

# The Music of Hildegard von Bingen

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By Margarida Barbal Rodoreda

## Hildegard's musical and poetic compositions

Until a few decades ago, Hildegard's music was practically unknown. In the last 30 years, scholars and musicians have published and interpreted her work with increasing interest.

Hildegard's musical and poetic compositions amount to 159 songs, 77 of which belong to *Symphonia harmonie celestium revelationum* and the rest to the morality play *Ordo virtutum*. Her music production is the largest with authorship written until the twelfth century that has been preserved.

There are two main manuscript sources of Hildegard's notated music: Dendermonde, St Pieters-&-Paulusabdi, Codex 9 "*Dendermonde*" and Wiesbaden, Landesbibliothek, Hs. 2 "*Riesenkodex*". Four other manuscripts contain fragments of her music and poetry.

A great number of her songs are Antiphons and Responses, written for the Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours, the most important of which are Matins, Lauds, Vespers and Complines. Every three hours the nuns gather together in church to sanctify the day and all human activities.

Hildegard accorded an enormous importance to music. The last year of her life the prelates of Mainz had ordered that the divine service had to be read quietly and without music at Rupertsberg. The interdict had been caused by the fact of having a noble allegedly excommunicated buried in the cemetery of the monastery. The abbess wrote to the prelates challenging that interdict. In that letter she makes a defence of music and her musical conception can clearly be seen; she admonishes the prelates using very sharp words and relating them with Satan, who took man away from celestial harmony and the beauty of Paradise.

To Hildegard singing was a way of spiritual practice above any other; this can be seen in her notion of word-music relation "words symbolize the body, and jubilant music reveals the spirit"<sup>1</sup> and she "liked to contrast human beings who were composed of soul and body so as to express God's image in both praise and work, with the angels, who were pure spirit and therefore pure song".<sup>2</sup>

It seems very likely, although it is not exactly known that musical instruments were commonly used in worship in ancient times. From the third to the eight centuries many Fathers and Doctors of the Church such as St. Augustine, St Basil or St Bernard of Clairvaux, calling for austerity, remembered the dangers of musical pleasure referred to the use of

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Holsinger, *Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2001, p.93.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Newman, *Hildegard of Bingen: Symphonia*, Cornell University Press: New York 1998, p7.

instruments and the embellishment of melodies. Hildegard praised instruments and she mentions them in several songs and “unlike many patristic and Cistercian writers she was untroubled by the sensual beauty of music and its potential for distracting worshipers from the text”.<sup>3</sup>

Hildegard claimed to write music through God’s inspiration, she herself recalled in her memories how she began to compose: “*untaught by anyone, I composed and chanted plainsong in praise of God and the saints, although I had never studied either musical notation or any kind of singing*”.<sup>4</sup>

Nowadays we refer to learning style as a series of personal traits with which people are born and develop as they grow. It determines through which activities and senses one tend to absorb information more easily. From her writings we could deduce that Hildegard was very sensitive and receptive in both, vision and hearing. These senses were connected with her inner perception and open to the mystical experience. This is why “from the aural contemplation of revelation (which manifests itself in the form of image, sound and word) she apprehends the revealed message and retains for a long time in her soul what she has seen and heard. Consequently the apprehension of the truth preserves the sensorial trace of the aural contemplation from which it began”.<sup>5</sup>

In the last *Scivias* vision, Hildegard wrote that she had seen a “*most luminous sky*” in which she heard a “*sound like the voice of a multitude singing in harmony, in praise of the celestial hierarchy*”.<sup>6</sup>

Her experience of the ineffable, processed by her sensitivity, her unconditional love of nature and her commitment to teaching, turns into original compositions of great spiritual expressive strength.

Her poetic texts, written in a very personal Latin that no writer would dare to correct, is very suggestive and expressive.

Her melodies are unique and do not conform to the usual patterns of Gregorian modes. Many of her songs have a great melodic range that makes us think that she and the nuns of her community sang with great freedom and mastery of their voices.

All Hildegard's songs captivate us because of the profusion and beauty of their images and some of them because of an unusual melismatic richness too. When we are in communion with this kind music, we feel subtly pushed by a dynamic Richness that can be physically felt as an internal flow. It can also bring us to an exceptional spiritual state that can be described as the inspiration, beauty, healing and enlightening strength of Hildegard.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p27

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.17

<sup>5</sup> Georgina Gonzáles Rabassó, *Subtilitates natura. Continuitats ruptures a la cosmologia d'Hildegarda de Bingen (1098-1179)*. Doctoral Thesis. Universidad de Barcelona 2015, p.51.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Newman, *Hildegard of Bingen Symphonia* .Cornell University Press. New York 1998, p 7.

## Hildegard's Marian Songs

Twenty-one songs out of the seventy-seven gathered in the *Symphonia harmonie celestium revelationum* are dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus. In the Dendermonde manuscript supervised by the author, those songs take an important place, just after those dedicated to God.

According to Hildegard, Mary is the link between the world after the human fall and Paradise. The incarnation of God in the Virgin is seen as the main act of salvation that was already in the mind of God before the beginning of time.

Mary has all virtues – humility above all - and redeems the negative vision of the feminine condition - *feminea forma* - which, after her, shines as a mirror of divine creation.

From the late stage of the Roman Empire a new paradigm based on the repression of corporality was taking place. The monastic communities regulated the virtues of their ascetic practices. The body became the representation of sin. "The sense of law had been extended by incorporating the hatred of sin into the necessity of punishment".<sup>7</sup>

The question of whether woman had been created in God's image and likeness like Adam was being discussed. "The twelfth century witnessed a growing awareness of the "incarnational", as opposed to a purely spiritual image of God".<sup>8</sup>

"For Hildegard, who used the feminine expressly to symbolize the eternal counsel, woman's role as vessel of the incarnation was the very seal of her creation in the image of God. (...) Herein lies the clue to Hildegard's surprisingly radical anthropology, which would exalt not the male but the female as the representative human being".<sup>9</sup>

The songs to Mary contain a great amount of images related to the body. The body of Mary as a sacred space closed by virginity and thus open to the sublime Love of God.

Singing is not only a spiritual artistic experience but also, and in the first place, a bodily experience in which the vibration and the outside-within interchange is felt as central. In the fact of singing the songs to Mary three phenomena occur at the same time:

The words and images referred to the body suggest spaces and sensations that are not only transmitted as concepts but that are bodily sensed and produce a sensory experience.

The symbolic to which these images relate allow one to feel one's body and the whole person is projected into another dimension or transforming experience.

The melody itself, the dynamics of the sounds, the ascending and descending cascades, the audacity of the intervals and the intrepidity of the melodic range require a kind of flexibility and a particular attitude unique to this repertoire.

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<sup>7</sup> Johan Huizinga, *El otoño de la Edad Media*. Alianza Universidad. Madrid 1979, p 34.

<sup>8</sup> Gerhard Ladner, *Ad imaginem Dei: The Image of Man in Medieval Art*. Latrobe, Pa., 1965, p 42, 108-9, quoted in Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*. University of California Press. 1989. P 92.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*. University of California Press. 1989. P 93.

Thus, a balanced attitude that puts together the humility and serenity of the Gregorian chant and an absolutely singular ingredient of bodily vivacity, suppleness and receptivity in which the three levels – words, music and the spiritual reality symbolized – are perceived synchronously. Also at the same time they feed back and create a new augmented reality that is felt in the body and can be transmitted to the listener.

“She believes that musical tone enhances the holiness of words when combined in sung speech, arousing sympathetic vibrations in the body and allowing the sense of the words to enter directly to the soul”.<sup>10</sup>

It is unknown how Hildegard’s music did sound in her time, as we don’t know either how Gregorian music was interpreted. On the one hand spiritual singing has to convey the meditative calm that helps the openness to God. In that sense “Hildegard’s writing suggests a quiet mastery that controls ecstasy and shuns delirium, always working within the mainstream of Christian tradition”.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand many scholars point out the probable difference between the ancient interpretations from our current idea of how plainchant sounds. “The Gregorian we hear now is probably more uniformed than the one that prevailed in the Middle Ages (...). The reform in Solesmes in the mid-nineteenth century drowned the expressive flight that entailed a freedom and metric superiority”.<sup>12</sup>

Hildegard’s compositions were creative because of the use of literary and musical structures. For many of Mary’s songs she wrote long antiphons, evoking vivid images of dynamism through melodic means. It does not seem out of place to imagine that this very rich poetic melodic landscape was sung with freedom and ease.

To express the updated perennial meaning of that chapter of salvation, of which Mary is the key, Hildegard uses a wide number of metaphors and poetic expressions of great strength and beauty which, symbolically, describe a higher reality. She often uses words and phrases related to nature which she knew well and loved so much, such as *Evergreen branch*, *Splendid gem*, *Lucid or Golden material*, *Dawn or Star of the sea*. Her humility as synonym of sanctity is described as *the sweet fragrance of the virtues*. Mary is seen as a *door*, in the double sense of suggesting the closed space of virginity and acknowledging the one who opens the door of paradise. And she describes incarnation as *the enjoyment of the entrails where all heavenly symphony resonates*, so is the warmest, brightest, most musical and most joyful expression of divine Love embodied in Mary.

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara Thornton. In *Sequentia*, dir Barbara Thornton. Ordo virtutum, 1982, 1991. Deutsche Harmonia mundi 77051

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Page. In *Gothic voices*, dir Christopher Page. *A feather on the breath of God. Sequences and hymns*. 1984. Hyperion CDA 66039.

<sup>12</sup> Manuel Valls. *El prodigiós món de la música*. Bruguera. Quaderns de cultura. Barcelona 1966

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Anonymous 4. **The Origin of Fire. Music and Visions of Hildegard von Bingen**, 2003 (*Harmonia Mundi USA HMU 907327*)

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