

The life and works of the medieval Abbess Hildegard von Bingen (1098- 1179) — books, letters, artwork, medicine, theology, and music — reveal a powerful, creative, compassionate woman who founded two convents at Rupertsberg and Eibingen, who was outspoken on political and ecclesiastical authority, and who was much sought after — by monastics and nobility — for her wise counsel and spiritual and medical advice.

Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) was the 10<sup>th</sup> child born to a noble family in the German town of Bermersheim near the hills of Alzey. When she is 8 or 9 years old, Hildegard's parents tithe her as an oblate to the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg. Entrusted to the care and tutelage of Jutta von Sponheim, an anchoress at the monastery, Hildegard learns to read the Psalms, Latin, and learns to write. At age 14 or 15, Hildegard takes the veil. With Jutta's death in 1136 Hildegard is elected to succeed her as Abbess.

Given to lucid visions throughout her life, it is not until age 43, upon receiving prophetic instruction to "write them down" that with the help of her assistant, Volmar, and one of her nuns, Richardis of Stade, Hildegard begins collecting her divine revelations in a book. Around this time, Hildegard sends a letter to the monastic leader and mystic, St. Bernard de Clairvaux seeking his advice, and sharing that "I have from earliest childhood seen great marvels which my tongue has no power to express but which the Spirit of God has taught me that I may believe." Upon approval by a papal commission designated by pope Eugene III, and Bernard's apparent endorsement, Hildegard's first book, *Scivias* (Know the Ways of God) was made public.

*Scivias* contains theological instruction, accounts of celestial realms, the musical play, *Ordo Virtutum* (Order of Virtues), and several poems that are found set to music in two remaining manuscripts, the *Dendermonde* (St. Pieters & Paul Benedictine Abbey, Belgium, MS 9) and *Riesen* (Hessische Landesbibliothek, Wiesbaden, Germany, MS 2) codices.

In the 77 songs that make up Hildegard's *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (Symphony of the harmony of celestial revelations), Hildegard uses the main chant forms: antiphons (Psalm and votive), hymns, responsories, sequences, an Alleluia (Mass Proper) and the Kyrie (Mass Ordinary). Of these, nearly one quarter are in praise of the Virgin Mary.

## Kyrie eleison

Antiphon to Divine Love: *Karitas Habundat in Omnia*

Sequence to the Holy Spirit: *O Ignis Spiritus paracliti*

Antiphon to Divine Wisdom: *O Virtus Sapientiae*

Antiphon for the Virgin: *Quia Ergo Femina*

Antiphon for the Virgin: *O Quam Magnum Miraculum Est*

Instrumental: *Ispariz* by Shira Kammen

Hymn to the Virgin: *Ave Generosa*

Antiphon for St. Mary the Virgin: *O Frondens Virga*

Antiphon for the Trinity: *Laus Trinitati*

Antiphon for God the Father: *O Eterne Deus*

Instrumental: *Kyrie* based on Hildegard/S. Kammen

Responsory for St. Disibod: *O Viriditas Digni Dei*



Vielle is made by Karl Dennis

Kentigern Medieval Harp made by Ardival Harps

Vajra Voices is an affiliate of the San Francisco Early Music.

The texts of Hildegard's musical compositions are in a style called *Kunstprosa*—free verse intended for oration. Since rhythm (as far as is known) does not seem to be indicated, the declamation of the text is the overall organizing principle. In her songs, the more transcendent and celestial the words, the more florid and wide-ranging is her music, often effecting an expansive vocal range of two octaves within a single piece. Though Hildegard employs the Gregorian (church) modes, her music is an amalgam of liturgical chant and ecstatic song wherein the word, the tone, and the meaning are inextricable.

The antiphon *Quia Ergo Femina* illustrates the medieval theology of the feminine, which reasons that without the destruction caused by Eve there could not have been the Blessed Virgin Mary's "supreme blessing" (Christ). The text of the hymn to Mary, *Ave Generosa*, is characteristic of Hildegard's distinctive blending of the exuberant with the intimate. Each of the seven verses juxtaposes the physical and the spiritual, the human and the Divine, where Mary's womb is the vessel of sanctity from which sounded forth the whole celestial symphony.

With Hildegard, the Divine feminine entities of Love (*Karitas*) and Wisdom (*Sapientiae*) work closely together holding the very fabric of the universe in place. In the prayer for God the Father, *O eterne Deus*, love which was made manifest in the Son is the same love that God created "in the primal dawn of all creation." This eternal love, *Karitas Habundat*, abounds in all and together with the strength of Divine Wisdom (*O Virtus Sapientiae*) encompasses the whole of creation.

The sequence *O Ignis Spiritus Paracliti* (sung for Mass) is praise and supplication for the omnipresent Holy Spirit who is the protector of all creation. It is the Holy Spirit that is the source of *viriditas* (greening) which permeates Hildegard's theology, medicine, and music. More than spiritual metaphor, Hildegard's *viriditas* is a tangible life-giving sap that flows through all of creation. Outstanding and perhaps most representative of Hildegard's fervid conviction in the essential nature of *viriditas* is her rhapsodic responsory, *O Viriditas Digni Dei* which she dedicates to the 7th c. Irish monk, St. Disibod—namesake for the monastery at Disibodenberg.

At every turn Hildegard masterfully affirms devotion to God according to the Benedictine Rule (with large emphasis on chastity) in a voice that is as sensual as it is resolute. — Karen R. Clark