

REFLECTIONS ON/THE WORKSHOP:

What Can We Learn from Singing the Music of Hildegard

By Rosamaria Aguadé and Margarida Barbal

Traslated by M. Teresa Barbal

The proposal to do an hour and a half workshop, the purpose of which was to sing a piece of music of Hildegard of Bingen didn't seem easy to put into practice . However, after doing the workshop and according to the written assessment of those who attended it, we can say it was a very rewarding experience for them as well as for The Scivias Ensemble, who actually conducted the workshop.

The piece of music chosen to sing in the workshop was the sequence *O virga ac diadema* and we followed the transcription of Otto Müller Verlag. It is said that this sequence, dedicated to Mary, was the Rhenish visionary 's favourite and that she hummed it while walking in the cloister or in the convent. The text of *O virga ac diadema*, very much focused on the internal state of Mary, tells us that her beauty is the beauty of light, the beauty of music (which is called "symphony") or the beauty of scents. Life emerges from Mary as "Aurora" to enlighten the human being. We had an extraordinary text that would lead us to

the Hildegardian experience.

The main challenge posed to us when conducting this course was to transfer our experience as singers of Hildegard's music to the workshop participants. How were we to pass a small part of what performing Hildegard's music means to us to other people?

While reflecting on this, a series of questions and issues arose and we believe it is important to explain them.

First of all, we realized that the idea of a concert as we normally conceive one betrays the reason why this music was composed. Most likely Hildegard transmitted her songs, as she felt them inside herself, to her nuns orally. This would mean that before putting her music in writing at the scriptorium, there was a true musical community practice, after which, or perhaps simultaneously, this music would be written. That would mean that there was a direct relationship with music at Rupertsberg or at Eibingen; music passed from the songwriter (who was also an interpreter of what was dictated to her by God) to the interpreter. This took place without the guidance of any manuscript or any other intermediary. Currently, the way we participate in the music of Hildegard is either by listening to it (in concert or

on recordings) or by performing it (this is usually reserved for professional musicians), therefore the listening or performing of this music is almost always tight by very modern parameters.

On the other hand, we must take into account that Hildegard's entire musical production was addressed to the nuns who were in her community, women who lived in a very special spiritual atmosphere, who were offered direct channels of relationship to Transcendence by Hildegard. Music was one of them. At no time can we forget what is behind the entire work of the twelfth century Rhenish Benedictine: a spiritual experience with an unusual power, which was meant to be transmitted, in the first place to those who shared her life with her (nuns of her community) and, secondly, to all mankind.

In preparing the workshop, we realized that we could not lose sight of the inaccessibility that usually frames this music. Very often it is reserved to medievalists, musicologists, professional performers or people with highly specialized profiles. But was this what Hildegard really intended when she composed it?

These and other considerations, led us to see the workshop

as an opportunity to get closer to the origin and the most genuine meaning of this music.

We wanted the music to be experienced, rather than performed. We wanted it to be a living being rather than set down on paper. We wanted it to be experienced in the body and with the guidance of someone who already knew the piece (which in this case was The Scivias Ensemble, although we later learnt that among the participants there were other women who sang Hildegard). If these ingredients were provided, then a workshop to study and to sing Hildegardian music was possible and had meaning.

The workshop, conducted at all times by Margarida Barbal, began with vocal and physical exercises. Slowly, Hildegard's music began to appear. The acoustics of the church of Bingen enveloped the voices of the participants and brought us close to the possible sonority for which it had been designed. The instrumental accompaniment by Santi Figueras facilitated the maintenance of the pitch and the support of the voices. We achieved in singing the entire piece from top to bottom all together; not bad for an hour and a half workshop!

Only a very small percentage of the participants had no

musical or vocal education. Most had a medium or high level of musical knowledge. This made the output of the workshop to be a positive surprise. We were quickly able to enter into the spirit of the music and we could soon feel as though we were a choir.

Due to the participants having had a certain command of the vocal instrument helped very much in achieving a good final result. Without a certain level of skills and abilities to sing, there cannot be a vehicle that holds a spiritual experience through singing. If these features are given, the support and guidance make it possible to reach a fine artistic result. At least this is what we have concluded after conducting the Bingen workshop.

According to the participants' answers to a short assessment questionnaire, the workshop was described as "a very complete experience," "an approach to what the music of Hildegard could have been like at her time," "an emotional experience," "the importance of feeling the body," "the importance of physical resonance associated to space," "the movement of feeling the lightness music requires physically and sonorously," etc. These are all comments we liked to hear since they were our goals, ideas from our own experience and which we wanted to pass on

to others from the very beginning.

Following the workshop, it has become clear that singing the music of the so called "Sybil of the Rhine" asks a series of requirements that go well beyond knowing or not knowing music: a sensory and physical readiness to be very open, a receptive attitude, listening to the body and the group or the desire to transcend the notes and submit them in the form of prayer. This is what music tells us, and in Bingen, that chilly day on October 27th, we felt it in the resonance of the church and within us. And it became clearer as we continued to perform and as the melody of *O virga ac diadema* was internalized within each of us; also within the beauty of the group as a whole.