

ABSTRACT

Music as Evocative Power: the intersection of music with images of the Divine in the songs of Hildegard of Bingen

Hildegard's songs evoke an erotic and embodied devotion to a Divinity imagined as sensuous, relational, immanent and often female. These songs, written for use in her predominantly female community, are part of Hildegard's educational program to guide the spiritual development of the women in her Benedictine monastery. Hildegard's theology of music proposes that the physical act of singing enables humans to experience connection to the Living Light (Hildegard's most common address for the voice of the Holy Presence in her visions, *lux vivens*), and to embody this Divinity in their midst. Her songs express, in dense poetic texts set to widely-ranging chant-like melodies, her rich imaging of the fecund presence of the Divine. The singers are thus encouraged to imagine themselves in relationship with the Holy One, the Living Light, through the physical act of singing these evocative songs.

This dissertation analyses four of Hildegard's songs, representing a small cross section of her musical oeuvre. The analysis elucidates the way in which the music affectively conveys the meaning and significance of the texts. Carefully incising the "flesh" from the structural "bones" of the melodies reveals underlying organising configurations which pervade the songs and deliver the texts in a distinctive manner. Hildegard professed herself to be musically uneducated because she lacked a knowledge of music notation, although she admitted to extensive experience in singing Divine Office. However, she clearly claims to be the oral composer of her songs, arranging late in her life for music scribes to notate her melodies. My analysis unravels the influence of the oral composer as it intersects with the influence of the musically trained scribes who neumed her texts. Hildegard wrote that the "words symbolize the body, and the jubilant music indicates the spirit" (*Scivias* 3:12:13). She claims that the music conveys the meaning of the texts with affective power, and my analysis shows ways in which the oral composer endeavors to achieve this goal. Her texts, conveyed by her melodies and thus intimately entwined with the words they deliver, are powerfully persuasive forces in the spiritual education of the women in her monastery.

This dissertation uncovers significant insights which can inform the communal practice of worship of the Divine, especially where song forms part of that worship, and particularly in regard to the imagining of Divinity in ways which can nourish the diversity of all humans, all creatures, and all creation. The work of feminist theologians is brought into dialogue with Hildegard's imagery and educational purpose, thus making available ways of imagining the Divine which are especially important for contemporary women, who have suffered from being excluded from the *imago Dei*. Thus the dissertation unearths a rich lode of female, and creatural embodied images, which threads its way though the millennia, but now needs to be mined to uncover images that might work for contemporary Christians seeking multiple imaging of the Divine to touch the deep feminist, ecological and liberative yearnings of many hearts and spirits.