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THE
ORIGIN
OF **FIRE**

Music and Visions of
HILDEGARD
VON BINGEN

*Anonymous***4**



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THE ORIGIN OF FIRE

Music and Visions of HILDEGARD VON BINGEN (1098–1179)

1	<i>Hymn</i>	Veni creator spiritus	[?] RABANUS MAURUS († 856)	4:26
2	<i>Sequence</i>	Veni spiritus eternorum alme	Swiss, 11th c.	2:37
3	<i>Antiphon</i>	O quam mirabilis est	HILDEGARD	3:26
	<i>Vision 1</i>	The fire of creation		
4		Et ego homo		1:46
5		Et audivi		3:07
6	<i>Sequence</i>	O ignis spiritus paracliti	HILDEGARD	7:50
	<i>Vision 2</i>	Wisdom and her sisters		
7		Vidi etiam		2:22
8		Prima autem		3:07
9	<i>Responsory</i>	O felix anima	HILDEGARD	6:33
	<i>Vision 3</i>	The fiery spirit		
10		Iterumque vocem		2:00
11		Et imago		4:54
12	<i>Hymn</i>	O ignee spiritus	HILDEGARD	10:02
	<i>Vision 4</i>	Love		
13		In vera		2:06
14		Et audivi vocem		3:18
15	<i>Antiphon</i>	Caritas habundat in omnia	HILDEGARD	2:16
16	<i>Antiphon</i>	O eterne deus	HILDEGARD	2:31
17	<i>Hymn</i>	Beata nobis gaudia	Frankish, 9th c.	2:47

ANONYMOUS 4

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THE ORIGIN OF FIRE

Music and Visions of HILDEGARD VON BINGEN (1098–1179)

SINCE almost every bit of sacred music from before 1300 is anonymous, those few works that survive with attributions draw our special notice. We ask not only “who?” but also how and why these works came to be identified with a creator. Even as J.S. Bach signed all his works with “Soli Deo Gloria,” the prevailing attitude among medieval church musicians was that it would constitute pride (if not the “deadly sin” variety then at least the simple human failing) to own music created to adorn the sacred liturgy. And even if not a matter of humility, pieces that were composed for local use did not need an attribution, since it was generally known who had written them.

But here we have a major repertoire – 76 pieces of liturgical plainchant and the music-drama *Ordo Virtutum* – attributed not only to an actual composer, but to a woman neither trained nor working as a musician. How could this be?

Hildegard of Bingen was born into a prominent Rhineland family in 1098. Her parents dedicated her to the church at the age of eight as a “tithe” – she was child number ten – and entrusted her to Jutta, a noblewoman who was seeking a life of holy reclusion. Jutta took Hildegard with her to the Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg as a prospective nun and, unlike many children who were “assigned” for family reasons to a monastic life, young Hildegard took up the veil and never looked back.

Although she kept them almost entirely to herself, Hildegard had been experiencing prophetic or mysterious light-filled visions from the age of five. Not until she was 43, nine years after she had succeeded Jutta as abbess at Disibodenberg, did she submit to an increasing inner urge to put these visions into writing, along with her own theological interpretations of them. Like Joan of Arc, Hildegard heard “voices” – indeed she insisted that her musical works were received whole from God – but her mystical experiences were over-whelmingly visual: she describes active, complex, colorful scenes of fantastic elements and beings in marvelous settings.

Like a fledgling mid-life writer who miraculously stumbles upon an agent, a publisher, and fame, Hildegard quickly became a spiritual celebrity when her first collection of mystical visions

received the support of Pope Eugenius III, who was most likely introduced to her work in 1147 by the French monastic reformer Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). A year earlier, Hildegard had sent a “cold call” letter to Bernard, one of the spiritual giants of his age, who was impressed enough with it to override his normally ultra-conservative nature (he had condemned the flamboyant Peter Abelard and other radical spiritual thinkers) and pledge his support to the strangely gifted German nun.

Hildegard recorded her visions in a series of books dictated to, and no doubt edited by, her scribe and confidant, the monk Volmar. The first, *Scivias* (“Know the Ways,” 1151) consists of visions with lengthy explanatory commentary, as well as the texts of fourteen of her liturgical songs. This was followed by two sequels: *Liber Vite Meritorum* (“The Book of Life’s Merits,” 1163) and *De operatione Dei* (“On the activity of God,” 1173). In addition to her visionary-theological works, on which her wider fame was based, Hildegard also produced an encyclopedic collection of writings on medicine and the natural world. There are even two volumes concerning a secret *Lingua Ignota* (unknown language), perhaps used by Hildegard and her nuns.

Hildegard’s correspondence was vast and ranged wide – her advice was sought by Pope Eugenius III, Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and King Henry II of England, as well as bishops, abbots, abbesses, monks, nuns, and laypeople both noble and common. At the age of 60 she began to travel extensively in Germany, preaching and advising, interpreting dreams and signs – unheard of for a woman, let alone a cloistered Benedictine nun. Such far-reaching influence with kings and prelates (as well as with lesser folk) increased her celebrity and assured her place in the larger world. Thus her musical works, along with her writings on medicine and the natural world, were copied and collected with care both during and immediately after her lifetime, at least partly owing to the fame of her visionary writings and the value of her spiritual guidance.

By the 1140s Hildegard had begun composing a number of chants for the liturgy, eventually collected under the title *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (“Symphony of the harmony of celestial revelations”). Aside from some isolated

fragments, the *Symphonia* survives in two manuscripts. The first, known as *Dendermonde* or simply *D*, was copied around 1175, along with the *Liber vite meritorum*, and sent as a gift to the monks of a Belgian monastery. Some leaves of the musical portion are missing. The second, called *Riesenkodex* (Giant Manuscript) or *R*, was prepared in the decade after Hildegard’s death in 1179. It contains all of her visionary works, and ends with the *Symphonia* and the *Ordo Virtutum* (“The Play of the Virtues”). We have used the earlier *Dendermonde* (probably prepared under Hildegard’s supervision) as our primary source, except for the two pieces (**O quam mirabilis** and **O felix anima**) found only in the *Riesenkodex*.

Hildegard was not a trained musician or composer, and never claimed to be. Whatever the real case may have been, she stated that she received her musical compositions whole – words and music together – in the same way that she received her visions. In today’s terms, she would have been “channeling” them and having them written down by someone literate in music. There is really no way to compare her style, unique and unforgettable, to any other music of her time. Her texts are rhapsodic chains of images echoing the Psalms and the Song of Songs. Her melodies are certainly formulaic, yet they sound remarkably free and are wedded perfectly to their texts. The vocal range of her melodies and the length of the pieces themselves far exceed those of the standard liturgical chants that she and her sisters would have sung every day. Hildegard’s compositions would almost certainly not have been sung consecutively in any service; they would have occurred occasionally, and must have seemed like exotic creatures alongside the everyday monastic chant.

THE PROGRAM

Since Hildegard's visions assured her fame, and since her fame assured that we would know of her music, we wanted to include both in this program. The images in her visions are brilliant and varied, drawing primarily on extreme expressions of the natural elements – air, water, earth and fire. Among these, visions with fire and light seem the most frequent and intense.* In her visions and in her songs, fire is related to the holy spirit, described as descending upon Jesus' disciples as tongues of flame on Pentecost, fifty days after Easter (Acts 2: 1-11).

Four themes associated with the holy spirit provide the framework for the main portion of this program. For each theme – the fire of creation, wisdom (*sapientia*), the life-giving spirit, and love (*caritas*) – we have selected one of Hildegard's works and have introduced it with an excerpt from a related vision. (Although the visions are written in prose, they fall into phrases much like those in her musical works.) We have set these vision excerpts to two types of recitation tones from medieval German sources: invitatory tones (special psalm tones for the service of Matins) for the introductory part of each vision, and, for the main part, festive lection tones (polyphonic settings of readings from the Mass and Divine Office). Although such lection tones were composed from the 12th through the 16th centuries, they all share an “archaic” medieval style, with recitation tones on parallel fifths, in the style of primitive polyphony.

To open and close the program we chose two Pentecost hymns, *Veni creator spiritus* and *Beata nobis gaudia*. *Veni creator* (traditionally attributed to the 9th-century German scholar and priest Rabanus Maurus of Mainz) is still sung today, its seven verses symbolizing the traditional seven gifts of the holy spirit (Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Knowledge, Fortitude, Piety, Fear of the Lord). Both hymns have been transcribed from a 12th-century manuscript originating in a German-speaking area of Switzerland. Although hymns are now used as a regular part of the Christian Mass or Eucharist services, they were originally a part of the various “hours” of the daily round of monastic psalms and prayers known as the “Divine Office.”

In the same manuscript there is an unusual *sequence*, a chant for the Mass characterized by a structure of relatively brief paired versicles (melodic scheme: aa bb cc... with possible variations, especially before the 13th century). *Veni spiritus*

eternorum alme opens with the same melody as the standard Pentecost sequence, *Sancti spiritus adsit*, composed by the Carolingian monk Notker in the 9th century; it then goes on to quote and comment on the text of the hymn *Veni creator spiritus*. We added a vocal drone to this monophonic composition.

An *antiphon* is a (usually) short plainchant meant to be used with a psalm or canticle as part of the Divine Office. Hildegard would have composed antiphons to replace the standard liturgical items on special feast days (although which feast is not always clear in the manuscript sources). Neither *O quam mirabilis est* nor *O eterne deus* is connected with a specific feast. *Caritas habundat* appears in the original sources among chants in honor of the holy spirit. Although Hildegard's antiphons are the shortest of her musical compositions, they are quite a bit longer and more complex than the standard Gregorian type.

The *responsory* – an element of the nighttime services of Vespers and Matins – is a long and ornate chant, meant to be sung with soloist(s) and chorus in alternation. *O felix anima* is a responsory in honor of St. Disibod, revered patron of Hildegard's first convent at Disibodenberg. We have added a drone to the “verse” and “*gloria patri*” sections of the elaborately decorated melody.

Hildegard composed two major works in honor of the holy spirit, and they are among her most impressive, impassioned pieces. *O ignis spiritus paracliti* is designated as a sequence; but this sequence, which follows the normal paired-versicle structure fairly closely for the first eight verses (verses 9 and 10 are independent melodies), so greatly expands the length of the typical sequence verse that the usual effect of the verse pairings (as in *Veni spiritus eternorum alme*) is much less immediately obvious to the ear. The hymn *O igne spiritus* only resembles the normal strophic hymn in that it has multiple verses. This is really a monumental through-composed piece with a close relationship between the text in praise of the fiery spirit and its intense melodic expression.

– SUSAN HELLAUER

* Some scientists have proposed that Hildegard suffered from migraine and that the “heavenly light” could have been related to pre-migraine aura. See e.g. Oliver Sacks, *Migraine: Understanding a Common Disorder* (Berkeley, 1985).

A NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION

Perhaps because it was a second language for everyone who used it, medieval Latin took on many elements of pronunciation of the vernacular dialect or language of each region or country. In Germany, the pronunciation of Latin was very much influenced by the sounds of German as it was spoken in the Middle Ages.

Our pronunciation of German Latin in this recording is based on linguistic research published by Harold Copeman and Vera U.G. Scherr in *Singing Early Music: The Pronunciation of European Languages in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Edited by Timothy J. McGee with A.G. Rigg and David N. Klausner, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

– MARSHA GENENSKY

For a complete discography and more information about ANONYMOUS 4, please visit www.harmoniamundi.com

1

Hymn: Veni creator spiritus

This Pentecost hymn is still sung today, its seven verses symbolizing the traditional seven gifts of the holy spirit (Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Knowledge, Fortitude, Piety, Fear of the Lord). Perhaps its tone 7 melody (the plainsong tone on G, with F natural) also represents the mystical “sevenness” of the Spirit.

Come, creator spirit,
visit the hearts of your people.
Fill with supernal grace
the hearts you have made.

You who are the comforter,
gift of the highest God,
living fount, fire, love,
and balm for the spirit:
bestow the sevenfold gifts,
you finger of the hand of God;
fulfill the father’s promise,
enriching us with holy speech.

Kindle light in our senses,
pour love into our hearts,
strengthen our weak bodies
with abiding courage.

You drive the foe far off,
and grant lasting peace;
thus with you leading us
may we avoid all harm.

Through you may we know
the father, and the son as well,
and in you, the spirit, with them both,
may we have faith forever.

Show us, father, most loving,
him who is one with you,
reigning with the spirit comforter
through every age.

2

Sequence: Veni spiritus eternorum alme

The tone 7 melody of this sequence quotes a famous Pentecost sequence by Notker of St. Gall (9th century). Its text and seven-verse structure are both closely related to the opening hymn. We have added a vocal drone to this monophonic composition.

Come, kind spirit of the ages,
visit the hearts of your people,
casting out ill conduct;
fill with supernal grace
each earth-born heart.

You who are the gift
of the most high God,
perpetual fount,
balm for the spirit,
promised gift of the almighty:
you merit our faith.

Upon the holy apostles
you poured forth fiery tongues.

Give light to hearts,
strengthening the wretched
with abiding courage.

Impart true love
and the manifold gifts of charity.

Drive away the envious foe,
grant the joy of heavenly peace.

Thus lead, going before us,
that we may have the strength to climb up
to the vault of heaven.

3

Antiphon: O quam mirabilis est

This very elaborate antiphon is found among Hildegard’s works with other songs in praise of God the Father, and is not connected with any particular feast. Its joyous 7th-mode melody spirals repeatedly upwards, as if humanity – the sum of all creation – is reaching upward to its creator.

O how marvelous is
the foreknowing in the divinity’s heart,
that foreknew every created thing!
For when God looked
upon the face of the human he had formed
he saw the fullness
of all his works
in that same human form.
O how marvelous is the breath
that brought humankind to life!

Vision 1: The fire of creation

The invitatory tones we have used for the opening portion of each vision are among the oldest plain-song reciting tones, generally more elaborate and varied than psalm tones. Some of these medieval tones are still in use today in the Solesmes plainchant books. The one used here is categorized as tone 4D – with reciting tones related to tone 4 (the plagal tone on E) but with a final on D.

And I – a human being neither afire
in my form with the strength of strong lions
nor familiar with their exhalations,
but constrained by the fragility of the weak rib
and flooded with mystical inspiration –
saw something like the most brilliant fire,
incomprehensible, inextinguishable,
all alive, and all filled with life,
having within itself a flame the color of air.

This vision contains one of Hildegard's most common conceits – her status as a frail and humble woman who has, for some inexplicable reason, been singled out to see the mysteries of heaven. Here, a voice from the “living fire” commands her to tell of her visions, despite her ignorant and uneducated state. The two-voice lection tone we have used is originally a setting of the *Consurge* reading from Christmas Matins.

And I heard, from that living fire,
a voice saying to me:
O you who are only wretched clay
and, being a woman,
untaught in any of the teachings
of our human masters
(that is, unable to read
with the understanding of the philosophers),
but embraced by my light,
which touches you from within
with a fire like the burning sun:
Shout and tell and write
these, my mysteries,
which you see and hear in this mystical vision.

Sequence: O ignis spiritus paracliti

This is one of Hildegard's two major works in honor of the holy spirit. It is designated as a sequence, but it is conceived on such a grand scale as to seem only nominally related to the typical sequence of her era. In this dramatic musical narrative, Hildegard envisions the holy spirit as the life force that animates all creations, spiritual and material, even the being of God.

O spirit of fire, bringer of comfort,
life of the life of every creature,
you are holy, giving life to forms.

You are holy,
anointing those perilously broken;
you are holy,
cleansing foul wounds.

O breath of holiness,
O fire of love,
O sweet savor in our breasts,
infusing hearts with the scent of virtue.

O clearest fountain,
in which we see
how God gathers the alienated
and finds the lost.

O breastplate of life
and hope of the whole human race,
O belt of honor:
save the fortunate.

Guard those imprisoned by the enemy
and free those who are bound
whom the divine power wishes to save.

O mightiest course
that has penetrated all things,
in the heavens and on earth
and in every abyss –
you reconcile and draw all humanity together.

From you clouds flow, wind flies,
stones produce moisture,
water flows in streams,
and the earth exudes living greenness.

You are always teaching the learned,
who, through wisdom's inspiration,
are made joyful.
Whence praise be to you,
who are the sound of praise,
the joy of life,
its hope and greatest honor,
granting the prize of light.

Vision 2: Wisdom and her sisters

The ancient practice of personifying virtues and spiritual qualities as beautiful young women was natural for the abbess Hildegard, as in her music-drama *Ordo virtutum* (“The Play of the Virtues”). We have set the prolog to this vision from *De operatione Dei* to a tone related to the modern one designated as 4E.

And I saw, as it were, in the midst of that southern region three forms,
two of them standing in a most clear fountain
encircled and crowned above by a round,
porous stone.

One was in gleaming purple,
and the other in dazzling white.
The third stood outside that fountain
and beneath the stone,
clothed in glowing white.

Wisdom (*Sapientia*), the first of the seven gifts of the holy spirit, is a common figure in Hildegard’s visions and musical works and is always personified as female. Here [see next page] she gives Wisdom the status of a demiurge, or co-creator, along with God and the holy spirit. The two-voice lection tone we have used originally set *Primo tempore alleviata*, another of the readings from Christmas Matins.

And the first image said:
I am Love, the light of the living God,
and Wisdom carries out her tasks along with me.

In the shadow, Wisdom
measures out all things equally,
lest one thing outbalance another,
and so that one thing might not
be changed into its opposite,
because she herself rules and constrains
every evil of the diabolical arts.

And in herself and through herself
she constructed all things mildly and gently,
and they can be destroyed by no enemy
because she sees the beginning and the end
of all things most truly,
she who composed all things completely
so that all things might be ruled by her.

9

Responsory: O felix anima

This ornate responsory is a chant for Matins of the feast of St. Disibod, patron saint of Hildegard’s first convent. In the typical Gregorian responsory, the verse and *gloria* are sung by the soloist(s), and usually feature a higher tessitura and more virtuosic writing. Here the case is otherwise, making us wonder (even more than we already do) how, and by whom, these chants were performed.

O happy soul, you whose body
came from the earth,
which body you, in your pilgrimage
in this world, trampled underfoot:

you are thus crowned by divine rationality,
which made you its mirror.

V. And the holy spirit saw you
as its own habitation.

you are thus crowned...

Glory to the father and the son
and the holy spirit.

you are thus crowned...

Vision 3: The fiery spirit

A voice again instructs Hildegard to write what she sees, and she describes another beautiful young woman, splendidly and regally adorned. The invitatory setting we have chosen for this prologue is an unusually simple one that is no longer in use.

And again I heard a voice from heaven
instructing me. And it said:
Write, therefore, what I tell you in this manner.
And I saw amid the southern airs,
in the mystery of God a beautiful, wondrous
figure with a human form,
whose face was so lovely and bright
that it would be easier to look at the sun;
and a broad circlet the color of gold
surrounded her head and face.

The beautiful creature speaks: she declares herself the spirit and source of creation. Here, Wisdom has become one of the pairs of wings carrying this fiery spirit as she circles above her created world. For this vision of circling circles we have chosen an elaborate two-voice lection tone of Polish origin, originally part of a setting of the Christmas Matins reading *Una cunctis leticie*.

And the figure spoke thus:
I am the great and fiery power
who has kindled every living spark
and extinguished nothing mortal –
for I judge these things as they are.
In circling circles
with my upper wings
(that is, with Wisdom)
I fly around, ordaining all things rightly.
And I am also the fiery life of divinity:
I flame above the beautiful fields
and I glow in the water
and I burn in the sun, the moon and the stars.

Hymn: O ignee spiritus

This immense, dramatic hymn – though a hymn in name only – is a mirror to its sister work, *O ignis spiritus paracliti*, dwelling not on the creative and comforting power of the holy spirit, but on its power to destroy what it has created – an active, warrior spirit smashing evil and its works, so that good creations can flourish.

O fiery spirit, praise be to you
who play on the timbrel and lyre.

The minds of men take fire from you,
and the tabernacles of their souls
restrain their powers,
whence the will rises up
and gives savor to the soul;
and its lamp is desire.

With sweetest sound the intellect
calls upon you and makes a place
for you with reason,
which brings forth works of gold.

But you always hold a sword
to cut off
what the poisoned apple
produces through blackest murder.

When clouds darken the will
and its desires,
then the soul flies about
and circles everywhere.

But the mind is the bond of the will and of desire.

And when the soul rises up
to look into the eye of evil
and the jaws of wickedness,
you quickly consume it
with fire as you will.

But when reason
falls prostrate through evil,
you restrain it through your power
and shatter and reshape it
through a flood of experiences.

And when evil draws its sword upon you,
you shatter it in its own heart,
as in the beginning you did to the lost angel,
hurling the tower of his pride
down into hell.

And there you raised another tower
in publicans and sinners
who confess to you the sinfulness of their works.

Whence all creatures
who have life from you praise you,
because you are the most precious ointment
for broken and fetid wounds,
which you change into most precious jewels.

Now deign to gather us all to you
and guide us on the right path. Amen.

Vision 4: Love

Hildegard's visions are recorded among her vast correspondence as well as in her theological works. Like many of her visions, this one is redolent with imagery from the *Revelation* of St. John. We have set it to an archaic tone 2 invitatory formula with an unusually florid opening gesture.

In a true vision of the spirit in my waking body
I saw, as it were, the most beautiful girl,
her face so aglow with a splendid brightness
that I could not really see it.
Her cloak was whiter than snow
and brighter than stars.
She held the sun and moon in her right hand
and she embraced them tenderly.

The vision image is again a beautiful young girl, a figure of Love. Like Wisdom and the Fiery Spirit, Love is a co-creator of every living thing, because she is the material of life itself. The very simple two-voice lection tone of English origin is another setting of the Christmas Matins reading *Primo tempore alleviata*.

And I heard a voice saying to me:
The girl whom you see is Love,
who abides in eternity.
For when God wished to create the world
he bent down in sweetest love
and foresaw every need
like a father preparing an inheritance for his son.
Just so, with great ardor,
he carried out all his works.
Thus all creatures in their species
and forms acknowledge their creator,
because Love was the primal stuff
of which every creature was made.
And when God said: "Let it be done," it was done.
And so every creature, in the blink of an eye,
was made through Love.

15

Antiphon: Caritas habundat in omnia

This antiphon is perhaps the best known of Hildegard's musical compositions, with its long melismas, wide dramatic leaps and sensitive text setting. The opening statement of the text perfectly summarizes Hildegard's view of the goodness of all God's creation, both material and spiritual.

Love flows richly into all things; she is greatly exalted from the depths up to the stars and most loving toward all things, for she gave the highest king the kiss of peace.

16

Antiphon: O eterne deus

This prayer in the form of an antiphon shows, in a small space, the extreme demands of both range and expression that Hildegard's music often makes. The extended tessitura, here and elsewhere, is always used in service of the text, which seems to support her assertion that she "received" the music and words of these songs together.

O eternal God, now may it please you to burn so with love, that we may become the limbs that you made in that same love with which you begot your son in the first dawn, before every other creature. Consider the need that falls to our lot: take it from us for your son's sake, and lead us into the joy of salvation.

17

Hymn: Beata nobis gaudia

We close with a Pentecost hymn that would have been familiar to Hildegard and her sisters. The exquisite melodic arch of its tone 7 melody seems to comfort, like the spirit it invokes.

The circle of days brings blessed joys to us again, when the comforting spirit shone forth among the disciples.

It brought a fire of shimmering light upon them in the shape of a tongue, that they might be fluent with words and fervent charity.

You once filled devoted hearts with your grace: forgive our sins, grant us peaceful times.

Praise be to the father, with the son, and likewise to the holy comforter, and may the son send us the balm of the holy spirit. Amen.

Translation: Susan Hellauer

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