

VISIONS MADE SOUND (review of CD launch concert)

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The current cult of Hildegard of Bingen is quite extraordinary. But, then, she was an extraordinary woman. A prolific composer, visionary, writer theologian and scientist, she brought profound insight to subjects as varied as the nature of the universe and female sexuality. No doubt the attraction in recent times may stem from the unusual status she holds as a 12th-century woman composer, a rare enough phenomenon, all the more impressive because of the sheer quality of her music.

Some 20 years after Gothic Voices' bestselling recording of some of her Latin monophonic songs, Sinfonye, an excellent all female ensemble, has embarked on recording the complete Hildegard, launched with a *son et lumière* spectacular at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Some of the illustrations to Hildegard's books of prophetic visions were projected onto a backdrop while readings from her writings linked 13 of her songs in a display of her creative genius. Angels' wings, stars and flames adorned striking circular or oval patterns populated by strange, composite figures. The readings, by Rose English, described the visions equally graphically and providing a gentle, logical frame work for the music.

The four women singers of Sinfonye were joined by the Oxford Girls' Choir. These young girls have clearly grasped the essence of Hildegard's often expansive and highly intricate melodies, their voices agile and sweet toned. Victoria Couper sang her solo with musical maturity that would knock spots off most boy trebles. The range of melody in terms of both pitch and style is considerable, one of the most extreme examples here being *O vos angeli*. This suddenly soars into the vocal stratosphere in a realisation in sound of the visionary qualities of a woman who claimed to have had no formal music training. Vocal drones and the accompaniment of the hurdy-gurdy added a foil for these ecstatic melodic lines in imaginative and compelling ways.

Tess Knighton