



June Barbara Boyce-Tillman MBE specialises in music, spirituality and theology, particularly women's role in church music. She is Professor of Applied music at the University of Winchester and was ordained as a deacon of the Church of England in 2006. She has done pioneering work in Interfaith dialogue, writing articles and speaking on interfaith and intercultural links in Britain and abroad. She has written and spoken on women's role in church music and music in general. Her research is into the medieval abbess, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and she is founder of the Hildegard Network which stretches over three continents and is concerned with bringing together the areas of healing, the arts and theology.

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN – A WOMAN FOR OUR TIME?

JUNE BARBARA BOYCE-TILLMAN
UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER, UNITED KINGDOM

ABSTRAK

Hildegard van Bingen (1098-1179) het in Duitsland geleef en is op agtjarige ouderdom toegelaat tot 'n klooster waar sy meer onderrig ontvang het as ander vroue van die Middeleeue. Sy staan bekend as een van die eerste vrouekomponiste in Europa en haar intuïsie was haar bron van inspirasie. Sy het ongeveer 70 liedere in Latyn geskryf waarvoor sy die Gregoriaanse modusse gebruik het. Hierdie eenstemmige *chants* is hoofsaaklik gememoriseer. Musieknotasie is eers later ontwikkel. Daar word vermoed dat 'n welgestelde persoon 'n kundige betaal het om Hildegard se liedere neer te skryf. Sy het die teks en die musiek gelyktydig geskep en vir haar was die proses net so belangrik soos die produk. Haar beskouing van die natuur en die teologie was geïntegreerd – sy het ook medisyne bestudeer. Hedendaagse musikante en terapeute maak van Hildegard se musiek gebruik om die fisieke, psigologiese en spirituele saam te voeg, want musiek bring die liggaam en die gees bymekaar.

HILDEGARD IN CONTEXT

Hildegard (1098-1179) has just been declared a Doctor of the Church.¹ She was oblated to an abbey aged 8, where she would have received more of an education than her female

¹ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20121007_ildegarda-bingen_en.html

contemporaries. Eventually she founded a Benedictine Abbey at Bingen on the Rhine. She wrote on theology, medicine and the lives of the saints and was allowed to preach in the pulpits of Germany. She entered into a vast correspondence with the great of her day including the Emperor Barbarossa and Bernard of Clairvaux. The Pope sent a commission to investigate her and affirmed her writing. She received visions from the age of three which included both moving images, speech and song. She is the first named woman song writer in Europe. This article historicises her and seeks out her contemporary relevance. The music was given as part of visions and she refused to revise it in any way. Her trust in the visionary experience as the main source of her theology shows her clear trust of intuitive and the non-verbal. She was able both to trust the intuitive visionary experience and to interpret it in words: "The perception of our inner vision teaches us what is divine" (Fox, 1987:198).

HER MUSIC

She wrote over seventy songs with Latin texts. There are two main manuscripts – the Wiesbaden copy, the so-called Riesencodex² and the one she gave to the monks at Dendermonde.³ They are monophonic chants using the Gregorian modes and of varying degrees of complexity. The notation system uses neumes similar to those used in the St Gall manuscript. However, her use of the signs and, in particular, the sign called a quilisma is not identical with other medieval usage, so we cannot always be sure of their meaning. There is no rhythmic indication. It is a very subtle style reflecting the fluidity of poetic rhythms. As we see below, she treated the modes in her own distinctive way.

There are no performance indications or any sign of any accompanying instruments although recordings often include various accompaniments of varying degrees of complexity. Her own music, given as part of her visions, summarised all her thinking. She used forms such as antiphons, hymns and responsories that would have been part of the regular offices. The hymns use fewer melismas than the antiphons and responsories. These sometimes have a wide range like *O vos angeli*. We cannot be sure at what pitch the pieces would have been sung or whether they were sung by a single singer or divided between singers with different ranges. Her works include 1 Alleluia, 1 Kyrie and 7 sequences for use with the Mass. For the Office she wrote 43 antiphons, 18 responsories, 3 hymns and 4 devotional songs.

Her collection of songs is entitled *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (*The Symphony of the Harmony of Heavenly Revelations*). Hers was primarily an oral tradition. Some material may therefore have been lost, as were later women's songs like those of the beguine Mechtild of Hackeborn, the so-called Flemish nightingale. The pieces have the character of having being created for particular festivals with no grand scheme in mind, following the themes that she loved and considered underrepresented in terms of the music of the Church. From the addition of

² Hildegard von Bingen. *Lieder: Facsimile Riesencodex (Hs.2) der Hessischen Landesbibliothek Wiesbaden, fol 466-481 v.* Edited by Laurence Welker; commentary by Michael Klaper. *Elementae musicae I.* Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1998.

³ The Dendermonde or Villarens Codex Ms. 9.

the psalm tones in the margins one of the manuscripts, it looks as though some of the songs may have had an independent life before being linked (somewhat uneasily) with the psalm tones. It is likely that the *Symphony* was not conceived as a grand cycle but was an ordering by Hildegard of diverse material created on different occasions.

HER COSMIC VIEW

However, what appears remarkable about Hildegard for us is often what would be part of the warp and weft of the Middle Ages – the ‘givens’ of that culture. Her medicine is set in the context of the system of humours that characterised the medieval medical frame. When the elements are in balance the body is healthy and an imbalance causes ill health. She was the first writer on childbirth with passages that are both accurate and poetic.

The theology of the day was neo-platonic but it is difficult to know which texts she read other than the Bible and the Shepherd of Hermes (a visionary 3rd century text); she would also have been in touch with many Benedictine communities. The Hildegard scholar, Barbara Newman describes how the Platonising cosmology captivated the minds of the 12th century:

... the divine ideas, eternal in the mind of God and bodied forth in creatures; the world soul, the deep resonance of macrocosm with microcosm, the fervent hope of access to God through human rationalism and virtue (Newman, 1987:44-45).

The uniting power of the universe that she develops from this she calls *viriditas* – a vital greening power flowing through all creation: “No tree blooms without greening power; no stone is without moisture; no creature is without its own power” (Fox, 1987:277).

She brought together the strands of the theology of her day to create a theology of interdependence between God and the world, sometimes portraying the world as the body of God (Schipperges, 1998:75). God is intimately bound up in creation – loving and generating it. It is a real community held together by love, a relationship developed by twentieth century theologians with the world as the body of God including the human and the other-than-human world (McFague, 1993).

HER SIGNIFICANCE FOR CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

The rest of this article examines how Hildegard’s position in the contemporary world is different her position in the world of her time (Boyce-Tillman, 1994b, 1996b). I will use a model that shows how the ways of knowing that she used are different from the dominant traditions of contemporary society in such areas as trust in intuition and a view of an integrated cosmos. Within her, our age finds a lost pole of human experience – a dimension that has been marginalised gradually since the Enlightenment which has concentrated on the scientific, objective and rational ways of knowing (Ball, 1990; Boyce-Tillman, 2000a, 2007). Many post-Enlightenment thinkers have called for a need to explore these hidden ways of knowing (Dewey, 1910). There are now

some signs (of which the rediscovery of Hildegard is one example) that Western society is rediscovering these ways of knowing. Hildegard recalls for us an age before the domination of this mode of thinking and opens up the possibility of new ways of understanding.

The visionary experience as a source of inspiration

The first example useful for musicians is the valuing of the intuitive approach to creativity. The visionary experiences are central to an understanding of Hildegard's authority and theology: "All arts are derived from the breath that God sent into the human body (Fox, 1987:359).

Such intuitive knowing is often pathologized today; but she drew her authority – which it took her half her life to realise – from this intuitive source. The still pictures painted by her community under her supervision, cannot recapture their dramatic moving images. The visions are infused with radiant light – the quality of her perception, in which she receives immense insight and her song. She sets out the nature of the experience in a letter to Guibert of Gembloux:

And I see things by means of my soul ... for I do not hear with my outer ears, nor by the reasonings of my heart, nor do I perceive by any collation of my five senses, but directly into my soul, with my exterior eyes wide open. I never fall into weakness of ecstasy, but have visions while awake, both day and night (Nolan, 1994:67).

Because of the monophonic nature of the liturgical song of the day, Hildegard was able through this intuitive source of inspiration to become a singer/songwriter, singing and remembering the inspirations of her visionary experiences.

In the Middle Ages there was a greater trust of the visual image as a source of truth. After the Enlightenment truth was seen resting in text. When I lead seminars on visionaries like Hildegard, I often receive accounts of contemporary visionary experiences that their recipients have not dared to articulate.

Connectedness

Understanding and reverencing the interconnectedness of the cosmos is clearly a need for our time but was much more part of the prevailing thought of Hildegard's time. Contemporary society has shown its preference for discrete forms of knowledge. The interconnectedness of her theology has implications for ecology (Grey, 1993), pedagogy (Belenky, *et al.*, 1986; Boyce-Tillman, 1994b), music (Storr, 1993; Subotnik, 1996; Escot, 1990) and the treatment of dualisms, including the body (Doyle, 1987; Isherwood & Stuart, 1998). In medieval thought theological ideas held the world in a unity:

For air flows freely
And serves every part of creation.
That is its real duty and function.
The firmament is sustained within it,
And air itself is also nourished by that same power (Boyce-Tillman, 1994a).

In this system, the theory of music is inextricably bound up with the cosmic order. Pozzi Escot (1990) has shown how her work is made up of mathematical proportions that reflect the patterns in the cosmos.

Valuing the Process

The result of its origin in the visionary experience is that the music is of a meditative improvisatory character. Hildegard's music flows forward in a continuous stream. Because the words and music were given to her together, their relationship is extremely subtle and sensitive. In this sensitive relationship she is in the tradition of women singer-song writers like Joni Mitchell for whom the songs represents an intensification of their own feelings and beliefs.

Compared with the works of her male contemporaries, like Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Abelard, her works are free form rhapsodic pieces, lacking the concern for symmetric construction of phrases and verses. The texts are characterised by the use of many conjunctions. The ideas pour forth in a connected stream that adds immediacy to the songs, and reveals the clear connectedness of the thought behind it. For Hildegard, process was deeply embedded in the product (Boyce-Tillman, 2000b). Having received her music directly from God, she resisted revising them in any way. The structure of the words mirror the feel of the visions, piling image upon image in a cumulative way which moves them from the dogmatic statements of faith towards a discursive exploration of various themes. She was not working in her native language but the associations of the images that she piles up have a dreamlike quality. Her *Hymn to the Spirit* contains image after image to portray the Spirit – comforter, anointer, fire of love, infusion in the heart of beautiful perfumes of goodness, fountain, garment of life, sword-belt of truth, reliable path and so on (Boyce-Tillman, 2000b:176-180).

O wound flowing with blood
That cries aloud to the highest,
When all elemental forces
Are themselves entangled
And crying with lamenting voice
Bringing terror,
Because this is the blood of creation itself touching them,
Anoint us
So that our wounds may be healed (Boyce-Tillman, 2000b:38).

This antiphon is a single sentence. Our wounds are intrinsically bound up with the cosmic cataclysm that has produced the 'wound flowing with blood'. The free-flowing interconnectedness of her thought patterns reflect those of the universe.

This rhapsodic characteristic has also been seen in the work of other women composers like Clara Schumann and Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn (Subotnik, 1996). We do not have a continuous women's classical music tradition in Europe. If we had, this more improvisatory approach to

formal structures may well have been better represented.⁴ And this may well be the choice of women, not simply the result of a lack of musical education as suggested by some writers.

Her multi-layered texts are mirrored in the music. She draws on a quite a small bank of motifs which she reworks in various forms in each individual piece. This is not unlike the techniques of improvisatory traditions like jazz. They therefore require a more cyclical way of perception, one of returning to certain ideas and motifs rather than of a steady linear progress from one end of a score to the other. The music rotates around a central axis. The stability of her pieces has a certain musical stability based not on the crafting of blocks of sound into regular strophes, but on motivic repetition and variation.

This has led some music and poetic critics of some generations to condemn them as untutored and unstructured; but it is due to the oracy of her method of creation. It is unlikely that she was literate musically and all of these songs would have been held in the memory of her and her nuns and only written down towards the end of her life. We therefore have a magnificent example of the complexity possible within an oral tradition (Ong, 1982). Hildegard calls us to be part of that flowing creativity and realise it in our own way – to be confident in our oral powers.

Once notation was developed music could be conceived of as a separate entity lacking a body or a specific place. The score of the classical piece became ‘the music’, separated from

- The body of its creator
- The place of its creation
- The context (time, place, event) of its first intended performance.

Classical music became about the abstraction of dots on a page and often its connection with anything other than its own internal construction systems became fractured (Boyce-Tillman, 2001). The 20th century composer Janacek (2008) complained in a musical analysis class that music was not about a page of a score but about life, passion and nature.⁵

This expressive style of writing is linked with musical exuberance with a regular use of wider leaps and triadic patterns that were unusual in medieval music. One of her favourite opening gestures is a leap of a fifth used as a springboard for a leap of a seventh or octave from the starting note as in the opening of *O virtus Sapientiae*.

Her melodies use the medieval church modes. She seems to associate a particular character with each mode. The mode based on D has an exalted feeling, while that based on E has a sense of timelessness. She challenges the prevailing practice of her day by changing modes in a piece. She ends *The Hymn to the Spirit (O ignis spiritus)* in a different mode from the one in which she starts, by the introduction of a B-flat. This gives the music a sense of continuing on into the

⁴This refers not to improvisation which was practised by many men in the European tradition but to the way these women composers’ written music is structured in a more rhapsodic way. Later male composers like Satie were also to rebel against the more linear structures but the above comments refer to the limited number of pieces we have by female European composers.

⁵This was particularly true when music education was opened up to more people. Although many composers, especially in the twentieth century, challenged this perception, phenomena like the examination systems of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music left many pupils seeing the decoding of the symbols as the central part of the European classical tradition.

silence following the piece, as there is not the sense of completion given by returning to the original mode. It is a model I have followed in my own pieces (Boyce-Tillman, 1996a; 1997). Some scholars see it as changing hexachords rather than changes of modes akin to the much later device of modulation; but it is out of keeping with the usage of her day. She changes modes in the middle of a piece as in *Caritas abundat* which deals with the blooming of all things through the energy of Love. Here the change of mode appears to express the transformation brought about by the embrace of Caritas and the Divine ruler.

Such dramatic writing would seem to demand a vibrant vocal style allied to her concept of *viriditas* – vibrant, greening power. There is a lack of inhibition about her music that calls forth a similar performance style. Hildegard writes in praise of a sweet clear, ringing tone (*dulcissima, clara, sonans*).

Monophony

In her day, music was valued in the curriculum. It was a higher order subject being included in the Quadrivium along with astronomy, geometry and mathematics. However, it was only open to aristocratic boys, because women were not considered capable of abstract thinking. Hildegard's musical education would have consisted of being immersed in liturgical music from an early age. It is unlikely that she wrote down her own music and it is possible that Volmar, her secretary, was also not musically literate. Musical scribes in the Middle Ages charged a high price for their services to cover their specialist skill and the cost of the materials for the manuscript. It is likely that a wealthy patron paid for her pieces to be written down near the end of her life giving a more public face to her pieces. This was unusual for a woman composer. The material would have been held in the memory of the people at the convent.⁶

During the time when European music was essentially monophonic it was easier for women to contribute to the musical repertoire. Around Hildegard's day Europe was developing a polyphonic musical style. This development was less accessible to women because of their lack of access to musical education.

Some of her material may well have been lost. In many professions such as schoolteachers and church musicians, pieces are produced for particular occasions and then not preserved. Indeed, it may be right that they are lost because they were too related to a particular event for wider usage. This is a changing, renewing tradition, not a one concerned with preservation. The notion of eternal values has featured prominently in the history of the Church and theology but far more hidden is the notion of the importance of the changing cycle of birth, growth, decay and death. This cycle sees the Divine in that constant ebb and flow and flux that characterise the natural world (Christ, 1997). This has traditionally been allied with women because of the cyclical nature of their own bodies, seen both in the short-term and in the longer cycle of youth, pubescence and menopause.

⁶ The ability to memorise is in inverse ratio to the ability to read. In an age where literacy is limited the memory is correspondingly more retentive. Anyone who has listened to the song repertoire of a class of five-year-olds with limited reading skills will have experienced this.

The notion of producing material appropriate only for a particular purpose after which it will be lost or decay is analogous to the amount of women's art to be found in children's clothes and quilts for beds and not on the walls of art galleries. In contrast, the preservation of works of art in some form like musical notation became of paramount importance and the centrepiece of training in the arts. This led to a museum based culture (Goehr, 1992) rather than one that valued context.

The Feminine in God

The notion of *viriditas* or greening power or vitality is linked with Hildegard's Wisdom theology drawing on the wisdom scriptures in the Bible. Hers was not a revolution but a rediscovery (Cross, 1995). The triumphalist notion of God has dominated Western theology. But there is another more hidden tradition often deliberately suppressed in patristic periods, charted by Barbara Newman in *Sister of Wisdom: St Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*:

Where the feminine presides, God stoops to humanity and humanity aspires to God. A more linear understanding of salvation history [is] cast in the form of a narrative beginning with creation and fall, culminating in the death and resurrection of Christ, and concluding with the Last Judgement ... The feminine designation, on the other hand, evokes God's interactions with the cosmos insofar as they are timeless or perpetually repeated (Newman, 1987:50).

She contrasts the view of the Trinity taken by male theologians as 'highly abstract' and lacking in erotic symbolism (Newman, 1987:50). This interactive Wisdom is expressed in her antiphon:

O the power of Wisdom
You, in circling, encircle all things.
You are embracing everything in a way that brings life into being;
for you have three wings.
One of them reaches highest heaven and another is sweating in the earth
and the third is flying everywhere.
Therefore it is right to give you praise,
O Sophia wisdom (Boyce-Tillman, 1994a).

In *Scivias* the figure of Wisdom/Sapientia/Sophia is developed. 'Sometimes she is identified as Scientia Dei (Knowledge of God) – not an academic knowledge, but "a paradoxical union of tenderness, radiance and terror" (Newman, 1987:47) – and is veiled because she is too bright and glorious to look at. She is thus a paradoxical figure embodying both terror and tenderness. She has a human form and is surrounded by angels and human beings who are venerating her. Wisdom points to the Creator and also acts as a co-creator with him. In the Ninth Vision of Book Three of *Scivias* she appears in a striking vision of a figure of great beauty, dancing with the Father, protecting people and part of a deeply mysterious Godhead. She restrains her power and is hidden in the heart of God. Her origin is in:

the first planting of the green seed of the patriarchs and of the prophets

... Then she was graced with the dazzling virginity of the Virgin Mary; next, with the solid and ruddy faith of the martyrs; and finally with the brilliant and light filled love of contemplation, by which God and neighbours ought to be loved through the heat of the Holy Spirit.

She will go on in this way until the end of the world, and her warning will not cease but will flow out always, as long as the world endures (Bowie & Davies, 1990:81-82).

The virtues are seen as feminine figures emanating from the central figure of Wisdom. They represent the feminine synergy between humanity and divinity in which the divine plan for salvation is worked out. They feature prominently in the musical morality play *Ordo Virtutum* which is variously translated as *The Play of the Virtues* or *The Play of the Powers*. It is her longest, most complex piece and may have been written for her novices for the celebrations at the consecration of the new buildings on the Rupertsberg. It is certainly in keeping with the way the parts for the Virtues are written, each having a short solo part and then singing in the chorus. The central character is the human soul. The heavenly powers in the form of the Virtues (who are all female) confront the lower world symbolised by the Devil. He is the only man with a significant part in the piece, making the work strikingly different from later examples of the operatic genre. He only speaks showing that he is not connected with God. There is a chorus of Patriarchs and Prophets but they only sing an opening chorus and do not appear again. At the beginning the Virtues give the soul the pure robe of faith and she aspires to be one of them. But before she can be fully integrated with them, the Devil appears and attracts her attention. The soul struggles with her calling to heavenly things but in the end decides that it is too difficult and casts off the robe of faith to follow the Devil, who promises her honour in the eyes of the world. The Virtues lament her loss and the apparent victory of the Devil; but they gather together and defeat him. The gendering of the Devil as male and the Virtues as female subverts the Church's traditional characterisation of women as sinful.

As a mystical play, the drama is quite statuesque, the interest lying primarily in the way in which the allegorical themes are developed in the music. The piece is 'through-composed' although the music is constructed from a number of small melodic motifs as described above. The text and melody are closely bound together and there are clear examples of word-painting as in the running melisma when the soul sings of running from the Devil. The videotape produced by Vox Animae beautifully set in an ancient Abbey is a fine introduction to it.

She becomes taken up with the figure of Caritas – Love who becomes almost synonymous with Wisdom encompassing the roles of mother, matrix, matter and womb:

Strengthening love
Is blooming in everything,
At her most excellent in the deeps
And the rising stars
And the most fascinating heart of all things,
Because she has embraced the Highest Sovereign
In peace (Boyce-Tillman, 1994a).

The rise in feminist theology in the middle of the twentieth century evidenced a renewed search for these traditions. Feminists of many religious traditions look back to a time in the past when female images were more acceptable and chart the loss of the feminine aspects of the Divine often allying this with the loss of an authentic female voice in many faith traditions. In this particular antiphon, where the female Caritas embraces the male Sovereign God, Hildegard offers a model that combines male and female aspects in the Divine.

Women's authority

Hildegard's attitude to the position of women contains a number of inconsistencies. She often refers to the age in which she lived as 'womanish' indicating that the men had become weak, sensual and generally lax in their observance of moral codes. Because the male ecclesiastical authorities had failed to fulfil their vocation, God raised up Hildegard as a 'virile' woman. However, Hildegard also thought that women should know their place in society because of their infirmity and weakness and in order to fulfil their role of childbearing and that they should not be ordained as priests.

She learned only gradually to speak with authority. The vision at forty-three in the middle of her life was a turning point. This has been true of other creative women who after a mid-life crisis have found an inner strength. Virginia Woolf is but one example. Also there is the playwright, Lucy Gammon who wrote her first play at 39 which won the Richard Burton Prize; she described the discovery she had a voice and that people wanted to hear it as like a fairy-tale. It is the rediscovery of the power of the older woman – the redeeming of the crone – who is marginalised and ridiculed by our society.

In the Middle Ages there were a number of women visionaries; indeed it was the only way a woman could claim authority in the Middle Ages. A woman would not be given by the leaders of her day authoritative positions like that of archbishop. She often puts down her abilities to make clear that whatever she produces comes from God:

I am a mere poor woman; a vessel of clay. What I say comes not from me but from the clear light: man is a vessel which God fashioned for himself, and filled with his inspiration, so that, in him, he could bring his works to perfection (Bowie & Davies, 1990:130).

This represents an important development in Western mysticism. The visionary experience could now be seen as a valid route to Divine truth alongside the better-established routes of prayerful study and scholarly discourse. Women could now claim a part in the development of Western mysticism.

Although Hildegard left her distinctive mark on all that she touched, she always stressed her relation to the Divine – her striving is for authenticity within a tradition not an innovation moving away. Some of her criticisms were similar to those made by Luther much later but there was no hint that she thought of splitting the Church; indeed she did not even join the more radical Cistercian movement. This may be a reason for the obscurity of some of her writing. Like other subject groups who wanted to exist within the established order, she invented a system

of “double speak” that could be interpreted a variety of ways. In another similar example, the oldest layer of the Black spirituals tradition in the US has a similar double meaning. Take for example, the phrase: “We will gather by the river”, common in many spirituals, which for the Christian overlords meant baptism but for the black slaves meant the celebration of their own African rituals. The multiple meanings associated with this type of writing need reading in a different way from other texts. It is often deliberately difficult to decipher.

She valued her own virginity and that of her nuns very highly. That vow, gave her the necessary separateness to realise her own potential. Only such a vow freed an aristocratic woman from the attentions of men. The line of women composers through Europe runs through the convents because they were freed from the continual round of childbearing (Reardon, 2002).

The silencing of her voice at the end of her powerful life is paralleled in many societies today. The expression of marginalised groups of people in contemporary society (as illustrated by Applebaum, 2003) in many fields have often been prohibited, regulated or circumscribed. Singing is an act of power. Other instances of singing as power can be found in Western history. For example, the singing schools in eighteenth century England played an important role in the empowerment of the working class (Jorgensen, 1996). Saulius Trepekunas in his account of Lithuanian revolution entitled *Revolution through song*, (Boyce-Tillman, 2000a) shows how the nation’s power was expressed primarily through song.

A Theology of Music

Music is central to Hildegard’s view of God:

Praise the Trinity
Our life-giving music.
She is creating all things.
Life itself is giving birth.
And she is an angel chorus praising
And the splendour of arcane mysteries,
Which are too difficult to understand.
Also from her true life springs for all (Boyce-Tillman, 1994a).

She offers us the possibility of a cosmic view of music (as do contemporary theorists like Anthony Storr [1993]), saying that you can hear in it twigs coming into bud, the brightness of radiant heavenly light, the deep thought of the prophets, the blood of the martyrs and the movements of holiness in our hearts (Van der Weyer, 1997:79). Music plays an important part in this greening power linking human beings and God:

Music is the echo of the glory and beauty of heaven.

And in echoing that glory and beauty, it carries human praise back to heaven
(Van der Weyer, 1997:79).

She saw music recreating the original harmony of God and the world in the Garden of Eden:

Music expresses the unity of the world as God first made it, and the unity

which is restored through repentance and reconciliation (Van der Weyer, 1997:80).

The notion of the Music of the Spheres underpinned a great deal of thinking in the Middle Ages but became subjugated at the Enlightenment (James, 1995). The fundamental idea concerns *musica universalis*. This sees the proportions in the movements of celestial bodies including the Sun, Moon and planets, as a form of music. It is not regarded as literally audible, but as mathematical or religious concept designed to represent the essential harmony of the universe. Each planet corresponded to a musical note to produce a musical scale that underpinned the universe and these were related to the rates of rotation around the Earth⁷ (James, 1995:30).

She drew on these ideas, to develop her cosmic plan of salvation through her own theology of music, seeing music as softening hard hearts and bringing about reconciliation so being part of God's plan for redemption (Van der Weyer, 1997:79) and seeing singing together as the highest form of unity human beings can achieve. It was a regenerative act central to monastic life. Singing is an act of incarnation:

The body is the vestment of the spirit, which has a living voice, and so it is proper for the body, in harmony with the soul, to use its voice to sing praises to God (Baird & Ehrmann, 1998:79).

In her cosmic plan of salvation she constructed her own theology of music giving each of the five tones a meaning linked with the stories of Abel, Noah, Moses and the Incarnation. The fifth tone is not yet realised but will appear when

a time of light will be given to the Son of God so he will be known clearly ... [A]fterwards the divinity in him will be manifest, for as long as he wants (*Vitae Hildegardis*, quoted in Flanagan 1990).

Contemporary musicians and *healers* are using Hildegard's music as a way of bringing the physical, psychological and spiritual together (Gentile, 1997). To manage the long phrases of her music can cause hyperventilation, which, if achieved, may induce a meditative state (Doyle, 1987). Music brings body and soul together.

The words of a hymn represent the body, while the melody represents the soul. Words represent humanity, and melody represents divinity. Thus in a beautiful hymn, in which words and melody are perfectly matched, body and soul, humanity and divinity, are brought into unity (Van der Weyer, 1997:79).

This is the reason for its centrality to the life of the convent. The silencing of the music in her convent at the end of her life would have been more significant than the excommunication for her. It meant the intrusion of the devil within the walls of her convent. It is in the letter that she wrote to the prelates of Mainz responsible for this prohibition, that she developed most fully her theology of music (Baird & Ehrman, 1998:79). She uses this theology (successfully) to persuade

⁷This is recalled in the Anglican Eucharistic Prayer G in Common Worship in the phrase 'silent music of the heavens'.

the prelates to lift their ban on her singing.

Her theology includes the metaphorical use of instruments. The sound of stringed instruments calls forth compassionate and remorseful tears and so they are associated with laments. The harp and psaltery are particularly blessed. She uses them as a metaphor for the soul's relationship to God. We need to rest in the hands of our creator like a harp in the hands of harpist (Van der Weyer, 1997:81).

SUMMARY

Hildegard reminds us of a way of knowing that has been lost, or rather reduced to the status of a subjugated culture, struggling to survive a dominant culture which has increasing power inextricably linked with the distribution of capital. These concern the need for the valuing of connection, intuition and process (Boyce-Tillman, 2007).

There is a fine Jewish story concerning the four rabbis who are taken up into the seventh vault of the seventh heaven and there they behold the face of God. When they return each has a different reaction. The cynic says that nothing really happened. One turns into a theological system and bores everyone with his preaching. One goes mad and wanders the desert foaming at the mouth. The fourth, however, is a singer and poet and makes songs that make the world a more beautiful place (Estes, 1992).

Hildegard calls us also to behold the beauty of heaven and incarnate it on earth in artistic objects that will both inspire and inform.

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