

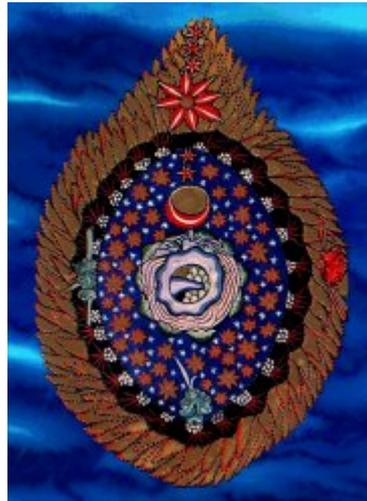
HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

THE SYMPHONY OF THE HARMONY OF CELESTIAL REVELATIONS

a sound-vision event created by Stevie Wishart for

SINFONYE

with the Oxford Girls' Choir
narrator - Jane Lapotaire



Thursday 25 June 1998, 7.45pm
Queen Elizabeth Hall

PRODUCED BY
SERIOUS

Royal Festival Hall
Queen Elizabeth Hall
Purcell Room



PROGRAMME

1. from whence they came (unde quocumque)
2. milk and honey beneath her tongue (favus distillans)
3. the firstwoman (deus enim in prima muliere)
4. o energy of wisdom (o virtus sapientie)
5. o fiery spirit (o ignees spiritus)
6. living-light angels (o gloriosissimi lux vivens angeli)
7. but the devil mocked (sed diabolus)
8. the devil's suggestion (o tu illustrata)
9. o radiant mother (o clarissima mater)
10. o orzchis ecclesia
11. ursula's virgins (et ideo puelle)

12. **place of the ancient heart (o vos angeli)**
13. **charity abounds (caritas habundat)**
14. **song to ecclesia (nunc gaudeant)**



As a young child, Hildegard was gifted as a visionary; "a brightness so great that (her) soul trembled" she later wrote of a vision she experienced at the age of three, and this gift remained throughout her long life. It was not until she was in her forties that she was bold enough to write down her visions, combining her visionary talents with more scientifically based treatises and books on medicine, as well as composing over 70 songs. She became famous throughout Europe as a writer and composer. The monk Volmar of St Disibod was her copy-editor until his death in 1173, only six years before her own. Her books were further expanded by her extensive correspondence with popes, statespeople like Eleanor of Aquitaine and Thomas à Becket.

Despite strong opposition, Hildegard founded her own independent convent at Rupertsberg, near Bingen, which was consecrated in 1152. She founded a second community at Eibingen in about 1165, which is the site of the present-day community at the Abtei St Hildegard.

Stevie Wishart

"it is reported that, exalted, you see many things in heaven and record them in your writing, and that you bring forth the melody of a new song..."

Odo of Soissons
University of Paris (1148-9)

"in my first formation, even in my mother's womb God raised me up with the breath of life. He fixed this vision in my soul ... and in the third year of my life I saw so great a brightness that my soul trembled; yet because of my infant condition I could express nothing of it. But in my eighth year I was offered to God, given over to a spiritual way of life ... I kept seeing this way until my fortieth year. Then in that same vision I was forced by a great pressure of pains to manifest what I had seen and heard ... I also brought forth songs with their melody, in praise of God and the saints, without being taught by anyone, and I sang them too, even though I had never learned either musical notation or any kind of singing."

Hildegard von Bingen

The music - *Symphonia*

I was introduced to the music of Hildegard of Bingen by Christopher Page, when searching for songs for female voices. The desire to realise something of Hildegard's creative genius has been evolving since Vivien joined the group

in 1989 and the concept has always been to perform those songs from SYMPHONIA which can be linked to Hildegard's visions.

As a nun, visionary, scientist, writer, healer, composer and theologian, Hildegard (1098-1179) experienced mystical visions whose sensual colour and dazzling imagery transcend centuries between her time and ours. The visions are expressed through intensely detailed descriptions - almost a stream of consciousness - and visualised in painted miniatures contained in the three manuscripts entitled Scivias (finished 1151), the Book of Life's Merits (1158-1163), and the Book of Divine Works (1163-1173). Once immersed in their intensity, I freely gathered a sequence inspired by the themes of creation, angels and celestial harmony, Eve and Mary, St Ursula, and the divine figures of Caritas (Love), Ecclesia (the Church) and Sapientia (Sophia or Wisdom).

Hildegard's songs are all collected in a work she called "The symphony of the harmony of celestial revelations" which in its poetry, melody and song-form is utterly unique. Our performance of the songs is mainly based on the copy of *Symphonia* which Hildegard supervised at her convent on the Rupertsberg, near Bingen in Germany and has been dated to around 1175. It is now in Dendermonde, Belgium, in the library of St Pieters & Paulusbij where it is known as Codex 9. A useful comparison is the more complete Riesen (or Great) codex compiled after Hildegard's death at the same convent (c.1180-1190, and now in Wiesbaden, Landebibliothek, Hs.2).

In referring directly to the original song notation, the eye is immediately drawn to the ornateness of the melodies, their soaring vocal range, and the heightening of the lyrics with various ornamental signs. This is anything but "plainsong". The lyrics are in free verse and have all the expressive force of Hildegard's visionary inspiration. Today's reverberant recordings often distance us from the words, which in fact were probably designed for quite intimate listening.

Although ambiguous, details such as the musical ornaments need to be clearly heard as they so often bring out the sound of the words - the sound of speech in song. Among Hildegard's favourite ornaments are the so-called liquescent (or liquid) signs used when symbols are joined by two consonants (Favus disti//ans, O vos **ang**eli) or when singing a diphthong (Nunc **gau**deant). These details make us enjoy and linger on the sounds in certain words, and so the composer can emphasise their expression and importance.

Certain notes of the melody are written with descriptive signs, the so-called *quillisma*, *pressus* and *oriscus*, whose shapes suggest how they should be sung (quivering, sliding, lingering), bringing out certain parts of the phrase. Our informed musical sensibility has to compensate for the limits of the written page and distance of the centuries.

The **hurdy-gurdy** (called *symphonia* in medieval Latin or *organistrum* in monastic circles such as in Germany) is based on carvings of guitar-shaped instruments that appear from around 1200, and were most likely in use some time before. This design is based on the two-person instrument like the one in the famous doorway of Santiago de Compostela, c.1188. It seems then, that towards the end of Hildegard's life, a less cumbersome single-person hurdy-gurdy was coming into use. Its portability and labour-saving technology were as welcome then as now!

English texts of the songs are taken from St Hildegard von Bingen: *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum*, edited and translated by Barbara Newman.

SINFONYE and Stevie Wishart

SINFONYE, founded in 1987 by Stevie Wishart, was conceived as an ensemble combining improvisatory skills derived from traditional music with performance practices recreated from historical research.

Springing from explorations into musical iconography at a time when north Africa and European cultures were abundantly interchanging, Stevie is using multimedia ideas for particular repertoires, such as the songs of Tristan and Iseult, and Hildegard. This year we perform the music and visions of Hildegard in Europe and the U.S. in German, Dutch, Spanish and Norwegian, in venues ranging from medieval castles to modern amplified theatres. Since Hildegard was a nun by the age of fifteen having entered her Abbey when only eight, the sound of girl's voices seems appropriate. For our recording of Hildegard in 1996 we were joined by members of the Oxford Girls' Choir and are now enjoying singing together live.

Sinfonye's latest CD *Red Iris*, pioneers the CD Plus format in the form of a full-length audio CD with a visual and sound interactive for CD ROM. On the screen there are journeys through the 14th century Italian frescos with stories associated with the music - instrumental pieces called *istampitte*. A live version is being produced for 1999.

As a composer/performer on violin, hurdy-gurdy, voice and electronics Stevie uses medieval and contemporary extremes. 1997 commissions included an extended work for the Oxford Girls' Choir entitled *Secret Spaces*, as well as music for *Dissect the Body* with the Sydney quartet *Machine for Making Sense*. She returns to Sydney in August to finish mixing a studio-based CD *Azeruz* with original songs performed by musicians from Sinfonye and others.

In 1998 a recently completed commission (from ANAT and Australia Council) was for the sound installation *UT* with the artist Joan Grounds at the Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney. *UT* uses medieval music from the turn of the last millennium and fast-forwards to our own time and place with an interactive and computer controlled sound-design looking toward 2000. A second stage was a radio piece for the ABC called *Re-inventing the wheel* and suggests comparisons between then and now in sound and words. The final stage will be in the form of a semi-staged opera for live performance.

Vivien Ellis joined Sinfonye in 1989. She also works in contemporary, folk and improvised music, dance-theatre and jazz. She sings with the medieval ensemble *The Dufay Collective*, folk/medieval duo *Alba* with fiddle player Giles Lewin, and Keith Tippett's big band *Tapestry*. As a music educator Vivien Ellis has taught in a wide variety of settings over many years, working regularly at the Dartington Music Summer School. This August she will run a workshop on the songs of Hildegard at *THE BIG SING* festival in Derbyshire.

Sara Stowe, soprano and keyboard player won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music, where she won the Raymond Russell Harpsichord prize. She then studied singing in Italy, working with Luciano Berio. She specialises in early and new music and has performed and recorded with Matthew Spring, The Academy of Ancient Music, Chalemie, the New London Consort, the Broadside Band, James Wood, Gemini and Singcircle.

Oxford Girls' Choir was founded by Richard Vendome in 1984 to give girls a vocal training comparable to that provided for boys by the collegiate choirs.

The choir has 60 members aged 8-18 who work in groups according to their age and experience. Associated with the choir is the Oxford Prep Choir, which teaches boys and girls aged 4-8 to explore the world of music.

In addition to singing the standard repertoire, the girls work in areas associated with women such as opera-ballet and the Venetian ospedale tradition. It gives regular performances and tours abroad; sacred music, opera, historical entertainments with dance and costume, and jazz are all part of the choir's activities.

OGC has also commissioned or premièred many new works, including Judith Bingham: *The Ghost of Combermere Abbey*, Howard Haigh: *The Oxford Mummings*, Kenneth Leaper: *Maids of Masura*, Francis Pott: *Nunc Natus Est Altissimus*, Roderick Williams *Alice in Wonderland*, and Stevie Wishart: *Secret Spaces*.

The **Oxford Girls' Choir** will present Roderick William's production of Purcell's *Dido & Æneas* at the PURCELL ROOM on Wednesday 2nd September 1998 at 7.30pm, starring Emily Levy as Dido and Roderick Williams as Æneas, with period costume, instruments and dance, choreographed by Nancy Walker and directed by Richard Vendome

top row: Sara Stowe,
Stevie Wishart, Emily
Levy
middle row: Clemmie
Franks, Vivien Ellis,
Victoria Couper
bottom row: Georgia
Black, Katherine
Taylor, Camilla
Scarlett, Louise
Eekelaar

photo: Pierre Chan



recent recordings by Sinfonye:

- Hildegard: Symphonia with Oxford Girls' Choir (Celestial Harmonies 13127/2)
- Red Iris, melodies from Tuscany, Stevie Wishart, fiddle, hurdy gurdy, Jim Denley and Pedro Esteban percussion. CD Plus interactive designed by Kate Richards (Glossa Records GCD 920701)
- Dissect the Body, Machine for Making Sense (Split Records 06) AZERUZ, new songs with Chris Abrahams and members of Sinfonye (in preparation)

Credits

Director - Stevie Wishart

Musical Director, Oxford Girls' Choir - Richard Vendome

Additional vocal coaching - Vivien Ellis

Technical production - Nigel March

Administration - .Judv Greenwell and Marv Taylor

Programme design - Richard Vendome and MiloHedge Ltd.
Thanks to the parents of the Oxford Girls' Choir, especially Sarah Franks for
providing rehearsal facilities and refreshments

[updated 25 May 2002]