

The *Symphonia* of Hildegard of Bingen: Ambiguities in origin and intention

Catherine Jeffreys

The *Symphonia harmoniae caelestium revelationum* [Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations] of German abbess and visionary Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) occupies a unique position within the corpus of twelfth-century plainchant. This cycle of seventy-seven liturgical songs and a liturgical drama is one of the few examples where two extant versions of the one body of plainchant by a single identifiable composer are available to us from an age, the works of which are often characterised by the anonymity of their composers. The two *Symphonia* manuscripts have long been the subject of considerable debate as the *Symphonia* survives in two distinct versions, distinguishable in terms of the content of each manuscript, that is the number and types of items included in each version of the *Symphonia*; the ordering of items in each manuscript; and the intended purpose of each codex in which the *Symphonia* is preserved.¹ The issues concerning the compilation and content of the two manuscripts in question provide an insight into the ambiguities in origin and intention (whether the *Symphonia* was intended as a collection of songs or a *Gesamtwerk*) of the musical output of one of history's most significant woman composers.²

Some biographical details about the Abbess Hildegard are important, to establish the historical locus of her *Symphonia*. Born in 1098 in Bermersheim (about 20 kilometers southeast of Bingen, which is on the Rhine in the western part of Germany), Hildegard was placed into the care of Jutta of Spanheim who occupied a small cell attached to the Benedictine monastery of Mount Saint Disibode, near Bingen. Upon Jutta's death in 1136, Hildegard became abbess to the small community of nuns at the monastery. The visionary encounters, first experienced in Hildegard's childhood, intensified with age, and after Jutta's death the matter was submitted to prelates who authenticated Hildegard's claims to divine perspicacity. This prompted a steady flow of written works which date from 1141 to her death on 17 September 1179. Part of her visionary experience resulted in one of the largest bodies of plainchant ascribed to a single composer.

It appears that Hildegard began composing music for liturgical use in the 1140s; two letters written to Hildegard in 1148 indicate that her compositional activities date from as early as 1141.³ During the period in question, it was common in monastic women's communities for one woman to assume responsibility for the musical activities of the convent, and this often involved the composition of items for liturgical use. In smaller communities, such as that at Mount Saint Disibode, it was not unusual for the abbess to assume that responsibility.⁴ As such, Hildegard may have been in a position to compose items for liturgical use as early as 1136.

The idea of collecting together composed items into a song cycle was not new at the time; famous examples include Notker of Saint Gall's *Liber ymnorum* from the ninth century and Abelard's *Hymnarius Paraclitensis* from the twelfth. Both Notker of Saint Gall's cycle and the first two books of Abelard's *Hymnarius* are arranged according to the liturgical calendar; the third book of Abelard's cycle resembles Hildegard's *Symphonia* as in both, items devoted to a particular subject are grouped together.⁵ Whether the concept of a song cycle implied performance as a cycle remains unclear. However, the concept of preserving liturgical items by providing a structure, that is, an ordering of liturgical items according to the liturgical calendar or by subject matter, is apparent. A distinction is to be made here between a manuscript that has been compiled as a miscellany, with items merely grouped together according to subject matter, and a manuscript in which the structuring of each subject group is based on a particular design which displays a structural unity consistent with the notion of a *Gesamtwerk*.

The earliest reference to Hildegard's *Symphonia* song cycle appears in the 1150s. In the preface to her *Liber vitae meritorum* (1158) Hildegard refers for the first time to the *Symphonia* as one of several items worked on during the 1150s.⁶ As the texts to fourteen songs which appear in both versions of the *Symphonia* are found in the thirteenth vision of Book III of Hildegard's first written work, the *Scivias* (1151), it is generally assumed that, firstly,

this vision formed the basis of the *Symphonia* song cycle and, secondly, the *Symphonia* was completed by 1158. However, there is evidence of Hildegard's compositional activities both before 1151 and after 1158. For example, the thirteen items devoted to Saint Ursula were composed after Hildegard's exposure to the cult of the Saint in Cologne between 1158 and 1163.⁷

As to the question of whether her compositions existed prior to the song cycle, the genres represented in the *Symphonia* suggest that the items included in the cycle were composed specifically for liturgical use. As such, they could exist outside the song cycle. All but three of the items included in the *Symphonia* (two Symphonies and an unclassified devotional song) can be integrated into the prescribed services of the Mass and the Divine Office. In addition to a Kyrie and an alleluia-verse, Hildegard composed seven sequences for the Mass, sung between the Alleluia and the Gospel. Compositions from the *Symphonia* associated with the Divine Office include four hymns, eighteen responsories and forty-three antiphons.⁸

Taking into consideration historical accounts of Hildegard's compositional activities and the genres included in the *Symphonia*, it is possible that Hildegard's compositions from the 1140s (or perhaps earlier) and 1150s were collected into a cycle once a number of items has been amassed. This seems likely as the two manuscripts in which the *Symphonia* survives date from between 1175 and 1190. The order in which the items appear in the cycle, as Ruth Lightbourne suggests, could have been revealed to Hildegard through visionary experience, as documented in the *Scivias*.⁹ This has important implications for the way we think of the *Symphonia*, as it is commonly considered a single work (as opposed to a compilation of items) which underwent a process of development, while the two extant versions of the *Symphonia* are seen to represent two stages of that developmental process. However, if one takes a closer look at the two manuscripts, problems associated with the idea that the *Symphonia* underwent such a process of development which was completed in the latter manuscript come to light.

The two manuscripts in which the *Symphonia* is preserved with musical notation were compiled at the Rupertsberg abbey (situated across the River Nahe from Bingen), Hildegard's official residence from around 1147. The older of the two manu-

scripts, Dendermonde (Belgium), Saint-Pieters & Paulusabdij MS. Cod. 9 (hereafter D), dates from around 1175, some four years before Hildegard's death in 1179. Two letters written to Hildegard in around 1175 confirm that D was originally intended as a gift of didactic texts and songs for a community of Cistercian monks in Villiers, Belgium.¹⁰ D comprises four works: Hildegard's *Liber vitae meritorum*, the *Liber viarum* of Hildegard's contemporary Elizabeth of Schoenau, the *Symphonia* and an anonymous dialogue. The D codex predates the only other extant version of the *Symphonia* by over a decade. Included in the *Riesenkodex*, Wiesbaden, Landesbibliothek Hs. 2 (hereafter R), the later *Symphonia* was compiled posthumously between 1180 and 1190.¹¹

We know that the two versions of the *Symphonia* were compiled independently from one another as D was in Villiers while R was being prepared in Rupertsberg. Furthermore, results of examinations of the textual and neumatic content of each manuscript suggest that the manuscripts were not copied from the same source.¹² Even so, of Hildegard's seventy-seven extant liturgical songs, fifty-seven are included in D and seventy-five in R. Fifty-five songs are common to both sources, although R includes the only extant version with neumes from the twelfth century of Hildegard's liturgical drama, the *Ordo Virtutum*.¹³

The text of the *Ordo Virtutum* appears in embryonic form in the thirteenth vision of Book III of the *Scivias*, alongside the fourteen song texts. Hildegard subsequently expanded the text of the *Ordo Virtutum* and gave it a musical setting for performance by the nuns at Rupertsberg. The appearance of the liturgical drama in the *Scivias* seems to imply that the *Ordo Virtutum* formed a part of the original *Symphonia*, as the ordering of items in the *Symphonia* appears to have been based upon the ordering of items in the *Scivias*. As such, the *Ordo Virtutum* has been considered an integral part of the cycle. Its absence from D has prompted the suggestion that it appeared before the surviving *Symphonia* in that manuscript, on folios now lost.¹⁴

It is highly unlikely, however, that the *Ordo Virtutum* ever formed part of the *Symphonia* in D. Firstly, the missing folios theory is based on the presence of a psalm cadence in the top right hand corner of the opening folio of the D *Symphonia*. A psalm cadence, or *differentia*, is a melodic formula which provides a connection between the end of a

psalm and its accompanying antiphon. It has been believed that this cadence does not belong to the opening antiphon *O magne pater* but to another now lost. This assumption is based on the conventional placement of psalm cadences after the antiphons they accompany. The practice of psalmody involved the singing of an antiphon, followed by the chanting of a psalm on a variable pitch determined by the mode of the antiphon; the psalm cadence provided a tonal link from the psalm back to its antiphon. As psalm cadences precede the antiphons they accompany in performance, it is not unreasonable to expect psalm cadences to appear in written form before the antiphons they accompany. Given that only two antiphons and two psalm cadences appear on the opening folio of the *D Symphonia*, the cadence in question could well belong to the opening antiphon *O magne pater*, particularly as psalm cadences appear before the antiphons they accompany, and after items other than antiphons, at five other points in the manuscript.¹⁵

Ultimately, the choice of psalm cadence was determined by the mode of the accompanying antiphon. The compilers of *D* utilised four basic types of psalm cadence: a common cadence accompanies antiphons in modes three and four, while items in modes one, two and eight are given separate cadences. The psalm cadence accompanying *O magne pater* may well have been considered inappropriate as the psalm cadence in question accompanies two other antiphons, both in mode two (the final of which is the note d).¹⁶ *O magne pater*, on the other hand, begins and ends on the note a. The appearance of melodies which closed on notes that existed outside the eight church modes (that is, ended on notes other than d, e, f or g) occurs frequently throughout the period in question;¹⁷ two other antiphons in *D* also begin and end on the note a (*Spiritus sanctus vivificans* on fol. 157r and *Et ideo puella iste* on fol. 168r), but both are accompanied by a cadence associated with antiphons in mode one. As such, the appropriateness of the psalm cadence accompanying *O magne pater* could be questioned.

However from the tenth century on, the connection between psalm and antiphon was made not between two notes but between two groups of notes, that is between the end of the psalm and the opening phrase of its antiphon.¹⁸ In *O magne pater*, particular emphasis is placed on the note d, the final of mode two, in the opening of the

antiphon. This occurs especially on the initial sounding of this note which is described in neumatic notation by a pressus (ϣ), a neume which gives emphasis to the upper of its two notes (see Example 1).

D: 153r



Example 1: Opening of *O magne pater*

As such, a mode two psalm cadence could not be considered inappropriate for an antiphon that emphasised the final of mode two in its opening, despite beginning and ending on the note a. It can not, therefore, be said that the psalm cadence in the top right hand corner of the opening folio of the *D Symphonia* does not belong to the antiphon *O magne pater*, especially as this cadence is more appropriate to this antiphon than the cadence following, which is particular to antiphons in modes three and four (the following item on the folio is the antiphon *O eterne deus*, which is in mode three). As such, the notion of an imagined antiphon which preceded the *D Symphonia* and was apparently accompanied by the *Ordo Virtutum*, or other unidentified items, can not be merited.

Psalm cadences aside, the original purpose for the compilation of *D* may provide a reason for the absence of the *Ordo Virtutum* from that manuscript. The Cistercians, for whom *D* was intended, observed a particularly strict version of the Benedictine rule and rejected the decorative elements introduced into the liturgy during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, of which liturgical drama formed a part.¹⁹ It seems unlikely that Hildegard would have included a version of the *Ordo Virtutum*, an example of liturgical embellishment, in a manuscript intended for Cistercian monks.

As to the presence of the *Ordo Virtutum* in *R*, it is important to recognize that the *R* codex constitutes an anthology of Hildegard's visionary works which was assembled presumably in anticipation of her canonization, for the manuscript only includes divinely 'inspired' works and omits those which were not the result of visionary experience. It is thought that *R* was compiled as a presentation manuscript for submission to the prelates who

would have overseen the canonisation process.²⁰ These church officials, in the search for signs of saintliness, would have placed an emphasis on the textual content of the *Symphonia*. This may provide a reason for the presence of the *Ordo Virtutum* in R. Rather than forming an essential part of the *Symphonia*, the *Ordo Virtutum* may have been singled out as deserving of particular attention, and hence inclusion in the manuscript, as the text of the drama was deemed significant enough to be extended and given a musical setting.

In relation to the question of whether the *Symphonia* was intended as a collection of items or as a *Gesamtwerk*, the most telling evidence can be gained from an examination of the variant structures of the *Symphonia* in D and R. The order in which the songs appear in the two manuscripts is governed by a similar hierarchical structure in which the individual items are grouped together according to their subject matter, beginning with God and descending through the celestial ranks to Ecclesia. However, the songs within each liturgical category more often contrast than coincide. The structure of R is complicated by the separation of the cycle into two parts.²¹ The order of the liturgical categories included in D and the first cycle of R (which incorporate fifty-seven and fifty-eight songs respectively) is outlined in Table 1.

D	R
God	God
Virgin Mary	Holy Spirit/Trinity
Holy Spirit/Trinity	Virgin Mary
Angels	Angels
Patriarchs and Prophets	Patriarchs and Prophets
Apostles	Apostles
Saint John the Evangelist	Saint John the Evangelist
Saint Disibod	Martyres
Martyres	Confessors
Confessors	Saint Disibod
Saint Rupert	Saint Rupert
Virgins	Virgins
Widows	(Widows reserved for 2nd cycle)
Holy Innocents	Saint Ursula
Saint Ursula	Holy Innocents
Ecclesia	Ecclesia
	Kyrie

Table 1: Order of liturgical categories in D and the first cycle of R

There are three main structural differences between the two hierarchies as outlined by Barbara

Newman.²² Firstly, the placement of the Virgin Mary before the Holy Spirit/Trinity contradicts the more conventional placement of the Virgin after the Trinity as she appears in R. The order in D is, as Newman suggests, indicative of Hildegard's theological view of the Virgin as, begetting of the son, an essential link between God and the Holy Trinity. Secondly, Saint Disibod, the seventh-century Irish missionary after whom the monastery at Mount Saint Disibode was named, is placed among the Apostles. In R, Saint Disibod is placed more appropriately among the confessors, alongside Saint Rupert. Thirdly, in D Saint Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins are placed among the Holy Innocents. This prompts an analogy between the Innocents slaughtered at the hands of Herod and the eleven thousand virgins slaughtered by thugs in Cologne.²³ Newman also points out the significance of the placement of the sequence *O Ecclesia* near the items devoted to ecclesia: the virgin martyr portrayed in the sequence 'becomes a prototype of the virgin church, which occupies the next and final place in the cycle'.²⁴ In R, the items devoted to Saint Ursula are placed among the items devoted to virgins.

As D was more than likely compiled under Hildegard's supervision, it seems possible that the structural 'inconsistencies' found in the D *Symphonia* were in fact purposeful to the creation of a song cycle that could be considered more than an assemblage of works. As Barbara Newman points out, the D *Symphonia*, on account of its structural peculiarities, gives the impression that Hildegard 'ultimately meant the *Symphonia* as a *Gesamtwerk* rather than a miscellany'.²⁵

In contrast to D, one could easily use the title 'Musical Output' in place of the title 'Symphonia' to describe the musical content of R. Admittedly, the more normative hierarchy of the R *Symphonia* is not enough to dismiss it as an assemblage of liturgical items; rather it is the appearance of two cycles in R that suggests that this manuscript preserves not a single work but Hildegard's entire musical corpus.

The division of the *Symphonia* in R into two cycles appears simply to separate Hildegard's shorter liturgical items (her antiphons and responsories) from her longer items (sequences, hymns, symphonies and other songs), while the structures of both cycles in R are based on the one hierarchy. However there is a more subtle difference between

the two cycles in R. The second cycle includes five items dedicated to four saints of local significance to religious communities in Trier (situated about 100km east of Bingen), where Hildegard gave a sermon in 1160.²⁶ The second cycle in R is outlined in Table 2.

The Holy Spirit	sequence, hymn
The Virgin Mary	alleluia-verse, sequence, song, hymn
Saint Matthias	hymn
Saint Bonifaci	antiphon
Saint Disibod	sequence
Saint Eucharius	responsory, sequence
Saint Maximum	sequence
Saint Rupert	sequence
Saint Ursula	sequence, hymn
Virgins	symphony
Widows	symphony

Table 2: Second cycle in R

The five items devoted to Saint Matthias, Saint Bonifaci, Saint Eucharius and Saint Maximum are not included in the D *Symphonia*, possibly as these four saints were of little significance to the Cistercians in Villiers, and, unlike Saint Disibod and Saint Rupert, of little local significance to the community at Rupertsberg. As this cycle includes an antiphon to Saint Bonifaci and a responsory to Saint Eucharis, the separation of the two cycles in R can not be said to have eventuated from the perspective of genre alone. It seems likely that the second cycle was created to separate the genres as well as accommodate the items devoted to these four saints within the *Symphonia*. This may have been done by compilers who wished to include all of Hildegard's compositions for inspection by the prelates overseeing her canonization, without disturbing the original subject matter of the *Symphonia*. The liberties taken with the form of the *Symphonia* are what has given R appearance of an assemblage, that is a collection of songs ordered according to subject matter.

As a consequence, it is possible to regard the *Symphonia* as an anthology of Hildegard's musical works; the older *Symphonia* survives as a *Gesamtwerk*, while the other version survives as an assemblage, as the structure, while not random, suggests only a means of organisation and lacks the structural unity found in D. This allows for the varied manifestations of the *Symphonia* as well as the existence of compositions outside the song cycle. While many regard the *Symphonia* as two

stages of development of a completed song cycle, it is perhaps preferable to regard the cycles in D and R as two different orientations of the one idea, that of a cycle of songs arranged according to subject matter.

NOTES

¹ There are also textual and neumatic discrepancies between the two versions of the *Symphonia*, which give rise to questions associated with how the *Symphonia* came to be recorded on parchment. The most complete study of the textual discrepancies was undertaken by Barbara Newman as part of her edition of the *Symphonia* texts. See Barbara Newman, ed., trans., *Saint Hildegard of Bingen: Symphonia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988). For a study of the neumatic discrepancies see Catherine Jeffreys, *The Symphonia of Hildegard of Bingen*, diss. University of Melbourne, 1993.

² Newman, *Saint Hildegard*, p. 59.

³ Peter van Poucke, *Hildegard of Bingen: Symphonia harmoniae caelestium revelationum* (Peer: Alamiere, 1991), p.6. In separate letters to Hildegard both Odo of Soissons and Volmar of Disibodenberg mention her musical activities.

⁴ See J. Miscle Edwards, 'Women in Music to ca. 1450', *Women and Music*, ed. Karin Pendle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 21-25.

⁵ Newman, *Saint Hildegard*, p. 57.

⁶ van Poucke, *Hildegard of Bingen*, p. 6.

⁷ Ruth Lightbourne, 'The Ordo of Hildegard of Bingen', diss., University of Otago, 1990, p. 17.

⁸ For a discussion of the items included in the medieval Mass and Divine Office see John Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 67-125.

⁹ Lightbourne, 'Ordo', p. 18.

¹⁰ Marianna Schrader and Adelgundis Führkötter, *Die Echtheit des Schriftums der Heiligen Hildegard von Bingen* (Cologne and Granz: Boehlau-Verlag, 1956), p. 49. The monks in Villiers thanked Hildegard for the manuscript in a letter to her from the 1170s. A letter to Hildegard from her secretary Guibert of Gembloux also refers to the manuscript. See van Poucke, *Hildegard of Bingen*, p. 6.

¹¹ The dates cited here are based on research by Schrader and Führkötter, *Die Echtheit*, pp. 154-170.

¹² See in particular Newman, *Saint Hildegard*, pp. 6-12.

¹³ The *Ordo Virtutum* appears with neumes in a manuscript now housed in London (British Museum, Cod. Add.) which was copied from R in 1487.

¹⁴ van Poucke, *Hildegard of Bingen*, p. 10. The last three fascicles of D, on which the *Symphonia* is preserved, are no longer affixed to the rest of the manuscript.

¹⁵ Other instances where a psalm cadence precedes an antiphon and follows another type of liturgical item occur on: fol. 154r (between responsory *O clarissima mater* and antiphon *O splendidissima gemma*), fol. 160v (between responsory *O vos felices radices* and antiphon *O chohors milicie floris*), fol. 161v (between responsory *O lucidissima apostolorum* and antiphon *O speculum columbe*), fol. 163r (between sequence *O presul vere civitatis* and antiphon *O*

victoriosissimi), and fol. 164r (between responsory *O vos imitatores* and antiphon *O successores*).

16 Both these antiphons, *De patria eriam* and *Sed diabolis*, appear on fol 168r.

17 Willi Apel, *Gregorian Chant* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), pp. 157-165.

18 Apel, *Gregorian Chant*, p. 222.

19 Lightbourne, 'Ordo', p. 98.

20 Schrader and Führkötter, *Die Echtheit*, pp. 154-70.

21 The structure of the D *Symphonia* is also complicated as it is missing three folios, probably due to the separation of the *Symphonia* from the rest of the manuscript. While the majority of missing material can be accounted for, the content of seventeen lines on one missing folio remains

undetermined. See P. Barth, M. I. Ritscher and J. Schmidt-Görg, *Hildegard von Bingen: Lieder* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1969), p. 318.

22 Newman, *Saint Hildegard*, pp. 58-59.

23 Although no historical account identifying the slaughtered virgins exist, it is thought that Ursula and her companions were British pilgrims who were slain by thugs in 451. The number of virgins slain is said to actually have been eleven. The number eleven-thousand is purportedly the result of a printing error.

E. Day, 'Ursula, St.', *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), p. 490.

24 Newman, *Saint Hildegard*, p. 58.

25 Newman, *Saint Hildegard*, p. 59.

26 Newman, *Saint Hildegard*, p. 58.