

"A Feather on the Breath of God" – what the melody language of Hildegard von Bingen's music makes her the great composer in the 12th century.

Hildegard of Bingen was born in 1098, convent-educated from the age of 7 by Benedictine nuns at Disibodenberg, near Bingen. She became abbess of her community at age 43. Historians know Hildegard mainly from her book of visions; medical historians and botanists for her two books on natural history and medicine. Literary and music scholars began from her morality play, the *Ordo Virtutum*. This is her first miracle play, which is set to music and was performed by women, a rarity for the time. Hildegard only turned her talented gift to music in the 1150s. Musicians know Hildegard for her antiphons, hymns, and sequences, a large body of monophonic chants whose text and music are both by Hildegard.

She is the first female composer who is known and whose works have survived. Her chants are rich in mystical images, and her melodies are elaborate, with florid melodic contours, ornamented inflections, and wide ranges. Hildegard's music did not get much attention by musicologists because of its difference in musical style from others at that of the Middle Ages. She was not included in music textbooks perhaps because her unique style was difficult to reconcile with much of medieval music and music theory.

Divine Harmonies

Music is extremely important to Hildegard. She regards it as the means of recapturing the original joy and beauty of haven, and to worship and praise god. According to her before the Fall, Adam had a pure voice and joined angels in singing praises to god. After the fall, music was invented and musical instruments made in order to worship god appropriately. This might explain why her music most often sounds like what we imagine angels singing to be like.

Hildegard wrote hymns and sequences in honor of saints, virgins and Mary. She wrote in the plainchant tradition of a single vocal melodic line, a tradition common in liturgical singing of her time. Her music is undergoing a revival and enjoying huge public success. She collected her 77 musical works in a volume called the *Symphonia harmoniae caelestium revelationum* (Symphony of Harmony of Heavenly Revelations). Her morality play, the *Ordo virtutum*, is appended to one manuscript copy of the *Symphonia*. Hildegard's training is not particularly exceptional; education at convents was focussed on the performance of the liturgy, and included literacy, Latin, and music.

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Thus, other nuns may also have composed plainchant--or even polyphony--for new feasts and special celebrations.

Motivic allusion

Her repertory of sequences and antiphons are not following the musical tradition, for she writes in a loosely formulaic melodic language. Earlier music scholars such as Ludwig Bronarski analyzed Hildegard's music in terms of "motivic variation" than by strict rules to modal range and standard melodic gestures. In many of Hildegard's pieces, short melodic fragments appear in the opening phrases and are repeated throughout the piece. The fragments vary with repetition and do not appear in regular intervals throughout the piece. Besides mode and genre, the musical motives are some of the most distinguishing markers of Hildegard's style. She wrote music and texts to her songs, mostly liturgical plainchant honoring saints and Virgin Mary for the holidays and feast days, and antiphons.

Wide vocal range nad leaps

In contrast to the narrow scope of most chants at that day, Hildegard's music has a very wide vocal range, somehow up to two octaves. She traverses the octave scale up and down with as much ease as if to bring heaven and earth together. Unlike the Romanesque curves of most plainchant melodies, Hildegard's melodies are more "angular and 'gothic' - full of the sharply pointed arches that, in the architectural realm, still lay several decades into the future"¹ (figure 1). Often we hear rapid ascents in the melodies with a slow, falling decline. The heights of her songs are like spires of Gothic cathedrals shooting upwards into the sky.

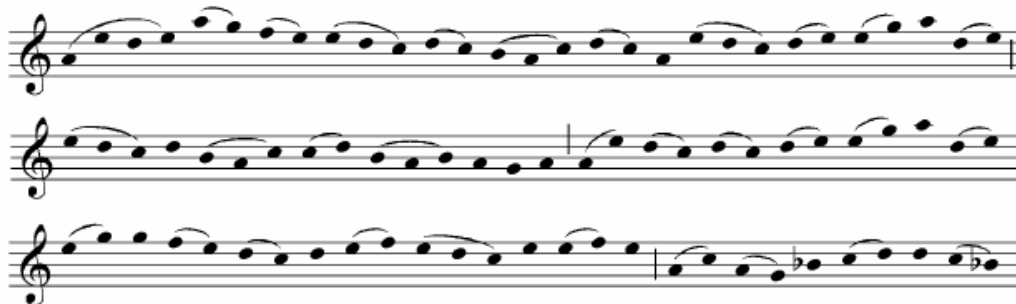


Figure 1, 'Spiritus Sanctus, vivificans vita.'

¹ Newman, 27.

Hildegard's musical vocabulary also includes large leaps. Plainchants scarcely use intervals larger than a second or third. Hildegard's music include upward and downward with wide intervals of fifths and fourths. With this key gestures of the open ascending fifth, Hildegard built pieces around all four possible finals (d, e, f, and g) and two cofinals (a and c), but e, which usually described as an unstable mode in medieval music, is the most common modal center of her music. This ascending fifth is most common in pieces on d, e, and a.

Melodic phrase

Hildegard adds and omits pitches and pitch groups in repetitions of melodic phrases, then stretches and contracts melodic phrases to create the "soaring arches" that we are familiar with in her music. Hildegard composed using sets of melodic patterns, and it seems there is a framework, signifying a general line of melodic movement, which is defined by the intervals and direction. We can see from the diagram that Hildegard creates a relatively small number of motifs and repeated with variation in different piece she composed (figure 2)².

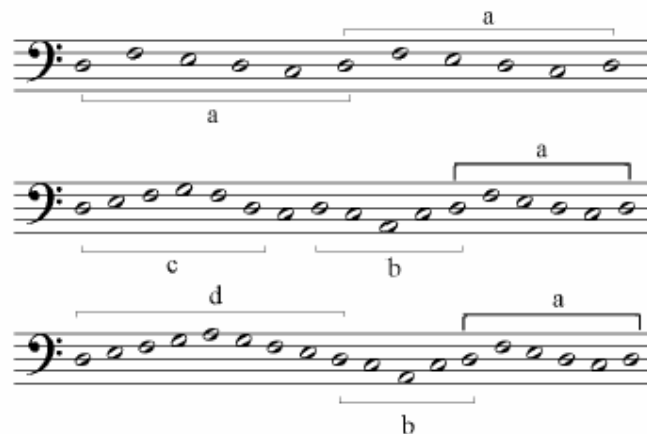


Figure 2, Poucke's formulaic structures 'O successores'

Symbolic language

Hildegard's chants contrast neumatic and melismatic passages. Neumatic passages are organized with two or three notes per syllable. Melismatic passages use

² Van Poucke, 8, 29.

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three or more notes per syllable. Hildegard often uses melismatic or decorative passages to articulate form, to animate the line, to create agile, supple melodies and to separate sections of pieces. Combined with an ascending passage at the end of the piece, Hildegard uses melismas to anticipate the joy we will experience in arriving at our final celestial destiny. Her writing text is beautiful in imagery and symbolism, which can reflect Hildegard's compressed, synesthetic mode of perception. Newman comments on Hildegard's use of symbolic language:

Hildegard's poems, at their best, are not simply vehicles for the immense common stock of symbols. One can take these symbols as a kind of bass continuo to ground the more fluid, unexpected meanings that constitute the "melody" of the poem.³

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Hildegard was a very expressive person. As a composer, she expressed herself intensely in the sound and words of her music. To conclude, this is how one of the most remarkably creative personalities of the Middle Ages, Hildegard of Bingen, describes herself:

"Listen, there was once a king sitting on his throne. Around him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king with great honor. Then it pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus am I, a feather on the breath of God."

"A Feather on the Breath of God" draws upon Hildegard's large collection of music and poetry, the "Symphony of the Harmony of the Celestial Revelations". It contains some of the finest songs ever written in the Middle Ages and a number of the most elaborate, the Sequences are recorded here for the first time. Hildegard expressed her devotional life in exploring music and poetry through spirituality. With her extraordinary creativity and vision from her heart, Hildegard's music made her the significant female composer and musician in the 12th century.

³ Newman, 36-37.

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