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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Instrument of God: The Celestial Harmony of Hildegard von Bingen and the Silence of Women in Sacred Music

By Kayla Ray

Abstract: This paper examines the music of Hildegard von Bingen considering the shocking lack of female composers to come after her, particularly within the genre of sacred music. It begins by exploring the history of women and liturgical music in the Early Church before analyzing Hildegard's prolific music career, including the vast range of genres she employed, the creativity and complexity of her compositions, her divinely feminine lyrics, and her theology of music and embodiment. It then investigates why so few female composers followed her, concluding that despite rare exceptions such as Hildegard, the Roman Catholic Church silenced women in sacred music for almost two thousand years. Although this is primarily a historical and musical analysis, it is influenced by feminist theology as well. Using Pope John Paul II's concept of "feminine genius," this paper ultimately argues that the Church today should seriously promote Hildegard as a creative role model to inspire more women to compose sacred music.

Keywords: Hildegard von Bingen, Theology of Music, Feminine Genius, Female Composers, Sacred Music

It is difficult to know where to begin when writing about the incomparable Hildegard von Bingen. The German abbess from the twelfth century held many unusual titles for a woman of her time, such as theologian, philosopher, and prophet. It is the title of composer, however, that will serve as the focus of this paper. While religious scholars, musicologists, and historians alike rightly express awe at Hildegard's compositional body of work, the Roman Catholic Church has paid little attention to it, preferring to focus instead on her visionary theological writings. In his apostolic letter proclaiming Hildegard a Doctor of the Church, Pope Benedict XVI only briefly mentions her work as a composer.¹ Perhaps worse, his predecessor and fellow admirer of Hildegard, Pope John Paul II, effusively praised the "feminine genius" of women, including women who work and contribute to the arts; yet he failed to

¹ Benedictus PP. XVI, "Apostolic Letter: Proclaiming Saint Hildegard of Bingen, professed nun of the Order of Saint Benedict, a Doctor of the Universal Church," *The Vatican*, October 7, 2012, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20121007_ildegarda-bingen.html.

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highlight Hildegard's true genius, which is both musical and distinctly feminine, while doing so.² But this is a symptom of a much deeper problem: after Hildegard, there have been shockingly few female composers throughout the centuries, particularly within the genre of sacred music. By analyzing Hildegard's ethereal melodies, divinely feminine lyrics, and extraordinary theology of music and embodiment, this paper will argue that Hildegard von Bingen is a breathtaking model of feminine genius for the Church and proves why more female composers are needed in sacred music. To tackle the complexities of this issue and appreciate just how inspiring Hildegard's compositions really are, it is important that we know the context in which she lived and understood her place as a religious woman in the High Middle Ages, beginning with the history of women and liturgical music.

It is reasonable to presume that women took part in worship singing during the earliest centuries of the Church. Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Ephesians that they should "remain joined in chorus" to "sing with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father."³ Although it could be argued that he was simply using musical metaphors to convey his message of unity between bishop and congregation,⁴ Johannes Quasten points to this as proof that women chanted with men in the first few centuries, writing that "an exclusion of women would have stood in very sharp contrast to the note of the communion of souls which Ignatius of Antioch had sounded so strongly..."⁵ Perhaps greater evidence is found in the account of the pilgrim Egeria in the fourth century, where she described laywomen and virgins singing with laymen and monks at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.⁶ Further, Ambrose, although stating that women should not speak in Church, defended their singing of the Psalms, and there are several other references scattered throughout Early Church documents of women chanting in congregations and choirs.⁷

However, not everyone supported women's participation in liturgical singing. The *Didascalía* treatise and figures such as Cyril of Jerusalem and Jerome were firmly against it, arguing for a literal interpretation of Pauline verses such as 1 Corinthians 14:34.⁸ Other reasons included pagan choirs of

² John Paul II, "Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women," *The Vatican*, June 29, 1995,

https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html.

³ William R. Schoedel and Helmut Koester, "Ignatius to the Ephesians," in *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1985), 51, muse.jhu.edu/book/46001.

⁴ Schoedel and Koester, "Ignatius to the Ephesians," 54.

⁵ Johannes Quasten, "The Liturgical Singing of Women in Christian Antiquity," *The Catholic Historical Review* 27, no. 2 (1941): 152, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25014016>.

⁶ J. Michele Edwards, "Women in Music to ca. 1450," in *Women and Music: A History*, 2nd ed., ed. Karin Anna Pendle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 41.

⁷ Quasten, "The Liturgical Singing of Women in Christian Antiquity," 152-157.

⁸ Quasten, "The Liturgical Singing of Women in Christian Antiquity," 157-159.



women, the worldly music of courtesans and harlots, and the threat of heretical and Gnostic groups which were more egalitarian in belief and practice.⁹ There may have been more personal reasons for men to fear women singing as well; Quasten writes that “there was something sensuous in the song of a woman according to some of the Fathers.”¹⁰ Some leaders like Gregory of Nazianzen and the Iberian ruler Arsillos even went as far as to advocate male-only singing in private home worship. Eventually, congregational singing shifted to choirs comprised of men and boys only,¹¹ and convents became the best, if not only opportunity for Christian women to sing and compose music.¹²

Known female composers of sacred music would not come until hundreds of years later. Between the ninth and fifteenth centuries, at least seven women have been identified as Byzantine chant composers, most notably Kassia from the ninth century. Numerous hymns that are attributed to her have survived; interestingly, her most famous work is a troparion (a short hymn or stanza) about Mary Magdalene. The one other preserved piece is by an unnamed composer in the fourteenth century, known only as the daughter of Byzantine hymnographer Ioannes Kladas.¹³ But these seven women were an exception, and a small one at that. Elsewhere, women’s participation in sacred music remained scarce. That Hildegard von Bingen would go on to be such a legendary composer, then, is as remarkable as nearly everything else about her life.

We are fortunate to have an unusual amount of information about Hildegard, thanks primarily to the hundreds of letters she wrote and received and the *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, her hagiography. Recorded by Gottfried of St. Disibod and Dieter of Echternach, Hildegard’s *Vita* includes many first-person accounts dictated by Hildegard herself.¹⁴ She was born the tenth child to parents of nobility in Bermersheim, sometime during the summer of 1098. Dedicated to God as a tithe by her parents, she began having visions in her early childhood and, as was common enough in the early twelfth century, was eventually sent to live with Jutta, an anchoress in a cell of a Benedictine monastery. Jutta taught her how to read and write simple Latin, and as the cell attracted more young women over time, it eventually transformed into a small convent. Hildegard confided only to Jutta about her visions, but when Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard was chosen unanimously by her religious sisters to become the new head of the convent. Her life-changing vision came at the age of forty-two. As she describes it in the *Scivias*, the

⁹ Edwards, “Women in Music to ca. 1450,” 42.

¹⁰ Quasten, “The Liturgical Singing of Women in Christian Antiquity,” 162.

¹¹ Edwards, “Women in Music to ca. 1450,” 41-42.

¹² Edwards, “Women in Music to ca. 1450,” 44.

¹³ Edwards, “Women in Music to ca. 1450,” 42.

¹⁴ Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 11.



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first of her visionary tomes, “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...” After that she began recording her visions with the help of the monk Volmar.¹⁵

The second half of her life on earth was a renaissance period, never mind that Hildegard was pre-Renaissance. Along with her landmark trilogy of visionary theological works, she also wrote groundbreaking scientific and medical treatises on subjects ranging from botany to gynecology, invented her own language, went on four preaching tours, and corresponded with popes and emperors. In modern parlance, she was a bit of a celebrity. She had the support of major figures like Bernard of Clairvaux, was a mentor to fellow visionary Elisabeth Schönau, and was regularly consulted by clergy, monastics, and members of the laity — all the while performing her duties as an abbess and dealing with her fluctuating and sometimes debilitating health problems.¹⁶ If that is not enough, she could even be called an exorcist on at least one occasion.¹⁷ This is only a brief summary of Hildegard’s accomplishments, and we have not even broached her musical endeavors yet. Thus, we now turn to Hildegard’s career as a composer.

In her *Vita*, Hildegard claims to have had no musical education: “untaught by anyone, I composed and chanted plainsong in praise of God and the saints, although I had never studied either musical notation or any kind of singing.”¹⁸ But she was composing music by the 1140s, and thanks to a letter from Odo of Soissons, we know that she was recognized for her music at least by 1148.¹⁹ The works she composed between 1151-1158 were assembled into a collection she entitled the *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (Symphony of the harmony of celestial revelations), a liturgical cycle of seventy-six Latin medieval plainchants.²⁰ Broken down, this collection includes forty-four antiphons, eighteen responsories, seven sequences, four hymns, two *symphoniae* (a genre seemingly invented by Hildegard), and one alleluia.²¹ Outside of the *Symphonia*, she also composed a Greek *Kyrie* and a morality play.²²

¹⁵ Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998), 1-3.

¹⁶ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 9-29.

¹⁷ Flanagan, *A Visionary Life*, 7.

¹⁸ Barbara Newman, Introduction to *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the “Symphonia Armonie Celestium Revelationum” (Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations)*, ed. and trans. Barbara Newman (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 17, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv75d3k2>.

¹⁹ Flanagan, *A Visionary Life*, 74.

²⁰ Matthew Hoch, “The Music of Hildegard Von Bingen: A Categorical Overview of Her Complete Oeuvre,” *The Choral Journal* 69, no. 10 (May 2020): 20.

²¹ Hoch, “The Music of Hildegard Von Bingen,” 22-23.

²² Hoch, “The Music of Hildegard Von Bingen,” 26.

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All of Hildegard's music was preserved in two different manuscripts: the Riesenkodez and the Dendermonde,²³ often labeled as "R" or "D."²⁴ According to Margot Fassler, Hildegard's breadth of theological and artistic output "provides opportunities to contextualize her works to a greater degree than any other composer before or since," and as "she was the first medieval musician to supervise a collected edition of her written works and her music. . . secure attributions. . . are readily made in her case."²⁵ Thus, that Hildegard composed all of these works herself is not in question by scholars, though Barbara Newman notes that in light of her texts on healing and natural science, the *Symphonia* "would scarcely be ascribed to the same author if the historical record left room for doubt."²⁶

Hildegard's music served a functional purpose, intended for Mass, the Divine Office, dedications, and feast days at her convent. Sabina Flanagan writes that "unlike the writing of theological treatise," her music "required little apology or justification."²⁷ An interesting exception to this functionality would be her morality play. Called the *Ordo virtutum* (*Play of Virtues*), this full-length liturgical drama features singing personifications of virtues and the soul along with prophets, patriarchs, and the Devil. It is the earliest surviving play of its kind and was possibly even staged by Hildegard and her nuns.²⁸ Also noteworthy is that she may have written a few pieces in the *Symphonia* on commission.²⁹

As for the music itself, Hildegard's melodies are beautiful, complex, and haunting. Perhaps avant-garde to the average modern listener, even those who knew Hildegard were also "taken with its beauty and its strangeness"³⁰ She would have been very familiar with chant as a Benedictine, but she apparently made no attempt to imitate mainstream compositional style; although some scholars have proposed that German folksongs were an influence, Newman rightly points out that "her compositions lack the two essential traits of a popular tune: it must be easy to remember and easy to sing."³¹ Indeed, Hildegard's music is very rarely considered easy. Her ambitious antiphons and responsories are incredibly melismatic, meaning several notes and phrases are often ascribed to a single syllable. Many

²³ Flanagan, *A Visionary Life*, 75.

²⁴ Hoch, "The Music of Hildegard Von Bingen," 26

²⁵ Margot Fassler, "Music and Prosopography," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Music*, ed. Mark Everist and Thomas Forrest Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 189, doi:10.1017/9780511979866.007.

²⁶ Newman, *Symphonia*, 7.

²⁷ Flanagan, *A Visionary Life*, 75-76.

²⁸ Flanagan, *A Visionary Life*, 105.

²⁹ Newman, *Symphonia*, 12-13.

³⁰ Newman, *Symphonia*, 17.

³¹ Newman, *Symphonia*, 27-28.



pieces span a range of two / two and a half octave and are full of wide melodic leaps, particularly in intervals of fifths.

Another common characteristic in Hildegard's compositions is tone-painting, where the music reflects the literal meaning of the text. A good example given by Newman is Hildegard's *O gloriosissimi lux vivens angeli* (antiphon for the Angels), in which the lyrical rise and fall of Satan is perfectly accentuated by the rising and falling melody.³² As June Boyce-Tillman observes, "Hildegard clearly favored and prioritized the expressive elements of music."³³ Her lyrics, too, are multifaceted and unique, and so different from formal twelfth century poetry that for some time, "scholars were reluctant even to dignify Hildegard's songs with the title of poetry." To the modern eye and ear, it is free verse, with no discernable meter or structure.³⁴ Other interesting aspects of Hildegard's lyrics are that she echoed scripture but rarely quoted it, preferring allusions to exact citations,³⁵ and the *Symphonia* contains no first person singular — it is "poetry of public worship."³⁶ With this basic understanding of Hildegard's music and compositional style, we turn now to the themes of the feminine divine in her lyrics, beginning with the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is significant to Hildegard and is notably the only member of the Trinity to whom an entire cycle of liturgical songs is solely devoted. Hildegard used many traditional images of the Holy Spirit in her various writings, such as wind, fire, and water; but what is unique is her infusion of these theological concepts into her scientific and medical writings.³⁷ This, too, is important to her music. For example, in the *Spiritus sanctus vivificans* (antiphon for the Holy Spirit), Hildegard describes the Holy Spirit as "a life that bestows life," the "root of the world-tree" that is "scrubbing out sins..."³⁸ The 'root' description may seem odd to anyone unfamiliar with her medical texts, but Hildegard often connected roots with healing.³⁹

Something else unique is that unlike classical notions of men relating to the element of air and women with the earth, Hildegard thought the opposite. As Adam was made from clay, so, too, is man

³² Newman, *Symphonia*, 28.

³³ June Boyce-Tillman, "Hildegard of Bingen: A Woman for Our Time," *Feminist Theology* 22 (September 1999): 34.

³⁴ Newman, *Symphonia*, 32-33.

³⁵ Newman, *Symphonia*, 35.

³⁶ Newman, *Symphonia*, 37.

³⁷ Joy A. Schroeder, "A Fiery Heat: Images of the Holy Spirit in the Writing of Hildegard of Bingen," *Mystics Quarterly* 30, no. 3-4 (September 2004): 88-89.

³⁸ Saint Hildegard of Bingen, "The Holy Spirit," in *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the "Symphonia Armonie Celestium Revelationum" (Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations)*, trans. Barbara Newman (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 141, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv75d3k2.11>.

³⁹ Flanagan, *A Visionary Life*, 77.



associated with the earth; but “the woman, created from the man after he was quickened with the breath of life, has an airy essence.”⁴⁰ Further, Hildegard believed that women’s airy temperament made them more sensitive to both spiritual forces and their physical environments, and once even compared a woman’s body to a stringed instrument like a lyre or, as Newman suggests, an aeolian harp, with its strings played by the wind.⁴¹ Ultimately, as a prophet who experienced intense, sometimes painful visions all throughout her life, Hildegard’s affinity for the Holy Spirit makes perfect sense. Though her “female airy nature made her prone to sickness,” it “also rendered her open to the breath,” and healing, of the Holy Spirit. “Were it otherwise, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit would not be able to dwell within her.”⁴²

Next, we turn our attention to Eve and the Virgin Mary. Just as the Holy Spirit was important to Hildegard, the Incarnation was central; thus, “with the mother of God we come to the heart of Hildegard’s theology of the feminine.”⁴³ There are a few differences between Hildegard’s Marian imagery and that of her contemporaries. For example, Hildegard was not so interested in Mary’s appearance, or any miracles attributed to her, nor did she join debates concerning the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption. This “impersonal quality” is also seen with her treatment of Eve; rather than caring about the personality or psychology behind each figure, Hildegard wrote about Eve and Mary as “cosmic theophanies of the feminine.”⁴⁴

In the “D” manuscript, the *Symphonia* compositions are arranged in a very specific hierarchical order, likely under the direction of Hildegard herself. Between works about God the Father and the Holy Spirit, we find numerous pieces dedicated to Mary. Therefore, “the Mother of God appears in the position that belongs to her Son...only through her can Christ and then the Spirit be revealed.”⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly, the Original Eve appears in many of the pieces dedicated to the New Eve, sometimes even indirectly. One example can be found in the opening line of the *Quia ergo femina* (antiphon for the Virgin): “Because it was a woman who built a house for death, a shining girl tore it down.”⁴⁶ On that note, it cannot be denied that in Hildegard’s Eve, we find notions of gender and sexuality that are troubling by modern feminist standards. However, we also find a sympathy for Eve, and a view of

⁴⁰ Schroeder, “A Fiery Heat,” 89.

⁴¹ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 110.

⁴² Schroeder, “A Fiery Heat,” 90.

⁴³ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 130.

⁴⁴ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 131.

⁴⁵ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 132.

⁴⁶ Saint Hildegard of Bingen, “Mother and Son,” in *Symphonia*, 117.



sexuality more nuanced than many of Hildegard's contemporaries. Both aspects of Hildegard must be acknowledged.

Personifications of the feminine divine also show up regularly in Hildegard's work, including her compositions. As important as Sapiientia (Wisdom/Sophia) and Caritas (Love) is to Hildegard's visions and writings, it is Ecclesia to whom the final cycle of liturgical songs in the *Symphonia* is devoted. Ecclesia is the Church Mother or Bride of Christ, a towering role model of virginity given more personality and description than Mary or Eve.⁴⁷ With Mary and the Incarnation as the "central moment" of time, Hildegard placed the proleptic Eve to one side and the eschatological Ecclesia to the other side; together, "these three theophanies of the feminine in history reveal the three human faces of the feminine divine."⁴⁸

Ecclesia is a paradox. In many ways, she is strong and powerful, a soldier for God, as seen in the opening lyrics of the *O orzchis Ecclesia* (antiphon for Dedication of a Church): "Ecclesia! Maiden tall beyond measure, clad in God's armor..."⁴⁹ But her femininity also makes her incredibly vulnerable to corruption: "the joyful mother can become a sorrowful mother in history, and the virgin bride can be ravished."⁵⁰ Ecclesia forces us to confront the fact that Hildegard used distinct feminine imagery to describe the Church, all the while supporting women's subordination within it. But Newman reminds us that in Medieval Christianity, "'powerlessness' in certain forms was upheld as a value for both genders"; and indeed, this humility is not resigned to Medieval thought, but is deeply Christian.⁵¹ And so the maiden warrior Ecclesia, Church Mother and Bride, is powerful and strong, despite or because of her feminine submission and vulnerability — much like Hildegard herself.

Finally, we must look briefly at ecology. *Viriditas* (greenness) and nature metaphors are abundant in the *Symphonia*. Although Hildegard did not invent the concept or theology of *viriditas*,⁵² the way she infused it into her lyrics is as theologically remarkable as it is poetically gorgeous. The *O quam preciosa* (responsory for the Virgin) is one of many examples: "the Holy One flooded her with warmth until a flower sprang in her womb, and the Son of God came forth from her secret chamber like the dawn."⁵³ According to Newman, "Viriditas for Hildegard was more than a color; the fresh

⁴⁷ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 186.

⁴⁸ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 158.

⁴⁹ Saint Hildegard of Bingen, "Ecclesia," in *Symphonia*, 253.

⁵⁰ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 182.

⁵¹ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 187.

⁵² John Daniel Dadosky, "The Original Green Campaign: Dr. Hildegard of Bingen's Viriditas as Complement to Laudato Si," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 81, doi:10.3138/tjt.2017-0226.

⁵³ Saint Hildegard of Bingen, "Mother and Son," in *Symphonia*, 135.



green...represents the principle of all life, growth, and fertility flowing from the life-creating power of God."⁵⁴ In short, when we talk about greening the liturgy, we need only look to Hildegard's music. As John Dadosky puts it, "she *is* the original green campaign."⁵⁵

Now we come to Hildegard's theology of music, the 'key' to understanding her compositions and her life's work. This is perhaps most easily found in two places: first, the *Ordo virtutum*, and second, a dramatic and devastating event that happened in the last year of Hildegard's earthly life. Starting with her morality play, the unmusical character of Satan is jealous of Adam's singing voice in the garden; notably, he is also the only character who speaks rather than sings his lines.⁵⁶ As for the event, Hildegard and her nuns buried a man who was formerly excommunicated on monastic ground. The prelates claimed the deceased was unworthy and demanded that his corpse be exhumed, but the nuns refused, arguing that the man had been reconciled to the Church. As a result, the convent was laid under interdict, and they were not allowed to chant the Office. In response, Hildegard wrote a letter warning the prelates to "beware" before they "use an interdict to stop the mouth of any church of God's singers," lest they "be ensnared in" their "judgments by Satan, who lured man away from the celestial harmony and the delights of paradise." Afterwards, the interdict was lifted.⁵⁷

But here we find her theology of music, that humanity was never meant to be without the celestial harmony. Music is the embodiment of joy, a supreme act of worship and the unity of soul and body. Hildegard liked contrasting human beings, "composed of soul and body so as to express God's image in both praise and work, with the angels, who were pure in spirit and therefore pure song"; and because Christ is who the angels are singing about, "wherever he is music must also be."⁵⁸ Music was also a duty to her; recalling her analogy of woman's body as a harp, Hildegard compared her own voice to that of a trumpet,⁵⁹ a powerful instrument of God which, despite or because of her gender and frailty, was used by the Holy Spirit to convey the messages of the Lord.

While Hildegard was never truly forgotten in German regions over the centuries, her music was rediscovered in the mid-nineteenth century;⁶⁰ since then, her popularity has exploded. By many accounts, she is the most important and prolific composer of the Middle Ages, and today her music is

⁵⁴ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 89.

⁵⁵ Dadosky, "The Original Green Campaign," 81.

⁵⁶ Newman, *Symphonia*, 19.

⁵⁷ Newman, *Symphonia*, 24-25.

⁵⁸ Newman, *Symphonia*, 20-21.

⁵⁹ Boyce-Tillman, "Hildegard of Bingen: A Woman for Our Time," 36.

⁶⁰ Jennifer Bain, "Was Hildegard Forgotten?" *Journal of Musicological Research* 34, no. 1 (January 2015): 27, doi:10.1080/01411896.2015.985520.



recorded and performed by religious, classical, and even New Age artists.⁶¹ In 2012, she was finally granted equivalent canonization by Pope Benedict XVI when he named her a Doctor of the Church, thus cementing her legacy in the Church and beyond.⁶²

It stands to reason, then, that she should have inspired other female composers in the Church to come after her, yet the next female composer in general came centuries later. Aside from the previously mentioned Byzantine chant composers — and unless one counts the trobairitz, secular songwriters of which one surviving melody is attributed to Comtessa de Dia⁶³ — we do not see any other female composers until Maddalena Casulana and Augustinian nun Vittoria (Raffaella) Aleotti in the sixteenth century.⁶⁴ This begs the question: what happened?

Scholars have a few theories. First, many Medieval composers published anonymously, and women especially may have remained anonymous because of societal pressures. It is also likely that many lacked the education for liturgical composition. When universities, closed to women, overtook convents and monasteries as the intellectual centers of Europe, “the artistic and intellectual activity of nuns declined.”⁶⁵ And it does not help matters that Hildegard’s music was all but lost for such a long time, thus robbing women of a serious role model in composition.

Returning to the sixteenth century, while things slowly improved for women in music, Church musicians continued to “remain almost exclusively male for some time,”⁶⁶ and the state of female composers in sacred music remained complicated. Although some nuns published liturgical music in the seventeenth century, it was lost to the Napoleonic wars. Other noteworthy moments during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries include a few religious works by secular composers Barbara Strozzi and Francesca Caccini, Viennese composer Marianna von Martines, Antonio Vivaldi composing religious works for female voices, and the restrictions enacted by Emperor Joseph II that discouraged women’s liturgical singing.⁶⁷

Women’s participation in sacred music would continue to be debated. Even as choral music became an activity for women and men alike during the nineteenth century, it was markedly independent

⁶¹ Nathaniel M. Campbell, Beverly R. Lomer, and Xenia Sandstrom-McGuire, “Music,” *International Society of Hildegard von Bingen Studies*, accessed on June 27, 2021, <http://www.hildegard-society.org/p/music.html>.

⁶² Benedictus PP. XVI, “Apostolic Letter.”

⁶³ Edwards, “Women in Music to ca. 1450,” 32.

⁶⁴ Karin Pendle, “Musical Women in Early Modern Europe,” in *Women and Music: A History*, 2nd ed., ed. Karin Anna Pendle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 88.

⁶⁵ Edwards, “Women in Music to ca. 1450,” 49.

⁶⁶ Pendle, “Musical Women in Early Modern Europe,” 91.

⁶⁷ Barbara Garvey Jackson, “Musical Women of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *Women and Music: A History*, 2nd ed., ed. Karin Anna Pendle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 98.



from the Church.⁶⁸ And then Pope Pius X issued a *Motu Proprio* in 1903 — on the feast day of Cecilia, patron saint of music and musicians — that strictly forbade women’s liturgical singing for the next several decades.⁶⁹ Ann L. Silverberg concludes that as post-Vatican II Catholics have become used to the musical freedoms of today, “no one may realistically expect the door to close again”;⁷⁰ but the fact remains that with the exception of Hildegard and very few others, the Roman Catholic Church silenced women in sacred music for almost two thousand years. This is disturbing, particularly now that Hildegard’s music has been rediscovered and we have an idea of the divinely feminine music and theology that I argue only a woman could compose. Just as Hildegard was an instrument of God, the question must be asked: how many other instruments of God has the Church silenced?

To conclude, let us return to Pope John Paul II and his concept of “feminine genius.” In his “Letter to Women,” he includes in his list of gratitude women who are “present and active in every area of life,” including the artistic sphere, for “indispensable contribution to the growth of a culture which unites reason and feeling, to a model of life ever open to the sense of ‘mystery.’” He goes on to call Mary “the highest expression of the ‘feminine genius.’”⁷¹ While I will not argue with him there, my hope is that this paper highlight another feminine genius that the Church should seriously promote as a creative role model for women — not just as a theologian and mystic, but as a composer, too. The celestial harmony of Hildegard von Bingen, while unique to her visionary, feminine brilliance, is also evidence of what women can contribute to liturgical song. Let us all encourage the next instruments of God to come forth, as Hildegard would sing, “like the dawn.”⁷²

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⁶⁸ Perry Jones, “The History of Women's Liberation In Choral Music,” *The Choral Journal* 16, no. 6 (1976): 12-13, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23544820>.

⁶⁹ Ann L. Silverberg, “American Catholic Liturgical Music in the Twentieth Century: Pius X’s ‘Motu Proprio’ at Its Centennial,” *American Catholic Studies* 115, no. 1 (2004): 45-47, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44195170>.

⁷⁰ Silverberg, “American Catholic Liturgical Music in the Twentieth Century,” 62.

⁷¹ John Paul II, “Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women.”

⁷² Saint Hildegard of Bingen, “Mother and Son,” in *Symphonia*, 135.



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