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**"The Lauds of Saint Ursula: Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)."**  
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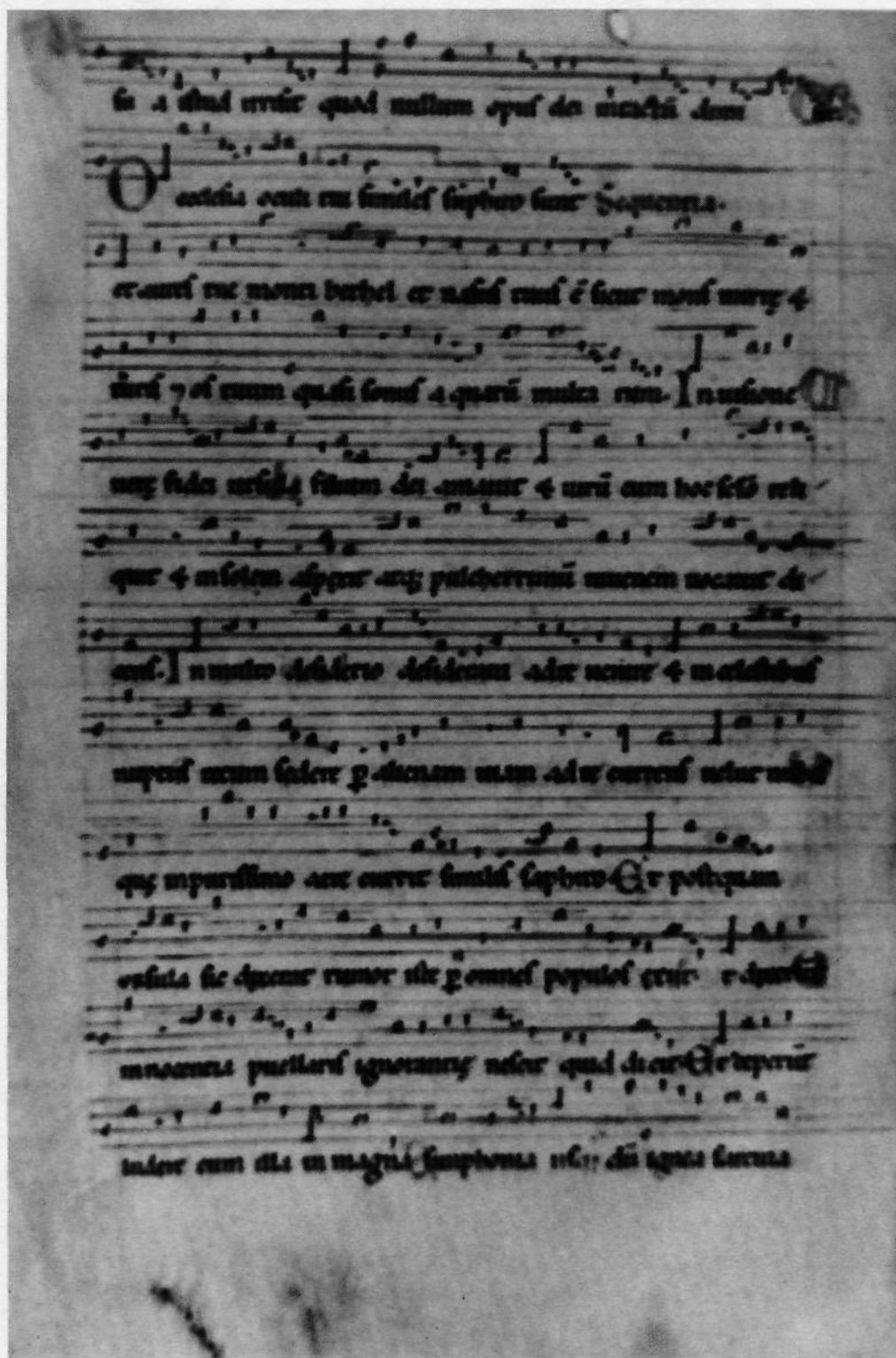
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Thomas Binkley, dir. *The Lauds of Saint Ursula: Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)*. Focus 911. Early Music Institute, Indiana University School of Music, 1991.

As in his recording of *Le jeu de Robin et Marion* (see above) Binkley here as well presents medieval music within a fitting contemporary context. With *The Lauds of St. Ursula* he offers a complete office for the martyr, built around chants from Hildegard's *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum*. Among the saints, Ursula receives the largest number of pieces in the *Symphonia*. And the fact that Hildegard devotes a total of 13 chants to Ursula suggests that a special liturgy may have been sung on her feast day.

Binkley attempts to reconstruct such a liturgy. He presents the chants as they might have been sung during the early morning office hour of Lauds, choosing seven of Hildegard's antiphons for psalms, a canticle, a Benedictus, and a procession. He also includes the hymn *Cum vox sanguinis* and the magnificent sequence *O ecclesia*. Strangely, however, the order of the antiphons does not entirely preserve the integrity of the narrative about Ursula and her virgins that originally tied them together. Binkley switches the positions of *Deus enim rorem* (no. 4 on the CD, no. 7 in Hildegard) and *Deus enim in prima muliere* (no. 6 on the CD, no. 4 in Hildegard), which obscures the thought progression underlying the service.

In Binkley's rendition of the hymn and the sequence the passages of personal speech are set off musically from the "narrative." He changes soloists, brings in a group, and divides the singers between Hildegard's melody and an added prolongation of the initial pitch of the phrase (invariably the final) as a drone. In the melismatic *Amen* this drone shifts up a third and the melodic line moves below it. In what must be considered the musical climax of the service, *O ecclesia*, Hildegard's sapiential concept of the Church speaks from the massive grandeur with which she imbues a personified "Ecclesia." The sheer length of the sequence is astounding, as is its range. Thrice it extends to *c'*, an octave-plus-third above the final, *a*, and once goes down to *E*, a fourth below it. The text includes narrative, personal speech (Ursula), and voices of the crowd. Binkley separates out these voices, setting up a miniature drama. When the devil invades the virgins and "slaughters {their} noblest way of living," the singer modulates into speech song, and on the virgins' cry of disgust ("Wach") before the

Figure 1. "O Ecclesia," *Sequentia* (performed on the CD)

throne of God, jarring dissonances appear against the drone. Binkley's is a vivid rendition of this dramatic tour-de-force.

Whether his interpretation is historically correct is impossible to say. It remains unknown if Hildegard's pieces were ever performed within the liturgy, which psalms may have been connected with which antiphons (many antiphons have a *differentia*), or what other chants may have been sung. But there are a great many open questions regarding the performance of her pieces, whether within or outside the liturgy. Beyond the medium—whether solo or group performance, monophonic or polyphonic rendition, purely vocal or with added instruments—there are the countless possibilities of rhythmic interpretation. The sources preserve the *Symphonia* in *Hufnagelnotation*, which bears no clues as to durational values. In the past two alternative approaches have been articulated in recordings, one favoring equal durations, the other a free delivery based on the intrinsic rhythmic shape of the texts.<sup>1</sup> Binkley obviously allies himself with the latter.

Binkley consistently interprets small groups of *puncti* in the sources as short note values, and derives all other nuances in durational values from the words and the musical impetus of a given phrase. Intelligibility of the text is a guiding principle. In both hymn and sequence this leads to very quick melismas that hardly interrupt the deliberate pacing of text syllables. The many liquescent neumes are beautifully integrated, and the *bi-* and *tristropheae* occasionally take on an Eastern flavor in their glottal quality. Overall fast-paced, the vocal interpretation is nonetheless for the most part convincing. A slightly slower pulse might have served the strength and enormity of the sequence, however. The very density of images in the text make this piece seem rushed.

By choosing a small female *schola* as medium, Binkley attempts to recreate the conditions of Hildegard's Rupertsberg, where she moved her nuns after they outgrew the male Disibodenberg monastery. While Rupertsberg began with just a dozen women, it grew to include some 70 nuns. Since the Ursula songs are probably late pieces from the height of the convent's activity, one

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<sup>1</sup>For nearly equal durations, see *Gesänge der hl. Hildegard von Bingen*, M. Immaculata Ritscher OSB, dir., Psallite 242 MC. Schola der Benediktinerinnenabtei St. Hildegard, Rudesheim-Eibingen. For free rhythmic interpretation, see *Geistliche Musik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, Helga Weber, dir. TELDEC 66. 22387, Hamburg 1989 (1980).



**Figure 2.** The Tower of the Church, *Ecclesia* Sustained by the Holy Spirit. (Eibingen, *Scivias* manuscript, part two, vision 4.)



**Figure 3.** Ecclesia with Virginitas and Her Companions. (Eibingen, *Scivias* manuscript, part two, vision 5.)



**Figure 4.** "The Seeress" (Hildegard of Bingen).



would expect a larger group of singers for the psalmody. In Hildegard's own pieces, though, with their often extremely large ranges and long phrases, the smaller, specially trained *schola* and the soloist seem quite plausible.

While Binkley's conceptions of the rhythmic flow, the strong piercing quality of the voices, and the "polyphony" through the addition of a vocal drone seem influenced by the recordings of *Sequentia*,<sup>2</sup> he nonetheless refrains from adding instruments. References to the symphony of angels ("summa symphonia") in *O ecclesia* might have suggested instruments, as in a related book illumination, where the angels all carry instruments. But as there is not direct evidence that instruments were intended for any of Hildegard's songs, aligning himself with the earlier recordings of Helga Weber<sup>3</sup> or of the St. Hildegard nuns<sup>4</sup> in this respect, seems to have been a judicious choice.

Notwithstanding questions about historical authenticity, the Binkley recording provides a glimpse of a world that will be meaningful today not just to historians, music students, or Hildegard scholars, but that will appeal to a broader audience looking for the kind of concentration and focus emanating from her highly spiritual music. It highlights the unique power of Hildegard's own compositions by embedding them in traditional chants, and it restores a sense of living context to her pieces by suggesting one way in which they may have originally been used.

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<sup>2</sup>*Hildegard von Bingen: Symphoniae (Geistliche Gesänge)*, Barbara Thornton, dir. Harmonia Mundi IC 067-19 9976 I. *Sequentia*, Cologne, 1983.

<sup>3</sup>*Geistliche Musik*.

<sup>4</sup>*Gesänge*.