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MUSICAL WORLD OF HILDEGARD OF BINGEN¹

Introduction

Hildegard of Bingen (Hildegard von Bingen, Hildegardis Bingensis, Saint Hildegard, Sibyl of the Rhine) was born in 1098 in the German province of Rheinhessen, and she died in Rupertsberg near Bingen, on the 17th September, 1179. She was an extraordinarily interesting personality, 'the first' in many fields, known for her literary, musical, scientific and research work, as well as religious and diplomatic activities. Her oeuvre includes recorded visions, medical, botanical and geological treatises, letters, lyrical and dramatic poetry which survived alongside monodic music.

Hildegard of Bingen is one of the first composers ever – and most definitely the first female composer – whose biography has survived. When she was eight, her parents sent her to church as a 'tithe' – a sort of tax, as was the custom in medieval times. Six years later, she was assigned to the newly-built Benedictine double monastery near Disibodenberg. Jutta of Sponheim,² sister of Count Meinhard of Sponheim and Hildegard of Bingen's tutor until her death, was very popular, with a great number of followers, thanks to which the

¹ The term paper titled "Svet muzike Hildegard of Bingena" ["Musical World of Hildegard of Bingen"] was written under the mentorship of Tijana Popović-Mladenović, Associate Professor, in the first year of undergraduate studies, and it was presented at the annual review of student papers in the academic year 2012/2013.

² Jutta was born to a rich and distinguished family. She despised all secular temptations and decided to dedicate her life to God.

monastic circle around Jutta grew wide even during her lifetime. Under Jutta's 'mentorship', Hildegard of Bingen learned Latin and was instructed in the strict religious practices of the time. After Jutta's death in 1136, Hildegard of Bingen was elected as the superior of the community (the abbess) and moved the group to a new (strictly female) convent in Rupertsberg, on the banks of the Rhine, near Bingen.

Later sources described her as the 'Sibyl of the Rhine', and popes, emperors and other secular and spiritual leaders, as well as the lower clergy, even the laity, obtained counsel from her and maintained lengthy correspondences. She was involved in politics and diplomacy at a time of great political and ecclesiastical turmoil. Inconceivably for a medieval woman, between 1160 and 1170, she headed four missions, travelling mostly across the German lands and preaching sermons. It is recorded that she had been having quite specific visions since she was five years old and that in 1141, the Church authorities allowed her to write down her visions, in which the monk Volmar assisted her. Thanks to his help, and the opportunity to attend sermons every day and consult numerous theological treatises of the time, stored in the convent where she lived, Hildegard of Bingen wrote three books: the first and the most significant is *Scivias* [*Know the Ways*], completed in 1151; then *Liber vitae meritorum* [*Book of Life's Merits*]; and *De operatione Dei* [*On God's Activity*], also known as *Liber divinorum operum* [*Book of Divine Works*].³

Over the last decades, the increasing interest in the activities of women in medieval times led to the popularization of Hildegard of Bingen's music.⁴ Recent literature, which, among other things, examines her compositional work,

³ In these books, Hildegard of Bingen first described every vision, and then explained it. The descriptions of her visions were richly decorated on her instructions, and the illustrations and decorations were most probably rendered by other nuns in the convent. Her interpretations of the visions, for the most part, comply with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Her vivid descriptions of physical sensations accompanying the visions were diagnosed by neurologists (including Oliver Sacks, the author of the book *Migraine* published in 1970) as the symptoms of migraine. The others saw them just as colourful illustrations of the governing doctrine supported by Hildegard of Bingen, rather than as real visions. The book *Scivias* was widely acclaimed in medieval times and first printed in Paris in 1513. Cf. http://sh.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hildegard_od_Bingena

⁴ Cf. Margot Fassler, *Composer and Dramatist: 'Melodious Singing and the Freshness of Remorse'*, *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, ed. Barbara Newman, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998; Barbara Newman, *Voice of the Living Light*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998; Fiona Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age*, New York, Doubleday, 2001; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2002; Carol Reed-Jones, *Hildegard of Bingen: Women of Vision*, Bellingham, Paper Crane Press, 2004; etc.

lists about eighty (surviving) compositions, a rich musical oeuvre in medieval terms. The most significant work is *Ordo virtutum* (*Order of Virtues* or *Game of Virtues*), a very specific kind of early oratorio for female voices and one male voice (representing the devil): like all of her works, it was written with the intention to be performed within the order of nuns whose spiritual leader was Hildegard of Bingen. The texts of her compositions were written in her individual modification of Medieval Latin, containing a large number of new and/or abbreviated words. The monodic music which she composed could be performed with a modest instrumental accompaniment, most often the pan flute, or it could be joined by another sung (improvised) part.

Pursuant to the modern tendencies of musicologists who have focused their research on the musical world of Hildegard of Bingen, this paper, on the one hand, aims to contribute to these tendencies by underlining the importance and function of music within Roman Catholic worship as practiced in the convent in Rupertsberg, and on the other, to mark the particulars of Hildegard of Bingen's musical language using three works – *O ignee Spiritus*, *De Spiritu Sancto* and *Item de virginibus* – as examples.

The musical world of Hildegard of Bingen

Music was very important to Hildegard of Bingen: on the one hand, it was a mundane manifestation of humanity's voice and, on the other, the ultimate means of communication between people and the divinity. Her music, conforming to ecclesiastical teachings, was an integral part of worship, thus having an implicit didactical and rhetorical role. Believing that man's everyday spiritual and physical balance is disturbed by this earthly life, Hildegard of Bingen advocated the healing power of music. In other words, she believed that the language of music was the most natural means for *restoring the balance* of humankind, i.e. to "redirect our hearts toward heaven and put our feet back onto the wholesome pathways of God".⁵

Although the exact year when Hildegard of Bingen started composing cannot be ascertained, one can assume that her early music was an integral part of the medieval lives of all the members of the spiritual community this composer and visionary belonged to. In monasteries, convents and churches, rituals accompanied by music were performed according to a strict timetable. The right to participate in these rituals called 'Hours', which were contained in a breviary and which, by Benedictine rules, were performed eight times a day (i.e. every

⁵ Quoted in: Nancy Fierro, *Hildegard of Bingen: Symphony of the Harmony of Heaven*, Mount St. Mary's College, Los Angeles, California, USA, 1997. Cf. <http://www.hildegard.org/music/music.html>

three hours), was restricted to monks and nuns. Christopher Page, the author of about a dozen books on medieval music, states that Hildegard of Bingen, thanks precisely to frequent worship in the convent she lived in, had the opportunity to hear the music of that geographic region. This British scientist wrote that Hildegard of Bingen's "life was spent singing the words of the liturgy and reading the words of the Latin Bible until the fabric of [her] memory was dyed with them to the deepest, to the most irremovable, tint".⁶ Hence, it can be assumed that the composer was involved in the monastery's musical life from the very beginning. It is interesting that women did not participate in the rituals in the same way as men: living in the female section, which had two windows – one opening outwards and the other connected to the church – they were, in fact, almost completely excluded from the Divine Office; hence, only through these openings could the nuns hear the music performed at worship, and it was a form of 'learning' music for Hildegard of Bingen too. The monastery was ideally suited to meet her needs as a composer, since it had experienced copyists in the scriptoria, who were able to write down her music, performers who could play it and liturgical events within which it could be performed. In her autobiographical texts, Hildegard of Bingen wrote, "I composed and chanted plainsong in praise of God and the saints even though I had never studied either musical notation or singing."⁷

Today, two manuscripts are in existence: *Dendermonde* and *Riesenkodex*, containing 77 songs written in neumes. Scholars gave these songs a joint title *Symphony of the Harmony of Heaven*, although it does not appear in any of Hildegard of Bingen's surviving texts. The foregoing song collection includes 43 antiphonal songs, 18 responsorial songs, seven sequences and a few hymns. All of them were performed within some part of the liturgical cycle or a festivity. Hymns and sequences are marked by syllabic melodies, while melismata in responsorial songs can contain up to 75 notes on a single syllable; antiphonal songs are a 'stylistic middle ground' based on the alternation of syllabic and melismatic sections, while sequences are distinctive as they do not adhere to the rhyme scheme. Another significant musical work is the already mentioned 'dramatic' piece, *Ordo Virtutum*, containing 82 mostly syllabic melodies with accompaniment. The work's subject is the struggle of a human soul with sixteen personified virtues and vices.

The texts of her songs are marked by a richness of symbolic imagery, and 'apocalyptic language' similar to her visionary writings; one can even find some similarities with the poetry of Notker Balbulus, while their richness and imag-

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

ination make them closely related to the works of Petrus Abaelardus (Pierre Abélard).

Based on her letters, it is assumed that the compositional oeuvre of Hildegard of Bingen included elements of secular music, since the 12th century was one of the most prolific periods for aristocratic art, or more precisely, the art of troubadours, trouvères and minnesingers. Given that the emergence and activities of minnesingers coincided in time and space with the life and work of Hildegard of Bingen, one can assume that the composer had the opportunity to become acquainted with the creative and performance practice of some of the most renowned minnesingers of the time – Walther von der Vogelweide, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Tannhäuser and others. Namely, according to some surviving written evidence, she was acquainted not only with secular music, but also with the musical instruments and musical practices of the liturgy. In the book *Scivias* there is an illustration of a female figure wearing armour and a helmet, with a sword and a spear, and the following text: “And there were also people, some of whom were sounding trumpets, and others were drolly making a noise with players’ instruments, and others were playing diverse games.”⁸ While a text so worded suggests that the author was inclined to these kinds of secular events, later on it is concluded that a woman warrior “savagely transfixed them with the spear she carried in her right hand”.⁹ This is probably one of her visions, which, in fact, favours the opinion that Hildegard of Bingen supported secular music, but at the same time disapproved of a certain shallowness and vulgarity in the secular pastime. In another passage, the author wrote about what would have happened if man had decided to walk in God’s ways: “He would have displayed you as the light of clarity in the renown of most holy deeds and made you ring like the sweet sound of a lyre.”¹⁰ This quotation leads us to the conclusion that Hildegard of Bingen certainly held non-liturgical musical practice and cultivating instrumental music-making in high regard. For her, secular music was *another intense brightness*,¹¹ hierarchically placed just below sacral music. Proof of this are the author’s words: “And in it I perceived the totality of every delight, and all kinds of music, and voices of many singers and the joy of those who rejoice, and an abundance of all gladness [...] And [secular musicians] were touched from time to time by a certain very sweet

⁸ John White, *The Musical World of Hildegard of Bingen*, College Music Symposium, 1998. Cf. http://cms.axiom4.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=2142:the-musical-world-of-hildegard-of-bingen.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

breeze, proceeding from the hidden places of God, having all the perfumes of plants and flowers; and then they gave forth the sound of sweetest harmony, and their voices resounded as the sound of many waters.”¹² From this quotation we can conclude that the musical world of Hildegard of Bingen, apart from the traditional monodic melodies of sacral chants, included instrumental music too, both polyphonic and secular.

The author considered musical instruments as a means to soften the heart and to turn man’s soul towards God; she even ascribed particular functions and meanings to certain instruments:

- Tambourine inspires discipline. The skin of the tambourine is spread tightly over the frame, like that of a fasting body.
- Flute, with its seductive and intimate sound, reminds us of the breath of the Spirit.
- Trumpet is clear, strong, wakeful, like the voice of the prophets.
- Strings correspond to the earthly condition of the soul as it struggles back to the light. The sounds of the strings stir up the emotions of our heart and lead us to repentance.
- Harp is the instrument of heavenly blessedness. It brings back thoughts of our holy origins and helps us remember who we are and who we are called to be.
- Psaltery represents the unity of heaven and earth since it is played both on the top and bottom strings.
- Organ, as an instrument capable of playing harmonies, helps create community.¹³

Properties of Hildegard of Bingen’s musical language

Hildegard of Bingen’s musical language is marked by a certain departure from the rules set by the church at that time. Broad and melodious lines, wide and unexpected intervallic leaps, long and ornamented melismatic ‘sentences’ were parts of her ‘musical vocabulary’. The complexity and diversity of melodic phrases stemmed from the fusion of poetry and music, i.e. from interlacing the grammatical and semantic properties of the text with a well-developed, mostly

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Nancy Fierro, *Hildegard of Bingen: Symphony of the Harmony of the Heaven*, Mount St. Mary’s College, Los Angeles, California, USA, 1997. Cf. <http://www.hildegard.org/music/music.html>

melismatic melodic style. The texts of the songs are punctuated with rhetorical devices, such as personification, ambivalence of meaning, vivid descriptions and comparisons (cf. Example 4). Thus, for instance, in the song *De Spiritu Sancto (To the Holy Spirit)*, the ‘Spirit’ is ‘the root of all created being’ which ‘wakens’ ‘life’, while in another song, *Item de virginibus (In Praise of Virgins)*, Hildegard of Bingen identifies ‘virgins’ with natural ‘Greenness’, comparing them to the ‘dawn’ and the ‘flame of the sun’. In order to ‘breathe life’ into these metaphors, the author uses musical means that emphasize the primary subjects and key words of her poetry. These tools include intervallic leaps, repeating short melodic phrases and ornamental variations of a single melodic pattern, which Hildegard of Bingen used to blend musical and textual ideas into a coherent entity. More precisely, she mostly employed melodic motion with ornaments, using referential pitches and characteristic notes of certain modes, to stress and musically ‘deepen’ the meaning of certain words, while on the other hand, she adhered to the inflection of the spoken word and punctuation provided with the texts.

In the time of Hildegard of Bingen’s compositional activity, the melodies of Gregorian chant, already formed and mature, were broad and slow, diatonic, and restricted to medieval modes. They could be accompanied with a parallel melodic line, at a distance of a fourth or fifth, above or below the plainsong part. Eight church modes were in use – more precisely, four authentic modes (Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian and Mixolydian) and four plagal modes, which were transposed a fourth downward compared to the corresponding authentic ones.¹⁴ Scales that Hildegard of Bingen used most often in her works had the minor triad on the final.¹⁵

Contrary to medieval church melodies, plainsong composed by Hildegard of Bingen is marked by a very wide range. Unlike choral chants, where melodies move conjunctly, with small intervallic leaps and the arc-shaped contour – ascent from the initial melodic formula (*initium*), plateau at a certain pitch (*tenor*) and closure (*finalis*), which is actually the return to the initial position¹⁶ – the melodies composed by Hildegard of Bingen are somehow more ‘angular’. The reason for this ‘angular’ shape of church chants lies in the use of wider intervallic leaps – fourths, fifths, even sevenths. Often, at the very beginning of a chant, we can note ‘quick’ melodic ascents to a certain pitch, followed by

¹⁴ Cf. Roksanda Pejović et al., *Muzika minulog doba [Music of the Times Past]*, Belgrade, Portal, 2004, 88.

¹⁵ This was probably an influence of the minnesingers, since they paid more attention to the minor-triad modes (Dorian and Phrygian).

¹⁶ Cf. Roksanda Pejović et al., op. cit., 88.

conjunct/‘slower’ downward motions. The high registers reached in her melodies are reminiscent of the spires of Gothic cathedrals ‘shooting upwards into the sky’¹⁷ (cf. Examples 2 and 3).

The usual range of the chants known to Hildegard of Bingen did not exceed the ninth interval, most of them remaining within the scope of a fifth or sixth. Her chants, on the other hand, exceeded an octave by a fourth or a fifth, and in Marianne Pfau’s opinion, the better part of Hildegard of Bingen’s church songs go beyond the ranges defined by medieval theoreticians. The range in some of her works is even wider than two octaves (cf. Example 3). In that respect, this composer seems to have given precedence to the musical space occupied by each individual melody, rather than its modal basis. The way of Hildegard of Bingen’s musical thinking is marked by the ‘strategic’ repetition of melodic ‘motives’ which are specific for each mode (cf. Examples 1 and 2). Besides, the melodic tissue contains fourth and fifth leaps upwards and downwards, serving as a sort of ‘entrance’ to high registers, separating and stressing certain words in the text at the same time (cf. Examples 1 and 2). Also, two consecutive leaps may occur at the beginning: an upward fifth, from the final to the reciting tone, and then the upward fourth, from the reciting tone to the upper final (cf. Example 2). Hildegard of Bingen’s melodies contain long melismatic sections, like in *Item de virginibus*, where their function is to focus the listener’s attention on the desired musical and/or textual ideas, or ‘images’ (cf. Example 3).

The compositional oeuvre of Hildegard of Bingen is restricted to four modal scales, but due to the exceptionally wide range of certain chants, it is hard to determine whether they are in the authentic or the plagal mode. Besides, around 25 songs have notes A and C as unconventional finals (cf. Examples 2 and 3). Although these finals were not accepted in the standard system, they certainly served as alternative points for the transposition of the melody. One can also assume that Hildegard of Bingen ‘played’ with modes, and in the process unknowingly discovered the Ionian and Aeolian modes, i.e. the precursors of the modern major and minor scales.

*O ignee Spiritus (O, Spirit of Fire)*¹⁸

The song *O ignee Spiritus* is in the Dorian mode; it begins and ends with the note D, i.e. the final, and the reciting tone is A. The note B-flat appears throughout the work, which leaves the impression of the natural minor scale.

¹⁷ Nancy Fierro, *Hildegard of Bingen: Symphony of the Harmony of the Heaven*, Mount St. Mary’s College, Los Angeles, California, USA, 1997. Cf. <http://www.hildegard.org/music/music.html>

¹⁸ Example 1 at the end of the paper.

The range is $a - d^2$. The song begins with a leap typical of the Dorian scale (D – A), which is subsequently repeated at the beginning of the textual phrases. The style is neumatic, and a few notes assigned to one syllable, most often three or four, are to be articulated quickly – as if their function is to ornament a particular note or word. The melodic motion is conjunct, with occasional leaps of a third, fourth and fifth. The song consists of four melodic and textual sections which coincide with one another.

This example contains initial, medial and final formulae. The final formula in *O ignee Spiritus* is the one that is repeated most frequently, and can be found at the end of each melodic and textual phrase, which apparently makes it the most important one. On the hierarchical scale, the initial formula is right beneath the final one; it appears more rarely and is more liable to varying than the final formula. And finally, there is the medial formula, which is the least pre-determined and serves as a connection between the initial and the final formulae. In the last melodic-textual section an accompanying parallel melodic line enters, at the distance of a fourth, which is reminiscent of an early polyphonic form – organum.

It is interesting that Hildegard of Bingen mentions musical instruments in the spiritual song *O ignee Spiritus*, such as the lyre and the timbrel; these two words, curiously enough, are accompanied by the melody with the greatest amount of ornamentation (row 2). In the middle of the chant (row 4 of the sheet music example), the melody is marked mostly by conjunct motion, but this in fact illustrates the word ‘animarum’ (souls). The climax is reached at the end (rows 6, 7 and 8 of the sheet music example), with the words ‘lantern’, ‘insight’ and ‘reason’.

*De Spiritu Sancto (To the Holy Spirit)*¹⁹

The final in this song is A, the reciting tone is E, and the subsequent melodic tissue mostly features the note B-flat, from which it can be concluded that the song is in the transposed Phrygian mode. The range is a ninth – from g^1 to a^2 . Although the chant is dominated by conjunct melismatic motion, there are also intervallic leaps of thirds, fourths and fifths. The melodic and textual sections coincide with each other and there are seven of them altogether.

Since the chant is melismatic, we cannot definitely determine the melodic formulae, but what we can determine is the melodic framework appearing throughout the chant as the core around which melismata are formed: the notes in question are A – E – A – E.

¹⁹ Example 2 at the end of the paper.

In this song, the melodic ‘framework’ is first presented with the least amount of added notes, on the word *Spiritus* (*Spirit*), which leads us to the conclusion that the ‘framework’ itself is the essence/core/‘spirit’ of the chant. In that way, the re-entrance of the melodic ‘framework’ on the second word leaves us with the impression that the ‘spirit’, now in a different shape, emerges as the ‘root’ of all existence, just as the ‘framework’ is the ‘core’ of the melody.

*Item de virginibus (In Praise of Virgins)*²⁰

Item de virginibus is melismatic in character. The longest melisma in the song contains 67 notes, and it appears on the word “divinorum” (the melisma is underlined in the Example). The mode is transposed Mixolydian, the final is C, and the reciting tone is G. In the course of the melody, occasionally the note B-flat appears. The range is from *g* to *d*³, which makes a fifth over two octaves.²¹ The melody is mostly conjunct, with the leaps of thirds, fourths and fifths, and at one point, the leap of a *major seventh* is employed (cf. line 9 of the sheet music, the framed place). It is interesting that the leap leads to the (foregoing) longest melisma in the song.

Similarly to the previous Example, we can only determine the melodic framework around which the melisma develops (C, G, C, F), and which disappears over the course of the chant. The song can be divided into six textual and melodic sections.

Conclusion

In this paper I have dealt with the importance and function of music in the monasteries and convents where Hildegard of Bingen lived and worked. Her musical oeuvre includes only spiritual works containing some elements of secular and instrumental practice of the medieval age. Given that aristocratic music was becoming popular during her lifetime, it is assumed that Hildegard of Bingen had the opportunity to hear the music of the minnesingers who, on their travels across the German lands, visited the monasteries and convents too. She approved of secular music and considered it to be the means of acquiring an exhaustive knowledge of music.

While analysing the three musical works – *O ignee Spiritus*, *De Spiritu Sancto* and *Item de virginibus* – I established that Hildegard of Bingen’s musical language deviated from the rules prescribed by the medieval church. Chants

²⁰ Example 3 at the end of the paper.

²¹ It is probable that Hildegard of Bingen wanted to describe the vocal capabilities of a woman by this range.

are much more melodious, have a wider range and contain a greater number of intervallic leaps, while the long and ornamented melismatic sections of the musical tissue are used to stress important words in the text. It would be very interesting, in future research, to compare her chants with Byzantine music and ascertain their similarities and differences. The frequent use of the Ionian and Aeolian modes anticipates the major-minor system.

The *musical world* of Hildegard of Bingen, placed somewhere in between spiritual and secular music, is a new and quite specific *world of music*, almost inconceivable at the time.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović

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Example 2. *De Spiritu Sancto*

The red overline marks the notes of the melodic 'framework'.

Antiphonae
de Spiritu Sancto

Spiritus sanctus vivificans vita Hildegard von Bingen
(1098-1179)

Spi-ri-tus sanc-tus vi-vi-fi-cans vi-ta,
mo-vens ó-mni-a, et ra-dix
est in omni crea-tura
ac omni-a de-in-mun-di-ci-
a á-blu-it, ter-
gens cri-mi-na, ac un-git vúl-ne-ra, et
sic est fúl-gens ac lau-dá-bi-lis vi-ta,
sú-sci-tans et re-sú-sci-tans

Example 4. Translations of the songs

1. *O ignee Spiritus (O, Spirit of Fire)*

Praise to you, Spirit of fire!
To you who sound the timbrel and the lyre.

Your music sets our minds ablaze!
The strength of our souls awaits your coming
in the tent of meeting.

There the mounting will
gives the soul its savour
and desire is its lantern.

Insight invokes you in a cry full of sweetness,
while reason builds you temples as she labors
at her golden crafts.

2. *De Spiritu Sancto (To the Holy Spirit)*

Holy Spirit, making life alive,
moving in all things,
root of all created being,
cleansing the cosmos of every impurity,
effacing guilt,
anointing wounds.
You are lustrous and praiseworthy life,
You waken and re-awaken everything that is.

3. *Item de virginibus (In Praise of Virgins)*

O most noble Greenness, rooted in the sun,
and who shines in bright serenity upon the wheel,
nothing on earth can comprehend you,
you are encircled in the arms of divine mysteries.
You are radiant as the dawn and burn as the flame of the sun.