

Georgina Rabassó*

Rediscovering the Secrets of Voice: Hildegard of Bingen

Abstract

This paper deals with the mystical and cognoscitive experience, conceptualized as «inner» vision and audition, of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and with the way in which the auditory relationship with the «heavenly voice» (*uox de caelo*) emerges in her compositions and in her reflections on music as a mediation of the divine present in the world. Hildegard's theology of music is related to a particular conception of human being, whose «symphonic soul» (*symphionalis est anima*) harmonises with the celestial harmony. Her conception of harmony thus shows that music constitutes an agent of personal and social transformation.

Keywords: 12th Century epistemology; senses; Theology of music.

Medieval Authors: Augustine of Hippo; Boethius; Hildegard of Bingen; Jutta of Sponheim; Tengswich of Andernach.

Redescubriendo los secretos de la voz: Hildegarda de Bingen

Resumen

El artículo analiza la experiencia mística y cognitiva, conceptualizada como visión y audición «interiores», de Hildegarda de Bingen (1098-1179) y de qué modo la relación auditiva con la «voz celestial» (*uox de caelo*) emerge en sus composiciones y en sus reflexiones acerca de la música entendida como mediación de la presencia divina en el mundo. La teología de la música de Hildegarda está relacionada con una visión particular del ser humano concebido como poseedor de un «alma sinfónica» (*symphionalis est anima*) que armoniza con la armonía celestial. De modo que su concepción de la armonía propone la música como agente de transformación personal y social.

* Universitat de Barcelona. Email: georginarabasso@gmail.com. I would like to thank Dr Rosa Rius Gatell (Universitat de Barcelona) for her precise directions on reading this paper, which has been written with the support of the *Seminari Filosofia i Gènere* and the *Institut de Recerca en Cultures Medievales (IRCV)* of the Universitat de Barcelona.

Palabras clave: Teoría del conocimiento en el siglo XII; sentidos; Teología de la música
Autores medievales: Agustín de Hipona; Boecio; Hildegarda de Bingen; Jutta de Sponheim; Tengswich de Andernach.

1. From Silence to Discourse: the Auditory Contemplation as a Creative Process

According to the «Protestificatio» of the *Sciuias*¹, the first personal challenge for Hildegard of Bingen was to overcome her inclination to silence. Her success there, laid out the foundations for the intellectual challenges to come. The periods of silence that she experienced in her life were profoundly marked by *infirmitas*, the illnesses that afflicted her and, at the same time, pushed her along the path towards writing². Her illness and her allegedly silent attitude are indicated in the *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*³ as two of the qualities of her sainthood⁴. However, according to Hildegard, silence contradicted the precepts of the Divinity, who ordered her to speak and write about what she saw and heard⁵. At the end of her life, the ecclesiastical hierarchy imposed silence on her community but Hildegard, with no little effort, managed to bring music back to the daily life of the monastery. She did it with an epistle addressed to the prelates at Mainz, in which she both argued against the interdict that prohibited singing during the divine office, and praised music and singing by producing a suggestive Neoplatonic-Christian theory of their function in the universe and in the history of humanity⁶.

A few years before that event, in a letter to Guibert of Gembloux, Hildegard, responding to the monk's interest in different questions related to the visionary

¹ Hildegarda Bingensis, *Sciuias*, ed. by A. FÜHRKÖTTER – A. CARLEVARIS, (Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis, 43-43a) Brepols, Turnhout 1978. Hereafter *Sciuias*.

² Both the expressions *quamplurimis infirmitatibus contrita* (Hildegarda Bingensis, *Liber diuinorum operum*, Prologus, ed. by A. DEROLEZ – P. DRONKE, (CCCM, 92) Brepols, Turnhout 1996, p. 46, l. 30-31; hereafter *LDO*) and *multis infirmitatibus compulsa* (*Sciuias*, Prot., p. 5, l. 83-84), are significant for interpreting the link between her illness and her creative process.

³ Biography initiated by the successive secretaries of Hildegard, Volmar and Godfrey of Disibodenberg, as well as Guibert of Gembloux, and produced during the 1170s by Theodoric of Echternach. *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, ed. by M. KLAES, (CCCM, 126) Brepols, Turnhout 1993. Hereafter *VSH*.

⁴ *VSH*, I, 2, p. 7, l. 9-12.

⁵ *Sciuias*, Prot., p. 3, l. 9-10: «dic et scribe quae uides et audis».

⁶ Hildegarda Bingensis, *Epistolarium. Pars prima I-XC*, XXIII, ed. by L. VAN ACKER, (CCCM, 91) Brepols, Turnhout 1991, pp. 61-66. Hereafter *EPP*.

phenomenon, describes the light from which her visions-auditions emanate⁷. In one passage she states that she always sees in her soul «the shadow of the living light» (*umbra uiuentis luminis*)⁸ and asserts that it never leaves her. She also claims to have seen «the living light» (*lux uiuens*) on occasion⁹. Her internal perception was both visual and auditory, but even during that apprehension her external senses remained fully functional. While in that state of «inspired consciousness»¹⁰, Hildegard goes through a unique mystical and cognoscitive experience, which does not start from the external senses and neither overrides them:

Ista autem nec corporeis auribus audio nec cogitationibus cordis mei, nec ulla collatione sensuum meorum quinquē percipio, sed tantum in anima mea, apertis exterioribus oculis, ita ut numquam in eis defectum extasis patiar; sed uigilanter die ac nocte illa uideo¹¹.

In this fragment on the way her soul receives the revelation, she explicitly disassociates her cognoscitive experience from others, in particular from ecstasy –a phenomenon characterised by a momentary loss of consciousness. In a passage of her first work *Sciuias*, she already recounted the importance of the inner senses, the senses of the soul, in capturing divine revelation:

Visiones uero quas uidi, non eas in somnis, nec dormiens, nec in phrenesi, nec

⁷ Hildegarda Bingensis, *Epistolarium. Pars secunda XCI-CCLR*, CIIIr, ed. by L. VAN ACKER, (CCCM, 91a) Brepols, Turnhout 1993, pp. 258-265. *EPS*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 261, l. 80-81.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 262, l. 97. Augustine of Hippo distinguished between three types of vision: *corporalis*, *spiritualis* and *intellectualis* (*De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*, XII, 7, 16). To each of them was linked a different type of light: *aetherea*, *sensualis* and *rationalis* respectively (*De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, V, 25). Augustine firmly separated the last types of *uisio* and *lux*, and Hildegard seemed to bear this in mind in her distinction between cognitive and mystical apprehension of the *umbra uiuentis luminis* and the *lux uiuens*. See: K. KRAFT, *The Eye Sees More Than the Heart Knows: The Visionary Cosmology of Hildegard of Bingen*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin 1977, pp. 66-72.

¹⁰ R. PÉRONOD, *Hildegarde de Bingen. Conscience inspirée du XIIIe siècle*, Editions du Rocher, Monaco 1994.

¹¹ *EPS*, CIIIr, p. 261, l. 70-75. «Still, I do not hear these things with bodily ears, nor do I perceive them with the cogitations of my heart or the evidence of my five senses. I see them only in my spirit, with my eyes wide open, and thus I never suffer the defect of ecstasy in these visions. And, fully awake, I continue to see them day and night». Eng. t.: *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 3 vol., trans. by J. L. BAIRD – R. K. EHRMAN, Oxford University Press, Oxford–New York 1994, 1998, 2004, vol. II, p. 23. On only one occasion had Hildegard referred to the experiencing of a state of ecstasy: «Subsequenti demum tempore mysticam et mirificam uisionem uidi, ita quod omnia uiscera mea concussa sunt et sensualitas corporis mei extincta est, quoniam scientia mea in alium modum conuersa est, quasi me nescirem», *VSH*, II, 16, p. 43, l. 2-5.

corporeis oculis aut auribus exterioris hominis, nec in abditis locis percepi, sed eas uigilans et circumspecta in pura mente, oculis et auribus interioris hominis, in apertis locis, secundum uoluntatem Dei accepi¹².

On the one hand, the senses that she mentions, «inner» sight and hearing, are the traditionally considered noble senses and take on a mediating role during her mystical cognoscitive operation. However, Hildegard combines that mediation of the senses of the soul with the immediacy of the divine revelation, produced all of a sudden¹³. On the other hand, the apprehension of the revealed knowledge occurs by means of those «inner» senses through which the contemplated truth acquires the dimension of beauty, not just as an intelligible entity but also in its aesthetic sense. According to her, both senses are equally active during her experiences: while sight contemplates the content of the vision, hearing is attentive and comprehends the story told by the «heavenly voice». Just as the *uox de caelo* «transmits» the hidden sense of the *uisio* to Hildegard, it can also be said that the *auditio* enables the *intellectio* of the *uisio*. For that reason, hers is not only a *uisio intellectualis*¹⁴, but also an *auditio intellectualis*¹⁵, because the «inner» vision and audition are both means by which Hildegard understands divine Wisdom. The privileged place the auditory sense shares with the visual is uncommon among the theories of the metaphysics of the senses within the classical and Christian

¹² *Sciuias*, Prot., p. 4, l. 43-47 «But the visions I saw I did not perceive in dreams, or sleep, or delirium, or by the eyes of the body, or by the ears of the outer self, or in hidden places; but I received them while awake and seeing with a pure mind and the eyes and ears of the inner self, in open places, as God willed it». Eng. trans.: Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. by C. HART – J. BISHOP, introd. by B. NEWMAN, preface by C. W. BYNUM, Paulist Press, New York–Mahwah 1990, p. 60.

¹³ *Sciuias*, Prot., p. 4, l. 30-31.

¹⁴ According to the Augustinian parameters mentioned in note 9, Hildegard's visionary experience lies between the *uisio spirituale* (associated with the prophecy and linked to images or other elements of mediation) and the *uisio intellectualis* (the vision of God Himself). However, in her references to her mystical-cognoscitive experience Hildegard uses the term *intelligere* in different passages, in a way that links the activities of the *uisio* and the *auditio* to the comprehension, in a strong sense, of contents revealed by *Sapientia*.

¹⁵ Among her fundamental references in the way of conceiving the *auditio* as a mediator for holy Wisdom, several repeated quotations of the Old Testament prophets stand out, such as those by David and Isaiah. As indicated in the *VSH* (I, 1, p. 6, l. 15-20), the reading of the Psalms would have been an important part of her early training together with the recluse and *magistra* Jutta of Sponheim. Augustine of Hippo reflected on the relationship between *sensus aurium*, *animus*, *intellectus* and *memoria* (*De musica*, I, 4, 8), in a conceptual treatise that appears as the background to the Hildegardian cognoscitive experience.

traditions, in which hearing normally takes the second place in the hierarchy. This oral-auditory aspect is frequently underplayed in the exegesis of Hildegardian texts due to the fact that the *theoria* has generally been understood in visual terms since the times of ancient Greece¹⁶.

Peter Dronke identified three interrelated phenomena in the use of the term *uisio*. First, Hildegard's particular visionary capacity or faculty; second, her experience of that capacity or faculty, and finally, the content of that experience: «all that she sees in her *uisio*»¹⁷. This distinction allows the overlapping discourses in Hildegard's writings to be articulated, as well as dissociating the intellectual legacy of the «supernatural» phenomenon in itself. However, Dronke does not insist on the fact that, in her experience, the revelation of sacred Wisdom takes place as much through «visions» as through oral transmission. In his analysis the *uisio* is separated from the *auditio*, which in turn is Hildegard's particular auditory faculty or capacity, her experience of that audition, and the content of that experience: the words of the «voice of heaven» and those of the figures that appear to her.

Audition, just like vision, is thus a constitutive aspect of Hildegard's mystical and cognitive experience as well as of its written expression. The fact that the vivacity with which she presents the figures she describes in her works is largely due to their capacity to communicate with the reader in their own voice is a proof of this. Other visual and auditory resources are also in play, such as carefully chosen colours, the precise positioning of the characters and the almost theatrical quality of their voices. The content of the visions-auditions is dissected in her commentary on them –also formulated as an audition– which refers to each one of these details. However, the theological and moral meaning constructed in the commentary does not detract from the images their most basic sense: their ability to induce those who read, look at or listen to them to return to those images. The effect they seek and produce is to magnetise the human being towards spiritual contemplation. Marcel Pérès¹⁸ speaks of a similar magnetism in the case of her musical compositions: «Hildegard's music [...] often takes the form of a slow

¹⁶ F. BIRULÉS, «Maneres de veure. Tres direccions», *Transversal* 22 (2003) 21-23.

¹⁷ P. DRONKE, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (d. 203) to Marguerite Porete (d. 1310)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge–New York 1984, p. 146.

¹⁸ M. Pérès is a musician, musicologist and director of the Ensemble Organum, a Medieval music consort that has recorded part of the musical repertoire of Hildegard of Bingen and which has tried to recreate in its music the same sonority that would have been interpreted at the time.

and solemn declamation destined to permit the listener to absorb each word and to plant in his mind the burgeoning image which, as it comes to life, may be contemplated»¹⁹.

The mark of orality and of the auditory aspects in Hildegard's mystical and cognoscitive experience turns our attention towards a number of different references that need to be studied. Orality has often been neglected as a means of transmission in close relationship with the issue of the primary sources—*lectures incertaines*²⁰— that nourished the rich and extensive speculative universe of Hildegard of Bingen. The difficulty in documenting them does not rule out the possibility of their having guided her reflections as much as the written sources and other less enduring ones, such as illustrations or diagrams did. In her historical and regional context, the ways of transmission of knowledge were multiple and the strategic location of the Rupertsberg monastery at the junction of the Rhine and the Nahe was a privileged place for the reception of that knowledge²¹. However, this is an interesting research topic that deserves more attention than allowed by this paper.

2. From Inspiration to Composition

In an autobiographical passage included in her *Vita*, she declares that she composed songs and melodies in praise of God and the saints without having ever received any specific training, and that she played them without ever having studied neither pneumatic musical notation nor singing²². Just in the same way she stated that she wrote her works in Latin despite not knowing Latin grammar²³,

¹⁹ ENSEMBLE ORGANUM, *Hildegard von Bingen: Laudes de Sainte Ursule* [CD], dir. M. PÉRÈS, trans. D. YELD, Harmonia Mundi, Arles 1997, p. 10.

²⁰ S. GOUGUENHEIM, *La Sibylle du Rhin: Hildegarde de Bingen, abbesse et prophétesse rhénane*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris 1996, p. 56. For textual references on the works of visions, see the works of P. Dronke, especially: «Problemata Hildegardiana», *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch*, 16 (1981) 97-131; Id., «The Allegorical World-Picture of Hildegard of Bingen: Revaluations and New Problems», in C. BURNETT – P. DRONKE (eds.), *Hildegard of Bingen. The Context of her Thought and Art*, (Warburg Institute Colloquia, 4) Warburg Institute, London 1998, pp. 1-16.

²¹ A. HAVERKAMP, «Hildegard von Disibodenberg–Bingen. Von der Peripherie zum Zentrum», in *Hildegard von Bingen in ihrem historischen Umfeld*, ed. by A. HAVERKAMP, Verlag Philipp von Zabern, Mainz 2000, pp. 15-69. I am grateful to Dr Michela Pereira (Università degli Studi di Siena) for her comments regarding this question.

²² *VSH*, II, 2, p. 24, l. 91-94.

²³ *Sciuias*, Prot., p. 4, l. 33-35.

she also said that she composed music without any knowledge of the rudiments of musical language. Nevertheless, she wrote and was understood, she composed and was listened to. Evidence of her musical activity can be seen in the play *Ordo Virtutum*²⁴ and in the songs of the *Symphonia armonie celestium reuelationum*²⁵, for which she wrote the lyrics as well as the music.

The *Ordo Virtutum* shows Hildegard of Bingen's preference for female personifications. This is a common trait among other authors of the same period, and it is also a characteristic of the works of Hildegard as a whole. The large presence of female characters in the play has been related to the possibility that the nuns of Rupertsberg performed it. In the case it was indeed acted out, one of the letters of the *Epistolarium* suggests how it could have been done, although it does not specifically refer to the staging of the *Ordo*. Anyhow, it refers us to the presence of music in the life of the community. This epistle, dated 1148-1150, was sent to Hildegard by Tengswich, *magistra* of the community of Andernach. In it we can read the following:

Aliud etiam quoddam insolitum de consuetudine uestra ad nos peruenit, uirgines uidelicet uestras festis diebus psallendo solutis crinibus in ecclesia stare, ipsasque pro ornamento candidis ac sericis uti uelaminibus pre longitudine superficiem terre tangentibus, coronas etiam auro contextas capitibus earum desuper impositas et his utraque parte et retro cruces insertas, in fronte autem agni figuram decenter impressam, insuper et digitos earundem aureis decorari anulis, cum primus pastor Ecclesie talibus in epistola sua contradicat²⁶.

²⁴ Hildegarda Bingensis, *Ordo Virtutum*, ed. by P. DRONKE (CCCM, 226), in *Opera minora*, ed. by P. DRONKE – C. P. EVANS – H. FEISS – B. M. KIENZLE – C. A. MUESSIG – B. NEWMAN, Brepols, Turnhout 2007, pp. 503-521. The *Ordo Virtutum*, considered to be one of the most important Latin musical dramas in the Middle Ages, was composed around 1151. The story describes the spiritual path followed by the character of the unhappy Soul towards spiritual happiness with the help of virtues. The backdrop for the play is the struggle between the opposing forces of good and evil.

²⁵ Hildegarda Bingensis, *Symphonia armonie celestium reuelationum*, ed. by NEWMAN, in *Opera minora*, cit., pp. 371-477. The *Symphonia* is composed of songs about the Divinity, the creation of the world and the human beings, as well as numerous songs dedicated to the Virgin Mary and some to the Holy Ghost, the angelic hierarchy, or the saints and the virgins.

²⁶ *EPP*, LII, p. 126, l. 12-20. «We have, however, also heard about certain strange and irregular practices that you countenance. They say that on feast days your virgins stand in the church with unbound hair when singing the psalms and that as part of their dress they wear white, silk veils, so long that they touch the floor. Moreover, it is said that they wear crowns of gold filigree, into which are inserted crosses on both sides and the back, with a figure of the Lamb on the front, and that they adorn their fingers with golden rings. And all this despite the express prohibition of the great shepherd of the Church». Eng. trans.: *The Letters*, cit., vol. I, p. 127.

Tengswich therefore warns the *magistra* of Rupertsberg about this unusual practice, which she considers to be indecorous. In her response Hildegard argues that there is nothing more decorous than virgins dressed in accordance with their condition and youth to offer themselves to Christ, their spouse. Tengswich's extremely detailed description of the dress, ornaments and objects that Hildegard and her sisters used is reminiscent of those described in her visions-auditions. Moreover, the use of the expression *festis diebus* as an allusion to the timing of celebrations accompanied by music held in Rupertsberg is also significant. This raises another question: that of the links between Hildegard of Bingen's musical compositions and liturgy and, more broadly, the integration of musical practice in the daily life of the Rupertsberg monastery.

Hildegard almost certainly wrote and composed most of the pieces of the *Symphonia* to be performed in the heart of her community. According to Barbara Newman²⁷, it is possible that the pieces were sung during the mass as well as during the hours of the divine office. In terms of typology, most of them are antiphons, but there are also responsories, sequences and hymns. The antiphon and the responsory are the types most subject to their liturgical context, while the hymn and the sequence are more autonomous. These four types of composition are in keeping with the Benedictine monastic liturgy, ruled by the *Regula*. In his analysis, Kent Christian McGuire²⁸ maintains however that the composition of Hildegard's last songs –and the liturgy celebrated at the time in Rupertsberg– was influenced by the Cistercian liturgical reform of the third quarter of the twelfth century. For his part, John Stevens²⁹ underlines that the fact that a large part of her compositions belonged to liturgical genres is not reason enough to suppose that the original sense of the *Symphonia* was fundamentally liturgical. However, it is difficult to find a definition for the term «liturgical» in the context of twelfth century composition. Since following the reforms of Pope Gregory I in the sixth century the book that

²⁷ B. NEWMAN, «Introduction», in *Symphonia. A Critical Edition of the Symphonia armonice celestium revelationum (Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations)*, ed. and trans. by B. NEWMAN, Cornell University Press, Ithaca–London 1998, pp. 1-63 (12).

²⁸ K. C. MCGUIRE, «*Symphonia caritatis*: The Cistercian Chants of Hildegard von Bingen», Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota 2007.

²⁹ The musical analysis carried out by Stevens of the pieces contained in the manuscripts of the *Symphonia* shows that in the Riesencodex the manner of composition was corrected in an orthodox direction; this was almost certainly done with a view to the canonisation of Hildegard. See: J. STEVENS, «The Musical Individuality of Hildegard's Songs: A Liturgical Shadowland», in *Hildegard of Bingen. The Context of her Thought and Art*, cit., pp. 163-88 (170).

contained all liturgical music was the *Liber Usualis*, in the twelfth century new compositions were mainly conceived as paraliturgical material, in contrast to the established chants³⁰.

Apart from the relationship between compositions, liturgy and the practice of music, there is also another relevant *topos* that needs to be mentioned: the relation between text and music. In general terms, word and sound are complementary ways of simultaneously expressing an emotion that turns hearing into seeing. In Stevens's words Hildegard's songs are «musical crystallizations of moments of vision»³¹. For her part, Maria Tabaglio³² underlines the centrality of the *Symphonia* to the totality of her work, and this idea of the centrality of music in the creative and intellectual production of Hildegard of Bingen emerges from her theology of music as well as from her conception of the *symphonia* as a mediating practice. For Hildegard, composition is one of the *uiaae* that bring human beings closer to the Divinity, and musical interpretation is a means of social cohesion that she would have used on a daily basis in her own community. In an age when musical practice was separated from and considered to be below musical theory, Hildegard gave it a function in the world. Through symphonic practice, the *harmonia mundi* became audible to humans physically, spiritually and intellectually.

3. From God to Human Being: Hildegard's Theology of Music

The musical legacy of Hildegard of Bingen is formed by her compositions as well as by the reflections inserted into different passages throughout her work, in which she transmits directly or indirectly her theology of music. One of these texts is the vision–audition found in the final pages of the *Sciuias*, where she describes the celestial concert she heard when the heavens opened³³. More than two decades later, some of the ideas there expressed took the form of a more elaborate theorisation in an epistle addressed to the prelates of Mainz, dated 1178-1179. This is one of the most interesting letters in her extensive epistolary and displays close links with the composition of both the *Ordo Virtutum* and the *Symphonia*. In this section I will describe the theoretical content of that epistle in

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 164-165.

³¹ Ibid., p. 188.

³² M. TABAGLIO, *Ad caelestem harmoniam. Poesia e musica in Ildegarda di Bingen*, Fiorini, Verona 1998.

³³ *Sciuias*, III, 13, pp. 614-615, l. 27-40.

order to show its intrinsic affinity with the musical compositions and the *uisio*.

The circumstances in which Hildegard wrote the letter are almost as interesting as the content itself. In it, she defended and praised music because she intended to persuade the prelates of her good work in a particularly delicate situation. According to the *Vita*, Hildegard and her community in Rupertsberg had taken in a *philosophus* who had been excommunicated³⁴. The nuns established a relationship with him during the last years of his life and when he died they buried him just outside the monastery. For that reason, in the absence of Archbishop Christian of Mainz, the prelates issued an order sanctioning them and prohibiting them to celebrate the Eucharist or to sing during the divine office. The order, finally withdrawn by the Archbishop, angered Hildegard and moved her to write the letter. First, she describes the reaction of the «heavenly voice» to the situation of distress in which the ecclesiastical punishment had left the community:

Aspexi etiam aliquid super hoc quod, uobis obediendo, hactenus a cantu diuini officii cessantes, illud tantum legentes remisse celebramus, et audiui uocem a uiuente luce procedentem de diuersis generibus laudum de quibus Dauid in psalmo dicit³⁵.

She goes then on to narrate her version of the events. However, the longest part of the epistle is a defence of musical practice in community life (it certainly receives more attention than the celebration of the Eucharist), and the eulogy of music as a mediator for the original harmony and a dissipater of evil. Her discourse falls within the field of theology of music, but it is important to specify that her main interest lay in chanting which, for Hildegard, was the closest expression to the original sound of the human voice. This sound belonged to Adam before the fall and was in harmony with the voice of the angels. Because of the weakness the Fall bestowed on human beings, he could not stand the powerful sonority of his former voice. However, according to Hildegard, there is a way to restore the

³⁴ *VSH*, II, 12, pp. 36-38. Tilo Altenburg identifies this character as Embricho I, philosopher and *Rheingraf*. See: T. ALTENBURG, *Soziale Ordnungsvorstellungen bei Hildegard von Bingen*, Anton Hiersemann, Stuttgart 2007, pp. 125-132. I am grateful to Dr Maura Zátanyi (Abtei St. Hildegard, Eibingen) for making this material available.

³⁵ *EPP*, XXIII, pp. 62-63, l. 56-59. «Further, I saw in my vision also that by obeying you we have been celebrating the divine office incorrectly, for from the time of your restriction up to the present, we have ceased to sing the divine office, merely reading it instead. And I heard a voice coming from the Living Light concerning the various kinds of praises, about which David speaks in the psalm [Ps 150.3, 6]». Eng. trans.: *The Letters*, cit., vol. I, p. 77.

lost voice of Adam together with the primitive state in which the human being was first created: the songs of praise. Restoring Adam's lost voice also means restoring the *rationalitas* transmitted by that voice, and this rationality is closer to the Divinity.

These ideas had already appeared in the *Sciuias*, where it is said that the faithful on Earth sigh when they hear the harmonious songs of the virtues, since the latter's chants remind them of the reward awaiting them in Heaven³⁶, and of the moment before their souls lost Adam's natural harmony.

The *symphonia* awakens the lethargic human soul and puts it into motion towards the search of her lost rationality. Both themes arise again in the letter addressed to the prelates of Mainz, in which she demands that they withdraw the ban on singing that prevented the nuns from renewing their heavenly condition and from recovering the more divine voice and *scientia* of the first human being³⁷. Moreover, Hildegard warns the prelates that their decisions support diabolic dissonance in the cosmos. In the final vision-audition of the *Sciuias* Hildegard introduced, inspired by the Neo-Pythagorean-Platonic doctrine of the harmony of the spheres, her particular way of understanding harmony. She claimed that she had heard voices that sounded like a multitude «making music in harmony praising the ranks of Heaven» and that they came from an air full of light. She describes how the sounds developed and the kinds of music she heard, endowed with a wide variety of both moral and sound qualities. She says that the heterogeneity of the «voice of a multitude» produced a harmonious sound that, while intoning songs of praise, magnetised the soul and became an echo of the celestial harmony itself.

Hildegard therefore describes the concept of «harmony» as a culminating moment of spiritual understanding that takes place in mundane life and brings about the presence of the Divinity. But dissonance also exists in mundaneness, since it appears as the work of the devil in the human soul. As can be seen in the *Ordo Virtutum*, Diabolus is the personification of discord and can only vociferate since he lost his original voice when he rejected his angelic condition. Substantially different to the voice of Diabolus is the voice of the virtues, and also that of God, the angels and the human beings, which maintain a sort of resonance among each other. The first link in this chain is the canticle of praise and that is why it reflects celestial harmony³⁸.

³⁶ *Sciuias*, III, 13, p. 632, l. 553-554.

³⁷ *EPP*, XXIII, p. 63, l. 65-73.

³⁸ *EPP*, XXIII, p. 64, l. 127-128: «canticum laudum secundum celestem harmoniam».

Hildegard's God, like That of the Old Testament, speaks with a clamour and his voice spreads through all the layers of being thus establishing an ontological-musical hierarchy in which the highest level is of the greatest beauty and divinity, and the lower level attempts to imitate that other within its own limitations. A descending scale spreads down from God, after Him come the choir of angels, Adam, the prophets, the wise men and scholars and finally the other human beings. The song of the human voice is an echo, the result of a sound that has progressively lost its similarity to the sonorous quality of the divine voice. The ultimate sense of Hildegard's compositions is therefore to propitiate the climbing of that scale for whoever performs them. The recurrent use of ascending melodies in her compositions, together with the range of two octaves and the frequent use of a high tessitura give her compositions an «angelic» feel, coherent with her theology of music. Another question, which will be dealt with at the conclusion of this paper, is the step of the scale from which the composer herself attempts her ascent.

Songs of praise generate spiritual delight and renew the heavenly state in the present. As Rosa Rius Gatell observes, Hildegard conceives both chant and instrumental music as an offering to the Divinity, as the means to «renewing the original sound and thereby re-establishing its primitive order»³⁹. Singing does not therefore recreate the nostalgic memory of Eden, but involves a *renouatio*, better understood as a programme or a rule rather than as a *modus uiuendi*. It involves what we have come to call symphonic praxis, through which human beings are capable of generating «harmonic music»⁴⁰ which sets out from the soul itself, regarded as symphonic by Hildegard (*symphionalis est anima*)⁴¹. But the music is not only interpreted with the soul, it also involves the body.

The corporal involvement and pleasure of musical interpretation was a question predominantly dealt with by certain Christian theorists, especially Augustine⁴². This subject had already been discussed in Ancient times⁴³. With the

³⁹ R. RIUS GATELL, «Armonías y disonancias en el cosmos de Hildegarda de Bingen», *Duoda. Revista d'Estudis Feministes* 16 (1999) 35-52 (46); Id., «La sinfonia constelada de Hildegarda de Bingen», in P. BENEITO (ed.), *Mujeres de luz. La mística femenina y lo femenino en la mística*, Trotta, Madrid 2001, pp. 123-135.

⁴⁰ The term «symphony» was used very freely in the Middle Ages. It could mean «melody», «harmony» and also «music» in general, both instrumental and vocal. See: B. NEWMAN, «Introduction», in *Symphonia. A Critical Edition*, cit., pp. 11-12.

⁴¹ *EPP*, XXIII, p. 65, l. 141.

⁴² Augustine of Hippo, *Confessiones*, X, 33.

⁴³ On the relationship between music, the body and the divine in ancient cultures, see: R. ANDRÉS, *El mundo en el oído. El nacimiento de la música en la cultura*, Acanalado, Barcelona 2008.

inaudible music of the spheres – a kind of music that is only intelligible to reason – Pythagoras began a tradition of thought that split the phenomenon of music into two parts: one of them a numerical and eternal reality, and the other a manual and temporal dedication. On the one hand, music in its mathematical facet was conceived as the abstract science of the proportions established between sounds. On the other hand, music as musical execution had scarcely any intellectual or social consideration since it was considered a manual practice. In the case of Hildegard, even if she did subscribe to a certain degree to this common split, she did so without underrating it. She often reflected on her works about the spiritual sense of music⁴⁴, in which she also praised composition and musical execution⁴⁵. She did this without rejecting either the emotion or the corporal involvement in interpretational practice: «Corpus uero indumentum est anime, que uiuam uocem habet, ideoque decet ut corpus cum anima per uocem Deo laudes decantet»⁴⁶. It is precisely from her defence of and eulogy to musical practice that her abstract discourse on music emerges in the epistle to the prelates of Mainz.

The practice defended by Hildegard in that epistle, as mentioned before, was above all vocal. But in her eulogy she also dealt with instrumental interpretation, using the psalm of David «Praise Him with sound of trumpet: praise Him with psaltery and harp» (Ps 150.3, 6), on which she gives an extensive commentary:

In quibus uerbis per exteriora de interioribus instruimur, scilicet quomodo, secundum materialem compositionem uel qualitatem instrumentorum, interioris hominis nostri officia ad Creatoris maxime laudes conuertere et informare debeamus⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ From a theoretical angle, Hildegard did not consider mathematical-musical speculations.

⁴⁵ Boethius (*De institutione musica*, I, 2) makes a well-known distinction between the three types of culturally distinct music: *musica mundana* (the music of the spheres; it produces a sound that can be rationally and not sensually captured), *musica humana* (referring to the harmony of body and soul) and *musica instrumentalis* (both instrumental and vocal, produced by human beings in imitation of the cosmic sound). This distinction established the bases for a conception that was developed during the following centuries.

⁴⁶ *EPP*, XXIII, p. 64, l. 129-131. «The body is the vestment of the spirit, which has a living voice, and so it is proper for the body, in harmony with the soul, to use its voice to sing praises to God». Eng. trans.: *The Letters*, cit., vol. I, p. 79. A comparison of the Augustinian and Hildegardian conceptions of emotional content and the corporal implication of music can be found in: C. PANTI, «*Verbum cordis e ministerium uocis: il canto emozionale di Agostino e le visioni sonore di Ildegarda di Bingen*», in M. CRISTIANI – C. PANTI – G. PERILLO (eds.), *Harmonia mundi. Musica mundana e musica celeste fra Antichità e Medioevo*, SISMELE–Edizioni del Galluzzo, Florence 2007, pp. 167-199.

⁴⁷ *EPP*, XXIII, p. 63, l. 61-65, «These words use outward, visible things to teach us about inward things. Thus the material composition and the quality of these instruments instruct us how we

Just as vocal music connects the body –represented by words– to the soul –represented by sound– so instrumental music connected the sound and the material quality of the different instruments with the spiritual meanings that internally instruct the human being. In that sense, Hildegard followed a tradition sanctioned by Augustine and the Carolingians, which produced allegories of the instruments mentioned in the psalm⁴⁸. Hildegard conceived vocal and instrumental interpretation as a source of inner learning and as a way to express devout happiness. Moreover, she legitimated it as a spiritual tool by alluding to the use the prophets made of it in the psalms:

Et quoniam interdum in auditu alicuius cantionis homo sepe suspirat et gemit, naturam celestis harmonie recolens, propheta, subtiliter profundam spiritus naturam considerans, et sciens quia symphonialis est anima, hortatur in psalmo ut confiteamur Domino in cithara, et in psalterio decem chordarum psallamus ei, citharam, que inferius sonat, ad disciplinam corporis, psalterium, quod de superius sonum reddit, ad intentionem spiritus, decem chordas ad completionem legis referri cupiens⁴⁹.

According to Hildegard's account, it was at the precise moment of the fall from Paradise that the vehicles for musical transmission were created so that humans could re-establish the happiness of their origins. In the Christian imaginary, angelical orders are closely linked to music and the beauty of their voices is a result of their spiritual nature. In the chapter of the *Sciuias* devoted to the choirs of angels, the nine militia described glorified the Divinity with marvellous voices of all kinds of music⁵⁰, creating an atmosphere of celebration. Similarly, music and spiritual celebration were also associated with the musical practice of the Rupertsberg community, as noted in the letter from Tengswich of Andernach mentioned previously. Moreover, this transmission goes to prove how, according to

ought to give form to the praise of the Creator and turn all the convictions of our inner being to the same». Eng. trans.: *The Letters*, ., vol. I, p. 77.

⁴⁸ B. NEWMAN, «Introduction», in *Symphonia. A Critical Edition*, cit., pp. 22-23.

⁴⁹ *EPP*, XXIII, p. 65, l. 138-145. «And because sometimes a person sighs and groans at the sound of singing, remembering, as it were, the nature of celestial harmony, the prophet, aware that the soul is symphonic and thoughtfully reflecting on the profound nature of the spirit, urges us in the psalm [Ps 32.2, 91.4] to confess to the Lord with the [zither] and to sing a psalm to Him with the ten-stringed psaltery. His meaning is that the [zither], which is plucked from below, relates to the discipline of the body; the psaltery, which is plucked from above, pertains to the exertion of the spirit; the ten chords, to the fulfillment of the law». Eng. trans.: *The Letters*, cit., vol. I, p. 79.

⁵⁰ *Sciuias*, I, 6, p. 101, l. 54-55.

Hildegard, God would have disseminated the prophetic spirit to certain people so that, through interior enlightenment, they would rediscover another of the gifts that Adam possessed and subsequently lost: *scientia Dei*.

As mentioned above, for Hildegard the memory provided by music is not one of nostalgia, but one that transports us spiritually, for a few moments, to the lost happiness of our origins. To that end, the prophets, and later the wise men and scholars, concentrated on the composition of *musica instrumentalis* –a notion that includes both chant and instrumental music– because musical practice enabled them to express the joy of the soul. In this way Hildegard not only offers an explanation of the sacred history from a musical perspective but, from her conception of music, she also defends and legitimises her liberty in the face of the prohibition imposed by the ecclesiastical institution. There also exists an intimate link between her theology of music and her task as a composer, since she placed herself implicitly, in the chain of musical and spiritual transmission, as an «inspired» composer. Hers was an enraged criticism before the clerics that had deprived her of her duty to sing to the Divinity. Regarding the prohibition, she warned the prelates of the possibility that the devil could make them err in their judgements, since she maintained that Diabolus always attempts to silence the proclamation of the divine beauty. Hildegard therefore gives the prelates' decision an atemporal dimension and warns them about the danger involved in participating in the act of dragging human beings out of the celestial harmony in which Adam's soul was created –a harmony that Hildegard of Bingen was meanwhile trying to restore by composing and interpreting the *symphoniae* that were «revealed» to her.

The voice of God resounds throughout the universe, which is itself sonorous⁵¹, until it reaches human beings who must etch onto their hearts the words spoken by the Divinity⁵². Hearing is therefore not enough, it is also necessary to sing. Hildegard interprets the biblical verse James 1.22 and tunes

⁵¹ In *Sciuias* (I, 3) there is a description of the crackling of fire and the clashing of the elements with the earth, as well as the clamour of the different atmospheric elements (storms, whirlwinds, etc.) which are then extrapolated to a universal scale. Hildegard compares the air with the «soft and gentle» sound that accommodates and sustains, and celebrates, the harmonic chorus of the multitude. As stated in *Liber diuinorum operum* (I, 2-3) there is a link between musical harmony and cosmic harmony, which is produced upon a physical basis: the air, which fills the universal space and constitutes the natural basis of the vocal phenomenon.

⁵² *Sciuias*, III, 13, p. 634, l. 616-626.

her hearing in a mystical sense to be able to write on her soul what is revealed to her by the holy Wisdom and to transmit it by singing⁵³. Hearing opens up an inner space and the act of hearing is linked to the intellect, as suggested at the end of the *Scivias*: «Et sonus earum ita pertransiuit me, quod eas absque difficultate tarditatis intellexi»⁵⁴. These words are reminiscent of the visionary phenomenon described in the testimonial of the *Scivias*⁵⁵ and indicate that the comprehension of what is revealed is also produced immediately when it comes to sounds. When the «heavenly voice» speaks these words, it does so in the following terms: «ubi diuina gratia operata fuerit, omnem tenebrositatem obumbrationis aufert, illa pura et lucida faciens quae carnalibus sensibus in infirmitate carnis obscura sunt»⁵⁶. Here, the explanation of the auditory phenomenon uses visual terms, thus setting out the point to which both perceptions –the visual and the auditory– are intertwined in Hildegard’s mystic cognoscitive experience.

4. Conclusion

The *auditio*, together with the *uisio*, constitutes the basis of the mystical *intelligere* of Hildegard of Bingen and this takes form in her visions-auditions as well as in her musical compositions. Through her reflections on music, and through her composition and interpretation, Hildegard participated as much in the theory as in the practice of music. On the one hand, in her eulogistic evaluation of the practice she broke away from the public opinion of her time, established by the authority of the Greeks and Augustine of Hippo, and manifested an opinion in the twelfth century that would not find acceptance until the Renaissance. On the other hand, she conceived the song of praise as an essential tool in the history of salvation. Human beings, with their symphonic soul, sit on the last step of an ontological-musical scale that is spread down from heaven towards earth by the Divinity. Through listening and singing, humans can renew the heavenly state, together with the original *uox*, *rationalitas* and *scientia*. The song of praise, which

⁵³ Ibid., p. 636, 669-671.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 629, l. 456-457. «And their song went through me, so that I understood them perfectly». Eng. trans.: *Scivias*, cit., . 532.

⁵⁵ *Scivias*, Prot., pp. 3-4, l. 24-35.

⁵⁶ Ibid., III, 13, p. 632, l. 556-559. «[W]here divine grace has worked, it banishes all dark obscurity, and makes pure and lucid those things that are obscure to the bodily senses because of the weakness of the flesh». Eng. trans.: *Scivias*, cit., p. 534.

involves both body and soul, is conceived as an echo of heavenly harmony and an expression that brings about the presence of the Divinity. Through the *auditio* and the *canticum laudum* humanity can be a part of the *armonia mundi*, because for Hildegard of Bingen it is not only an intelligible notion, but a fully realisable one that ultimately constitutes an agent of social transformation that is an alternative to the cohesive forms of society used in her time⁵⁷.

⁵⁷ Translated by Fiona Kelso and revised by PangurBàn Ltd. and Georgina Rabassó.

