The Life and Works of Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179)

Introduction

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was a remarkable woman, a "first" in many fields. At a time when few women wrote, Hildegard, known as "Sybil of the Rhine", produced major works of theology and visionary writings. When few women were accorded respect, she was consulted by and advised bishops, popes, and kings. She used the curative powers of natural objects for healing, and wrote treatises about natural history and medicinal uses of plants, animals, trees and stones. She is the first composer whose biography is known. She founded a vibrant convent, where her musical plays were performed. Although not yet canonized, Hildegard has been beatified, and is frequently referred to as St. Hildegard. Revival of interest in this extraordinary woman of the middle ages was initiated by musicologists and historians of science and religion. Less fortunately, Hildegard's visions and music had been hijacked by the New Age movement, whose music bears some resemblance to Hildegard's ethereal airs. Her story is important to all students of medieval history and culture and an inspirational account of an irresistible spirit and vibrant intellect overcoming social, physical, cultural, gender barriers to achieve timeless transcendence.

The Early Years

Hildegard was born a "10"th child (a tithe) to a noble family. As was customary with the tenth child, which the family could not count on feeding, she was dedicated at birth to the church. The girl
started to have visions of luminous objects at the age of three, but
soon realized she was unique in this ability and hid this gift for many years.
At age 8, the family sent this strange girl to an anchoress named Jutta to receive a religious education. Jutta was born into a wealthy and prominent family, and by all accounts was a young woman of great beauty. She spurned all worldly temptations and decided to dedicate her life to god. Instead of entering a convent, Jutta followed a harsher route and became an anchoress. Anchors of both sexes, though from most accounts they seem to be largely women, led an ascetic life, shut off from the world inside a small room, usually built adjacent to a church so that they could follow the services, with only a small window acting as their link to the rest of humanity. Food would be passed through this window and refuse taken out. Most of the time would be spent in prayer, contemplation, or solitary handworking activities, like stitching and embroidering. Because they would become essentially dead to the world, anchors would receive their last rights from the bishop before their confinement in the anchorage. This macabre ceremony was a complete burial ceremony with the anchor laid out on a bier. Jutta's cell was such an anchorage, except that there was a door through which Hildegard entered, as well as about a dozen of girls from noble families who were attracted there by Jutta's fame in later years. What kind of education did Hildegard receive from Jutta? It was of the most rudimentary form, and Hildegard could never escape the feelings of inadequacy and lack of education. She learned to read Psalter in Latin. Though her grasp of the grammatical intricacies of the language was never complete - she always had secretaries to help her write down her visions - she had a good intuitive feel for the intricacies of the language itself, constructing complicated sentences fraught with meanings on many levels, that are still a challenge to students of her writings. The proximity of the anchorage to the church of the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg (it was attached physically to the church) undoubtedly exposed young Hildegard to musical religious
services and were the basis for her own musical compositions. After Jutta's death, when Hildegard was 38 years of age, she was elected the head of the budding convent living within cramped walls of the anchorage.

**The Awakening**

During all these years Hildegard confided of her visions only to Jutta and another monk, named Volmar, who was to become her lifelong secretary. However, in 1141, Hildegard had a vision that changed the course of her life. A vision of god gave her instant understanding of the meaning of the religious texts, and commanded her to write down everything she would observe in her visions.

And it came to pass ... when I was 42 years and 7 months old, that the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain. And so it kindled my whole heart and breast like a flame, not burning but warming... and suddenly I understood of the meaning of expositions of the books... Yet Hildegard was also overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy and hesitated to act.

But although I heard and saw these things, because of doubt and low opinion of myself and because of diverse sayings of men, I refused for a long time a call to write, not out of stubbornness but out of humility, until weighed down by a scourge of god, I fell onto a bed of sickness.

The 12th century was also the time of schisms and religious foment, when someone preaching any outlandish doctrine could instantly attract a large following. Hildegard was critical of schismatics, indeed her whole life she preached against them, especially the Cathars. She wanted her visions to be sanctioned, approved by the Catholic Church, though she herself never doubted the divine origins to her luminous visions. She wrote to St. Bernard, seeking his blessings. Though his answer to her was rather perfunctory, he did bring it to the attention of Pope Eugenius
(1145-53), a rather enlightened individual who exhorted Hildegard to finish her writings. With papal imprimatur, Hildegard was able to finish her first visionary work *Scivias* ("Know the Ways of the Lord") and her fame began to spread through Germany and beyond.

**Major Works**

Around 1150 Hildegard moved her growing convent from Disibodenberg, where the nuns lived alongside the monks, to Bingen about 30 km north, on the banks of the Rhine. She later founded another convent, Eibingen, across the river from Bingen. Her remaining years were very productive. She wrote music and texts to her songs, mostly liturgical *plainchant* honoring saints and Virgin Mary for the holidays and feast days, and *antiphons*. There is some evidence that her music and moral play *Ordo Virtutum* ("Play of Virtues") were performed in her own convent. In addition to *Scivias* she wrote two other major works of visionary writing *Liber vitae meritorum* (1150-63) (Book of Life's Merits) and *Liber divinorum operum* (1163) ("Book of Divine Works"), in which she further expounded on her theology of microcosm and macrocosm-man being the peak of god's creation, man as a mirror through which the splendor of the macrocosm was reflected. Hildegard also authored *Physica* and *Causae et Curae* (1150), both works on natural history and curative powers of various natural objects, which are together known as *Liber subtilatum* ("The book of subtleties of the Diverse Nature of Things"). These works were uncharacteristic of Hildegard's writings, including her correspondences, in that they were not presented in a visionary form and don't contain any references to divine source or revelation. However, like her religious writings they reflected her religious philosophy-that the man was the peak of god's creation and everything was put in the world for man to use. Her scientific views were derived from the ancient Greek cosmology of the four elements-fire, air, water, and earth-with their complementary qualities of heat, dryness, moisture, and cold, and the corresponding four humours in the body-choler (yellow bile),
blood, phlegm, and melancholy (black bile). Human constitution was based on the preponderance of one or two of the humours. Indeed, we still use words "choleric", "sanguine", "phlegmatic" and "melancholy" to describe personalities. Sickness upset the delicate balance of the humours, and only consuming the right plant or animal which had that quality you were missing, could restore the healthy balance to the body. That is why in giving descriptions of plants, trees, birds, animals, stones, Hildegard is mostly concerned in describing that object's quality and giving its medicinal use. Thus, "Reyan (tansy) is hot and a little damp and is good against all superfluous flowing humours and whoever suffers from catarrh and has a cough, let him eat tansy. It will bind humors so that they do not overflow, and thus will lessen."

Hildegard's writings are also unique for their generally positive view of sexual relations and her description of pleasure from the point of view of a woman. They might also contain the first description of the female orgasm.

When a woman is making love with a man, a sense of heat in her brain, which brings with it sensual delight, communicates the taste of that delight during the act and summons forth the emission of the man's seed. And when the seed has fallen into its place, that vehement heat descending from her brain draws the seed to itself and holds it, and soon the woman's sexual organs contract, and all the parts that are ready to open up during the time of menstruation now close, in the same way as a strong man can old something enclosed in his fist.

She also wrote that strength of semen determined the sex of the child, while the amount of love and passion determine child's disposition. The worst case, where the seed is weak and parents feel no love, leads to a bitter daughter.

**Divine Harmonies**

Music was extremely important to Hildegard. She describes it as the means of recapturing the original joy and beauty of paradise. According to her before the Fall, Adam had a pure voice and joined angels in singing praises to god. After the fall, music was
invented and musical instruments made in order to worship god appropriately. Perhaps this explains why her music most often sounds like what we imagine angels singing to be like. Hildegard wrote hymns and sequences in honor of saints, virgins and Mary. She wrote in the plainchant tradition of a single vocal melodic line, a tradition common in liturgical singing of her time. Her music is undergoing a revival and enjoying huge public success. One group, *Sequentia*, is planning to record all of Hildegard's musical output in time for the 900th anniversary of her birth in 1998. Their latest recording *Canticles of Ecstasy* is superb. Be sure to read the translations of the latin text of the songs which provide a good example of Hildegard's metaphorical writing, and are imbued with vibrant descriptions of color and light, that also occurs in her visionary writings.

**The Most Distinguished Migraine Sufferer**

It is now generally agreed that Hildegard suffered from migraine, and that her visions were a result of this condition. The way she describes her visions, the precursors, to visions, to debilitating aftereffects, point to classic symptoms of migraine sufferers. Although a number of visual hallucinations may occur, the more common ones described are the "scotomata" which often follow perceptions of phosphenes in the visual field. Scintillating scotomata are also associated with areas of total blindness in the visual field, something Hildegard might have been describing when she spoke of points of intense light, and also the "extinguished stars." Migraine attacks are usually followed by sickness, paralysis, blindness-all reported by Hildegard, and when they pass, by a period of rebound and feeling better than before, a euphoria also described by her. Also, writes Oliver Sachs

Among the strangest and most intense symptoms of migraine aura, and the most difficult of description and analysis, are the occurrences of feelings of sudden familiarity and certitude... or its opposite. Such states are experienced, momentarily and occasionally, by everyone; their occurrence in migraine auras is
marked by their overwhelming intensity and relatively long duration.
It is a tribute to the remarkable spirit and the intellectual powers of
this woman that she was able to turn a debilitating illness into the
word of god, and create so much with it.

**Bibliography**

1 *Hildegard of Bingen, a Visionary Life*, by Sabina Flanagan.


11 *German mysticism from Hildegard of Bingen to Ludwig*
Discography

Bison Tales has recently released two recordings of Hildegard's music and spoken word by Ellen Oak. Ellen Oak has been studying and performing the life and work of Hildegard for more than a decade.

1 Harmony of Heaven
2 Sounding the Living Light

CDConnection has the following disks available.

1 Hildegard of Bingen Canticles of Ecstasy DEUTSCHE HARMONIA MUNDI 12/94 Sequentia - excellent
2 DES77051 Hildegard of Bingen Ordo Virturum Vol 1 DEUTSCHE HARMONIA MUNDI 4/90 1:29 DDD Sequentia - a bit weird, not for the faint of heart.
3 DES77020 Hildegard of Bingen Symphoniae Spiritual DEUTSCHE HARMONIA MUNDI 10/89 Sequentia - pleasant and beautiful.
4 CHW41 Hildegard Antiphons and Songs CHRYsalis 11/93
5 CHW74584 Hildegard Hildegard & Her Time CHRYsalis 3/93
6 HYP66039 Hildegard of Bingen Feather on the Breathe of God HYPERION 2/88 Emma Kirkby/Page/Gothic Voices

Glossary

plain_chant or plain_song \pla_n-,chant\ n or \pla_n-,so´n\ n (1513)

1: GREGORIAN CHANT

2: a liturgical chant of any of various Christian rites

cho ler_ic \kaªl-e-rik, ke-ler-ik\ adj (1583)
1: easily moved to often unreasonable or excessive anger: hot-tempered

2: ANGRY, IRATE

an_ti_phon \ant-e-fen, -,fa²n\ n

[LL antiphona – more at ANTHEM] (1500)

1: a psalm, anthem, or verse sung responsively

2: a verse usu. from Scripture said or sung before and after a canticle, psalm, or psalm verse as part of the liturgy

san_guine \san-gwen\ adj [ME sanguin, fr. MF, fr. L sanguineus, fr. sanguin-, sanguis] (14c)

1: BLOODRED

2a: consisting of or relating to blood

b: SANGUINARY 1

c: of the complexion: RUDDY

3: having blood as the predominating bodily humor; also: having the bodily conformation and temperament held characteristic of such predominance and marked by sturdiness, high color, and cheerfulness

4: CONFIDENT, OPTIMISTIC

phleg_mat_ic \fleg-'mat-ik\ adj (14c)

1: resembling, consisting of, or producing the humor phlegm
2: having or showing a slow and stolid temperament

mel_an_choly \mel-en-,ka\textsuperscript{a}l-e\_ [ME malencolie, fr. MF melancolie, fr. LL melancholia, fr. Gk, fr. melan- + chole_ bile – more at GALL] (14c)

1a: an abnormal state attributed to an excess of black bile and characterized by irascibility or depression

b: BLACK BILE

c: MELANCHOLIA

2a: depression of spirits: DEJECTION

b: a pensive mood

Web Resources

1  Women's Voices performing group.

Created: 2/15/95 Last modified: 5/24/95

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