Hildegard of Bingen: Prophet or Composer?

by

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Introduction

Abbess and Visionary Hildegard of Bingen

*Hildegard’s Letter to the Prelates of Mainz*

In 1178, nearing the end of her life, Benedictine Abbess Hildegard of Bingen wrote a letter to the prelates of Mainz Cathedral protesting an interdict they had placed on her convent. The interdict intended to punish Hildegard and the nuns in her convent for allowing an excommunicated man to be buried on their property. This punishment prohibited the nuns from singing the liturgical music that customarily accompanied the daily observance of the Divine Office. According to Hildegard, banning music from the convent denied the most fundamental means of praising God. Indeed, in her letter, Hildegard cautions the prelates:

[B]eware before you use an interdict to stop the mouth of any church of God’s singers…lest you be ensnared in your judgments by Satan, who lured man away from the celestial harmony and delights of paradise.¹

Thus, not only does Hildegard demand that the prelates withdraw their sanction, but she notes that *not* to do so would violate God’s will.² It is surprising that a woman living in the twelfth century could question and critique high-ranking religious authorities without being condemned by the Church. Furthermore, as a result of her protest, the Archbishop of Mainz repealed the interdict. This scenario prompts the questions: How was Hildegard in a position to write this letter with relative impunity?

Why or in what way was devotional singing so important to Hildegard the she responded with such vehemence? Moreover, these questions can serve as starting points from which to explore the broader inquiries: How does Hildegard’s idea of musical and artistic creation differ from our own (modern) conception of composition and musical expression? How were music and spirituality related for Hildegard? What did she see as the role of music in her religious community? Finally, are Hildegard’s conceptual ideas about music evident in the form of her liturgical hymns?

Biographical Overview

Before examining these questions, I will give a brief overview of Hildegard’s life, her religious and political activities, and her musical works. In her first book of visions, Scivias, Hildegard claims that she began hearing a heavenly voice and seeing divine visions at age five, although she did not communicate these experiences. These religious visions, combined with her strict upbringing in a Benedictine hermitage influenced Hildegard in her roles as abbess, religious reformer, music writer and prophet, and informed her perception of life as inextricably linked to God. The youngest of ten children, Hildegard was born in 1098 to “noble parents, who dedicated her to God as a tithe”. Thus, when Hildegard was eight years old, she left her home in Bermersheim bei Alzey, and her parents placed her in the care of Jutta von Sponheim, a nun and anchorite associated with the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg. Under the tutelage of Jutta and the monk Volmar of St. Disibod, Hildegard learned to read Latin and to recite the Psalter. Indeed, Elizabeth Henderson suggests that this daily recitation of the Psalter and the ascetic lifestyle at

3 Barbara Newman, Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine, 5.
Disibodenberg were formative for Hildegard’s strong religious devotion and her connection between verbal recitation and worship.⁴

Upon Jutta’s death in 1136, Hildegard became abbess of the growing community of nuns at the Disibodenberg monastery. Soon after assuming this role, Hildegard gained the courage to record the divine visions that she had received since childhood. In 1141, Hildegard began writing Scivias, a title derived from the “exhortation Scito vias Domini, or Know the Ways of the Lord”.⁵ Because Hildegard asserted a direct connection to God’s message in Scivias, it is surprising that the church did not condemn her for seeming to overstep its authority. However, when Pope Eugenius III traveled to Germany in 1148 for the Council of Trier, he read the unfinished Scivias manuscript and sanctioned the visions as genuine messages from God. Furthermore, the religious leader of the Disibodenberg monastery, Bernard of Clairvaux, who was also present at the Council, joined the Pope in support of Hildegard’s visionary gift.⁶ Accredited by religious authorities, Hildegard gained more confidence in her prophetic abilities, using them to critique the church and to continue her own religious writing and ministry.

In fact, within the same decade, Hildegard received a vision from God instructing her to relocate her nuns to a larger site for a new convent at Rupertsberg near Bingen.⁷ Although the Disibodenberg monastery discouraged Hildegard from leaving, she asserted the divine origin of the command she had heard and in 1150 successfully moved her nuns to the new location. Furthermore, having gained a

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⁴ Geraldine E. Henderson, *A Sound Theology: The Vital Position of Sound and Music to Hildegard of Bingen’s Theology and Public Identity*. Ph.D.Dissertation, University of Minnesota,
⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Ibid.
reputation for her prophetic abilities, Hildegard established a second convent at Ebigen and undertook four preaching tours. In these tours, she spoke to nuns, monks, and laypeople, expressing to them the church’s corruption and the need for “monastic and clerical reform”.8 Far from condemning these activities, many religious leaders sought Hildegard’s advice, writing her letters and visiting her abbey. Therefore, Hildegard’s influence was not confined to her role as abbess; rather she reached a wider audience through her vision of spiritual renewal. Until her death in 1179, Hildegard continued to both question religious and political authorities and to guide and admonish her sisters and correspondents.

A Brief Overview of Hildegard’s Works

A detailed description of Hildegard’s oeuvre is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, here, I merely note the vast extent of Hildegard’s work in medical and religious writing as well as music. After completing Scivias in 1158, Hildegard began writing an “ethical” guide in her second visionary work, Liber Vitae Meritorium (Book of Life’s Merits), which she completed in 1163. A decade later, she had completed a third volume of her visions, De operatione dei (Book of Divine Works), in which she describes a “moralized cosmos” defined by symbolism that joins even “disparate phenomena”.9 In addition to these religious works, Hildegard wrote two medical reference books that she does not claim to have received in visions: Physica, in which she categorizes herbs, animals and minerals and Causes and Cures that provides descriptions of illnesses and their antidotes. Though different in content,

8 Ibid. 11.
9 Ibid.
Hildegard’s religious and medical works both reflect her desire to understand the heavenly cosmos and seek cures for maladies in the natural world. Moreover, I propose that this intention to comprehend, create and heal is also evident in Hildegard’s music.

Apart from her written work, Hildegard began recording her visionary music in 1148 as part of the *Scivias* manuscript. In the final vision of *Scivias*, Hildegard includes a draft of what would become her morality play, *Ordo Virtutum (Play of Virtues)*, the first recorded liturgical drama from the Middle Ages. Conveying Hildegard’s sense of the cosmic struggle between divine and demonic, *Ordo Virtutum* recounts the efforts of seven virtues—embodied by seven actresses—who must save an individual’s soul when she is tempted by the devil. From accounts of life at the Rupertsberg convent, it is clear that Hildegard performed this play with her nuns acting as the virtues and the monk Volmar, perhaps, playing the devil.10 This paraliturgical work can thus be seen as a musical antidote to vice because it vivifies the struggle between good and evil, and powerfully communicates both the difficulties and rewards of leading a holy life.

Therefore, just as Hildegard’s religious and medical works sought to instruct, thereby edifying both the soul and the body, so does this drama present a moral lesson for the humans who can choose either to progress in the way of virtue or fall into sin. The same principle of practical care and help Hildegard intended with her work also extends to her liturgical musical pieces, which like her religious writing and *Ordo Virtutum*, she received from a heavenly voice. Practically, these pieces served an important function in Hildegard’s convent. Her nuns could sing her divinely inspired

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hymns, responsories and antiphons in their daily observance of the Divine Office, and her Kyrie, Alleluia and sequences during the Mass.11

A Note on Editions and Historical Accuracy

Although it seems that Hildegard did not intend these various liturgical pieces to form a unified song cycle, she eventually collected them under the title, Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum (Symphony of the harmony of celestial revelations). The largest recorded body of monophonic plainchant attributed to a single composer, the Symphonia exists in two original manuscripts: Dendermonde, compiled under Hildegard’s supervision in 1175 and Riensenkodex Wiesbaden, compiled in the 1180s after Hildegard’s death.12 Riensenkodex constitutes an expanded version of the initial compilation, containing seventy-five liturgical pieces rather than the fifty-seven presented in Dendermonde. Furthermore, Riensenkodex offers a more formal, orthodox presentation of Hildegard’s work that scholars speculate was to be submitted for Hildegard’s canonization. Perhaps to create a more suitable document for this occasion, the editors of the Riensenkodex altered Hildegard’s original organization of the pieces. Instead of listing the songs for the Virgin Mary after those for the Father and Son, as Hildegard stipulated, the editors placed all three members of the Trinity at the forefront of the collection, ahead of the Virgin Mary. In doing so, they presented a more doctrinally correct manuscript in which Father, Son, and Holy

Spirit appear first in the celestial hierarchy and the Virgin Mary second. However, this alteration also undercut Hildegard’s belief that the Virgin Mary acted as an intermediary between the Father and the Holy Spirit, the rationale that led her to place the songs to Mary in between the members of the Trinity.13

The difference in magnitude and structure between the two original manuscripts raises difficulties for modern scholars studying these documents in order to clarify Hildegard’s original musical and editorial intentions. Indeed, because of the complexity of such a project, I have chosen to use transcriptions of the original manuscripts: Barbara Newman’s critical edition of the poetic text of the Symphonia and Pozzi Escot and Marianne Pfau’s transcriptions of the neumes. It is my belief that these scholars offer well-researched translations and transcriptions of the original Symphonia manuscripts. These modern editions can therefore be used to shed light upon Hildegard’s understanding of her creative process and the religious context of her music.

Discrepancies between these two editions of Hildegard’s work also prompt the question of historical accuracy, not only in the posthumous edition of the Symphonia, but in the works recorded during Hildegard’s lifetime. Female mystics and visionaries, such as Hildegard—and others including but not limited to Angela of Foligno, Catherine of Sienna, and Teresa of Avila—did not record their visions themselves. Instead, they dictated their experiences to a scribe, usually a monk or priest. This was the case with Hildegard who related the heavenly commands and images to her teacher and friend, the monk Volmar. The fact that Hildegard did not personally record these experiences, therefore, raises the question of how closely the

13 Ibid.
written version resembles her original dictation. It is possible that Volmar had some, even unintentional influence over Hildegard’s ostensibly direct testimony. Although there is no better source from which to read Hildegard’s visionary statements, awareness of the circumstances under which her visionary works were written warrants consideration. This suggestion is not intended to discredit the transcriptions that are available, but to note the historical context.

Thesis Structure

To explore the questions I posed above, I examine ways in which Hildegard’s religious beliefs and her self-conception as a prophet shaped her ideas about music and what it could accomplish for worshipers. Chapter 1 reviews Hildegard’s claim that she was a conduit, or channel for God’s words and music. Hildegard’s conception of herself as an agent rather than the source of the music has its origins in Greek and early Christian descriptions of the musical body that resonates in harmony with the cosmos, and in testimony of Hebrew Bible prophets. Indeed, her claim to be a messenger for God afforded her a position from which to critique the Catholic Church. In Chapter 2, I place Hildegard’s role as a reformer and prophet in dialogue with her service as a vehicle for divine music. With these two perspectives of Hildegard’s instrumentality, I propose that Hildegard’s objective to reform and redeem is inseparable from her intention for her musical works. In Chapter 3, I analyze three of Hildegard’s antiphons to support the view that these pieces’ forms reflect Hildegard’s theoretical conceptions of music discussed in Chapter 2. After
exploring the ways in which Hildegard’s beliefs might manifest in her musical style, I conclude by examining the present-day context for Hildegard’s Symphonia.

**Chapter 1**

Hildegard of Bingen’s Divinely Inspired Music and the Origins of this Musical Embodiment

In the introduction, I raise the question: how does Hildegard’s idea of musical and artistic creation differ from our own (modern) conception of composition and musical expression? Here, I will examine Hildegard’s own testimony about her musical works, focusing especially upon her claim that she received music through heavenly visions. Indeed, she describes the relationship between her visionary and musical roles by stating: “those who desire to perform the works of God…should abandon celestial matters to Him Who is celestial…only sounding the mysteries of God like a great trumpet”.¹ In this musical metaphor, Hildegard encapsulates her own approach to writing music. That is, she directs humans to be vehicles for creation, rather than the source of creation itself. Within her own world view, then, Hildegard appears to be more of a prophet—a “channe[l] through which the divine word [comes] to the world”—than a music composer.² However, Hildegard differs from

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many prophets and visionaries precisely because her visions were “musically expressed”. To elucidate Hildegard’s complex identity that encompasses both musical creation and divine prophecy, I examine the ways in which Hildegard’s theories resemble Greek, Roman and early Christian musical cosmologies. Furthermore, I draw out the similarities between prophetic traditions of the Hebrew Bible and Hildegard’s approach to both written and musical expression. In tracing these two influences, I examine Hildegard’s “instrumentality” in both a metaphoric and literal sense: as a figurative instrument, she was an agent of God’s word, as an actual, physical instrument, she embodied and transmitted celestial harmonies.

Hildegard as an Instrument of God in Her Written and Musical Work

Hildegard’s three visionary works, *Scivias, Liber Vitea Meritorium* and *De Operatione Dei* begin with an introduction in which Hildegard renounces her authorship: “And I wrote these things not through a desire for human composition but through God alone”. Similarly, when Hildegard presents music, she specifies that she did not invent the melodies or text herself. For example, her first recorded song text appears in *Scivias* in the vision “The Symphony of the Blessed”. In this vision, Hildegard hears “different kinds of music,” that do not originate from her consciousness but rather are sung by the “joyous citizens of Heaven”. Hildegard

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6 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 525.
7 Ibid.
further emphasizes her passive role in musical creation by stating that she was “untaught by anyone,” and “composed and chanted plainsong in praise of God and the saints, although [she] had never studied either musical notation or any kind of singing”. By asserting her own ignorance of music theory and vocal technique, Hildegard necessarily cedes authorship to a higher authority. Seen in light of Hildegard’s testimony, the Symphonia becomes a series of divine messages that Hildegard received, embodied and recorded in musical form, rather than original compositions in which Hildegard expressed personal emotion or artistry.

Therefore, instead of delineating a personal creative process, Hildegard writes of her role as a messenger “sounding God’s mysteries”. That is, though the visions were “not…contrived by [her],” God compelled her to “transmit” what she saw and heard with her “inner” eyes and ears. Hildegard physically embodied God’s word and music, as demonstrated in her description of herself as a “fragile vessel” for these divine messages. Indeed, Bruce Holsinger describes the concrete sense in which Hildegard saw her body and soul as a conduit for God’s music with the term “musical corporeality”. This “corporeality,” refers not only to the body as instrument, but also to the suffering this body incurs as such. Hildegard links this physical discipline to the body’s performance as a musical instrument in her statement, “God always

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beats those who sing through his trumpet”. Thus, she presents a metaphor for the musical body that both praises and suffers in the service of its Creator. This connection leads Holsinger to claim that, for Hildegard, “music…constitute[s] the very means of Christian subordination”. Within this view, serving as God’s instrument is the ultimate form of relinquishing one’s personal agency, of giving oneself over to a greater power. In this way bodily suffering becomes the visible sign of the messenger’s true connection with God. Indeed, Hildegard seems to authenticate her divine music and writing by pointing to her illnesses as physical manifestations of God’s will; it was only when she was “laid low by the scourge of God” that Hildegard began to communicate her visions. In this way, Hildegard predicates her access to the “mysteries of God” upon the “grave sufferings” she experiences, implying that she is only “permeated” by divine knowledge to the extent that she feels the weight of God’s message. Accordingly, she legitimizes her music as truly divine in origin by describing herself as a “musical” body who “suffer[s]” God’s “demands”. Therefore, Hildegard did not see her music as an expression of her own original, creative sensibilities. Rather, the music arose from an external, heavenly source that she, as a literal instrument filled with its resonance, transmitted. In the process, she was fully engaged physically as a body that could contain the “breath…[of] God” and by conducting this breath bring forth the music of the *Symphonia*.

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13 Hildegard, *Scivias*, 60.
14 Hildegard, *De operatione Dei*, 5.
Origins of Hildegard’s Instrumentality and Concept of the Musical Body

In fact, some scholars argue that Hildegard’s focus on the body’s musical structure has indirect origins in Greek, Roman and early Christian music theory.\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to claim that Hildegard was influenced by earlier classical philosophers or patristic theologians. Elizabeth Henderson asserts that Hildegard’s broad cultural background was shaped by “musical understandings handed down from the Greeks,” and Peter Dronke suggests that Hildegard was well-read despite her claims to be unlearned.\textsuperscript{18} Although the extent to which Hildegard drew directly from classical sources is unclear, her musical ideology parallels that of Greek theorists Pythagoras and Boethius.

Living in the sixth century B.C.E., the Greek mathematician Pythagoras proposed that musical harmony governs the planet’s “relative distances and rates of motion”.\textsuperscript{19} Eight hundred years later, the Roman statesman Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius conveyed Pythagoras’ theories in his De Institutione Musica (*The Principles of Music*).\textsuperscript{20} Here he terms the music governing the universe *musica mundana*, the music that unites “the whole structure of soul and body,” *musica humana*, and audible music, *musica instrumentalis*.\textsuperscript{21} It is the concept of *musica humana* that especially coincides with Hildegard’s claim that the “very soul is symphonic”.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, Pythagoras, Boethius and Hildegard suggest that humans are

\textsuperscript{18} Elizabeth Henderson, *A Sound Theology: The Vital Position of Sound and Music to Hildegard of Bingen’s Theology and Public Identity* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Nebraska, 2003), 23.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. 25.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
innately programmed toward harmony, that their disparate parts align through a
d figurative music. Furthermore, humans are not singular in their harmonic makeup, but
rather mirror the planets’ composition. Because they operate by the same musical
principles, these two levels of creation have a dynamic, interactive relationship. In a
certain sense, the originally pagan idea that music regulates and connects different
planes of existence enters a Christian context with Hildegard’s depiction of humans
as a trumpets filled with God’s breath.

This notion of the body’s musicality attained Christian significance before
Hildegard through patristic writers such as Clement of Alexandria and the Church
Father Ambrose of Milan (340-397 C.E.).23 Living in the third century C.E., Clement
describes Christ as an “all-harmonious…instrument of God,” whose suffering is
manifest in his “crucified and resurrected flesh”. In turn, Christ himself “impos[es] a
harmony” upon the “resonant bodies of the faithful”.24 Therefore, Clement uses the
“musicality of the body” to define the means of salvation and subordination for the
worshiper whose “sinews as strings” are “strummed by the spirit”. Ambrose, Bishop
of Milan from 374 to 397 C.E., strengthened the link between music of salvation and
that of suffering through his descriptions of “musical embodiment” in his sermon De
Iacob et vita beata.25 Here he discusses a passage from 4 Maccabees 15 in the
Apocrypha in which seven brothers die for the sake of their religion. He describes
their “final agony” as a “swe[et] song” and equates the “martyr’s cadavers” with the

21 Henderson, A Sound Theology, 23.; Holsinger, Music Body and Desire, 34.
24 Holsinger, Music, Body and Desire, 34-35.
25 Clement of Alexandria, Paedogogoud 2.4, PG 8, col. 441; Quoted in Holsinger, Music, Body and
Desire, 60.
“strings of a *cithara*” that have sounded God’s music through sacrificial death.\(^{26}\) For Clement and Ambrose, therefore, it is not only that musical harmony regulates the human body and soul but that God can pluck and tune the body in God’s service.

Yet Clement’s and Ambrose’s descriptions of “musical embodiment” are figurative. In fact they believed that material music, far from defining spiritual experience, could lead the listener to sin. Similarly, Boethius and other Greek and Christian theorists privilege the conceptual harmony regulating the human body over the material music the body produces. For example, Plato (429-347 B.C.E.) noted music’s dangerous power to sway human emotions and morality and Saint Augustine (354-430 C.E.) privileged the geometrical concept of music that was not tainted through association with the body.\(^ {27}\) Like Clement, Augustine believed that music’s sensuality could distract the listener from God. By contrast, this distinction between abstract and audible music is absent in Hildegard’s ideology. For Hildegard, singing aloud was an expression of the music that ordered the cosmos and humanity rather than a deviation from it.

Indeed, the division between *musica humana* and *musica instrumentalis* became less rigid in the Middle Ages as singing became a standard part of the church liturgy. However, theorists still grappled with material music’s lowly and immoral connotations. In his ninth century treatise, *De musica disciplina*, the Frankish writer Aurelian of Reome opens the possibility for a music that is both material and moral by adding to Pythagorean and Boethian musical theories the category of *musica*

\(^{26}\) Ibid. 59.
celestas, or “music of the angels”.

Noting that the “office of singing pleases God if it is performed with an attentive mind,” he claims that humans can “imitate the choirs of angels” with the proper kind of singing. Thus, Aurelian sanctions material music provided that it aspires to musica celestas. In another attempt to reconcile the church liturgy with Boethian cosmology, the ninth-century Carolingian theorist Regino of Prum describes singing as a “natural music” and therefore includes it within musica humana. Claiming that singing “is modulated by nature alone under divine inspiration,” Regino conflates the allegorical harmony governing the body and the actual harmonies that the voice creates. Therefore, it is possible to see the connection between Hildegard’s insistence on singing as merely an extension of God’s will and Regino’s theory that unifies music, body and voice.

In echoing these classical ideas, Hildegard positions herself in a lineage—extending through Roman and Christian teaching—that combines music and cosmology. Furthermore, by investigating some of the conceptions of music theory that preceded Hildegard, it is possible to see the ideological basis for her self-conception as a “fragile vessel,” or channel for music rather than a source. In that Hildegard’s concept of music charts a connection between the human soul, which is symphonic, and the body that can literally resonate with heavenly sound, she situates herself in a discourse founded upon Boethius’ musica humana. Finally, just as previous thinkers used musical metaphors to describe the complex interaction between the various levels of the universe, so did Hildegard see music as definitive of

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29 Ibid.
30 Aurelian of Reome, De musica disciplina I, ed. Lawrence Gushee, Corpus scriptorium de musica 21 (Nijmegen, 1975), 59; Quoted in Barbara Newman, Symphonia, 20.
her own connection to a higher, heavenly order. Yet in extending this musical metaphor to a literal, physical level, Hildegard departs from classical concepts of an immaterial harmony. Moreover, by describing her own experience as an instrument of God in literal, physical terms, she differs from Greek, Roman and patristic writers. Indeed, in this personal testimony of her role as messenger of divine music, Hildegard seems more akin to biblical prophets who similarly recount their physical embodiment of God’s word.

Hildegard’s Instrumentality and Biblical Prophecy

As I have discussed, Hildegard’s conception of the body as a musical instrument has its roots in Greek and early Christian theories. But this same concept also draws upon prophetic narratives of the Hebrew Bible. Specifically, Hildegard’s conception of herself as a channel for God’s music and words echoes the testimony of biblical prophets who claim to hear God’s voice. Hildegard’s literary style, her descriptions of her experience during her visions and her intention for these visions bear similarities to that of the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah. The confluences—in language, experience and intent—between Hildegard’s statements and those of Old Testament seers ground her work in established prophetic narratives and behavior. Indeed, I would suggest that her society more readily accepted her as a true prophet because she exhibited recognizable prophetic traits.

In her work Sister of Wisdom, Barbara Newman states that the manner in which Hildegard conveys her visions “clearly proclaims her prophetic self-
awareness”.\(^{32}\) As evidence, Newman cites the similarity in language between the introduction to the Book of Ezekiel and Hildegard’s introduction to *Scivias*. Ezekiel, chapter one, opens with a statement that gives the exact date of the prophet’s revelation: “Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month…the heavens were opened”.\(^ {33}\) Similarly, in Hildegard’s introduction, she states: “It came to pass in the one thousand one hundred forty-first year of the Incarnation…that the heavens were opened”.\(^ {34}\) Newman juxtaposes these two quotations to demonstrate the way in which Hildegard models her description of her own visionary experience upon an established, accepted tradition. In so doing, Hildegard authenticates her work by making its prophetic content immediately recognizable through its biblical style.

Hildegard’s description of her experience while receiving her visions also resembles that of the Hebrew Bible prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In describing her visions, Hildegard relates the “intense pain and physical suffering” that accompanied the experience. She further notes that, despite her own hesitance to communicate God’s word to others, it was futile to try to keep the visions to herself.\(^ {35}\) Indeed, Hildegard “was hardly eager to prophesy” because she did not “trust herself to speak” and saw herself as uneducated and “simple in expounding”.\(^ {36}\) Likewise, this ambivalence can be seen in Jeremiah 1:6-7 in which the prophet states that he does “not know how to speak, for [he is] only a youth”. However, like Hildegard, he must

\(^{34}\) Hildegard, *Scivias*, 60.
\(^{35}\) Henderson, *A Sound Theology*, 118.
\(^{36}\) Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 34.
prophesy because the Lord proclaims: “whatever I command you shall speak”. 37 Jeremiah 20:8-9 then conveys the physical difficulty of containing God’s message. Here, Jeremiah feels God’s message as a “fire shut up in [his] bones” that he “cannot” “hold in” even though proclaiming it brings him “insult and reproach”. 38 Similarly, Ezekiel feels “bitterness” and “anger” in his task to reform the exiled Israelites, yet he must proceed because the “strong hand of the Lord” is upon him. 39 Just as Jeremiah and Ezekiel are wary to proclaim God’s word because of the potential social repercussions, so is Hildegard plagued by “doubt and bad opinion”. 40 However, each prophet finds that he or she cannot chose to remain silent in the face of God’s command.

By invoking these Hebrew-Bible prophets in her writing style and content, Hildegard fuses classical, biblical, and Christian accounts of the connection between the universe and its creator. Like Pythagoras and Boethius, she sees herself as connected to the cosmos through musical harmonies. Furthermore, following from Clement of Alexandria and Ambrose of Milan, she adapts these theories within a Christian context, using musical terms to describe the relationship between God, the player, and humans, the instruments. For both Hildegard and patristic writers, these musical metaphors also delineate the bodily sacrifices necessary to realize a harmonious connection between divine and human. Yet Hildegard differs from these previous thinkers in that she enacts the musical cosmologies and figurative descriptions on a literal plane. In so doing, she resembles biblical prophets who

40 Hildegard, *Scivias*, 60.
physically felt God’s presence and literally heard God’s message. Thus, she puts forth a third type of divine-human connection—a literal transmission of specifically musical visions. Therefore, Hildegard’s physical manifestations of suffering result from the fact that she is actually an instrument of God, a musical body that channels celestial harmonies. In this way, Hildegard blends the musical metaphors of the body with the prophetic transmission of God’s word to embody the music of heaven and make it audible on earth.

The Expression the Prophetic Position Afforded Hildegard

In light of the parallels between Hildegard, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, I argue that Hildegard was able to establish herself as a messenger for God’s word, in part because her descriptions of God’s command align with biblical records of communication between God and humans. Indeed, it was so important for Hildegard to assert an instrumentality akin to that of biblical prophets because acceptance of and accreditation for her visions was crucial if she was to communicate her ideas. If Hildegard had not established herself as a true prophet of God, her works would have been dismissed or condemned. This is because, by strict Roman Catholic law, women were not allowed to preach or “have authority over men”. Therefore, Newman argues that if not for Hildegard’s role as divine seer, the abbess would “never have preached or written at all”. As a woman in the twelfth-century, Hildegard had to be

41 I Tim. 2:12 Quoted in Newman, Sister of Wisdom, 34.
42 Newman, Sister of Wisdom, 34. Yet Hildegard’s claim of divine inspiration, and her invocation of biblical prophets, should not be reduced to a mere “desire for authority”. Rather than an end unto itself, this prophetic authority was her only viable means of expression.
a prophet if she was to profess religious doctrine and preach her message of salvation and reform.

Indeed, Hildegard intensified the validity of her visions precisely by commenting upon the weakness of her sex. Instead of demanding the “right to teach or prophesy,” Hildegard secured her authority by emphasizing her faults. The more Hildegard asserted her own femininity and weakness, the more she qualified her work as necessarily divine because it would have been “humanly impossible” for a “poor” “untutored” woman to be its source.43 In fact, Hildegard claimed that it was by necessity that God selected a humble, uneducated woman as the messenger of reform. According to Hildegard, she was living in a corrupt age in which the ostensibly “learned, masculine clergy” did not heed God’s command.44 Therefore, also like “the seers of the Old Testament,” Hildegard saw it as her mission to “bring the people of God to repentance”.45 Hildegard conceived of her visions as necessary messages that would uplift and redeem the world in an era in which the traditional professors of church doctrine had failed. Furthermore, she endowed her task with greater significance and urgency; she had a privileged position to relay God’s message precisely because she was a woman whom God had exalted to defy expectations and awaken the church to reform.

43 Ibid, 3.
44 Ibid, 3.; Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop with an Introduction by Barbara Newman (New York: Paulist Press:1990), 15-16. Hildegard considered her era to be corrupt in part because of a papal schism that divided the church from 1159 to 1178. During Hildegard’s lifetime, the emperor Frederick Barbarossa supported one anti-pope, Victor IV, and appointed another in 1164. Although Barbarossa was Hildegard’s advocate and protector, Hildegard nonetheless prophesied against him, warning that not to join with the majority of cardinals in recognizing the true pope was to contradict God’s will.
45 Newman, Sister of Wisdom, 28.
Thus, it may be that Hildegard’s conception of herself as an instrument, filled with God’s breath was so important to her identity, in part, because it allowed her to assume positions from which she would have otherwise have been prohibited. As a prophet, Hildegard rejected direct responsibility for the doctrinal and ethical messages she communicated in her written work. In turn, religious leaders, monks, and laypeople heeded these messages because they originated from God, not from the otherwise lowly woman who conveyed them. In light of the limited opportunities afforded to women in Hildegard’s society, I would suggest that Hildegard’s literal role as a physical instrument for divine music lent more credibility to her musical works. Just as Hildegard would not have been able to communicate her written visions were they not directly inspired by the Holy Spirit, so might her musical pieces have been overlooked if they were not sent from God. By portraying herself as a prophet who transmitted God’s music rather than a composer drawing ideas from her own mind, Hildegard gave her liturgical pieces spiritual weight. In claiming that these works transcended her abilities, she actually elevated herself and the music she wrote in the eyes of her contemporaries.

Therefore, by stating that she was not the source of her musical work, Hildegard made it possible to produce liturgical pieces; by rejecting her own creativity, she afforded herself the opportunity to create. It is specifically in Hildegard’s musical methods of communicating her spiritual message of reform that she blends both biblical and classical ideas of instrumentality. Like a biblical prophet, Hildegard sought to redeem others living in a corrupt society, a task which she accomplished, in part, by bringing musical praise from heaven to the world. It is this
method of reform and redemption through music to which I will turn in the Chapter 2. Having established Hildegard’s identity as a channel for divine music and the ways in which this instrumentality enabled her calls for reform, I will argue that her musical work cannot be separated from her mission to redeem.
Chapter 2
The Interdependence of Music and Spirituality in Hildegard’s Thought

In this Chapter I claim that Hildegard’s music is inseparable from her mission to educate others spiritually. Indeed, Hildegard saw education as directly connected to redemption: to be spiritually educated was to be on the path to salvation. Accordingly, her role was to lead those under her instruction toward this goal.¹ To illuminate the context of Hildegard’s educational beliefs, I first discuss the interrelatedness of spiritual education and salvation that was long established in Benedictine monastic practices and beliefs. Then, drawing on what Elizabeth Henderson terms Hildegard’s “theology of sound,” I examine Hildegard’s interpretations of particular biblical passages, which I argue ground her belief in music’s redemptive power. By combining both Benedictine practices and her own scriptural readings, Hildegard formulated an educational philosophy that emphasizes collective, musical study. In turn, this pedagogical approach prompted Hildegard to communicate her own music. Just as Hildegard’s personal connection to God was defined by the music she received, so could she extend this divine-human connection to the nuns in her convent by teaching them her celestial pieces. In this way, Hildegard was both a prophet who transmitted celestial harmonies and an educator who taught this prophetic music to initiate others into a process of conversion, of turning toward God.

¹ Elizabeth Henderson, A Sound Theology: The Vital Position of Sound and Music to Hildegard of Bingen’s Theology and Public Identity (Ph.D. Diss., University of Nebraska, 2003), 17.
The Rule of Saint Benedict

In approximately 540 C.E., Benedict of Nursia wrote what is now called the Rule of Saint Benedict. This Rule, which is the first recorded set of directions for a monastic community, gave rise to the Benedictine order. Benedictine monasteries then began to replace a more solitary religious practice that had prevailed until that point.\(^2\) The Rule promoted the development of religious communities by stipulating that a leader, the abbot, was responsible for the souls of his monks on Judgment Day.\(^3\) Thus, the religious leader and those under his charge entered into a sort of contract in which it was the abbot’s duty to guide and admonish the monks to ensure their spiritual welfare.

Hildegard’s mission to aid her nuns in their fight against sin through the Holy Scripture and the Rule of Saint Benedict was a continuation of this monastic tradition. Indeed, this monastic rule was not only a contractual agreement between the abbess and her nuns, but a template for living a holy life. For Hildegard, it was an essential tool to engage in humanity’s ongoing struggle between virtues and vices, good and evil. Within this world view, to be responsible for her nun’s souls on Judgment Day, was necessarily to help them in their present “battle against sin”.\(^4\) The Rule of Saint Benedict was vital in this battle because it outlined for the religious leader concrete methods through which she could guide those under her care.

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\(^4\) Ibid.
Specifically, the Rule stipulated that by transmitting spiritual knowledge, the abbess could fulfill her responsibility to assist her nuns in their moral struggles. In turn, if the nuns could triumph over sin on earth with the assistance of this religious education, they might be redeemed on Judgment Day. Thus, instruction—chiefly in the bible and commentaries thereof—played a vital role in the theory and practice of the Rule of Saint Benedict because it could illumine a path to redemption.

Indeed, Jean LeClercq and Christopher Page discuss the Benedictine emphasis on a literary and spiritual education, in which the practitioner must be actively engaged in the sacred text. Leclercq notes that Saint Benedict considered education to be both “grammatical” literacy and the religious knowledge that this literacy enabled.\(^5\) The “grammatical” education facilitated both communal reading (\textit{lectio}) and contemplation and memorization of holy text (\textit{meditatio}).\(^6\) Monks and nuns put this reading and memorization into spiritual practice during their daily worship in the Divine Office. The Divine Office includes eight daily services and is designated for the recitation of the Psalter and the singing of antiphons, canticles and responsories. Thus, the Divine Office provides a vehicle for religious experience founded in “grammatical” literacy. Furthermore, with these daily services, monks and nuns were more fully able to “absorb” and “ruminate” upon the spiritual meaning of the texts they recited collectively.\(^7\)

\(^6\) Ibid., 15.
\(^7\) Christopher Page, notes to Gothic Voices, \textit{A feather on the breath of God: Sequences and Hymns by Abbess Hildegard of Bingen}. CD, Hyperion Records Ltd. 66039.
Both LeClercq and Page emphasize the Benedictine belief that this process of rumination and internalization was most effective when the devotee read the text aloud. The mental, physical and auditory processes involved in these forms of recitation thus required an active engagement with the text that could facilitate a more intimate knowledge of the words and their significance. Indeed, LeClercq specifies that readings were performed “with the lips” so that the practitioners “pronounce[ed] what they saw” and listened to sound of the words they uttered. Monks and nuns compared the recitation that involved the “whole body and mind” to the body’s digestion of food. Once “digest[ed],” a text’s inner, symbolic meaning could fortify the reader’s soul just as food provides nutrients to the body. With its prescription of collective reading and singing as part of the Divine Office, the Rule of Saint Benedict thus outlined a means by which a devotee could be proactive in the battle against sin through literary and spiritual education. Because this aural form of learning enacted through the Divine Office guided the soul toward salvation, it was vital in Benedictine monastic practice and culture.

The importance of collective education influenced Hildegard’s practical approach to instructing the nuns in her convent. Indeed, Margot Fassler suggests that Hildegard formulated a program for her sisters that integrated the spoken and musical visions she received into the established worship of the Office and Mass. This strong connection between sound and knowledge also shaped Hildegard’s biblical interpretations. She explains Christian conceptions of good and evil, salvation and

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8 Leclercq, *The love of learning and the desire for God*, 15.
corruption, and reason and ignorance through her particular beliefs about sound. These beliefs in turn reflect her view that morality, music, reason, and resonance are interdependent—and in some cases synonymous—mechanisms that allow humans to reflect the divine. That is, for Hildegard, music and sonic resonance promote morality and reason, allowing the individual to emulate God. It is therefore in our interest to define these terms and their relation to one another, to elucidate Hildegard’s educational approach and her intention for her music.

Reason Speaks Through Sound

As outlined above, Hildegard’s didactic methods were traditional in that their purpose was to redeem through the recitation of sacred texts. As with the practices established under the Rule of Saint Benedict, Hildegard held worship and learning to be reciprocal and inseparable. Yet Hildegard created her own variation on the traditional model in her emphasis on melodic recitation of liturgical chant. Hildegard used her hymns, antiphons, responsories and canticles to enrich the Mass and the Divine Office and thereby further her nuns’ spiritual knowledge. Thus, her mission as a prophet to reform others converged with her responsibility as a Benedictine abbess. In turn, both roles find expression in Hildegard’s music, which, like her preaching, could carry her message of spiritual renewal and in keeping with the Rule of Saint Benedict could instruct her nuns. As I will explore further, Hildegard’s music lay at the center of her divinely inspired task to “unlock the mysteries of Scripture…and instruct the people of God”.¹¹

¹¹ Newman, Sister of Wisdom, 4.
Yet how might music specifically do the work of salvation? This section explores the theoretical ground that led Hildegard to claim sound and music as active forces that help the practitioner to turn towards God. In her biblical interpretations, Hildegard conflates the utterance itself with the holy message it carries so that the means of religious education—sound and music—are themselves holy and rational. Within this conception, singing becomes a performative act that is necessarily to contain and know the sacred. Accordingly, in this section, I examine two of Hildegard’s scriptural exegeses in particular to elaborate upon the ways she believed sound and music to be inherently transformative and educational, sacred and rational.

A broader monastic emphasis on aural recitation seems to have informed Hildegard’s claim that “reason speaks through sound,” that God communicates to humans through Christ, the resonant, rational Word.12 Indeed, Hildegard defines the relationship between human and divine in terms of sound: in her Book of Divine Works Hildegard states that “the Word [of God] is found in Reason…because Reason is already in the Word and thus neither of them can be separate from one another”.13 Here “Word” refers to Christ through whom God’s Word “became flesh and made his dwelling” on earth.14 In traditional exegeses, God’s “Word,” or “logos” in the original Greek, signifies the principle of rationality that guides and orders the universe. Thus, by stating that the “Word of God,” is inseparable from “Reason,” Hildegard draws upon orthodox notions of Christ as the embodiment of God’s rational will.

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13 Ibid.
However, in her statement that the Word “resounded,” producing a sound that represented “life in every creature,” Hildegard departs from standard exegeses in her emphasis on the Word’s *sonic*, life-giving power. In Hildegard’s interpretation, God’s resonant Word “did the work [of] creation” and continues to “keep…the entire universe” “in motion”. For her, the very means of transmission—the sound itself—has an important function of its own, apart from the contents of its message. According to this view, it is precisely through the act of reverberating, of *sounding* God’s rational Word, that Christ translates the divine will into that which humans can absorb; sound allows God, through Christ, to enter and affect the world. For Hildegard, then, sound is effectively “a deed,” because it is the means through which God indicates the Word.

When Hildegard states that “reason speaks by means of sound,” she refers to the fact that humans are only imbued with reason insofar as God communicates through resonance, a medium that they can comprehend and contain. Indeed, I would suggest that Hildegard’s interpretation of God’s Word as the sounding of reason expresses her own take on the Benedictine tradition of learning by speaking. If sound and reason are related at a cosmic level, then they are also connected on a practical, human level. That is, if sound represents a transmission of God’s reason into the world, then it can also embody reason that instructs and redeems human beings. Sound itself may then form a crucial tool for communicating spiritual reason in the practical context of religious education.

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15 Hildegard, *De operatione Dei*, II.4.105, 132.
16 Ibid, 128.
17 Ibid, III.8.2, 206.
Hildegard confirms this notion that God’s reason can be enacted through humans on earth, asserting that humans are able to contain God’s rational, sonorous Word because they are “mirror forms,” who reflect the image of their Creator and thereby “resonate in a song of praise” for this Creator.\(^{18}\) Just as God resonates through Christ, the Word, so humans can be a channel for divine reason through their voices: “by our mouth God indicates God’s Word…we achieve very many things by this sound, just as God’s Word did the work in creation”.\(^{19}\) Thus, God’s Word not only “did the work” of creating humans, but continues to speak through them, endowing the human voice with wisdom. Furthermore, by comparing the sound of God’s voice that created the world to the human voice that can “achieve…many things,” Hildegard suggests that humans’ resemblance and connection to God is defined by sound. That is, humans reflect God because the human voice affects the world and has the power to create, just as God’s voice called creation into being.

Thus, for Hildegard, sound is a force for creation that flows from God through humans.

However, human speech only reflects God’s Word if humans remain “mirror forms” of their Creator and do not turn away from God through sin.\(^{20}\) For Hildegard, then, those who can speak with wisdom are those who recognize “the image of God in [themselves]”.\(^{21}\) Indeed, she states that “whoever has righteous faith” is able to “see the mysteries of God” “as if through a mirror” so that they recognize themselves

\(^{18}\) Ibid., II.4.105, 129.
\(^{19}\) Ibid.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 128.
as a copy or reflection of God.\textsuperscript{22} In turn, when humans cease to reflect this image, they forget God within themselves, and no longer “open their mouth to righteousness”.\textsuperscript{23} They are cut off from the rational sonority of God’s Word and are “covered with...a veil,” that blinds them to their true nature.\textsuperscript{24} Thus, a symbolic loss of hearing in turn leads to a figurative blindness, for to turn away from God is to become deaf to God’s message and to obscure ones rational vision of the world. Within Hildegard’s interpretation, then, the Benedictine practice of reciting sacred texts is crucial to education in that it facilitates regaining this rational seeing and hearing. Furthermore, one may turn toward God by literally \textit{listening} to holy words that may illumine and clarify God’s immanent rationality.

\textit{Music Describes the Struggle between Good and Evil}

In the previous section, I discussed the ways in which, for Hildegard, sound is rational and redemptive, and is therefore the principle force of spiritual transformation. In the following section, I will argue specifically that Hildegard defined her theological beliefs in reference to different \textit{types} of sound, namely music and noise. For Hildegard, not all sound was music—she made a distinction between music created by singing or playing instruments and demonic noises that plague the listener. Hildegard states that Heaven is filled with “music of all kinds,” whereas her visions of hell include “noise and commotion” made by “many horrible hissing

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., III.3,125.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., VI.65, 289.
Hildegard employs these symbolic and literal connotations of music and noise in her morality play, *Ordo Virtutum*, in which seven virtues, embodied by seven actresses, engage in a struggle with the devil over an individual’s soul. Here, Hildegard represents evil and music as mutually exclusive, in that Satan is the only character who cannot sing; for Hildegard, the “ultimate unmusical spirit [is] the Devil”. If that which is evil cannot produce song, then, by extension, the presence of singing may expunge evil and thus redeem the singer as well as the listener. In this way, Hildegard maps her personal definitions of music and noise onto the more general theological opposition between good and evil. Thus, she creates parallel axes of meaning in which corruption and noise are coextensive, as are holiness and music. Because she asserts song as analogous to heavenly praise, Hildegard believed that it could serve as a powerful tool in the struggle between virtues and vices. Therefore, I would suggest that music was perhaps the most significant and redemptive form of sound for Hildegard.

Hildegard extends this connection between music and redemption to her view of humankind’s corruption and potential salvation. She held that “Satan…drove man from celestial harmony and the delights of paradise”. Hildegard here offers her

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exegesis of humanity’s fall, described in Genesis 3. According to Hildegard, Satan lured humankind into sin precisely by tempting Adam away from the “celestial harmony”. Hildegard believed that, before he disobeyed God, Adam’s voice had “power and resonance” so that it “blended fully with the voices of the angels in their praise of God”. However, after his transgression, Adam “lost that angelic voice” and “fell asleep to that knowledge which he possessed before his sin”. By “knowledge,” Hildegard seems to refer to Adam’s connection to the divine by virtue of his ability to join the angel’s singing. In losing his “resonan[t]” voice, Adam “became wrapped up in the darkness of inward ignorance” because he was cut off from divine insight and will. Thus, Hildegard connects the pre-exilic, angelic voice and “forgotten knowledge” as two elements that defined the lost paradise and that mark humanity’s rupture with God.

Yet just as sound and insight were co-dependent before humanity’s fall, so can humankind’s songs “bring back the sweetness of the songs of heaven” and thereby “regain some of the knowledge which Adam had before he was punished for his sin”. 28 Thus, music can serve as a bridge between God and humans because it “emerges from the earthly yet is not earthbound”. 29 That is, songs are “both material and immaterial” in that they are played upon earthly instruments and sung by earthly voices, yet can invoke the heavenly. 30 Because it is precisely music that can educate and initiate the process of remembering lost knowledge, it seems that praising God through music is humans’ most potent tool for repairing the previous rupture wrought by Adam’s sin.

28 Ibid., 77-79.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 199.
Hildegard intimates specifically how music works upon the listener to illicit a pre-exilic knowledge by explaining that “outward things” can teach of “inward things”.31 Here, the words “outward things” refer to “psalms…canticles…[and] musical instruments” whose “melodic strains” “admoni[sh] and arous[e]” the listener. In this model of religious education, then, the devotee turns inward by first turning outward to the external, temporal medium of music. Humans have access to this transformative medium only because God “infuse[es] [souls] with the light of truth” by “inspir[ing]” them to compose music of praise. That is, it is God who grants “holy prophets” the ability to “recall…[the] divine melody of praise” and thereby “compose” melodies that transcend humanity’s present state of corruption. In turn, those who hear the prophets’ music may learn of “inward things” and in so doing, leave their “inward ignorance,” and “regain…knowledge”.32

_Hildegard’s Own Liturgical Pieces: Musical Discipline and Redemption_

Not only did Hildegard “believe in the redemptive and healing power of music,” but she saw her own music as having the power to educate and save.33 However, as discussed in Chapter 1, mental and physical suffering accompanied Hildegard’s embodiment of divine music in her role as an instrument of God. In teaching this music to others, then, Hildegard extends both the divine connection and musical subordination that constitute her personal prophetic experience. Although the ultimate goal of reunification with God through music would heal, the process involved a musical disciplining of the body and soul. Indeed, through its very

31 Hildegard quoted in Henderson, _A Sound Theology_, 77.
32 Ibid., 78.
33 Ibid., 3.
sweetness and nostalgic invocation of a prelapsarian age, Hildegard’s prophetic music acted as a material *force* that aligned the singer with God’s will. In this way, Hildegard’s intention—that her music teach the women in her convent—reflects her own experience as a musical body shaped by and subordinated to sacred music.

Thus, it is this discipline, enacted by the divine sound of God’s word and by sacred music, that initiates and motivates the search for God. Facilitated by sacred music, this search is a gradual process of conversion, of turning toward God and thus speaking with “*rationalitas*”.34 By singing sacred music, the individual recalls “inward things,” thereby regaining the image of the Creator within herself. As she recalls this internal divine imprint, her “individual will” becomes “fused” with God’s so that she embodies and speaks with divine reason.35 In turn, she sings with an intensified connection to heaven and thus becomes increasingly attuned to the rationality that “animates” all life.36 By this logic, then, singing and listening to music can bring forth reason because these activities allow humans to emulate God and thereby become channels for divine wisdom. As noted previously, Hildegard’s particular belief that sound effects knowledge draws upon the Benedictine practice of collectively learning spiritual doctrine through aural transmission. The belief that pronouncing sacred words enables one to embody the Word’s physical resonance and thereby receive God’s rational message is rooted in the Rule of Saint Benedict. Just as God’s Word as sound affects the world, so too can sound transform, redeem and educate the spiritual practitioner.

34 Schmidt, “Hildegard’s Care of Souls,” 43.
35 Ibid. 46.
Hildegard’s particular approach, however, differs slightly from general Benedictine practices. For her, music specifically is the most powerful form of sound, because it unites the human and the celestial. Sound works in and of itself because it flows from God into humans and infuses them with life and reason. Yet music allows for a bi-directional communication in which humans can “resonate” with songs “of praise” and thereby connect with their Creator. Furthermore, because music can recall paradise, it creates a channel of communication between the material and the immaterial, the worldly and the sacred.

Hildegard elaborates upon this connection achieved through music with her statement that “the words symbolize the body…the jubilant music indicates the spirit…the celestial harmony shows the Divinity, and the words the Humanity of the Son of God.” 37 In this description, words and music are inseparable because they represent opposing, but complementary parts of both the human and the divine. The musical component communicates that which transcends the temporal and material—the human spirit and God’s Divinity. By contrast, the words ground the “celestial harmony” in the finite and worldly (the human body and Christ’s Humanity). Because of the interdependence of “jubilant music” that represents the Divinity and words that convey the “Humanity of the Son of God,” one who sings sacred music can enact “the incarnation” itself. 38 That is, the union of words and melody in song mimetically joins the divine and human elements that were unified in Christ. Indeed, Hildegard states that both “Jesus Christ” and the “canticle of praise” arise from the “operation of the Holy Spirit”. However, both are also “rooted in the Church,” that is, in human’s

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37 Hildegard, Scivias, III:13:12, 533.
38 Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist,” 91.
worship on earth.\textsuperscript{39} Therefore, in that the “canticle of praise” resembles Christ, it allows humans to representatively incarnate the divine “in an earthly mode”.\textsuperscript{40} Singing and performing music thus creates a “bond between worshipers and heaven” in that, like Christ’s incarnation, it expresses the profound connection between Creator and creation.

Finally, because Hildegard saw her own music as having the ability to create this bond, she believed it to be a vital means of helping the nuns in her convent to connect with the heavenly realm. In fact, I would argue that Hildegard felt an urgent need to share the music she received because she thought that it could be a crucial tool in her nuns’ education. Indeed, the power Hildegard attributed to music, in part explains her strong reaction when the prelates of Mainz prohibited her convent from singing in the Divine Office. That is, if she could not sing her own music with her sisters, Hildegard could no longer facilitate a collective communication with God. In this way, she could not help those under her care regain their lost knowledge of the celestial harmony and thereby reflect God’s will. This letter is thus clarified in the context of Hildegard’s intention that her music be a means toward the ultimate goal of salvation. Therefore, because of its redemptive purpose, Hildegard’s music cannot be treated as separate from her assumed responsibility for her nuns’ souls on Judgment Day. Both theoretically and practically, Hildegard carried out her duties under the Rule of Saint Benedict through a specifically musical approach.

\textsuperscript{39} Hildegard, \textit{The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen Vol. I}, 79.
\textsuperscript{40} Peter Dronke, \textit{Women Writers of the Middle Ages}, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 198.
Chapter 3

Purpose in Form: Analysis of Three Hildegard Antiphons

Musical Theology to Musical Practice

In Chapter Two, I discussed the ways in which Hildegard’s religious beliefs and musical symbolism converge. With her biblical exegeses stated in terms of music and sound, Hildegard puts forth a radical interpretation of music’s ability to spiritually educate the singer or listener. She compares Christ—who reconciles human and divine in his very being—to the “canticle of praise,” which similarly joins the earthly and material with the heavenly and immaterial. In so doing, Hildegard implies that music can, like the Messiah, reunite the singer or listener with God. Because music possesses this reunifying power, it can thus turn humans away from sin and guide them on the path to redemption. To relate this musical theology with how Hildegard’s own “celestial harmonies” operated in practice, I examine the musical form of three of Hildegard’s antiphons. By analyzing both the general tenets and specific properties of her musical style, I hope to illustrate the connection between the “what” and the “how” of Hildegard’s theology and music. That is, the interrelation between what Hildegard believed and how this manifested in the structural aspects of the music she received. In applying the analytic methods of Marianne Pfau to Hildegard’s antiphons, I hope to demonstrate that it was not only music’s symbolic power, but also its actual form that was conducive to heightened spiritual practice and understanding.
Yet exactly how might music perform the work of conversion on a practical rather than merely symbolic level? I would argue that it is both the performative repetition of liturgical pieces as well as structural repetition within liturgical pieces that can gradually turn the singer toward God. First, the repetition of the pieces themselves might be conducive to fully absorbing the music and text’s full spiritual nourishment. By singing a piece multiple times, the singer becomes increasingly intimate with its “deeper spiritual meaning”. ¹ The depth of experience promoted by this repetition thus facilitates *ruminatio*, or “chewing over” the music to uncover layers of spiritual meaning. Because the process of *ruminatio* is founded in the act of repetition, I would argue that cyclicality within the structure of a single piece could therefore also give rise to this practice; internal, formal repetition might add another layer of iteration that could further permeate mind and body. By returning to similar melodic patters, the singer might uncover progressive degrees of meaning that only unfold because he must revisit similar musical figures. Hence, these two layers of repetition in music—external practice and internal musical form—might have the power to guide the devotee in a holy life by allowing him or her access to the “deeper spiritual meaning behind both words and music”. ²

The first layer of musical repetition, of practicing liturgical songs, was integral to life in the Rupertsberg convent. This is because the daily observance of the Divine Office includes seven services, called “hours” in addition to the midnight

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² Ibid.
service, Matins. With these eight daily services, Benedictine monks and nuns could complete “the full cycle of 150 psalms every week”. Because a liturgical antiphon framed each of these psalms, a monastic community might sing hundreds of antiphons over the course of a week. Thus, the nuns at Rupertsberg sang constantly in their worship. Furthermore, because the psalm cycle began anew each week, the nuns would undoubtedly repeat many of the same antiphons on a regular basis. The repetition in listening to and singing music might have allowed them to fully “absorb,” and “ruminate” upon, the “inner” significance of music and text. Returning again and again to the same liturgical pieces, the nuns could continue to uncover new layers of meaning with each iteration.

Furthermore, in addition to the sheer number of times the nuns sang Hildegard’s antiphons, the form of the pieces could contribute to the music’s function as a “contemplative…practice” that furthered spiritual understanding. In part, Hildegard’s music might create a contemplative sound environment in both its circularity and its irregularity. Hildegard’s antiphons differ from pieces by contemporary composers because they are not characterized by a fixed, predictable song form. Moreover, Hildegard composed her poetic text in free verse, a style that contrasts with the rhythmic sequences popular in the twelfth century and more closely

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4 Ibid..
5 Christopher Page, notes to Gothic Voices, A feather on the breath of God: Sequences and Hymns by Abbess Hildegard of Bingen. CD, Hyperion Records Ltd. 66039.
6 Bent and Pfau, Hildegard of Bingen.
7 Jeremy Yudkin, Music in Medieval Europe, (New York: Prentice Hall), 1989. Peter Abelard (1079-1142) and Adam of Saint Victor (d. 12th c) wrote strophic, rhyming sequences in regular, rhythmic meters. Therefore, the musical settings of these metrical sequences were more likely to be fixed, consistent song forms that underscore the poem’s rhyme scheme and rhythm.
resembles tenth and eleventh-century texts for the Divine Office. Not subordinated to a regular rhythmic pattern, Hildegard’s poetry thus required a musical setting that could expand and contract to accommodate varying syllabic lengths. She creates this flexible framework by rearranging a fixed set of “melodic patterns” in ever-varied combinations. Such patterns both create a sense of melodic coherence and adapt to align with the unpredictable poetic text. By musically articulating the poem’s complex sentences and uneven lines, these flexible melodic patterns illuminate and clarify the poem’s meaning. The patterns further elucidate meaning in that they repeat within a piece over similar poetic phrases, thus melodically pointing the singer to semantic parallels within the poem. Therefore, the music’s flexibility and cyclical bring forth the poems’ often complex theological interpretations. In this way, Hildegard’s antiphons allow for the internal ruminatio upon sacred text discussed above. In the following section I analyze three of Hildegard’s antiphons in greater detail to demonstrate exactly how the music works as a vehicle for spiritual contemplation.

Repetition and Variation

As stated above, in addition to the repetition of practice, the pieces in the Symphonia also contain repetition within their structure. In the section that follows, I hope to demonstrate the function of iteration specifically in Hildegard’s antiphons. In her article “Mode and Melody Types in Hildegard’s Symphonia,” Marian Pfau classifies the pieces in Hildegard’s Symphonia by “modalities,” which are determined

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8 Newman, Symphonia, 33.
by the pieces’ final tones: \(d\), \(a\), \(e\), \(g\), or \(c\).\(^9\) Although these modalities do not correspond precisely to the Church Modes used to categorize Gregorian Chant, they are similarly defined by their final tone. Of the seventy-five pieces in the Symphonia, those with finals on \(d\), \(a\), and \(e\) possess the highest degree of modal unity. Indeed, the final tone in these pieces operates similarly to the tonic of later music theory; in both cases, a return to the final or tonic provides a sense of closure at the end of a musical phrase.\(^{10}\)

To analyze these modally consistent pieces with finals on \(d\), \(a\), and \(e\), Pfau develops three melodic templates, or “matrices,” that describe the general characteristics of pieces in these three modes, respectively.\(^{11}\) These matrices, consisting of basic melodic gestures, provide a blueprint, or structural template that allows for comparison between pieces sharing a final. The matrix is not represented as such in the actual pieces, but rather serves to identify the basic melodic gestures these pieces hold in common. In my examination of Hildegard’s use of recurring melodic and motivic gestures, I will apply Pfau’s “D matrix” to three antiphons from the Symphonia with finals on \(d\). In turn, this detailed analysis will allow me to suggest broader tenants of Hildegard’s style.\(^{12}\) With this combination of analysis and

\(^9\) Marianne Pfau, “Mode and melody types in Hildegard von Bingen’s ‘Symphonia,’” Sonus 11/1 (January 1990), 53.


\(^{11}\) Pfau, “Mode and melody types,” 54.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 71. I am drawing upon Pfau’s work to suggest that it is possible to use analysis of some of Hildegard’s pieces to extrapolate general stylistic qualities. Pfau claims that there is a “high degree of integrity in the modal and formal underpinnings” across the Symphonia. Indeed, from her study of the pieces with finals on \(d\) and \(e\), Pfau concludes that not only do pieces within a given mode resemble one another, but that pieces across these three modes also possess similar traits. Therefore, from Pfau’s analysis, as well as the claims of Margot Fassler, Barbara Newman and Ian Bent, I would argue that
qualitative description, I hope to demonstrate the unique confluence of sequential progression and cyclicality in Hildegard’s music that makes it especially conducive to ruminatio.

In general, the *Symphonia* pieces with finals on *d* are built upon “a limited set of melodic conventions” that operate across “three tone spaces”. Therefore, the matrix, or blueprint for these piece consists of three distinct melodic gestures, which Pfau terms “I,” “II,” and “III” (See Ex. 1). In the first gesture (I) the melody begins on the final tone (*d*4) and moves to the fifth above (*a*4). In the second discrete melodic gesture (II) the melody proceeds to *d*5 and returns to *a*4. Finally, the melody descends a fifth to *d*4 in the third melodic gesture (III).

Ex.1

This general model is not representative of any one antiphon, but rather each individual antiphon realizes the matrix’s three melodic gestures distinctively. At the same time, elaborations on the basic template tend to vary within a set of conventions, and therefore occur across antiphons in the *d* modality. For example, “gestures I and II” often “elid[e]” so that the melody moves immediately from *a*4 to *d*5 without detailed analysis of three antiphons can point to broader qualities of Hildegard’s liturgical style as a whole.

13 Ibid.
14 Jane Clendinning and Elizabeth Marvin, *The Musician’s Guide to Theory and Analysis*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 15. Here I am using Clendinning and Marvin’s terminology for enumerating pitches based upon their range. In this system, middle *c* is numbered “c4,” and serves as the standard by which to name all other notes according to their name and range.
15 Pfau, “Mode and melody types,” 54. I am indebted to Marianne Pfau for this “basic scheme,” or matrix as the template for analyzing Hildegard’s antiphons.
lingering on the fifth scale degree. The result of this direct movement from fifth to octave is a more propulsive, energetic rendition of the basic template (See Ex. 2, the second phrase in “Caritas abundat”).

Ex. 2

Conversely, some versions of the basic matrix extend horizontally by repeating a single note—usually the final or the fifth (See Ex. 3, the third musical phrase in “Caritas abundat”).

Ex. 3

In addition, some variants include a third melodic gesture (denoted III+), that expands “vertically” by descending to a3 below middle c and rising again to the final tone at the end of the line. (See Ex. 4, the second musical phrase of “O frondens virga”).

16 Pfau, “Mode and melody types,” 55. In example two, I apply Pfau’s model in my own analysis of the second phrase in “Caritas abundant”.
17 Ibid.
Thus, actual renditions of the three melodic gestures contained within the general “D matrix” are flexible. In fact, perhaps Hildegard’s recurring melodic gestures operate successfully in a large number of chants precisely because they can expand and contract while still retaining their essential character.

Not only do these three gestures of the basic matrix recur across chants, they also function in similar ways within each antiphon. In Pfau’s analysis, each musical phrase in the $d$ pieces contains a rendition of the three-part template, or matrix. Therefore, most complete musical phrases include the previously described ascent from the final to the fifth and back to the final. Furthermore, the complete musical phrase as outlined by the tripartite matrix generally aligns syntactically with the poem in that it spans, and then repeats for, each poetic phrase. However, because Hildegard’s poetry is in free verse, there is not a fixed ratio between poetic lines and musical phrases. Rather, the musical phrases help to define and emphasize the work’s discrete poetic statements, thereby giving an inflection and cadence to the unmetered lines. In this way, the grammatical and musical aspects of Hildegard’s antiphons operate in a reciprocal relationship, where the beginning and ending of a melodic

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18 Ibid., 56.
19 Ibid.
phrase can denote a poetic section, while the text-setting can often point to both similarities and departures from the “basic [melodic] scheme”. Interestingly, it is often in the places where text and music do not align in the expected manner that one can see the principle of variance within cyclicality at work.

Three antiphons, “O frondens virga,” “Caritas abundat,” and “O pastor animarum,” can serve as case studies to illuminate the simultaneously cyclical and through-composed nature of Hildegard’s music. As I will show, while Pfau’s “basic scheme” appears in each of the musical phrases in each of these three works, there are also variations and anomalies, which result in part from text-music interactions.

In Hildegard’s antiphon to the Virgin Mary, “O frondens virga,” the D matrix that Newman describes recurs in each of the four musical phrases (See Appendix A1). However, these four renditions are never identical. For example, phrase one contains no second gesture (II), or leap to the upper d5, and phrase three does not begin with the final tone, d4, as do each of the others. Furthermore, phrases three and four elide to form a larger musical unity that distinguishes the second half of the antiphon from the first. By splitting the poem into two sections, the musical setting highlights the poem’s structural progression and meaning.

The title of the antiphon, taken from the first line of the poem, compares the Virgin Mary to a “leafy branch” that stands “in nobility as the dawn breaks”. Hildegard draws this metaphor from Isaiah 11.1-2, in which Isaiah foretells of a savior that will descend from the house of David, describing this Messiah as a shoot

20 Ibid., 58.
21 Ibid., 58-59.
of the Jesse tree. In Hildegard’s metaphor, Mary is the branch of this prophesized tree from which the shoot, or flower (Christ), blooms. This figurative comparison dominates the first three poetic lines of the poem, while the second half offers a direct appeal to the Virgin:

O leafy branch,
standing in your nobility
as the dawn breaks forth:
now rejoice and be glad
and deign to set us frail ones
free from evil habits
and stretch forth your hand
to lift us up.

The initial statement of the subject “O leafy branch” aligns with the first musical phrase. That is, the first poetic line coincides with the first rendition of the three melodic gestures described above. The return to the final tone, d\textsuperscript{4} in the third melodic gesture thus articulates the comma at the end of the first line by providing a musical pause. By contrast, the next two lines “standing in your nobility/as the dawn breaks forth” do not divide into two musical phrases, reflecting the fact that there is no grammatical caesura between these two statements. However, the second musical phrase closes on d\textsuperscript{4} after the third poetic line to reinforce the colon at its end. Musical phrases three and four then each repeat the three gestures presented in the first two phrases. However, because these repetitions are “out-of-phase with the

\[23\text{ Fassler, “Composer and Dramatist”, 158.}\]
\[24\text{ Hildegard, }\textit{Symphonia},\text{ trans. Newman, 121.}\]
\[25\text{ Pfau, “Mode and melody types”, 59.}\]
\[26\text{ Hildegard trans. Newman, }\textit{Symphonia},\text{ 121.}\]
\[27\text{ Pfau, “Mode and melody types”, 60.}\]
text”—as compared to the first two musical phrases that align with the poetic syntax—they are not identical or “schematic” repetitions.  

Because the melodic patterns rendered in musical phrases three and four do not repeat precisely, they help draw out poetic meaning. Pfau notes that the music-text alignment breaks in the sixth poetic line that ends in the word “liberare”. Although “liberare” occurs at the end of a poetic phrase, it does not coincide with the third melodic gesture and the musical resolution that the return to $d_4$ has provided in the previous three poetic phrases. Instead, “liberare” occurs over melodic gesture I, the ascent from $d_4$ to $a_4$, thereby disrupting the established relationship between melodic gestures and poetic phrases. This displacement thus emphasizes the word “liberare” that now occurs on the upward leap from to $d_4$ to $a_4$; its significance is heightened by the unexpected climb in musical range. Indeed, Pfau notes that the musical stress on this word reflects its semantic importance in this poem that praises Mary, the woman who has the power to “free [us] from evil habits”.  

In addition to defining music-text relationship in the third and fourth musical phrases, this displacement also has more far-reaching effects on the antiphon’s overall structure. Because musical phrase four interrupts phrase three in the ascent from $a_4$ to $d_5$, it seamlessly joins with phrase three without the customary pause on $d_5$. These two phrases therefore create a continuous musical line, constituting a section distinct from the first two musical phrases. The antiphon’s overall structure can thus be considered as two larger sections containing two musical phrases each. In turn, this two-part musical scheme shapes poetic meaning in that it parallels the two phases of

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28 Ibid.  
29 Ibid.
the poem. The first musical section (musical phrases one and two) aligns with the three initial, more abstract poetic lines. Then, the second musical section (phrases three and four) underscores the concrete appeal to Mary in poetic phrases four through eight.  

Therefore, on the level of the single musical phrase, the antiphon usually displays syntactic alignment. When this alignment breaks with the musical elision between phrases three and four, the music enforces the larger poetic structure and—although obliquely—its semantic progression.

Like “O frondens virga,” Hildegard’s “Caritas abundat,” (“Antiphon for Divine Love”) contains a rendition of the D matrix in each of its five musical phrases (See Appendix A2). That is, the matrix works similarly not only within, but across these two antiphons in order to delineate each musical phrase. Furthermore, as in the previous example, differences between the musical phrases also give shape to the poem’s syntactic and semantic particularities. Observing these variations in musical structure in isolation and then in the context of the poem may elucidate the way in which layers of parallel phrases create a musical framework that allows one to digest the poem’s religious commentary.

In the musical setting of the poem, phrases one, three, and five are parallel phrases whose layers of similar material produce both incremental change and cyclicality. Specifically, the second musical gesture (II) in both the first and third musical phrases does not reach $d_5$ as expected, but rather stops at the seventh, $c_5$. However, phrase five—that resembles these two previous phrases in its first four notes—proceeds from the seventh to the octave above the final. Thus, the three similar phrases form a sequence in which each phrase changes because of its

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30 Ibid.
sequential relation to the others. The recurrence of these parallel phrases creates an incremental movement toward high $d_5$ in phrase five. However, because these phrases are closely related, I would argue that they do not constitute a clear linear progression through contrasting sections. Rather, the constant return to the rising fifth ($d_4$ to $a_4$) at the beginning of each phrase and the recurring melismas on the pitches bellow middle $c$ thwarts any definitive sense of linear development.\textsuperscript{31} Indeed, it is this persistent return to familiar melodic gestures coupled with incremental, subtle changes that render the music neither completely cyclical nor completely linear.

Rather, it is the combination of these two elements that invites contemplation of the poem. “Caritas,” the poem’s subject, describes the Holy Spirit as charity and “the feminine quality of Love:”\textsuperscript{32}

Charity
abounds toward all,
most exalted from the depths
above the stars,
and most loving
toward all,
for she has given
the supreme King the kiss of peace.\textsuperscript{33}

The musical setting for this poem subtly points to the all-encompassing generosity of “caritas” and highlights the pauses after lines two, four and six. Indeed, poetic lines one through six divide into pairs forming distinct syntactic units marked by a commas. This grammatical pattern is mirrored musically in that—as in “O frondens virga”—the final tone of each musical phrase falls on the pause at the end of each pair.


\textsuperscript{32} Ibid. 88.

of poetic lines. However, this regular pattern breaks with poetic lines seven and eight, each of which occupies its own musical phrase. This change in the established ratio of poetic lines to musical phrases allows the two final lines to expand musically, creating a sense of spaciousness. Indeed, as Pfau notes, only a single word, “dedit” (given) occupies the final musical phrase in an elaborate twenty-six note melisma.

Pfau further remarks that the melodic expanse afforded to this word both illustrates its connotation of generosity and links it to the poem’s subject stated in the first phrase. Both the subject, “caritas,” and the final verb, “dedit” occur on extensive melismas, a musical parallel that underscores their similar expression of love and generosity.34 Moreover, the notable expanse of only these two words over the longest melismas in the piece formally reflects the expansive charity and giving “caritas” offers “toward all”. Therefore, it is possible to see the ways in which each musical phrase both repeats to create clear syntactic parallels with the text, yet also departs from this regularity in order to underscore overarching poetic meaning. Furthermore, this relationship between words and music also points to the neither predictably circular nor precisely linear form of Hildegard’s antiphons.

The third antiphon I examine, “O pastor animarum,” is an “Antiphon for the Redeemer” collected under the songs to the Father and Son (See Appendix A3).35 In this antiphon, Hildegard describes Christ as a “shepherd of souls” and puts forth her belief that Christ, as the Word of God, was already contained within God, in the resonance of God’s “primal voice” that “created” the world.36 As the sound of God’s voice, the Word animated all of creation through the force of sonority, a creation that

34 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
anticipated the Messiah’s arrival on earth. Indeed, the second half of the poem deals
with Christ’s role as the incarnate Word to redeem humanity. Encompassing a
complex theological exegesis in only seven lines, this antiphon constitutes a sonic and
poetic “meditation” on themes that Hildegard develops further in *The Book of Divine
Works*:\(^{37}\)

O shepherd of souls
and O primal voice
through which we all were created,
now let it please you, please you
to deign
to free us from our miseries
and our diseases\(^{38}\)

As with “Caritas abundant,” examining the musical phrases first in isolation
and then in the context of the words may more clearly illuminate their formal
underpinnings. Each of the three musical phrases in “O pastor animarium” returns to
a similar pattern. With each new phrase, the melody begins on \(d4\), leaps upward a
fifth to \(a4\), ascends by skip or step to \(d5\) and descends in a series of melismas,
occupying the range below middle \(c\). This basic arch that reoccurs in each musical
phrase thus creates a series of echoes and returns internal to the antiphon. Moreover,
it invokes this pattern *between* antiphons, implicitly referring to the other antiphons
with finals on \(d4\) that share these familiar melodic gestures. However, at the same
time, the pattern is recast anew in each of the three musical phrases of “O pastor
animarium,” both internally, in that the phrases within the antiphon never repeat
exactly, and externally, in that they also do not duplicate a musical phrases from
another antiphon.

\(^{37}\) Bent and Pfau, *Hildegard of Bingen.*
\(^{38}\) Ibid.
Like both “O frondens virga” and “Caritas Abundat,” each of the three musical phrases in “O pastor animarium” creates its own melodic arc that adapts to the poem’s syntax and emphasizes significant words. For example, the first three poetic lines form an independent clause that concludes with a comma. Accordingly, the first musical phrase encompasses these three textual lines, closing on $d_4$, with the comma after line three. The melodic pattern, in resolving to $d$ after the third poetic line (“through which we all were created”) also marks a complete semantic unit. With the final tone, the opening description of Christ as “primal voice” in these first three lines ends, giving way to a call for salvation in poetic lines four through seven.

Musically striking in the first phrase is the length and expanse of the third part of the melodic matrix (III+). This melodic gesture begins in the middle of the melisma on “pima” (primal, first) and continues with the final word of the second poetic line, “vox”. On “vox,” the melody departs from the expected trajectory. Instead of concluding the phrase on $d_4$, the melodic gesture expands, unfolding on the word “creati” (created) in an even-note melisma, the longest in the piece thus far. Perhaps this more rhapsodic passage that generates new musical material parallels the creative voice to which the poem refers, the Word of God. Through this particular music-text alignment, the melody enhances different layers of poetic meaning. It underscores the grammatical phrasing, formally separates a complete figurative description of Christ from the remaining content, and expands to reflect the creative resonance of the Word.

Phrase two similarly begins with a leap from $d_4$ to $a_4$ and an ascent to $d_5$, however, it differs from phrase one most notably in its shorter length. The second
melodic gesture (II) in phrase two is condensed as compared to its counterpart in phrase one; instead of descending in step-wise motion as with gesture II in phrase one, gesture II in phrase two leaps downward from c5 to g4. Furthermore, the third melodic gesture (III) in phrase two presents a condensed version of III in phrase one. This third gesture, beginning on “ut” does not elaborate melismatically to the same degree as its counterpart in phrase one. Instead of repeatedly ascending and descending in the lower range (as in the melismas on “vox perquam omnes crea”), gesture III descends step-wise downward to a3 and skips up to resolve from c4 to d4.

The differences between phrases one and two—between the meandering melismas in phrase one and the melodic compressions in phrase two—reflect the poetic material. Phrase two that coincides with poetic lines four and five (“nunc tibi, tibi placeat/ut digneris,” “now let it please you, please you/to deign”) uses the same melodic template yet encompasses less poetic material. Therefore, it compresses, adapting to the fewer number of words and syllables. Between phrases one and two, then, one can see both repetition and difference: the melodic pattern established in phrase one repeats, though with leaps instead of step-wise motion in gesture II, and a shorter version of the lower-octave melismas that occur in phrase one, gesture III. These changes demonstrate the flexibility of the melodic patterns that can expand or compress to adapt to the words, yet still retain enough of the same ingredients to be recognizable as different forms of the same species.

Finally, phrase three adds another layer of recurrence as it repeats the opening gestures present in the two previous musical phrases. It resembles the arc of phrase one, gesture II, ascending to d with the melisma on “liberare”. In this way, the
parallel phrases, both of which culminate on d the piece’s highest note, underscore the link between the words “animarium” (“of souls”) and “liberare” (“free”). Christ, as the “shepherd of souls,” has the power to “free” these souls from their “miseries”. However, this parallel in both music and meaning ends with the next gesture in phrase three that does not continue on c as in phrase one, matrix two with the word “prima”. Instead, the melody in phrase three proceeds to the third matrix, in which it descends to middle c with a melisma on “miseriis” (miseries). The descent from d on “liberare” to middle c on “mieriis” parallels the words’ contrasting significances: the freedom granted by Christ, marked musically by the soaring melisma to the upper register, contrasts with human miseries, melodically expressed by the pitches that fall to the antiphon’s low register.

The differences between phrases one and three also heighten the opposition between the poetic meanings communicated in each. The melismas on “et o prima” (“and O primal”) in phrase one continue above a4, musically denoting this phrase’s affiliation with the “pastor” (“shepherd”), the text that falls within the antiphon’s upper octave; melodic range links the shepherd of souls with his primal voice. By contrast, the melisma in phrase three on “miseriis,” that lies in the analogous position to that on “o prima” in phrase one, is not analogous in pitch. This contrast aurally separates “miseries” both from “liberare,” as mentioned above, and moreover, from all of the preceding poetic material that describes the attributes and powers of the “primal voice”. Therefore, this quick descent to the lower register in phrase three denotes the switch from the subject, Christ, to the lowly humans he can redeem.
The final sixteen pitches of melodic gesture III, phrase three, however, are identical to those of phrase one. Besides providing closure by resting on the final, these duplicate endings also point to a semantic parallel between poetic lines one through three and the final lines, six and seven. As discussed, the words in the first phrase, “through which we were all created,” convey that the Word’s resonance brought forth creation. The theological corollary to this act is that the Word must be made flesh in order to redeem creation, in order to “free” humans from “their diseases”. Therefore, this poetic sequence of events reflects Hildegard’s exegesis of the Book of John. The “creative Word uttered by God in the beginning” inherently prefigures the coming of Christ who, as “the Word-made-flesh” is the only one who could “interpret” God’s original creative Word. Thus, the identical musical phrases mark this contingency in that the ending of the first phrase forecasts the final melisma and cadence just as the “primal voice” forecasts human redemption.

*Contemplation through Repetition, Concentration through Variance*

Each of the three antiphons contains subtly varied melodic motifs that are shifted, displaced, and altered by the words they articulate. Indeed, although Hildegard’s compositions contain recurring “melodic formulae” combined in a “mosaic-like fashion,” they are never predictable or systematic; instead, they transform the basic template upon which they are built, spinning it out in constant permutations. Because the melodic gestures repeat, they create a somewhat stable

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object on which to concentrate. The singer’s mind may therefore settle and become more still as he or she focuses upon the recurring melodic sequences. Moreover, these musical gestures allow the singer to return again and again to familiar ground. Each iteration of the melodic template grounds the singer in his or her experience because it echoes previous musical phrases; the music directs the singer to the present because it continually refers back to itself. At the same time, changes within the repetitions create complexity that requires the singer’s concentration. Therefore, through this combination of mental calm and absorption promoted by repetition, and concentration required by the incremental changes, the music is conducive to contemplation.

In that the antiphons create a contemplative activity through their form, they contribute to Hildegard’s duty to spiritually education her nuns. These motivic recurrences provide an opportunity for “ruminatio,” for digesting and re-digesting the sung melodies and text. Because similar words and parallel phrases occur over analogous melodic lines, the singer may deeply internalize the melody and the words it carries through the layers of meaning that the antiphons have established. In turn, since the melodies change, the singer must be alert, and therefore may more readily comprehend the biblical exegesis expressed in the poem. Therefore, through their structure, Hildegard’s liturgical pieces can connect the singer with the sacred. As vehicles for digesting the spiritual meaning behind the words they carry, they provide a concrete tool through which the singer may progress on the path to redemption. Hildegard’s musical theology in which the “canticle of praise” connects heaven and earth is thus born out in her own musical works. That is, just as music symbolically
reconciles God and human, so the words and music work upon the singer to convert and uplift him or her toward the divine.
Conclusion

Hildegard as a Musical Prophet

In Chapter 1, I explore Hildegard’s idea that the “soul is symphonic,” a concept that echoes Pythagorean and Boethian thought in which the “music of the spheres” is analogous to the harmony that unites the human body and soul. Within this rationale, humans operate by the same laws as the cosmos, a concept that Hildegard adapted and implemented in a Christian context. Taking her cue from early Christian patristic writers such as Clement of Alexandria and Aurelian of Reome, Hildegard proposes that it is not the impartial harmony of the cosmos, but the music of God and heaven that resonates in creation. From this musical and Christian cosmology, Hildegard claims that to truly manifest the celestial harmonies—for her, God’s message—humans must be like “trumpet[s],” “only sounding the mysteries of God”. Therefore, instead of espousing her own interpretations of God’s “mysteries,” Hildegard claims that she merely transmitted these messages from heaven as an instrument filled with God’s breath. 1

Interestingly, this musical metaphor of the body as a musical instrument for God’s word also resembles aspects of biblical prophets’ testimony. In each case, the individual does not state his or her subjective opinion but rather channels a message from a divine source. Thus, with her own claim to be a conduit for both celestial commands and harmonies, Hildegard formulates an identity based upon classical, Christian philosophies and prophetic behavior. In that she received heavenly visions

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of healing and reform, Hildegard can be aligned with biblical prophets; because many of these visions were “musically experienced and musically expressed,” Hildegard makes literal the figurative analogies between humans as instruments, resonating with the harmony of a cosmic power.² That is, by literally embodying music as a prophet would a divine command, Hildegard actualized the symbolic image of subordinating oneself to God as God’s metaphoric instrument. Her identity as a literal instrument, then, suggests that she did not think of herself as a composer, as do her modern listeners. Rather, she proclaimed a non-authoritative, non-subjective role in her music making. What is ironic from a removed, historical perspective, then, is that it was this very abnegation of compositional authority that allowed Hildegard to create music at all. By crediting any potentially individual artistry to God, Hildegard did not breach the strict limits on women’s expression. Rather, her society accepted her as a seer, blessed with a prophetic gift for which she was not responsible.

Once Hildegard received her music, she communicated it to others—including the nuns in her convent—to uplift and educate. Therefore, just as she blends music theory and biblical traditions in her formation of her own identity, so too does she bind these elements in posing the larger social need for and effect of celestial harmonies. For Hildegard, music was an essential part of Christian worship because it allowed singers to connect with God. Just as Hildegard received music from the Lord, she and her sisters sung these praises, sending them back to heaven. In this way, they could both communicate their devotion to God and mirror God’s musical activity on earth. Because this music extended both horizontally—to edify and unite a religious community—and vertically—to connect this community with heaven—it was

analogous to Christ’s role in reconciling humans with God. Therefore, when the Mainz interdict restricted her convent from singing, Hildegard vehemently argued for her convent’s right to sing during the Divine Office. Because music possessed this fundamentally redemptive function, not to sing was to stray from the path of redemption and to withhold the praises that were pleasing to God.

Following the tradition of Benedictine aural education, Hildegard believed music to be important on a practical as well as theological level. For Hildegard, including music in the Divine Office allowed the singer to chew and digest the sacred text that he or she sang. In that Hildegard’s own pieces combine melody and poems explicating theological concepts, they constitute “sonic meditations,” that enable this “chewing over”.3 Indeed, I would argue that the music’s purpose as a vehicle for digestion of sacred text is also reflected specifically in the music’s form. As I demonstrate in Chapter 3, the recurring, yet varied melodic patterns in Hildegard’s antiphons are conducive to heightened absorption of religious text in their very structure. In that their melodic patterns combine elements of both cyclicality and incremental change, they create a vehicle for digesting the spiritual meaning of the words and music.

Sacred Chant in the New Age: The Recent Revival of Hildegard’s Music

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Indeed, it is in part the celestial and meditative quality of Hildegard’s music that has attracted listeners to it in the past thirty years. Until the 1980s, it seemed that Hildegard’s music was relegated to the domain of academics and music specialists. Yet in 1979, the nuns at the convent of Saint Hildegard in Ebigen recorded a portion of the *Symphonia* pieces, thereby initiating a new wave of interest in Hildegard’s work.4 In the three years following this recording, five groups released collections of Hildegard’s music. Most notably the album, *A Feather on the Breath of God* that includes *Symphonia* pieces sung by the early music group, Gothic Singers, gained wide acclaim when it was released in 1982.5 Yet why was there a sudden market for pieces little recalled after Hildegard’s lifetime and known only to specialists in the twentieth century? Part of this rediscovery can be correlated with the growing academic fields of women’s studies and early music performance. However, I would also argue that another influence upon the seemingly sudden, wide-spread appeal of Hildegard’s music lies with the then developing “New Age” movement and its focus on spiritual musics.

In her work, *Constructing Musical Healing*, June Boyce-Tillman attributes part of the attention Hildegard’s pieces received in the 1980s to the New Age movement that claimed chant as a tool for spiritual healing. According to New Age principles, a new, more harmonious era will dawn if enough individuals “transform”

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themselves through diverse spiritual and therapeutic practices. In many New-Age belief systems, music is a crucial tool for this mental and spiritual transformation. Boyce-Tillman notes that “chanting traditions” became popular in New-Age groups that saw this music as conducive to meditative states. These chant types include “repetitive chants drawn from the Native American tradition,” Tibetan Buddhist overtone singing, and the recitation of “mantric symbols,” especially from Hindu texts such as the Chandogya Upanishad.

It was within this context that both Gregorian chant and Hildegard’s Symphonia were rediscovered by listeners, some of whom embraced these pieces for their ability to “induce transcendent experiences”. Like chanting in other spiritual traditions, Hildegard’s music might induce this state in part because of its minimal texture and its simple, recurring, melodic patterns that periodically depart from and return to a final tone. These cyclic, even hypnotic melodies might lull the conscious mind into tranquility, allowing the listener to access the unconscious mind that is otherwise inaccessible in daily thought. In turn, if they might provide spiritual insight through such “transcendent experiences,” these melodies could transform and heal the individual. Thus, some New-Age beliefs hold music to be a literal force that can act upon the singer or listener by bringing about a particular mental state. This faith in

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6 “New Thought and the New Age” in Perspectives on the New Age, ed. James Lewis and Gordon Melton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 18-19. Editor of Perspectives on the New Age, J. Gordon Melton, traces the New Age movement’s advent to the “late 1960s,” and defines it as a “revivalist religious impulse directed toward the esoteric/metaphysical/ Eastern groups and to the mystical strain in all religions”. The movement takes its name from the central belief that modern society, now plagued by ecological turmoil, poverty and violence, is on the brink of a New Age of “love, joy…and harmony”. Many of the institutions and ideas associated with the New Age focus upon holistic healing at the mental, physical, spiritual and ecological level.

7 Boyce-Tillman, 197.

8 Boyce-Tillman, 177 and 197.

9 Ibid.
music’s restorative power, to some degree, parallels Hildegard’s assertion of music’s ability to recall a lost connection with the divine. Furthermore, it is possible to see how Hildegard’s notion of music as a vehicle for digesting spiritual meaning relates to New-Age traditions that use music to reach a deeper, more profound spiritual experience.

My Interest in Hildegard’s Music

Although I too recognize meditative qualities in Hildegard’s music, I am also suspicious of using it, along with other chants from diverse traditions, to achieve certain states. To me, the practice of searching for “cosmic sounds” that are “different,” “deeper” and “associated with ancient traditions” seems to risk appropriating and “collecting” various cultural artifacts for one’s own purposes. Furthermore, employing different chanting traditions in order to gain access to a transcendent, spiritual essence seems to imply that all of these practices ultimately produce the same effect. In this way, Native American chants, Buddhist overtone singing, Hindu mantras and Gregorian chant are all reduced to the result they produce, and seem to be homogenized under the goal of spiritual improvement.

However, I do acknowledge the dept to New Age thought that in part, created a new interest in Hildegard’s music. In fact, it is likely that my own discovery of the Symphonia is at least indirectly linked to this broader, renewed interest in sacred

10 Boyce-Tillman, 172.; Chogyam Trungpa, Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism (Boston: Shambhala Publishing Company, 2002). I draw this notion of “collecting” spiritual traditions from the Tibetan-Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa. Reacting to what he saw as the New Age movement’s tendency to amass and assimilate spiritual cultures and practices, Chogyam Trungpa, coined the term “spiritual materialism” upon his arrival in the United States in 1970. Trungpa defines spiritual materialism as the practice of amassing various spiritual traditions. This materialism is both detrimental and deceptive because although the individual believes herself to be engaged in a profound spiritual search, she is actually distracting herself from embarking on a spiritual path by surveying and, in a sense, shopping for spiritual practices. Here, I have applied Trungpa’s “spiritual materialism” specifically to sacred or healing music.
chant. However, despite the positive aspects of this modern focus on diverse spiritual music traditions, I disagree with some aspects of New Age thought that helped bring the Symphonia into the spotlight. Furthermore, although Hildegard’s philosophy has some confluences with New Age principles, it is ultimately grounded in a particular form of Christianity from a particular time. That is, for her seemingly modern beliefs, Hildegard was nonetheless a strict religious reformer who advocated heightened clerical discipline and disciplined devotion to God. Therefore, careful consideration of the particularities of the spiritual traditions one discusses is necessary when comparing sacred beliefs or practices.

Indeed, at the risk of reducing this music in the manner I have just questioned, however, my own interest in Hildegard’s Symphonia is at least in part because these pieces allow for a process that I find to be analogous to the practice of Buddhist samatha meditation. In this form of meditation, the practitioner focuses upon a single object, most commonly the breath. When the mind wanders, the practitioner notes this departure and without judgment returns to the breath. Over time, this meditation allows the practitioner to train his or her mind; the mind grows increasingly still as it is able to stay with the present moment.

Since I began practicing this meditation two years ago, I have found that I can apply it in daily activities. For example, when I am washing the dishes I can focus upon this act and when I note that I am thinking about the past or worrying about the future, I can bring my mind back to the present. Furthermore, I have discovered that music too can be a vehicle for this form of concentration. (In fact, technically any activity or any music could provide this opportunity). However, for me cyclic, though
nuanced music is more amenable to applying samatha practice in daily life because it presents a direct parallel to following the breath; both experiences allow the individual to return repeatedly to similar, though also ever-changing phenomena. That is, although the breath may at first seem a repetitive, even monotonous object on which to place one’s attention, it is actually constantly changing with each recurrence. Similarly, the melodic patterns in Hildegard’s antiphons provide an object upon which to focus one’s mind that is both iterated and constantly recast. Thus, singing or listening to Hildegard’s music allows me to become absorbed in these patterns of change and return so that the melodies become a manner by which to train the mind to the present experience.

However, I emphasize that these phenomena are similar, not the same; I would not argue that Hildegard’s music is samatha meditation or that it could be a substitute for this practice. Rather, I suggest a parallel in these two distinct entities. In their divergent sources, they nevertheless both allow the opportunity to focus upon a simultaneously simple, though subtly complex process. Furthermore, for me this concentration is not aimed at achieving an altered state of consciousness or trance, but rather in being more fully present and discovering the ever-renewed character of even seemingly redundant, daily activities. For me, the two activities are complementary because they both afford a heightened absorption in the object at hand and allow the mind to settle. My own experience of Hildegard’s music thus differs from that of Hildegard’s sisters, who connected to the sacred through both the symbolic joining of heaven and earth in music, and the practice of ruminatio. While recognizing these
fundamental differences, I nevertheless see Hildegard’s music as a form that can lead the willing singer or listener to awareness and clarity of mind.
In Appendix A1 I apply Pfau’s three-part “D matrix” in my own analysis of each of the four musical phrases in “O frondens virga”.

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1 Marianne Pfau, “Mode and melody types in Hildegard von Bingen’s ‘Symphonia,’” *Sonus* 11/1 (January 1990), 58.
Appendix A2: Melodic Analysis of “Caritas abundant” with transcription by Marian Pfau

In Appendix A2, I apply Pfau’s three-part “D matrix” in my own analysis of each of the five musical phrases in “Caritas abundat”.

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Appendix A3: Melodic Analysis of Hildegard of Bingen’s “O pastor animuarium,” transcribed by Pozzi Escot

In Appendix A3 I apply Pfau’s “D matrix” in my own analysis of “O pastor animarium”.

Bibliography


Discography


Compositions

Compositional Note

With the aim of connecting Hildegard’s work to my compositions, I have used material from some of her written visions in the titles and vocal text of my pieces. I have chosen only short passages and fragments from Hildegard’s visionary texts in order to communicate an impression or sense of her words. Furthermore, removing (some) elements of my own subjectivity from the music, I have selected pitch sets from Hildegard’s antiphons, “Caritas abundat,” and “O pastor animarium”. I manipulated these pitch sets—through inverting and folding the sequence order, inverting the intervals, and changing pitch durations—to create new works that nonetheless contain a trace of Hildegard’s original chants. Finally, my aspirations for the works I have written are informed by Hildegard’s purpose for her music. Intrigued by the possibility of plainchant as a vehicle for contemplation, I have employed techniques in my compositions—repetition, circularity and slight change over time—to create an environment in which the listener’s mind might begin to slow down, or perhaps become still.
"These are True Visions Flowing from God"

Quarter note=52

Text by Hildegard of Bingen translated into English by Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop

Katherine Seabill

Soprano

1. And Behold! In the forty-third year

2. Spoken: say and write what you see and hear

Alto

1. Et ecce quadragesimo tertio

2. Diet et scriba quae uides et audis

Piano

S

course as I was gazing with great fear and trembling attention

A

temporinus cum sim anno cum celestis visioni timore et tremula

Pno.
Say and Write

at a heavenly vision
but as you see and hear

intention inharo, uidi maximum splendorum

In which resounded a heavenly voice saying:
on high in heavenly places

ad me dicens:
It happened that
In the eleven-hundred and forty-first year

Factum est
in millesimo centesimo quadragesimo primo

of the incarnation
heaven was opened and a fiery light

Fili Dei Iesu Christi incarnations anno
maxime coronationis ignem lumen
of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain

totum cerebrum meum transfudit et totum cor

and inflamed my whole heart

I sensed
in myself wonderfully the power and mystery of secret and admirable visions from

virtutem autem et mysterium secretum et admirandum

my childhood that is from the age of five up to that time

But the visions I same I did not perceive

tempore illo cum quinqueannis esse usque usque ad praesens
Say and Write

S
in dreams or sleep or delirium or by the eyes of the body

A
nec eas in somnis nec dormiens nec in phrenes: nec corporis oculis

S
or by the ears of the outer self

A
aut auribus exterioris hominis
Or in hidden places
But I received them while awake and seeing

nee in obsitis locis percipi
Sed eus uigiaris et

with pure mind
circumspecta in pura mente
Say and Write

S
and the eyes and ears of the inner self in open places

A
oculis et auribus interioris hominis in apertis locis

Pno.
But I refused to write for a long time through doubt and bad opinion

dubitatem et malamopinionem

until laid low by the scourge of God I fell upon a bed of sickness

quosque aertitudinis flagello Dei depressa caderem
Then compelled at last by many illnesses
I set my hand to writing.

And I wrote these things
by the secret.
Say and Write

mysteries of God. And again I heard a voice from Heaven

Et iterum audiui uocem caelo

saying to me:

mihi dicenat:
Say and Write

'Say out therefore, and write thus!'

"Clama ergo et scriba siel!"
"On the Origin of Life"

Katherine Scahill

Text by Hildegard von Bingen translated by Robert Cunningham

And I saw with the mystery of God... In
the midst of the sou thern breeze a won drous ly beau ti ful i mage
It had a human form and its countenance was of such beauty and rai...
Hildegard Vision One

distance that I could have more easily gazed at the sun than at that face.
broad golden ring en circled his head. And
B: Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

S

in this ring above the head

A

And in this ring above the

Pno.
B: Cl.

Vln.
pizz.

Vc.
pizz

S
like that of an elderly man

A
like that of man

Pno.
Hildegard Vision One

B. Cl.: 

Vln.: 

Vc.: 

S: 

A: 

Pno.: 

Wings rose above the should.
And I heard a voice from heaven saying to...
Hildegard: Vision One

B. Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

S

A

Pno.

I glean and I burn

I glean in the waters

p
B: Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

S

A

Pno.

in the sun, moon and stars

With

in the sun, moon and stars

With
Hildegard Vision One

B: Cl. 

Vln. 

Vc. 

S 

turn ing green 

A 

the air lives by turn ing green 

Pno.
Hildegard Vision One

B: Cl.

Vln.
sul ponticello

Vc.
sul ponticello

S

the waters flow

A

bloom being in bloom being as if a live

Pno.
wa ters flow the stars give
en kin dled en kin dled
Hildegard Vision One

B: Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

clear light

A

Pno.

beam

ing

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"Vision Three: The Universe and Its Symbolism"

Quarter Note = 60

Katherine Scabill

Violin

Cello

Spoken:

And again I heard a voice from heaven

Soprano

Sung:

Et, et et inter

Alto

Piano

Vln

Ve.

S

Saying to me And again I heard

A

Pno
is a demonstrated is

a voice from heaven saying to me: The visible and temporal

is a manifestation of the invisible
is a demonstrated is

eternal which is demonstrated by

the vision you are perceiving

Quarter note = Half note
is a demonstrated is

Sung:

is visible and eternal of which man fete thin is

Spoken:

Deus qui erat in sua voluntate condidit ea ad cognitionem

et horum hominis sui creavit non solum autem ea quae visibilia et temporalia
Vln.

S

Sunt in ipis ostendens, Sed etiam illa quae invisibilia et aeterna sunt in eis manifesta.
is a demonstrated is

Sung:

are the per ceiv i
"Then I Saw"

Katherine Scahill

Piano

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