

**Friedrich Geiger: Art as a Vocation: Vladimir Vogel's drama-oratorio *Jona ging doch nach Ninive*.**

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Friedrich Geiger

## Art as a Vocation: Vladimir Vogel's drama-oratorio 'Jona ging doch nach Ninive'

The composer Vladimir Vogel was born in Moscow in 1896. His mother was Russian, his father a businessman who came from Dresden. After the end of the First World War he went to Berlin where he was admitted to Ferruccio Busoni's masterclass, along with Kurt Weill. His studies completed, his career was at first extremely promising, but it came to an abrupt halt with the relinquishing of power to National Socialists. In jeopardy on three counts as a Communist, a Jew and a so-called *Neutöner* or 'new-note composer', Vogel roamed Europe for a number of years. Finally he found a home in Switzerland, where he produced new compositions until the end of his life without managing to emulate his own early success. He died in Zurich in 1984.<sup>1</sup>

Vogel's output was extensive and very varied. His works include a *Sinfonia fugata* for large orchestra (1928-29), die *Vier Etüden* for orchestra (1930-32), which were very highly successful in their time, a Violin Concerto (1937), important piano works including the powerful *Epitaffio per Alban Berg* (1936), and many vocal pieces on texts ranging from Leonardo da Vinci to Hans Arp. Between 1926 and 1971 Vogel composed seven major vocal works that constitute the centre of his many-sided oeuvre. To describe these he introduced the overall generic term, 'drama-oratorio'. This refers to a special form of the oratorio which has been extended to include elements of the straight theatre ('drama'). Here, instead of being sung, substantial portions of the text are uttered by solo speakers or a chorus of speakers (*Sprechchor*). Vogel had been exploring the use of the spoken word in text-setting since his *Drei Sprechlieder nach August Stamm* for male voice and piano (1922). Any conversion into a theatrical medium is, however, deliberately avoided, since Vogel was aiming for a non-visual, purely auditive form of music theatre where the stage is in the listener's imagination.

Vogel's first drama-oratorio after World War II was *Jona ging doch nach Ninive* which he composed in 1957/58.<sup>2</sup> This was sparked off by a commission from Rolf Liebermann, a former composition pupil of Vogel's and then head of the music section of North German Radio in Hamburg. Vogel conceived *Jona* as the first part of an oratorio trilogy entitled *Leviathan*. The second part was to be based on Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and the third part on

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the life and music, see the author's *Die Drama-Oratorien von Vladimir Vogel, 1936-1984*, Hamburg 1998.

<sup>2</sup> The vocal score by Usko Meriläinen was published in 1958/59 by Bote & Bock, Berlin and Wiesbaden.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. But *Jona*, lasting about 45 minutes, was the only part Vogel realized. It received its première in Hamburg on 4 January 1959.

For his text Vogel used the Old Testament story of the prophet Jonah. Instead of drawing on one of the traditional Christian versions he resorted to a translation by the Jewish religious philosopher, Martin Buber. For this version was always intended to be read out an audience and is notable for the great musicality of its language.

Vogel set the text unabridged and with only slight alterations. The first part of the drama-oratorio portrays God's revelation of Himself to Jonah, who is commanded to proclaim God's wrath to the sinful city of Nineveh. Jonah tries to wriggle out of the unwelcome task and boards a ship for Tarshish. But God sends a mighty tempest and the ship gets into difficulties. By casting lots the sailors identify as the perpetrator. He challenges them to throw him into the sea. At first they refuse, but when the storm becomes increasingly strong they throw him in. Immediately the sea grows calmer. Jonah is devoured by a great fish in whose belly he spends three days and nights in prayer. Eventually God orders the fish to spew Jonah upon dry land.

The second part of the work begins with God's fresh revelation: Jonah is to travel to Nineveh. This time Jonah complies. In Nineveh he proclaims God's punishment: the city will be overthrown in forty days. The inhabitants, led by their king, are full of remorse and go in sackcloth and ashes, beseeching God to spare them. God indeed resolves not to punish the city. Deeply mortified by this volte-face, Jonah quarrels with God. He sits down outside the city. To his pleasure, God causes a bush to spread its shadow over him, but by the next morning it has withered. Exposed to the sun and the wind, Jonah wishes for death. Then God puts it to him that if he is grieving so much for a bush, for which he had not even laboured, how could He, God, fail to have pity on Nineveh, that great city?

*Jona ging doch nach Ninive* is a good example of Vogel's new invention, the genre of the drama-oratorio. A number of passages in the work clearly have an oratorio-like character. The beginning of both parts is in recitative style, while Jonah's prayers in the belly of the whale, for instance, show *arioso* features. Some of the passages for *Sprechchor* seem like Baroque *turba* choruses; in particular the depiction of the sailors casting lots in Part One is an obvious allusion to the chorus of soldiers casting lots for Christ's raiment in Bach's *St John Passion*. On the other hand the highly dramatic ensemble writing and sometimes illustrative orchestral sound for the storm scenes in Part One are in operatic tradition of the 'Temporale' scene.

Fundamental to the generic concept is the distinction between text intended to be spoken and the text intended to be sung. Vogel examined the individual sentences and words of the libretto minutely – in places syllable by syllable – for their musical potential. He then distributed among the five carriers of

the text that are used in the drama-oratorio generally: solo speakers, *Sprechchor*, solo voices from the *Sprechchor*, singers, chorus of singers. Each of these is allocated a specific dramaturgical function which again recalls the traditional genre of the oratorio. Thus the function of the solo speaker may be compared to the *historicus* whose task is provide the effective framework of the action. The function of the sung passages, on the other hand, corresponds to that of the aria, their object being the emotional intensification of a particular segment of the text. The *Sprechchor*, finally, occupies an intermediary position between the two poles of speech and music. Here the spectrum extends from unison spoken passages where the chorus sounds like a single, monumentalized speaking voice to complex polyphonic passages.

By distributing the text in this way, Vogel took the classical principle of the oratorio genre a stage further. What emerges is no longer just a series of sections with different functions, e.g. a recitative followed by an aria followed by a chorus, and so on; instead these functions now appear simultaneously and in a variety of combinations. This is conducive to a subtle and flexible interpretation of the text.

The storm scene in Vogel's *Jona* offers a good example of how the oratorio functions are made to work simultaneously. Example 1 shows the Biblical text in the Martin Buber translation which Vogel used for his setting, along with the manner in which he distributed it among the performers. In the first half the *Sprechchor* takes over the evocative portrayal of the tempest, repeating the appropriate segment of text. During the pauses the speaker recounts the course of events. The solo baritone is inserted between these two elements, and Jonah's urgent appeal is assigned to him. With the exclamation 'Da riefen sie ihn an!' by the *Sprechchor* in the second half, the sailors become involved and are subsequently represented by the men's speaking voices. At the same time the women's speaking voices go on portraying the tempest. Finally the chorus of singers solemnly sings the *Pronomina*, in which the sailors invoke God: Ex. 2.

Like nearly all Vogel's works after 1937, *Jona* is a twelve-note composition. After a short prelude the first part begins with the basic form of the note-row. The second part begins in much the same way, but using the inverted form of the row. The clear indication is that the composer saw the two parts as antithetical. In terms of content this must mean that two alternatives are being presented: the alternatives are being presented: the alternatives are being presented: the alternatives facing the individual person – Jonah – when God gives him a mission. Either he can try to avoid it (Part One), or else he can comply with it (Part Two). In the first instance he will discover that there is no getting away from his duty. In the second instance he will need to come to terms with the fact that, having followed his vocation, he will not see any results. For Nineveh will not be destroyed in the end and the prophet will, as Vogel put it, 'end up by being mocked by the divine author of his mission into the bargain'.

It may be concluded from things he said that the composer associated the parable of Jonah with his own situation as well. After the Second World War Vogel, in common with the majority of émigrés, found himself banished to the periphery of musical events by the dominance of the F' Darmstadt circle (Stockhausen, Boulez). Another factor was his isolated position in Switzerland and the suspicious rivalry of the native composers. Not until 1954 was Vogel naturalized, and before that, admission to important institutions like the Swiss Composers' Association was denied him because he was not a Swiss citizen. Even then, he was not elected to any of its panels but restricted to being a member without influence. It was not until 1957 that one of his works was performed at a Swiss Composers' Festival.

When he composed *Jona*, then, Vogel was clearly and painfully aware of his work's lack of popularity. Nonetheless he remained convinced of the rightness of his artistic path and stuck to the concept which he had begun to develop in the 1920s. The theme of Jonah – the binding character of his one's vocation, even if one can foresee the negative resonance, was – transferred to the problems of being an artist – the theme of Vogel as well.

## Example 1

### Originaltext Buber

Sie sprachen zu ihm:

Was sollen wir mit dir tun,  
daß das Meer von uns ab sich stille?  
denn das Meer stürmt immer heftiger noch!  
Er sprach zu ihnen:  
Ergreift mich und schleudert mich ins Meer,  
daß das Meer von euch ab sich stille!  
denn ich erkenne,

daß meinethalb dieser große Sturm wider euch ist.  
Die Männer ruderten drauf los,  
es ans Trockne zurückzubringen,  
aber sie vermochten nicht,  
denn das Meer stürmte immer heftiger wider sie.  
Da riefen sie IHN an, sie sprachen:  
Ach, DU,  
laß uns nimmer doch hinschwinden um die Seele die-  
ses Manns!  
nimmer auch mögst du unsträfliche Blut über uns  
geben!  
Denn selber, DU, tust du wies dir gefällt.  
Sie ergriffen Jona und schleuderten ihn ins Meer.  
Und das Meer hielt ein in seinem Wüten.

### Verteilung im Libretto

**Sprechchor:** Das Meer stürmte, stürmte

**Bariton:** Ergreift mich,

**Sprecher:** Die Männer

**Bariton:** ergreift mich

**Sprecher:** ruderten drauflos.

**Sprechchor:** das Meer

**Bariton:** schleudert

**Sprechchor:** stürmte!

**Bariton:** schleudert mich! mich! etc.

**Sprecher:** Sie ruderten! Es ans Trockne

**Sprechchor:** das Meer

**Sprecher:** zurückzubringen

**Sprechchor:** das Meer stürmte!

**Sprecher:** aber sie vermochten's nicht!

**Sprechchor:** Denn das Meer stürmte immer heftiger  
wider sie

**Sprechchor Männer:** Da riefen sie Ihn an!

**Gesangschor:** Ihn, Ihn, Ihn etc.

**Sprechchor Männer:** ach! Du!

**Sprechchor Frauen:** das Meer stürmte, stürmte etc.

**Gesangschor:** Du, Du, Du, etc.

**Sprechchor Männer:** Laß uns nimmer doch  
hinschwinden um die Seele dieses Manns  
nimmer auch mögst Du unsträfliches Blut über uns  
geben.  
Denn selber Du, tust Du wie Dir gefällt!

**Gesangschor:** Dir, Dir, Dir!

**Sprechchor:** Sie ergriffen Jona und schleuderten ihn  
ins Meer...

**Sprecher:** Und das Meer hielt ein in seinem Wüten.

Example 2

n. *Da rie-fen sie Ihn an!*  
 t. *Da rie-fen sie Ihn an!*  
 S. *Ihn, Ihn*  
 A. *Ihn, Ihn, Ihn, Ihn*  
 T. *Ihn, Ihn, Ihn, Ihn*  
 B. *Ihn, Ihn, Ihn, Ihn*

Piano accompaniment includes markings for *6*, *f*, *pp*, and *ppp*. The piano part features a *Cadenza* section and a *3/4* time signature.

S. *das Meer stürzte das Meer*  
 T. *(Klagend) f stürm - te!*  
 n. *an! Du! Laß uns nim-mer doch hin-schwin-den die-ses Manns*  
 t. *an! Du! Laß uns ~~nim-mer~~ nim-schwin-den, um die See-iz die-ses Manns*  
 S. *an! Du Du Du*  
 A. *an! Du Du*  
 T. *an! Du Du ach!*  
 B. *an! Du Du ach!*

Piano accompaniment includes markings for *f*, *pp*, *ppp*, and *bd.*. The piano part features a *3/4* time signature and a *4/4* time signature.