

***Sibyl of the Rhine* – the life and music of Hildegard of Bingen**



24 October 1999, Holy Redeemer Church, Chelsea
26 October 1999, Sarum College, Salisbury

Oxford Girls' Choir directed by Richard Vendome and Penelope Martin-Smith

An audio-visual exploration of the life of this remarkable woman: mystic, poet, scientist, theologian and composer. The programme reveals the whole gamut of her output, from the musical play which she wrote for the edification of the novices in her Benedictine abbey to ecstatic melodies which were revolutionary in her own day and still astonish us 900 years later. Voices and medieval instruments combine to create a rich soundscape of the 12th-century world.

Kyrie eleison

"Hildegard's journal" (24th December 1152)

O magnum mysterium! It is my great joy that townspeople from Bingen can flock to our Midnight Mass this year, and that guests will arrive for the Ordo Virtutum on the 27th [of December]. The consecration of our virginity is our holy power, our protection, and our opportunity to live educated, informed, and spiritual lives. We can protect ourselves with walls of ritual that allow us to express our fervent longing for the rightful Bridegroom in sensuous colour and song. So long as we live our lives in the spirit of contempt for worldly things, we do not need the protection of walls of stone. Let us be our own keepers of the gate.

Deus enim in prima muliere (Victoria Couper)

O viridissima virga

Hail, O greenest branch, sprung forth in the airy breezes of the prayers of the saints. So the time has come that your sprays have flourished; Hail, hail to you, because the heat of the sun has exuded from you like the aroma of balm. For the beautiful flower sprang from you which gave all parched perfumes their aroma. And they have radiated anew in their full freshness.

Whence the skies bestowed dew upon the pasture, And all the earth was made joyful because her womb brought forth

corn, And because the birds of the firmament built their nests in her. Then there was harvest ready for Man and a great rejoicing of banqueters, Whence, O sweet Virgin, no joy is lacking in you. Eve rejected all these things. Now let there be praise to the Highest.

O orzchis ecclesia (Clementine Franks)

O boundless Ecclesia, girded with divine arms and adorned with jacinth, you are the fragrance of the wounds of nations and the city of sciences. O how you are anointed amid noble sound, and you are a sparkling gem.

O vos angeli

O you angels who guard the peoples, whose form gleams in your face, and O you archangels who receive the souls of the just, and you virtues, powers, principdoms, dominations, and thrones, who are counted in the secret number five, and O you cherubim and seraphim, seal of the secrets of God: Praise be to you, who behold in the fountain the little place of the ancient heart. For you see the inner strength of the Father, which breathes from his heart like a face. Praise be to you, who behold in the fountain the little place of the ancient heart.

A letter from Hildegard to Abbot Adam of Ebrach (before 1166)

He who is says: the sun shines and sends forth its rays. And a certain man, a friend of the sun, had a garden in which he wanted to plant many herbs and flowers. And the sun, in the fire of its rays, sent heat upon those herbs and flowers, and the dew and the rain gave the moisture of greenness to them.... Now you, O Father, understand these words spoken to you, for you have the highest of callings as God's representative. Listen, therefore: the grace of God shines like the sun and sends its gift in various ways: in wisdom, in greenness, and in moisture.

O nobilissima viriditas (Penelope Martin-Smith)

Ordo virtutum (sections IV – end)

"Hildegard's journal" (27th December 1152)

In the apocalyptic vision of St John, the great battle between Good and Evil shows itself in the most cosmic of terms – in seals, scrolls, beasts, and disasters beyond our normal imagination. But unless we are the Painter with the entire firmament for a canvas, or the Angel floating in the empyrean who understands all the music of the heavens as well as the music of the spheres, these powerful visions from the Creator might even strike us dumb, blind our eyes, or seal our lips for ever. The only solution for those of us who wait zealously, our listening made acute by the Fear of God, is found in the prologue to St John's Gospel.

I could not have foreseen the extent to which each sister took on the character of the Virtue she acted in the Ordo Virtutum. I think it was in the nature of the particular music each woman sang. I hadn't really planned it that way; I just wrote down what I heard with my inner ear.

As I rehearsed the sisters, the constant hesitation and repetition prevented me from appreciating the consistency of the music for each. Humility, for instance, sings highly ornamented melodies; her decorations are complex and difficult to sing. On the other hand, the triumphant cry of Victory, immediately after the Virtues have bound Satan, sounds like a peal of bells high in the firmament. But Chastity's music is lower-pitched, with a more insistent quality than the others. It is she who most directly confronts the Devil.

What a terrifying Devil Volmar turned out to be! He learned his speeches with me, separate from the women's rehearsals, where I myself acted the Devil in a low voice, much to amusement of all! Volmar had a way of spitting his words out, almost overlapping the last notes of the singer he followed. But nothing was as startling as the two piercing upward leaps at the beginning of the last chorus of the Virtues. Those [sisters] who could manage these intervals... were almost ecstatic in their accomplishment.

Et ideo puelle

And therefore these girls sustained by noble men are the flag-bearers of the royal child of immaculate nature.

Unde quocumque (Victoria Couper and Georgia Black)

Vos flores rosarum

Blessed are you roses in the streaming of your blood, Fragrant with supreme delight, Distilling the purchase that flowed from the innermost Heart of the purpose of Him who abides before time.