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Music 310

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Hildegard of Bingen

When compared to other eras in human history, the Middle Ages provide posterity with marginal examples of monumental innovations. As centuries wedged between the time of Roman imperialism and the flourishing Renaissance era, the Middle Ages have been regarded as a time of dark stagnation. However, as with every other groundbreaking achievement, significant individuals lay the groundwork for future generations to build upon. Just as atoms come together to form molecules, which in turn unite to form the building blocks of life, so individuals build upon existing ideas to further ignite future creativity and innovation. Such individual are truly remarkable and worthy of our investigation. One such person is the mantic composer, Hildegard of Bingen. In this essay the researcher will seek to explore Hildegard’s remarkable contribution to her own generation and to the generations that followed. In doing so, we will look at her life, how she fit into the relevant historical framework of her time and what her contributions were to the world of music.

It was during the unsteady years of civil war that a significant event took place in Rhinehassen, Germany. In 1098, an aristocratic couple gave birth to their tenth child and named her Hildegard.¹ In her visionary trilogy, Hildegard describes her childhood as being quite unusual, stating that she had a deep understanding of spiritual things even at a young age.² The one story we have about Hildegard's childhood serves to illustrate her predilection toward

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² Peter Dronke. Women Writers of the Middle Ages: (Cambridge: 1984), 145.
prophecy. According to the tale, Hildegard was with her nurse in a barn waiting for the birth of a newborn calf. In vivid terms she described the visual characteristics of the calf before it was even birthed; "White and marked with different colored spots on his forehead, feet and back."³ Though the accuracy of prophetic description was not recorded, the nurse was allegedly so impressed by this incident that she told Hildegard's mother about what had occurred. For some reason, Hildegard's mother decided to reward the nurse with the calf.⁴ Though the reason for doing so was not recorded, it could possibly have been because her mother felt that the nurse was positively influencing her daughter and saw this incident as an illustration of that influence.

Another woman, whose name we do not know, also greatly influenced Hildegard as a child. In one of her works, the Vita, Hildegard describes a "certain high-born woman, to whom I have been entrusted for education,"⁵ as being an important figure in her life. According to her, this woman was the first to speak of her spiritual gift to a superior in the church while Hildegard was still a child.⁶ Hildegard's parents, recognizing their child's intense spirituality, admitted her at eight years of age into a Benedictine monastery for her novitiate.⁷ Hildegard's parents may have also considered her frail health when deciding to send her to the monastery. Other than becoming a nun, the only other option for women at that time was marriage and child-rearing. Because of Hildegard's poor health, her parents may have felt that the latter would be too strenuous for her, so decided instead to direct her in the path of celibacy. However, this in itself presents an incongruity, as nuns were often charged with the keeping and raising of orphaned and outcast children, the very thing the parents may have sought for her to avoid.⁸ Regardless, Hildegard

³ Flanagan, "Hildegard of Bingen," 25
⁴ Ibid, 25
⁵ Dronke, *Women Writers*, 145
⁶ Ibid, 145
⁷ Bent, "Hildegard," 553-554
⁸ Flanagan, "Hildegard of Bingen," 26
flourished under the auspices of the church. Known as “the Sybil of the Rhine,” Hildegard continued to climb the ranks of monastic hierarchy, becoming head of her monastic division after the death of her superior. Later on, she established her own monastery near Bingen, which she occupied with eighteen other women, and lived there until her death.

The distinguishing feature in the life of Hildegard was her ability to receive what she claimed to be heavenly visions. Believing that her extra worldly experiences began at age three, she continued to be overcome by an illness that she said had induced her visions. Out of fear for the implications of her prophetic understanding, Hildegard kept them a secret until she felt it was her spiritual obligation to tell others of what she experienced. She discussed the matter with a monk who in turn shared the information with his abbot. After reviewing Hildegard’s visions, it was decided that the Pope should be made aware of the remarkable woman and her prophetic abilities. In her biographical writings, Hildegard recalls the event, “with joy he had read them out in the presence of many people, and read them for himself, and, with great trust in God's grace, sending me his blessings with the letter, he bade me commit whatever I saw or heard in my vision to writing, more comprehensively than hereto.”

Some have been skeptical of her prophetic abilities, stating that the “illness” which she so frequently referred to induced visions, rather than the visions inducing the illness. One scholar, upon analyzing the descriptions of her condition, specifically “the falling stars, the concentric luminous circles, the many evocations of dazzling or blinding lights -- concluded that Hildegard suffered from frequent migraines or ‘scintillating scotoma’.” Regardless, Hildegard’s visions were deemed legitimate by her contemporaries, and her “talents” were called upon by many

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9 Ibid, 553-554
10 Ibid, 553-554
11 Dronke. Women Writers, 145 -- 146
12 Ibid, 146
notable figures. Among those seeking advice were Conrad III, Frederick Barbarossa, Henry II of England, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and three popes, to name a few. Hildegard continued to receive visions throughout her entire life, becoming the famed Speaker through which "the living light" expressed itself.\(^{13}\) Hildegard died on September 17, 1179.

Hildegard composed plainchants for liturgical use in the Catholic Church. Among her other notable achievements, the compositional aspect of her creativity may very well stand above all others in the aspect of importance. Unlike others during her time, Hildegard publicly identified herself as the author of her chants. In a time when human autonomy was frowned upon, it was a bold step for a woman composer.\(^{14}\) Other composers, who worked within the musical guidelines of the day, used pre-existing works as the basis of their compositions. The philosophy of the time held that composing entirely of one's own creativity was a mark of pride and self elevation. Although it was generally frowned upon, Hildegard nevertheless boldly continued to compose entirely new works which bore no witness to pre-existing chants.\(^{15}\)

Hildegard was not only a composer of music, but also a defender of music. In a bold and independent act, she wrote her church authorities, charging them with the implication of unfair punishment. The offense, which involved the women at the Rupertsberg community, alleged that they had allowed an ex-communicated member to be buried on church lands under their jurisdiction. As a result, Hildegard and her nuns were forbidden to sing liturgical chants as a part of the mass. Although they were allowed to read the chants, the denial of musical participation stirred up consternation within the group of women. Although Hildegard did not deny the allegation, she did denounce the mode of harsh correction. Rising to the occasion, Hildegard penned a fiery response: "Thus they without the weight of sure reason impose silence

\(^{13}\) Dronke. *Women Writers*, 145 -- 147
\(^{15}\) Ibid, 42
upon a church in the matter of songs in praise of God, and thereby unjustly deprived God of the honor of his praise on earth, will be deprived themselves of the participation in the angelic praise heard in heaven, unless they make amends by true regret and humble patient.”\textsuperscript{16} The outcome, which was decided in favor of the prioress, illustrated the influence that Hildegard had over those around her.

Hildegard wrote two main stylistic compositions: the \textit{Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum} (“Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations”) and the \textit{Ordo virtutum} (“Play of the Virtues”). Each one is comprised of sacred thematic material and not based on any pre-existing material.

The music of Hildegard was greatly influenced by medieval Catholic imagery, particularly the Jesse tree. The tree, based upon Isaiah 11:1-2, is a representation of the incarnation of Christ. “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots: the spirits of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirits of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.”\textsuperscript{17} This particular passage of Isaiah prophetically speaks of the coming of the Messiah. The Jesse tree celebrates the lineage through which Christ was born and the virtues which adorn those who are moved upon by the Holy Spirit. In her song cycle \textit{Scivias}, which is part of the larger collection \textit{Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum}, Hildegard celebrates the saints who adorn the Jesse tree by attributing an antiphon and response to each in increasing order of importance (as illustrated in the table below).\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 50
\textsuperscript{17} Isa. 11:1-2 (King James Version)
\textsuperscript{18} Barbra Newman. \textit{Living Light.} (Berkeley: 1998), 158 – 160
TABLE 4. THE CONTENTS OF THE FIRST LAYER OF SONGS  
(IN ORDER IN SCIVIAS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Numbers in Symphonia</th>
<th>Pages in Lieder</th>
<th>Genres</th>
<th>Subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10/21</td>
<td>28/44</td>
<td>Antiphon and responsory</td>
<td>Virgin Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29/30</td>
<td>57/59</td>
<td>Antiphon and responsory</td>
<td>Angels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31/32</td>
<td>62/64</td>
<td>Antiphon and responsory</td>
<td>Patriarchs and prophets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33/34</td>
<td>66/69</td>
<td>Antiphon and responsory</td>
<td>Apostles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37/38</td>
<td>82/83</td>
<td>Antiphon and responsory</td>
<td>Martyrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40/39</td>
<td>87/85</td>
<td>Antiphon and responsory</td>
<td>Confessors (bishops)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55/56</td>
<td>97/99</td>
<td>Antiphon and responsory</td>
<td>Virgins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While Hildegard's compositional style was not entirely unlike others of her time, she still demonstrated an innate ability to unify the text with the music. This researcher has chosen to analyze the first response, *O tu suavissima virga*, in order to better understand Hildegard's style.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgeEM0QyWyk

Hildegard's compositions were an instrument through which she instructed her charges in the worship of God. The text, which was central to the importance to the liturgy, was the principle determiner of how the music was set. Certain words were stressed, usually by the insertion of melismatic sections. In *O tu suavissima virga*, the words that receive this kind of attention tend to be visual in nature: "sweetest branch," "flesh," etc. ¹⁹

¹⁹ Newman, *Living Light*, 162
Another interesting aspect of *O tu suavissma virga*, and Hildegard’s music in general, is the wide range of pitch that she employed. Hildegard used this tool to bring attention to specific words and to reflect the meaning of the text. For example, the phrase “as an eagle” is reflected in the vocal line which “soars” to the highest pitch in the response. In contrast, the lowest notes are used when referring to humanity (seen as low and subordinate beings), with words such as “branch budding from the stock of Jesse” and “take flesh in her” (both referring to the Virgin Mary).21

Not only were her text settings reflective of her era, but so were the elements of her compositions that related to time. Because of the absence of rhythm or meter, Hildegard’s compositions are fluid and unobtrusive. Each section, moving seamlessly from one phrase to the next, is absent of any jarring or otherwise disturbing elements that appears in music with modern rhythmic dictation.22

Though not as prominently illustrated in *O tu suavissma virga*, another of Hildegard’s stylistic traits was her frequent use of repetition. The one place that illustrates this aspect of her style in *O tu suavissma virga* unites the phrase, “an eagle sets its eye upon the sun” with the

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20 ibid, 163
21 ibid, 164
22 ibid, 162
concluding phrase "to take flesh in her." This method helps to unify the structure of a work of music.\textsuperscript{23}

Upon close examination of the score, an interesting observation comes to light. While leaps were being used during the Middle Ages, they were almost always small and in an upward direction. However, in this piece we find examples that went against current dictates. In several places we discover leaps of a fourth and leaps of a fifth. Even more surprising is the fact that the leaps are directed in a downward direction, also occurring in several places. Furthermore, contained within the very first line of music we discover a \textit{musica ficta} note which adds a brief touch of dissonant coloration. This same note alteration can be found throughout the remainder of the text, all serving essentially the same coloristic function. These few examples serve to illustrate Hildegard's evident innovative independence which touched every aspect of her life.

One of Hildegard's most notable works was one that illustrated her bold spirit and brave independence. \textit{Ordo Virtutum} is not an antiphon or a response, but a play that celebrates the victory of sixteen Virtues over the devil. It is thought that Hildegard may have composed this for a performance commemorating the establishment of a new church.\textsuperscript{24} Unlike antiphons or responses, this play is musically less challenging as it was to be performed by everyone, not just by a few soloists or a group of nuns. It is also significant to note that none of Hildegard's compositions were composed to represent Christ himself, but rather were meant to be the overarching themes which indirectly represented Him. Christ was, instead, "the music that the members of his body meet together in heaven, the music of the city of God."\textsuperscript{25} Thus the virtues, whose music in entirety represented Christ, were the spiritual force that defeated the devil. The

\textsuperscript{23} Newman, \textit{Living Light}, 163
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 50
\textsuperscript{25} Barbra Newman. \textit{Living Light} (Berkeley: 1998), 158 -- 160
devil, devoid of all hope of salvation, was given a spoken line rather than a sung one which signified his state of depravity.²⁶

Hildegard was truly a unique woman. Her list of achievements stands as a reminder to all those who take the time to examine the life of such a significant individual. Notwithstanding her compositional abilities, Hildegard was also a poet, painter, medical writer, and theologian. Upon reflecting on Hildegard's legacy, one author aptly summed up the significance of the remarkable woman;

“Hildegard was the only woman of her age to be accepted as an authoritative voice on Christian doctrine; the first woman who received express permission from a pope to write theological books; the only medieval woman who preached openly, before mixed audiences of clergy and laity, with the full approval of church authorities; the author of the first known morality play and the only 12th-century playwright who is not anonymous; the only composer of her era (not to mention the only medieval woman) known by name and by a large corpus of surviving music; first scientific writer to discuss sexuality and gynecology from a female perspective; first saint whose official biography includes a first-person memoir.”²⁷

It is truly a virtually inexhaustible store of evidence that bears witness to Hildegard's stunning list of accomplishments.

It is hard to say whether Hildegard was influenced by other composers, since it was not customary for composers of the Middle Ages to attribute themselves as the authors of their works. Individualism was not celebrated during that time, as any form of self-elevation was looked upon as a rebellious act towards God. It is surprising that Hildegard was not chastised for being forthright in claiming authorship of her work. When compared to others of her time, the mantic composer stands steeped in a wealth of personal information. This important aspect allows us to better understand the driving force behind Hildegard and her creative genius.

Though it is equally ambiguous as to whether Hildegard directly influenced fellow or future

²⁶ Ibid, 172-173
²⁷ Ibid, 1
composers, it is certainly plausible that her example empowered some to build upon her creativity in the spirit of her boldness.

Hildegard entered the scene of history during a time when the glimmer of musical innovation was just beginning to shine. Although the Guidonian Hand had been developed, rhythmic notation was decades from being established. The church, with its firm hand controlling all sacred music, also served as the vehicle through which cracks in the rigid cement of tradition began to appear. Hildegard, though composing within the general guidelines of the church, established her own front of creativity as a leading figure in the ever expanding world of music. Taking the text and making it her own, Hildegard wrapped her works in the casing of modal monophonic plainchants and delivered them to an audience that has listened in wonder for nearly 500 years.
Bibliography


Dronke, Peter. Women Writers of the Middle Ages. Cambridge: 1984
