

Yale Journal of Music & Religion

Volume 5
Number 2 *Music, Sound, and the Aurality of the Environment in the Anthropocene: Spiritual and Religious Perspectives*

Article 9

2019

Hildegard of Bingen

William Flynn
University of Leeds

Follow this and additional works at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yjmr>

Recommended Citation

Flynn, William (2019) "Hildegard of Bingen," *Yale Journal of Music & Religion*: Vol. 5: No. 2, Article 9.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17132/2377-231X.1181>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yale Journal of Music & Religion by an authorized editor of EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. For more information, please contact elischolar@yale.edu.

Honey Meconi
Hildegard of Bingen
Women Composers 3
Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield:
University of Illinois Press, 2018
xiii + 157 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-08367-9.

This short, readable book aims to introduce students and general readers to the biography and musical works of Hildegard of Bingen. It provides a good overview of her life and influence in the first seven chapters that reflects the current scholarly consensus. These chapters consider Hildegard's musical works within a chronological survey of her visionary theological trilogy, homiletical, hagiographical, and scientific writings. Honey Meconi displays a fine awareness of the difficulties involved in creating a biographical account based on Hildegard's own literary persona and on her community's representation of her as worthy of being canonized as a saint. Meconi commendably provides a context for Hildegard's work that, by avoiding exaggerated claims of singularity, heightens appreciation of Hildegard's gifts. Because Meconi points out where the sources are incomplete and deficient and avoids speculation, careful readers of the book will be able to avoid the frequent errors of fact concerning Hildegard's life found in many online and earlier publications.

Occasionally, enough evidence exists to resolve debates that Meconi leaves open. For example, in discussing the nature of the *capella* reconsecrated at Rupertsberg in 1151, Meconi points out that this may refer to the church or merely to a chapel. However, the term *capella* was used to refer to the choir (in the east end of the church) – a space that would be renovated or constructed at an early stage in any monastic building program.

Nevertheless, Meconi is certainly on target when she points out the difficulties involved in dating Hildegard's musical works. She distinguishes between songs that appear with and without musical notation, and texts that are not presented as songs but have later versions with musical notation. In general, the cautious suggestions regarding dating are well considered, and Meconi often leaves open contested datings of certain works like the sequence *O Ierusalem*. However, she occasionally assigns dates that are still under debate to some of the repertory. For example, an early date is given for the repertory for St. Ursula: Meconi correctly points out that Disibodenberg received relics of St. Ursula's cohort while Hildegard was in residence, and that the Ursula texts have correspondences with events in Hildegard's life in the 1150s. Nonetheless, a closer look at the verbal correspondences shows that all the relevant texts (including descriptions of her earlier years) were written by Hildegard from the late 1160s to the early 1170s.

Meconi's final three chapters describe Hildegard's musical style, including her models, the underlying music theory, and the regional styles that provide a context for her work. Newcomers to medieval chant will appreciate the clear and helpful explanations. Two chapters explain the genres provided by the rubrics of the two principal notated manuscripts stemming from Hildegard's monastery. Meconi pays particular attention to how Hildegard's music both conforms to and differs from the traditional expectations

of each chant genre. In addition, Meconi treats one genre that is unique to Hildegard: her two *symphoniae*, written for her own convent's virgins. Meconi's comparison insightfully draws upon the experience of a performer as she points out that the more limited range and use of melisma and the shorter form of the *symphonia* for widows is practical for members of the community who have not received as much training as the virgins, who would normally have been trained as girls and professed as teens. Meconi describes Hildegard's music and writings as "holistic," correctly noting that their topics and imagery frequently intersect and supplement each other. Although a detailed musical and textual analysis of one of the longer pieces would have brought out

this point more fully, the limited analysis given provides clear guidance for students and performers to make further explorations.

The book's end matter consists of chapter notes which contain fuller references than the very short select bibliography that follows. There is also a discography intended to demonstrate a variety of performing approaches to the repertory, and a good index. In sum, Meconi's guide provides a fine introduction to anyone interested in Hildegard's music and a solid foundation for further reading, performing, and research.

William Flynn
Institute for Medieval Studies
University of Leeds
w.flynn@leeds.ac.uk