

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN
SYMPOSIUM

SALISBURY
OCTOBER 1999

The music of Hildegard:
from source to performance

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Hildegard is such a fascinating historical figure; that is why we're here, of course. The breadth of her life and work, and the fact that much of it has come down to us, enable us to ask the sort of questions which will be considered here this week. But with Hildegard, as with all historical research, we should remember the words of L. P. Hartley 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there' (*The Go-Between*) and of Christopher Haigh, the Tudor historian, 'History is what we don't throw away'. It is easy to create a mental picture from secondary sources: Hildegard on the environment or Hildegard on gender as retold by an enthusiast keen to enlist the aid of such a beguiling historic figure, an enthusiast perhaps not so hot on twelfth-century theology! Do we need to be told, in Margot Fassler's otherwise excellent chapter 'Composer and Dramatist' in *Voice of the Living Light* that 'At the Mass... nuns... could not officiate or serve as priests'? We certainly need a theological context as well as a musical one in order to understand her music. My first experience of her music was probably the same as most of yours – the Gothic Voices recording 'A Feather on the Breath of God', now 15 years old. Later recordings, especially those by Sequentia, directed by the late Barbara Thornton, gave a different slant to the Hildegard repertoire.

From my days at the Music Faculty at Oxford I have worked on and off with Stevie Wishart, director of the medieval group Sinfonye, who has had a long-standing ambition to record the complete works. We have both transcribed and performed Hildegard, always taking the Dendermonde codex 9 or the Reisen codex as our starting point. Both these sources are notated in early German neumes, a form of notation which dates from between St.Gall neumes and the more familiar Gothic neumes. The Dendermonde source is available in an excellent 1995 facsimile (published by Almere) with a useful introduction by Peter van Poucke; in 1158 (when she was 60) Hildegard wrote in the preface to her *Liber Vitae Meritorum* that she had been working on the *Symphoniae* (songs) for eight years. Did she mean she had finished it by then? If not, she had certainly done so by 1175, because that is when a codex, almost certainly the Dendermonde codex, was sent from Hildegard's convent at Rupertsberg, near Bingen, to the monks at the Abbey of Villers in Belgium. I say 'almost certainly' because on f.173v of the codex are the words 'Liber Sancte Marie de Villari' in a 12th century hand. The Reisen codex (Great codex) is slightly more complete, and seems to have been assembled at the convent shortly after Hildegard's death (c.1180-1190). It also includes her other musical work, the didactic *Ordo Virtutum* (or Play of Virtues).

Nowhere does Hildegard refer to herself as a *composer*. She writes: '...I only *received* what I heard with my inner ear' and: 'When the words come, they are mere empty shells without the music. They *live as they are sung*, for the words are the body and the music the spirit'. This seems to suggest that the words with the music, (the music with the words) form in her mind, as if dictated from heaven. Indeed, the idea of Hildegard as a vessel for the will of God permeates her whole existence: many of her letters, especially those critical of the recipient, begin with the awesome words 'He Who Is says:' (perhaps followed by 'You have been found wanting' or some similar reproach).

Most of us are familiar with the image from the *Liber Divinorum Operum* (c.1240) (*show*) of Hildegard receiving a fiery stream of divine inspiration through an open window. She is waiting to record her vision on a wax tablet, the equivalent of our

modern notebook (centre), with Volmar making a fair copy on parchment (left) and Richardis standing behind her (right):



Other images are found in the pages of *Scivias*, along with the two best-known passages in which Hildegard refers to her musical ‘sight’:

In the third year of my life I saw so great a brightness that my soul trembled... I kept seeing this way until my fortieth year when I was forced by such pressure of pains to write about the visions I had seen and heard. I brought forth songs with their melody, in praise of God and the saints, without being taught by anyone; I sang them too, even though I had never learned musical notation nor any kind of singing.

Underneath all the texts, all the sacred psalms and canticles, these watery varieties of sounds and silences, terrifying, mysterious, whirling and sometimes gestating and gentle as somehow be felt in the pulse, ebb and flow of the music that sings in me. My new song must float like a feather on the breath of God.

‘The past is a foreign country’, and to appreciate it we must learn its language and try to understand its history and culture. How are we to enter it, a country so foreign that we have just celebrated the 900th anniversary of Hildegard’s birth? Must we understand the whole of Hildegard’s creative work as ‘received’ from God, the *Scivias* images, the poetry, theology, natural philosophy, music, and so on? On the eve of the third millennium, in this post-Renaissance, post-Enlightenment, and for many people post-Christian age, we might easily misunderstand the nature of Hildegard’s creativity, and see a line between her ‘work’ and her ‘vision’ which isn’t really there. A modern

archetype of human society (and by this I mean post-Renaissance western society) is that of the ‘self’, people like us with ideas of our own role in society: ideas of our own skills and worth, of our uniqueness as individuals. Here the ‘foreignness’ of Hildegard and the her age can seem almost absolute, unless one leads a religious life of the sort she herself would recognise, a life which includes a strong element of contemplation, a vessel into which ‘the One Who Is’ pours his creative spirit.

‘History is what we don’t throw away’: are we to believe that Hildegard ‘brought forth songs with their melody’ from her fortieth year? Where are the songs of the 1140s? Do they form the basis of the later corpus? Did Hildegard ‘receive’ more music that has come down to us? This is what actually survives:

1. The play: *Ordo Virtutum* (1152). This consists of more than 80 sections, melodies long or short depending on the drama, frame by opening and closing processions. Each sister played the part of one of the Virtues, and although the music is simple there is some clear use of characterisation. The Devil, having no place in the heavenly order, has only a spoken part:
2. The liturgical pieces: *Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum*. There are 58 items in the liturgical cycle in the Dendermonde manuscript and 77 items in the Reisenberg manuscript. 56 of these are common to both sources.

For the Mass there are 9 pieces: 7 sequences, and Alleluia and a Kyrie.

For the office there are 68 pieces: 43 antiphons, 18 responsories, 3 hymns and 4 other devotional works.

The structure of the *Symphonia* is unusual in that Hildegard has apparently ordered the pieces in hierarchical importance from her own theological standpoint: in particular it illustrates the esteem in which she holds the Virgin Mary. She also gives emphasis to local saints Rupert, Disibod and Ursula.

1. Songs to the Father and Son (3)
2. Songs to the Blessed Virgin Mary (12)
3. Songs to the Holy Spirit (5)
4. Songs to the Celestial Hierarchy (18)
 1. Angels (2)
 2. Patriarchs and prophets (2)
 3. Apostles (2)
 4. St John Evangelist (2)
 5. St Disibod (3)
 6. Martyrs (2)
 7. Confessors (2)
 8. St Rupert (3)
5. Songs to the virgins, widows and innocents (5)
6. Songs to St Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins (13)
7. Songs to Ecclesia (2)

Today we will attempt to understand the musical world and language of Hildegard through a single work, the responsory *O vos angeli*, tracing it from the ‘foreign language’ of the Dendermonde codex through to modern notation and finally to

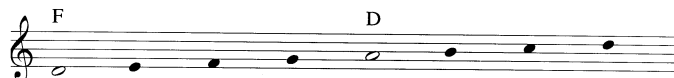
performance. Here I acknowledge some ideas from a former student, Hester Briant, of St Annes College, Oxford, who made an analysis of this piece under my supervision.

At this point it is important to keep in mind that, whether or not we accept Hildegard’s claim that she “brought forth songs with their melody.... without being taught by anyone” and “had never learned musical notation nor any kind of singing”, her musical language, if not its precise vocabulary, was clearly rooted in the conventions of her day.

To provide some historical context: this musical language, based on the western system of eight modes (or “tones”), four “authentic” and four “plagal” (prefixed “hypo”), had evolved from Greek and then Byzantine antecedents, and was established in the Carolingian Empire (essentially modern France and Germany) by the mid 8th century. Here are the eight modes with their Final (key note) and Dominant (reciting note, sometimes called “Tenor”, not to be confused with the modern use of the term). Three centuries later the theorist Guido d’Arezzo (995–1050) gives us some insight into the emotive qualities of the different modes:

mode	Name	Final	Dominant	Guido “quality”
1	Dorian	D	A	serious
2	Hypodorian	D	F	sad
3	Phygian	E	C	mystic
4	Hypophrygian	E	A	harmonious
5	Lydian	F	C	happy
6	Hypolydian	F	A	devout
7	Mixolydian	G	D	angelical
8	Hypomixolydian	G	C	perfect

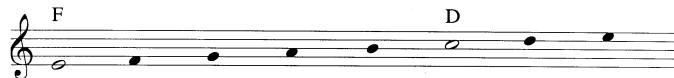
1 - DORIAN



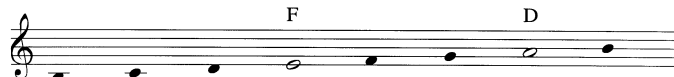
2 - HYPODORIAN



3 - PHRYGIAN



4 - HYPOPHRYGIAN



5 - LYDIAN



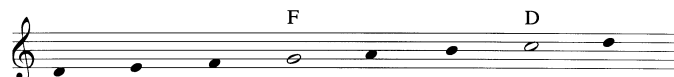
6 - HYPOLYDIAN



7 - MIXOLYDIAN



8 - HYPOMIXOLYDIAN



To the Greeks a complete “gamut” spanned two octaves, though medieval theorists preferred to analyse melodies in small units of a fourth or fifth. It was Guido who first described the hexachord, which became the first six notes of our major scale (tone-tone-semitone-tone-tone). The G hexachord is “hard” (durum); C hexachord is “natural” (naturale); and the F hexachord, in which B is flattened, is “soft” (molle).

The image shows a musical staff with two systems of notes. The first system is in bass clef and the second in treble clef. Brackets above the notes group them into hexachords: DURUM (G), NATURALE (C), and MOLLE (F). Below the staff, the solfège syllables are written in a staggered fashion to align with the notes: ut re mi fa sol la, ut re mi fa sol la, ut re mi fa sol la, ut re mi fa sol la, ut re mi fa sol la, ut re mi fa sol la.

Guido’s description, of course, predates Hildegard and does not adequately explain her modal structures. More specific to her part of the world is a freer concept, described by the Benedictine cripple and polymath Hermannus Contractus (Reichenau, 1013-54), of the “modal qualities” of tetrachords. A tetrachord defines the four middle notes of a hexachord as a unit (protus-deuterus-tritus-tetrardus) which can overlap or move to an adjacent tetrachord and thus create melodies which exceed the “gamut” of hexachordal theory.

The image shows five staves, each representing a different tetrachord. The notes are labeled as protus, deuterus, tritus, and tetrardus. The tetrachords are: GRAVES, FINALES, SUPERIORES, EXCELLENTERES, and SYNEMMENON. Each tetrachord is shown on a staff with its four notes.

In Hildegard we see how these units were joined to create wide-ranging melodies, as in *O Vos Angeli* which we study today.

We can establish pitch and text quite easily from the source, but otherwise the piece presents us with some fascinating challenges. In examining this substantial and virtuosic piece I hope to show how Hildegard, inspired and original as she undoubtedly was, created melodies which were built on the musical language of her day, even if her grammar and vocabulary break new ground. The range of techniques and ideas she

employs to sustain such a long piece are particularly interesting. Some follow the conventions of the age; others are striking in their originality and apparent spontaneity. We see how she shapes the long melodic lines within a stricter framework of phrase structures, and it is this that gives the piece much of its energy. It also demonstrates how interest is created by her progressive use of modes, as she combines established concepts of medieval modality with new ideas. We also explore some of the thorny issues of rhythmic interpretation in Hildegard.

There are two songs dedicated to the angels: *De Angelis* and *O Vos Angeli*. The first is an antiphon and the second, which we examine here, is a responsory. It is one of the most highly imaginative and virtuosic of her works, with a range from of two and a half octaves (from g – d''' at notated pitch). In many ways it represents the pinnacle of her exploration of song. The piece lasts at least eight minutes in performance. There would have been perhaps three occasions during the church year on which it could have been sung in Hildegard's community.

Today's reverberant recordings often distance us from the words, which were probably conceived for an intimate atmosphere of prayer and praise. We might also think, subjectively perhaps, that elements of the ecstatic and charismatic were involved. But whereas in our largely post-religious age such matters seem to belong to the realm of primitive emotion (the phrase "New Age" springs to mind), we should not forget that Hildegard was a formidable theologian and writer of her day, consulted by princes and popes on all manner of issues, and her words, worthy of detailed examination in their own right, are quite as important as the music. This is no standard liturgical text: the poetry is in free verse and has all the expressive force of her visionary inspiration:

O vos angeli
Qui custoditis populos,
Quorum forma fulget
In facie vestri,
Et o vos archangeli
Qui suspicious animas iustorum,
et vos virtutes, potestes,
principatus, dominationes et troni,
qui estis computati
in quintum secretum numerum,
et O vos cherubin et seraphin,
sigillum secretorum Dei:

*Sit laus vobis,
qui loculum antiqui cordis
in fonte aspiciatis.*

Videtis enim
interiorem vim Patris,
que de corde illius spirat
quasi facies.

Sit laus...

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,
princedoms, 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...

Notation

The table below lists the symbols used by Hildegard in the Dendermonde and Wiesbaden (Reisencodex) sources, both notated in *Hufnagelschrift* (horse-shoe nail script), together with their names, standard plainchant and transcribed equivalents.

symbol	<i>Hufnagelschrift</i> (Hildegard, 1170)	Standard plainchant (Franconian, 1280)	Transcription
virga	┆	┆	
punctur	˘	◊	
pes	┆┆	┆┆	
flexa	∩	┆┆	
torculus	∩	┆┆	
porrectu	∩	┆┆	
climacus	┆┆	┆┆	
scandict	┆┆	┆┆	
apo-, bi-	┆	┆,┆,┆	
cephalic	∩	┆┆	
epiphon	˘	┆┆	
pes liqu	┆┆	┆┆	
pes flexi	∩	┆┆	
pressus	∩	┆┆	
pressus l	∩	┆┆	
quilisma	∩	┆┆	
quilisma	∩	┆┆	

Our subject is “The music of Hildegard: from source to performance”. Presumably you like Hildegard - otherwise you wouldn’t be here - but I suspect you prefer the performances of some singers to others. What distinguishes them? The timbre of the voices: young or mature, choral or operatic, perhaps “folky”? The interpretation: plain, with added harmonies, with medieval instruments (such as psaltery or fiddle) or even electronic effects? The style: scholarly, dramatic or contemplative? Here I will make the assumption, to me a fundamentally important one, that the original notation, in the historical context I have presented, has something to tell us. From the table above you can see that even the short step from Hildegard’s *Hufnagelschrift* to standard plainchant takes something away from the original. And as I said earlier, the sources themselves date from her final years, some three decades after the music was composed (or “received” in

Hildegard's terminology). It requires more faith than most modern mortals can muster to imagine the original journey from the Holy Spirit to Hildegard's wax tablet and thence to Volmar's fair copy.

But practical questions are sometimes quite as intriguing as spiritual ones. As in all chant, the symbols which dominate this piece are the *virga* (= stick) and *punctum* (= point), which brings us neatly to the matter of rhythmic interpretation. Are they the same length? Is the *virga* longer or more accented than the *punctum*? Or is this a calligraphic device to help legibility, akin to the beaming of quavers in modern notation, the *virga* denoting the start of a group or of a descending phrase? This is an issue which no interpreter of Hildegard can avoid, and when we listen to groups who sing this repertoire we realise that it goes to the heart of performance. We must be wary, I suggest, of applying later conventions, such as 13th cent. rhythmic modes or modern Solemnes-style liturgical chanting, backwards to Hildegard. Instead we must work with what information we have: the poetry, bearing in mind that Hildegard wrote both words and music, the music itself, with the demands of breath control it makes on the singer, and not least the visual appearance of the score.

Although sometimes ambiguous, the details of musical ornamentation need to be heard clearly as they 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 *O vos a-n-geli*, and *sigi-l-lum* or when singing a diphthong: *Nunc ga-u-deant*. These details make us enjoy and linger on the sounds in certain words, and we realise that they have special meaning, sensuous and devotional. 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 musical sensibility has to compensate for the limits of the written page and distance of the centuries.

I am reminded here of the Marronite priest Fr Shafiq Abuzaid, who over coffee and *baclava* one day sang me the most beautiful Arab-Christian chant (I think it was Psalm 121), prefacing it with the words 'this is how we pray', as if stating the obvious. Ornate and melismatic chant is so much part of prayer in these ancient traditions. Fr Shafiq's claims that his family in Damascus can trace this oral tradition back to early Christian times; I am still trying to persuade him to make a recording. 'I am too young - when I am 80 perhaps I will be ready', the implication being that only when one is at the heavenly gates is one fit to enter the recording studio!

Here is *O Vos Angeli* as it appears in the Dendermonde source, followed by my transcription. We see immediately how clear the words are to the modern eye, and how the syllables are divided. Whole words can be grasped more easily than in a modern printed edition, except in the case of long melismas (many notes to a single syllable). Compare the conciseness of the original to its modern equivalent. Our eye is immediately drawn to the visual complexity of the melody, its soaring vocal range, and the heightening of the text with various ornamental signs. This is surely anything but 'plainsong'.

O vos angeli – facsimile of Dendermonde codex 9 f.159r

O vos an
geli qui custo
di tis
po pulos quo rum for ma ful get in fa ci e ues
tra 7 o vos an change li qui suscipi tis animas
uis torum & uos uirtutes po tes ta tes prin
ci pa tus do mi na ti onis et tron qui es tis
computati in quantum se cre tum nu merum et o
uos che ru bin & se ra phim si gu lum
se cre to rum de i sic laus uo bis qui to
cu lum anti qui cor dis in fon te al
spici tis. ¶ Uideris enim in
teriorum uim patris que de cor de il luis spi rit qua si
fa ci es. Sic.

O vos angeli - Responsorium

Dendermonde codex f.159r [transcribed by Richard Vendome]

The image shows a musical score for a Latin responsory. It consists of ten staves of music, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across multiple notes. The text is: "O vos angeli (n)-ge li qui cus - to - - di - - - tis po - pu - los quo - - rum for - ma ful - - get in fa - ci - e ve - - - stra et o vos arch - an - - ge - - li qui su - sci - pi - - - tis a - ni - - ma iu - - - sto - rum et vos vir - tu - - tes". The music features a variety of note values, including minims, crotchets, and quavers, with many notes beamed together. There are several slurs and fermatas throughout the piece.

O vos an - - -

- - - - - (n)-ge - li

qui cus - to - - di - - -

- tis po - pu - los

quo - - rum for - ma ful - - get


in fa - ci - e ve - - - stra

et o vos arch - an - -

- ge - - li qui su - sci - pi - - - tis

a - ni - - ma iu - - - sto - rum

et vos vir - tu - - tes



po - - - tes - - - ta - - - tes




prin - - - ci - - - pa - - - tus




dom - - - mi - - - na - - - ti - o - - - nes



et thro - ni qui e - - - stis com - pu - ta - tis




in - quin - tum se - cre - - - -




- tum nu - me - - - rum



et o vos che - - - -



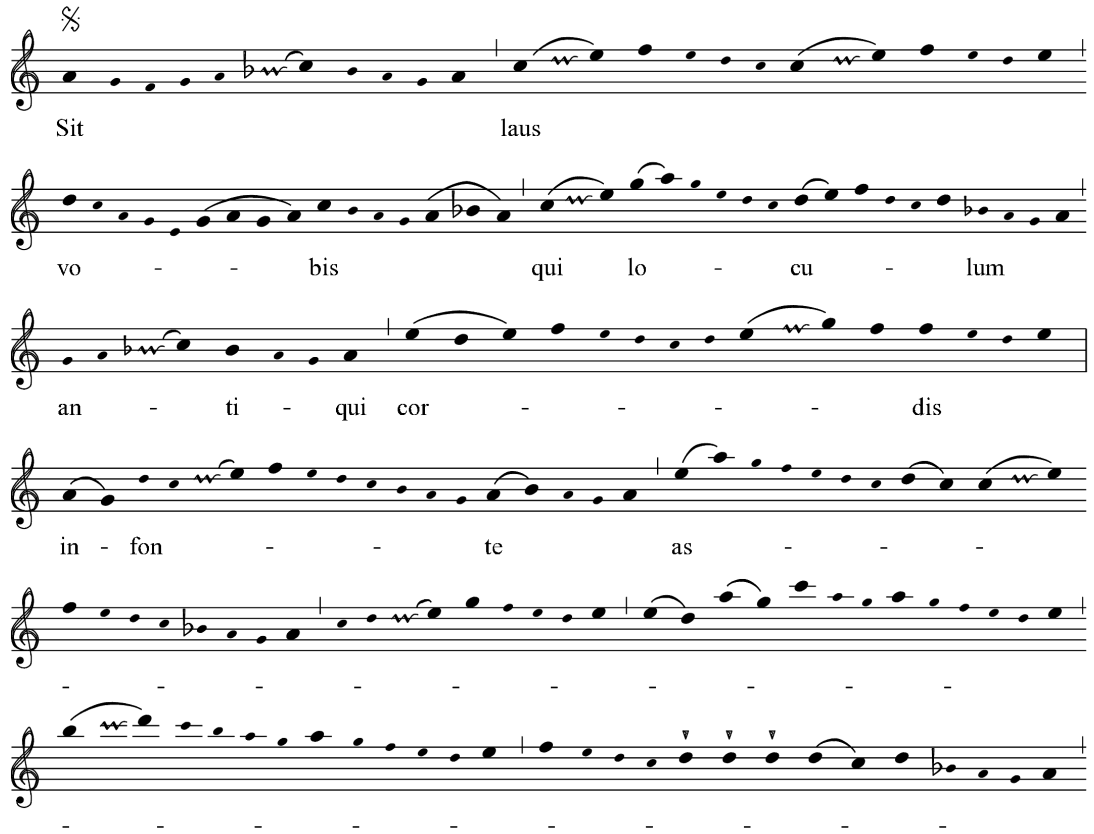
- ru - - - bin et se - - - -



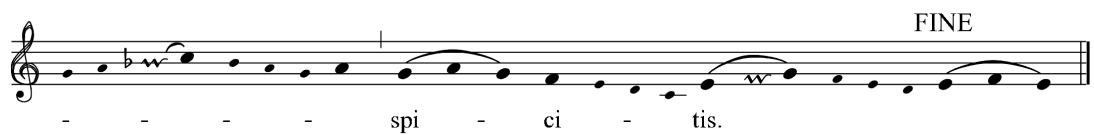
ra - - - - phin si - gil - - - lum



se - cre - - to - - - rum de - - - i



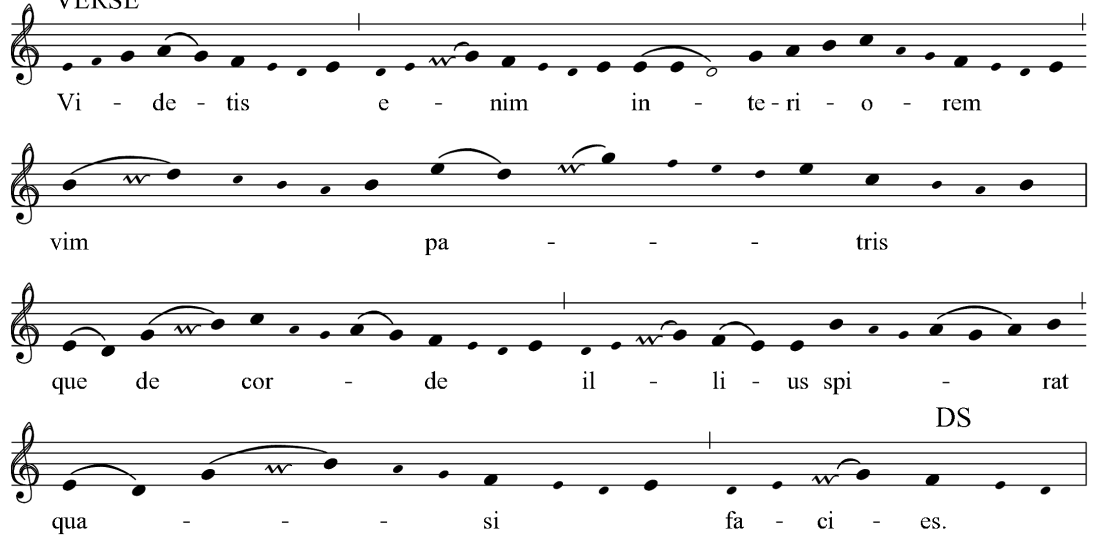
 Sit laus
 vo - - bis qui lo - cu - lum
 an - ti - qui cor - - - dis
 in - fon - - - te as - - -
 - - - - -
 - - - - -



 - - - spi - ci - tis.

FINE

VERSE



 Vi - de - tis e - nim in - te - ri - o - rem
 vim pa - - - tris
 que de cor - de il - li - us spi - rat
 qua - - - si fa - ci - es.

DS