

The Journal of Hildegard of Bingen: Inspired by a year in the life of the twelfth-century mystic

Barbara Lachman

New York: Bell Tower, 1993. \$39-95, pp. xiv+187

Includes notes, chronology, translations of Latin texts, bibliography, discography and glossary

Our modern view of the German Abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) is that of a woman whose achievements are remarkable for one of her era and gender. Hildegard's life and work are well documented, as are ideas about the creative persona responsible for the body of works attributed to her. Her output has been a focus of academic study in English-speaking countries for the last thirty years and it includes theological writings, treatises on natural history and medicine, a large collection of correspondence, and seventy-seven liturgical songs and a liturgical drama collectively entitled *Symphonia harmoniae caelestium revelationum*. However, academic treatment of Hildegard's works has too often led to the separation of the works from the person who created them, with the exception of those instances where it best serves an academic purpose to throw in a fact or two from Hildegard's life. This separation, while consistent with the notion of the anonymity of the creative persona which may be said to characterise the medieval period, reflects the distance between our modern mentality and Hildegard's twelfth-century one.

The distance between the modern researcher and the twelfth-century mind is especially evident in musicological writings about Hildegard. We have little understanding of Hildegard the composer of liturgical song, while in the more general sphere, her music is overshadowed by her literary achievements. In Sabina Flanagan's 'overview' of Hildegard's life and output for example, mention of Hildegard's music is limited to the occasional reference scattered throughout the biography, while the discussion of the *Symphonia* is restricted to a small selection of song-texts.¹

Twenty years in the making, Barbara Lachman's *Journal of Hildegard of Bingen* serves to remedy the situation by attempting to place Hildegard, her works and especially her music in a medieval context. The result is an intimate and detailed account of Hildegard's

daily life as a Benedictine nun who, first and foremost, chanted the *Opus Dei* and was responsible for the running and the spiritual well-being of her community of nuns. It is into this environment that Hildegard the producer of original writings and music is placed.

Lachman's *Journal* fulfils the function of an historical novel; that is a work of fiction through which the author endeavours to convey the spirit of an historical era. Historical novels differ from other fictional works in that they are based on documentation, and in Lachman's case, Hildegard's life has been thoroughly researched. Although Lachman's account of Hildegard is a semi-fictional one, Lachman's approach has the distinct advantage of offering an immediate insight into an era that could otherwise only be gauged from dry, impersonal and often convoluted texts. There are three levels of information imparted to the reader: the historically accurate facts about Hildegard, which are derived from documentary sources; assumptions about Hildegard, which are based on actual events and writings pertaining to or from the era; and there is the fictional content, which is contextual to the period in question, but in no way provable. The facts are distinguished from the fictional content by footnotes which appear alongside the main text.

Our glimpse of Hildegard's life begins on 1 December 1151 ('first Sunday of Advent') and concludes on 6 January 1153 ('feast of the Epiphany'). Within this relatively small time frame (Hildegard died age 81), the reader is introduced to all aspects of Hildegard's existence as a cloistered woman. Lachman cites her reason for choosing the year 1152 as a setting for her novel 'because of the unrelenting obstacles it presented to this abbess' (p.xi). These obstacles included the furore incurred over Hildegard's desire to relocate her nuns from Disibodenberg to Rupertsberg (the novel is set in the latter) and the departure and death of her prioress Rikkarda von Stade. However,

this time frame provides a convenient a setting for a description of Hildegard's musical activities, which emerge as the most frequently discussed aspect of Hildegard's life. This is hardly surprising as the daily life of all twelfth-century cloistered women was dominated by the chanting of the liturgy.

Whilst Lachman's *Journal* touches on all aspects of Hildegard's creative output, much attention is given to her compositional activities; for example, Hildegard spends much time musing over the problems associated with the writing and performance of her *Ordo Virtutum*, and in numerous journal entries we find her either contemplating the writing of songs in praise of a divine personage or describing the appearance of a song in a vision. The reader is also introduced to the involvement of music in the practice of the mass and the divine office; the various liturgical genres that existed at the time; important feast days of the liturgical calendar, which accompany each journal entry with the significance of each feast being dutifully footnoted; and numerous theological concepts and biblical personages.

The fictional setting also allows Lachman the liberty of proposing various scenarios alluding to the creation of Hildegard's works, in particular her musical ones. One example includes the confrontation between Hildegard and a traveller seeking medical attention, during which Hildegard notes that the prayers chanted by the traveller were 'different from anything I had previously heard' (p.51). Through this example, Lachman suggests that Hildegard was exposed to music from beyond the immediate area. These sorts of scenarios, although entirely fictional and improbable, tend to provide food for thought.

There are problems associated with the presentation of 'facts' pertaining to Hildegard's music however. One example is Lachman's rehashed view of the *Symphonia* as a collection completed in the 'first years at Rupertsberg' (p.5). She implies that Hildegard had one period of creativity which lasted only ten of her eighty-one years; her activities as a composer then ceased. This view contradicts evidence that Hildegard's compositional activities dated from as early as 1136 when she became Abbess at Disibodenberg, and persisted as late as 1173, as suggested by the relation between certain song texts and events surrounding Hildegard's life.

The musical terminology employed by Lachman may also misguide readers. The standard term 'square

notation' is referred to as 'Gregorian choral notation' (p.11), while the word 'chant' is rarely used, and is often replaced with such descriptions as 'the contemplative act of singing' (p.20). Lachman's explanation that Hildegard's 'music does not obey the customary rules of modal writing for the twelfth-century' (p.60, f.n.88) is erroneous; the modes functioned as a guide to the reciting tones of psalms, not as a basis for the composition of music. In this respect, Hildegard's music does indeed adhere to the rules governing the modes. Lachman's references to hexachords are also inappropriate; she uses the term to describe melodic progression, as in the instance where Hildegard states that the notation in manuscripts should reflect 'the distance one is required to travel in the hexachord when singing through [a] phrase of text' (p.97). Someone should have told Lachman that the theory of hexachords was only of use in the designation of *ficta*.

Hildegard's claims to poor education—'as a woman I had never received formal training in grammar and rhetoric' (p.83)—also present a significant problem. The conclusion that Hildegard was not proficient in the medieval trivium (grammar, rhetoric, logic) is suggested by Hildegard's own assertions that she was poorly educated. Therefore, it must also be concluded that she was not exposed to the quadrivium, of which musical theory formed a part. Yet, according to Lachman, Hildegard is able to expound upon hexachordal theory, solmisation and modal theory (p.144); engage her nuns in the 'singing at the diasparon' (p.102); and, quite ridiculously, explain the workings of chironomic theory, which comprises nothing more than an entirely modern attempt to explain conveniently the transmission of music from an oral sphere to a written one.

The problems associated with the documentation of Hildegard's musical activities pale into insignificance, however, in the face of the wealth of material presented by Lachman. The context in which so much material is placed can only facilitate an understanding of Hildegard's life and work, and though Lachman may be criticised for her subjective approach, she presents a concise and highly readable depiction of monastic life in the twelfth-century, more so than most documentary presentations of the subject.

Catherine Jeffreys

Note

¹ Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).