

Between Sounding Vision and Liturgical Practice - Compositions by Hildegard of Bingen

To talk about Hildegard of Bingen is quite a challenge. Everyone seems to know her. She has become the label of natural cosmetics, a pop icon, the protagonist of environmental protection and emancipation, just as well as the pious, loyal to hierarchy front woman of conservative Catholics. The enormously broad spectrum of statements, that are to be found in her works, invites to project one's own wishes and views onto her. That applies to broad reception as well as to those who engage in the subject in a scientific and artistic way. Not infrequently, the theses one reads about Hildegard's work breathe the spirit of a certain philosophy of life and unspoken reluctance to bid well-tended prejudices farewell, so that we meet an exceedingly lively woman, whose multi-faceted works don't fit into any of the boxes they have been tried to be stuck into.

But those who meet Hildegard with preconceptions won't have the privilege of an encounter that challenges to think one's own attitude through, as well as to listen and watch carefully—

Which is of even more importance, seeing the subject of today's lecture: the relationship between Hildegard's visions and her music.

I have pondered the question, what to tell you about Hildegard and her musical work, for some time. I could simply ignore the subject of the relationship between vision and composition, and offer you an analysis of the usage of quilismas, which she, typically for the twelfth century, as I could prove in comparative studies, used with repeated first pitch, but not, as like de Loos proved in the case of the Utrecht Antiphon from the twelfth century, to avoid the half-steps, but to use the tendency of striving of those Neumes, in order to lead to the important pitches of a particular mode. This study also proved that Hildegard used divergent structural notes for the CF and the CG mode, what can in no case be called a maceration of tonality of the modes in direction of the major-minor-tonality, as was consistently claimed until the nineteen-eighties. I could, coming a bit closer to the subject, give you an overview of the usage of music related terms in Hildegard's Marian songs and their connection to music related anthropology of Hildegard, or I could delight you with an analysis of the progression 'O virga ac diadema', which illustrates to what extent Hildegard has respected the word-music-relationship in adapting parallel verses. The one or the other of those topics I will actually touch on in the following; but I think you better read about the most of it; because today is about the relationship of a very personal experience—the vision to composition. For that, too, are detailed studies vitally necessary. But who restricts himself to them, will lose touch with the whole. And exactly that is the point, if you want to understand, how Hildegard's visionary experiences were consistent with her compositional works. A specialist is someone, who is learning more and more of less and less until he understands everything about nothing. The danger to lose oneself in details, and then get a complete wrong picture by specialisation and disregard of her linked reality, in which she lived, thought, wrote, and composed, is especially with Hildegard very high. Therefore I want to tell you today about my very personal story with Hildegard. Because incidentally, the relationship between her visionary gift and her works were the focus of my interest. And that caused me a lot of trouble. Germany was in the nineteen-nineties a country, in which one, as a scientist, aroused suspicion, attaching too much importance to questions of

belief. Those, who counted notes, were by far more respected than those, who dared entering the touchy terrain of spirituality. When a professor of the musical science faculty—however not my later PhD supervisor, to be precise—asked me, whether I thought that Hildegard really had visions, and I answered yes, he said, ‘If you believe that, you aren’t scientifically qualified.’ I was back then blessed with little reverence for questionable authorities, and replied, ‘If you don’t believe it, you are not qualified to supervise such a dissertation.’ You see, the path to the answers of the questions that I have asked myself at that time and which you now submit to me, is filled with hurdles; but what I have seen and experienced on my way, was enlightening, and might help you, like I have, to take a free-spirited route, in order to gain deeper insights.

I will thus tell you, how I’ve tried, notwithstanding the passion for detail, to dare look beyond the scientific fencing, how I dared a leap into the network, Hildegard moved so confidently in; if it carried me, and what I have learned.

How Everything Started

In the nineteen-eighties in a bookshop in Bremen, the city I was born and grew up in, I came across a copy of ‘Hildegard of Bingen, songs’. I was fascinated instantly. As a student of church music with keen interest in Gregorian chant, I knew how exceptional this book was, that I held in my hands. Seventy-seven songs and a liturgical play, composed by a woman, published under her own name—that was greatly surprising. After all that I had learned about unisonous liturgical song so far, this was a repertoire that almost completely went without mentioning the names of authors and composers, that even defined its ‘sacredness’ with a certain degree of anonymity, which reinforced the impression of the songs as having been sung into Pope Gregory’s ear by the Holy Spirit personally.

I bought the book, and picked it up again and again in the following years, continuing a still very soft-spoken, but increasingly present dialogue, which had evolved between Hildegard and me. I wanted to understand exactly, who this woman was, what had led her to create such a complex, multi-faceted work, and I was curious to know the reactions of her contemporaries and those who had studied her during the more than eight-hundred years since the creation of those songs. Shortly after beginning my musical science studies in Muenster, I saw professor Schleppehorst about my idea of writing a doctoral dissertation about Hildegard’s songs. His reaction was unhesitating, ‘You cannot know yet, what you want to do a doctorate about.’ I had a different opinion, but, since the request was obviously mistimed, I went seemingly without having achieved anything. But my plan had not changed. I began to study the songs. That meant, I went every day to the church, where my husband and I worked as church musicians additionally to our studies, and sang—until I mastered each and every of those songs. This approach was unusual. Many of my fellow students would have read scores rather than actually singing from them. But I wasn’t only a musicologist and theologian, but also church musician. Additionally, I deepened my studies of Gregorian chant; because although Hildegard’s songs feature audible differences to that repertoire, I was nevertheless convinced that similarities were larger than distinctions. Much to the surprise of one or the other of my fellow students, I read each and every of Hildegard’s works, which wasn’t easy, since her Latin differs significantly from Cicero’s language, which I had learned during nine high school years. Apparently, it had different sources than those of the Latin philosophers.

Hence I started saying the Latin *Liturgia Horarum*. I was convinced that: Only if I would master the texts Hildegard had dealt with every day, so that they would not only leave their marks in my mind but also in my spirituality, then I would understand indications, references and her linked thinking, which shaped her visionary works as well as the lyrics of her songs. To be on the safe side, I didn't tell anyone of my way of research, because I assumed that this would have fed doubts as to whether I was capable of scientific thinking. Actually, I benefited greatly from spending time on the psalms, texts of church fathers and Benedict's Rule, just as Hildegard had, because I discovered many a thing, that would escape those, who had only counted notes. When I, four years later, returned to professor Schlepffhorst with the same index, that I had brought before him at the begin of my studies, I could provide first results. This time he accepted to supervise my PhD. His decision was bold; for who worked on the subject 'Hildegard of Bingen', could be caught between two stools effortlessly. By this time, I knew the various positions of scientific communities, which had dealt with her compositions. Theologians were convinced that her songs had at the most been sung during the hours of recreations as element of edification. For them it was unthinkable that the works of a woman, may she have been characterised by her exceptional visionary gift, or not, could have been sung in public during a service. This thesis was as widespread as wrong, since contemporary sources testify explicitly and stemming from priests' mouths that exactly that was the case. Semiologists, those scientists, who explore the notation of songs of Gregorian chants, were certain that Hildegard's works as a part of late Gregorian musicology weren't of any interest. That was on the one hand due to the lyrics, which partly derived from Hildegard's visionary works, and were based on a completely different, poetical concept than the strongly biblical orientated chant, and on the other hand due to the fact that Hildegard's neumes are notated on lines. Rhythmical distinctions, as they were common in the heyday of Gregorian chants, and which appear in particular accounts of neume notation, in a specific way of use of liquescences, and in the use of additional letters, didn't characterise her works. Semiologists therefore thought that her songs had no rhythmical significance, and were to be recited equalistically, as the Gregorian chant itself had been only few years before. At this point, pausing for a moment is rewarding, since the misinterpretation, which semiologists afforded to make about Hildegard's songs, is very revealing. I have witnessed the change from equalistic performance practice of the Gregorian chant to meaning-orientated, appropriate interpretation of neume notation, which is focussed on the word-music-relationship. Professor Schlepffhorst had been my tutor for Chant in Bremen, and he had then preferred equalistic singing. My question, why on earth the composers of those songs had taken the trouble of using different symbols for the same or similar melodies, had stayed unanswered. But my supervisor was, though a very careful, rather conservative man, at the same time a learning man. When I told him, what I had discovered: that the notation of Hildegard's songs necessarily suggested that the neumes hadn't been chosen by chance, but consciously, and—even though in a different way than in the case of the Gregorian chant—followed comprehensible and consistently traceable rhythmic principles, he effectively overtook the semiologists, whose current state of research he had adopted as his own by that time, gave my research more freedom and breathing room, and took his place between the stools and at my side.

Also singers, who had specialised in interpreting medieval music, and who were during the nineteen-nineties increasingly discovering Hildegard's compositions for themselves, attached no value to the neumes, which had been used to notate her songs. They arranged them mensuralistically, the melisma rhythmised, but no one of them could give me a logical explanation for arranging identically notated sequences in different ways. Mostly they argued that they empathised with the songs, with Hildegard's thinking, which made me deeply suspicious, since none of those, who had justified their interpretation on these grounds, had ever read Benedict's Rule, and possessed next to no basic knowledge of catholic liturgical science. I asked one singer, who sung Hildegard's antiphons, hymns and sequences, putting high, physical pressure on herself, so that a piercing, very crystalline sound was created, if she could sustain this technique on a daily basis of five hours. She answered no, and asked me, why I wanted to know that. 'Because Hildegard's spent five hours in the church daily, singing the Liturgy of Hours,' replied I. 'An interpretation of her songs would therefore, to be regarded as realistic, have to pass the real-life-test.' The answer was telling silence. Similarly reserved was and is the stance of those, who interpret Hildegard regarding her belief. Her visionary gift is considered as an additional benefit, a good marketing strategy, but many people don't want to be bothered with the belief in God and Jesus Christ, and think that its contents are nothing to worry about, if they want to understand the compositions. Well, think again. Of course, you cannot expect that everybody who studies Hildegard has to share her belief. But what I take for essentially necessary is to engage with what she believed, what it meant to her, and how her visionary experience was linked with her works, if you want to get a realistic impression of what she did.

Within musicological research Hildegard's compositions were rated divergently as well. Opinions varied from ingenious to dilettantish. Some researchers were convinced that there was no evidence that the songs were designed for liturgy. My question, why then they were titled consistently 'antiphon, hymn, sequence, kyrie,' or 'alleluia', whether the sceptics had read sources, which described performances during services, or if they regarded performances in the context of concerts or workshops with 'composer in residence' in the twelfth century as likely, stayed unanswered. Hildegard's critics provided as proof for her alleged dilettantism among others that some of her responsories had doxology while others hadn't. That drew my interest. Reading Benedict's Rule, which Hildegard had lived by and which I had by then exercised daily over several years, helped me finding the answer to the question, whether this was about dilettantism or purpose, rather quickly. I encountered then plenty of well firmly rooted prejudices, when I brought my first research results into discussion carefully.

Listen to Light's Colours—Chants for the Service

What music means to Hildegard, and why she composed for liturgy, is linked with her firm conviction that people are born to praise God. Hildegard shows that very impressively, using the example of her vision of the Choir of Angels. Originally, she says, there were ten Choirs of Angels, surrounding God, singing his praise, and sharing his light. But then one of the choirmasters, called Lucifer, which means translated 'light-carrier', became convinced that he and his choir had their beauty and brightness not thanks to God. So he turned away from God. At this moment all light and facility lapsed, and they fell like lumps of lead down into hell. Since then

one choir was missing in the Concert of Angels. To form it, is task of mankind. Therefore praising God is their birth vocation, and there is no better and more important task for a composer to compose chants for the service. Hildegard's chants were at her time perceived as new spiritual songs, and found favour far beyond monastic walls. Hence she also composed on behalf of other monasteries, and created new songs in honour of Saints, who were worshipped there. The Monastery Disibodenberg and her foundation Rupertsberg were adorned with new compositions just as well. Thematically, her songs follow the spiritual trends of the twelfth century. That is, why there are many songs in honour of Saint Ursula and her companions, whose remains were believed to be found in Colonia at that time, and the young visionary Elisabeth of Schoenau helped spreading the good news with her visions. Here, by the way, you can notice an important difference between Hildegard's visions and those of Elisabeth. While Elisabeth quasi reacted on her brother's enquiry by receiving visions, from which she got information about certain details regarding the found bones, Hildegard saw cosmic relations. The biggest amount of songs for a Saint are addressed to Mary. She was worshipped in the twelfth century in general and particularly by Hildegard personally. Who wants to understand Hildegard's songs right, can only do that through belief. Without knowing Benedict's Rule, without knowing what praising God meant for Benedictines, you cannot study her scientifically. During my research about Hildegard, it became evident that many questions even only could be answered that way. Hildegard's responses, for example, the responsories, sometimes have a 'Glory be to the Father' ('Gloria Patri'), but sometimes they don't. Earlier researchers said, 'She hasn't paid attention there.' But if you read Benedict's Rule, by which Hildegard lived, it becomes clear: In the nightly Liturgy of Hours there are many lessons and responses. Every third of them includes a 'Glory be to the Father'. Only with the knowledge of belief and Liturgy, the pieces of the puzzle can be put into order again. Hildegard's compositional work is strongly influenced by her visionary gift, because she didn't only see mysterious, wonderful or occasionally terrifying images, but she also heard sounds, which are resounding in her melodies as well as her writings are a reprocess of what she saw in her visions. The lyrics of her songs, some of which originate from her visionary writings, contributed essentially to proving Hildegard's authorship for the compositions. The antiphons, responsories, hymns, and sequences however have also a very practical aspect. Reviewing the themes, shows that Hildegard has very consciously composed for those Saint's days which lacked significant songs, for example for Rupertus, Disibod, Eucharius, and Maximin, or else sung about such Saints, who played an important role in the spirituality of twelfth century people, like Mary and Ursula. At the same time, their stories give answers to the current demographic situation in the twelfth century, which was marked by surplus of women. To lead a spiritual as well as comparatively free life was, as the movement of the beguines shows, an attractive alternative to a life in marriage or behind cloistral walls. The Ursula legend, which portrays an extensive pilgrimage of the young women, here thus meets a by crusades and extensive pilgrimage marked, literally moved society, and makes its awareness of life in Liturgy sing before God. In her Marian songs, which thematically form the biggest group within the compositions, and attest to Hildegard's own, Marian shaped spirituality, unfolds Hildegard's philanthropic theology. Against the mainstream, which imputed Eve's sin to every woman, Hildegard let her sisters sing: 'Death, brought by a woman,

was conquered by a light virgin. Therefore highest blessing rests upon the shape of the woman before all creature,' and distances herself by that from a theology, which convicted women because of their gender. Mary has with her openness for the work of God not only made up for Eve's actions, but put it more than right. It's interesting that both Mary and Eve are described in the Marian songs as active persons, therefore freely answering to God's will. In this context, terms are attached to Mary, which express a high degree of creativity, of constructive, healing powers. Obviously, it was important to Hildegard to make especially these powers a spiritual attitude and let the spiritual life unfold in her convents. She didn't give room to body hostile asceticism and let her sisters celebrate Holy Eucharist on holy days in white silk robes and festive jewellery.

Bringing Her Own Life into Play—the Ordo Virtutum

Hildegard's visionary gift was to her never an end in itself. She saw herself rather as engaged by God. Hence, it was only natural for her to use her abilities to heal wounds of the body and the soul. The Ordo Virtutum serves exactly this purpose. It takes an exceptional position among Hildegard's compositions. Unlike most of the liturgical plays, which enjoyed great popularity in the twelfth century, it wasn't based on texts from the Holy Scripture as the disciples' of Emmaus Passion play, and it doesn't focus on the lives of Saints like the Ludus Danielis, which very much favours Bernard Konermann's estimation, who sees the Ordo as 'the first independent, truly novel and self-contained post-classical theatre work we know'. During the Classical period, theatre was not only about entertainment, but also mental hygiene, which the ancient Greeks called 'Katharsis'. By watching emotional conflicts, the audience could both live through them and break free from them. Because of this healing character, ancient theatres were commonly integrated in sacred sites or medical centres, and tragedians were, as for example Sophocles, who served Asclepius, God of healing, often priests. Still, Hildegard's idea of staging the inner conflict of the soul, its struggle for the right path and the role of the good powers, which come from God to its rescue, is a literary role model. In Psychomachia by Prudentius, a Spanish poet from the fourth century, there also appear personified powers. Hildegard begins the Ordo with a song by the Saints of the Old Covenant. By that she sees the basis of the spiritual attitude already realised in the Old Testament, contrary to Hugo of Saint Victor, whose image of the tree of the virtues and the tree of the vices she quotes; a subtle, but for the expert of literacy, to whom it is regarded, even more notable theological statement. With *virtus*, the cardinal positive and for everybody achievable spiritual attitude, Hildegard links the *operatio*, a term, which's meaning is as extensive as that of the word *virtus*. *Operatio* as a start means translated simply working, activity. Hildegard however links *operatio* inseparably with God's saving actions, while God is with his healing activities concentrated on mankind, which is target of all his efforts, and on the other hand by its originate vocation in its actions geared towards God. Therefore working on one's weaknesses, the self-fulfilment, is in Hildegard's theology not as commonly today a variety of egocentricity, but the active endeavour to practice spiritual attitude. That this is no easy task becomes very clear in the Ordo Virtutum. The reason for that is obvious. Moving her convent from Disibodenberg to Rupertsberg had been followed by numerous conflicts within the community. Some of those vices, which Hildegard described so graphically in her second ethical visionary work, she probably could

imagine lively, because the arguments she put into their mouths had been part of the conflict with her fellow nuns. But challenges aren't, as Hildegard knew from her own painful experience, mastered by idleness or refusing collaboration. The seemingly easy path leads, as other spiritual writers in the Middle Ages too highlight tirelessly, into ruin. With the *Ordo Virtutum* and a personalisation of inner psychic forces Hildegard gave her sisters a chance to bring themselves and their lives into the play, similar to a bibliodrama, and to find their role and finally their path to their very sound origin. Thereby she hoped to make her convent sustainable; because every of her sisters and Hildegard herself could identify with the protagonists of the *Ordo*, with the happy soul, which is weighed down by the hardship of its life, and finally gives in to the temptation of the devil, here accurately related to as *Diabolus*, the confuser. Who, confronted with the challenges of the process of individuation and reduced to oneself, loses the perspective for a successful life, will come into a situation, which Augustinus calls 'cor se incurvatum', 'self-distorted heart'. This narrow-minded angle, this reduction to established, but in one's own situation inappropriate behaviour, causes progressive 'back damage of the soul', whereat, following an inner psychic domino effect, one malposition generates the next, and results in a proceeding hardening of the human soul. The good is just not the easily achieved. You have, just as in a strict sport training program, to make the effort daily to accomplish it. Who doesn't have the motivation—spiritual life depends, as physical training does, at least half on the mental approach—loses sight of the admittedly remote goal of eternal life and lets himself be lured by material stimuli. But shopping satisfies the soul's hunger as little as a successful career. In the end, what remains of all superficial activity is inner void, which cannot be filled with material prosperity or mere appearance. In everyone's life therefore is a point of return, of intersection, where the call to conversion—though it might be a very soft one—becomes audible within everyday noise. The challenge, which the unhappy soul has to face, is the same as with you and me. It is imperative, as Bernard of Clairvaux said, to approach God up to oneself. But this is, given the condition the unhappy soul has driven itself into, a painful process, since it has to learn that it now is in an unpresentable state. At this point the powers living within the soul raise their voices and quieten the brawling chaos, interpreting its clamour as a result of its inner injuries and burning pain. In the emerging free space the virtues one after another raise their voices. The order, in which they sing, arises by reason of necessity of the process of the soul's healing, which they attend. Therefore the melodies of Humility, Love and Godliness, those powers, which are most important in the phase of reorientation, sound first. Humility means in Latin 'humilitas' and is a grounded power of great inner strength, humorous and endued with the courage to serve, as you can see from the words 'humus' and 'humor' which are both part of the term 'humilitas'. Hence the point of humility is not that attitude, which is also often with in the church seen as scathing humiliation and unnecessary belittlement, but rather the spiritual attitude, which is shaped by inner calmness and the ability to take oneself not too serious. Who practices this rightly understood humility, becomes able to accept oneself and the help of the other powers, which now will raise their voices. Love, Latin 'caritas', induces the transformation from the soul's yearning of love to an inner attitude of love. The orientation towards material trappings is abandoned. From material prosperity it is no longer expected to allay the longing for eternal life and deep acceptance.

Godliness effects, because the soul is now rooted in the hope of eternal life, a change of perspective as to the being and doing of others. They are seen with the aid of godliness as from God and are accepted.

The next three spiritual attitudes help the soul to overcome its fears, which can arise as a result of the reorientation. With Obedience Hildegard connects the concentration on God's will and the independence of outer motivation. Fides, which is translated 'faith' and 'trust', is etymologically related to 'fiducia', which means 'reliance'. Hildegard portrays Fides as a mirror of life, which is there to give clear view onto God's life in the soul. Hope is the power which always considers conversion and unfolding of new life possible. Next follows the group of powers of emancipation from those misjudgements which have made the soul's ensnarement in disastrous ties possible. Castitas is next to 'chastity' mostly to be understood as that spiritual attitude, which realises that any community whatsoever cannot allay the yearning of love completely. Chastity or rather the ability, which is relying on inner independence, on residing in oneself, strengthens the relationship between God and the soul. 'Innocentia' is innocence, or integrity. It strengthens perception of healing powers. That it, as we know from psychological studies, an effective strategy of change of perspective, which is now part of methods as neuro-linguistical programming (NLP). Contemptus mundi is translated the contempt of the world. Since that can easily be misunderstood, we should imagine a power, which teaches the soul emancipation from all forces and norms, which assert a claim on it, and thereby offers a path to individuation. The love towards the heavenly is strengthened by the contemptus mundi through its orientation towards transcendence, the unto eternal life extended horizon of the soul. It is the power, which ultimately changes the soul's view. Now those powers speak out, which stabilise and develop the soul's capacity for relationship. Discipline is linked with the consequently persevered focus on the essential. Veracity teaches the soul respect for the secret and the vulnerability of others, freeing it from the tendency of comparing itself with others. Mercy stands at the end of the soul's long journey to itself. It teaches the soul to accept itself and gives it therefore the ability of healing others. The soul is no longer in doubt about the norms, which apply to its life. Now the last group can be fully effective in unfolding the gifts of distinction, patience and victory. The ability of measured and wise distinction help the soul to realise, what its mission consists of. Patience accompanies its actions, and victory states its success. The Ordo Virtutum is not only interesting as liturgical play with strong psychotherapeutic aspects; it is, having a closer look on its conception and contents, also a new contribution to the ethical discussion of the twelfth century; since Hildegard overrides with her demonstration of the spiritual attitude as to be practised, actively to be experienced powers the until then valid hierarchy of action and contemplation. This attitude, which is demonstrated in the Gospel by Martha and Mary, who had always attached little value to active demeanour, is brought into balance by Hildegard. Here appears once more the dispute between the Apostles Paul and James, who argued about whether the faith or the works were more important. Hildegard is with her concept of the active and to be practised spiritual attitude on James's side, who said, 'Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.' Hildegard is convinced: We are not only invited to sing along in the Choir of the Angels, but we ought to and are allowed to operate here on earth co-creatively. Thereby she finally confirms Benedict's Rule, which

demands that we treat all material goods we use like holy vessels of the altar, and therefore, translated to modern terms, that we regard the washing up and the ironing as important as the preparation of services. The first public performance of the Ordo Virtutum probably took place on the occasion of the sanctification of the church of the Convent of Rupertsburg on the first of May eleven-fifty-two. The part of the Diabolus was assumably played by Volmar, Hildegard's clerk and provost; the Saints of the Old Covenant by the attendant Mainz prelates, among whom was also Hildegard's brother Hugo, who as choirmaster could have rehearsed with the men's choir. At the same time the Ordo, which's textual base stock was already part of the in eleven-fifty-one completed Liber Scivias, had been drafted as its textual sum. This idea is not only based on the Ordo's content, but also on a numbers game. The Liber Scivias includes overall thirteen visions, while twelfth is the holy number, which reminds of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. When there was now added a thirteenth chapter to twelfth visionary ones, it must be, so people in the Middle Ages thought, of high relevance, because after the number twelve the counting virtually had to start anew. You could summarise Hildegard's associated intention as such: All knowledge of the ways of the Lord ends in going them. Faith without works is dead. Spiritual attitudes back only those, who practice them daily.