by strife and disorder. Telramund accuses his ward, Elsa, of having murdered her brother, Gottfried, heir to Brabant's Christian dynasty. (Gottfried was actually enchanted by the evil Ortrud, whom Telramund has wed.) When Elsa is called to defend herself, she relates a dream of a knight in shining armor who will save her. The herald calls for the defender, but only when Elsa prays does the knight appear, magically drawn in a boat by a swan. He betroths himself to her on condition that she never ask his name or origin. Defeating Telramund in combat, the newcomer establishes the innocence of his bride.

**ACT II.** Before dawn in the castle courtyard, Ortrud and the lamenting Telramund swear vengeance. When Elsa appears serenely in a window, Ortrud attempts to sow distrust in the girl's mind, preying on her curiosity, but Elsa innocently offers the scheming Ortrud friendship. Inside, while the victorious knight is proclaimed guardian of Brabant, the banned Telramund furtively enlists four noblemen to side with him against his newfound rival. At the cathedral entrance, Ortrud and Telramund attempt to stop the wedding — she by suggesting that the unknown knight is in fact an impostor, he by accusing Elsa's bridegroom of sorcery. Though troubled by doubt, Elsa reiterates her faith in the knight before they enter the church, accompanied by King Heinrich.

**ACT III.** Alone in the bridal chamber, Elsa and her husband express their love until anxiety and uncertainty at last compel the bride to ask the groom who he is and whence he has come. Before he can reply, Telramund and his henchmen burst in. With a cry, Elsa hands the knight his sword, with which he kills Telramund. Ordering the nobles to bear the body to the king, he sadly tells Elsa he will meet her later to answer her questions.

Escorting Elsa and the bier to the Scheldt, the knight tells the king he cannot now lead the army against the Hungarian invaders. He explains that his home is the temple of the Holy Grail at distant Monsalvat, to which he must return; Parsifal is his father, and Lohengrin is his name. He bids farewell and turns to his magic swan. Now Ortrud rushes in, jubilant over Elsa's betrayal of the man who could have broken the spell that transformed her brother into a swan. But Lohengrin's prayers bring forth Gottfried in place of his vanished swan, and after naming the boy ruler of Brabant, Lohengrin disappears, led by the dove of the Grail. Ortrud perishes, and Elsa, calling for her lost husband, falls lifeless to the ground. (2010)



If the mise-en-scène created around this plot chooses to take Wagner's aspirational intent seriously, its visual, intellectual, symbolic and kinaesthetic aspects will work together to create spiritual experiences, including their physical expressions such as frisson. My argument here supports the view expressed earlier regarding the disadvantage of Panksepp's theory about frisson: it is not only music that has the strong potential of evoking this experience.

In evoking the religious and spiritual contexts so evident in the plot, which are, furthermore, reflected in the music and should serve as a blueprint for the mise-en-scène, Wagner clearly sought to create a religious feeling in those involved with the opera as performers and as spectators. Assuming that a religious feeling in performer or spectator represents an expression of a higher state of consciousness, Wagner thus sought, at least implicitly, to raise the state of consciousness of performers and spectators. Domingo's account of his response to *Parsifal*, discussed above, confirms the potential also inherent in *Lohengrin*. The plot of *Lohengrin*, as succinctly summarised above provides an imaginative production team with an abundance of rich opportunities for varied and diverse interpretation within its own terms, as a medieval fairy tale (as in the 1977 Elijah Moshinsky production at the Royal Opera Covent Garden) or a timeless piece of depth psychology (as in the 2006 Baden Baden Festspielhaus production by Nikolaus Lehnhoff).

In other words, there is ultimately no need for radical interpretations that deconstruct the plot, the meaning carried by the plot, or seek to update the contents to make it, allegedly, more meaningful to a contemporary audience, or to younger audience members. Such justifications either sell a director's ideas under a false pretext, or do serious injustice to the abilities and sensibilities of today's opera audience, no matter what age. It is the very potential of the plot and mise-en-scène for inducing religious and spiritual experiences that makes it so clear to spectators and critics that a production is not cooperating with Wagner's

aspirational intent. The 2009 Bavarian State Opera production of *Lohengrin* may serve as an example. At the center of that production was the concept that both Elsa and Lohengrin represent, and want to build, a new order. The image used to get that concept across to the audience was to have Elsa design her ideal petty bourgeois, core-family-unit detached home (Gohlke 2009) (during the overture), which she then proceeds to build, white brick by white brick, while the accusations of fratricide are thrown into her face. When her saviour does not materialise on the first call by the Herald, the villagers and soldiers proceed to build a stake from the building materials and bricks, lead Elsa to it and douse it in petrol, ready to burn her in immediate execution of the death penalty. Lohengrin appears, defeats Telramund, and immediately takes up a trowel and joins Elsa in building the house. A few times a curtain very close to the front of the stage is lowered, and every time it is raised again, the building of the house has progressed considerably, with a finished house with beautiful wooden floors and walls completed by the end of Act II, ready for Lohengrin and Elsa to move in. When Elsa asks the forbidden question, and before Lohengrin reveals his identity, he carries the heavy wooden cradle from the first floor nursery into the ground floor bedroom, throws it on to the bed and sets fire to the bed. The petty bourgeois dream has come to an end. Gohlke comments that the entire subplot involving the clash between pagan views held by Ortrud and the Christian ethos represented by Elsa and in particular Lohengrin, takes place in a vacuum, and that audiences not familiar with the plot will wonder what Ortrud is always so hysterically concerned about (2009). For all those reasons, Jones's production is quite unlikely to provide anything conducive to supporting the development of spiritual experiences in either performers or audiences, for which there may be potential through the music and singing. The same is true for Stefan Herheim's 2009 production for the Berlin Staatsoper unter den Linden, which apparently arbitrarily juxtaposed so many ideas and

visual elaborations that critics across the world did not identify any clear overall concept or even storyline (Brug 2009; Apthorp 2009).

### **Conclusion: Opera and Spirituality**

In conclusion, I will now seek to bring together the individual strands discussed in this article to present a picture of opera and spirituality that encompasses the full range from the cosmos to the individual. On a cosmic level, in the Divine Plan of the God and Goddess, Saint Germain tells us, planet earth has the purpose of allowing souls to develop their feminine side by way of incarnating as a human being on earth. One of the ways created by humans themselves to facilitate this development of the feminine aspects of every human being's nature is opera with its emphasis on the feminine elements of emotion and beauty. It is part of the Divine Plan that different humans will best respond to different means of developing the feminine side of their nature, therefore it is the case that opera does not appeal to everyone, nor is it necessary.

Opera is a whole, which is more than the sum of its parts—plot, libretto, score, music, singing and mise-en-scène. As a whole it, and its constituent parts, affect the participant (orchestra, conductor, singers, and spectators) in every single performance in a potentially holistic, spiritual way. All opera has that potential. In principle, the extent to which that potential is tapped and put into action and practice depends on the extent to which the component parts are carried out in spiritual terms. The range of that extent is quite wide, as the number of supporters and detractors of any one singer, conductor, or opera, among opera-lovers, will confirm. Depending on what any one opera lover needs, in terms of spiritual development and according to what the Divine Plan has determined for them individually, they will like the interpretation of the score by von Karajan or by Solti, will prefer the tenor

voice of Ben Heppner or Klaus Florian Vogt, and the production by Nikolaus Lehnhoff or Stefan Herheim.

A holistic understanding of how opera creates its spiritual impact is possible with reference to the Vedic model of language: combined together, all aspects of any particular performance of opera may stir, in the pure consciousness of the musician, conductor, singer and spectator, an intuitive glimpse of the eternal ideal of beauty that the genre potentially offers—an experience which is available at a level of consciousness independent of time.

From the holistic level we proceed to the individual level. Those two levels exist in mutual interdependence, not at all in opposition to each other. On the individual level, the spiritual experiences of the singers, as well as research into the impact of music, including that of opera, on an audience, are relevant. I discussed both earlier in the article, within their respective explanatory frameworks of music psychology, transpersonal psychology and consciousness studies. The *mise-en-scène*, finally, has its own role to perform among the constituent parts of opera that can make the experience of opera spiritual. Future research can explore any level of the argument presented in this article further, in theoretical and empirical contexts and terms.

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