

# Hildegard

## by James Wood

Hildegard SARAH LEONARD *soprano*

Bishop Otto }  
The Devil }  
Pope Eugenius }  
Monk Arnold }

OMAR EBRAHIM *baritone*

Richardis ANNA MOLYNEUX (Norwich, Salisbury)

HELEN STANGER (London, St Davids)

Hiltrud JENNY DUNFORD (Norwich, St Davids)

MEA JENKINS (London, Salisbury)

Victoria SARA UNDERWOOD (Norwich, Salisbury)

PIPPA HYDE (London, St Davids)

Other solo parts CELIA JACKSON, RONA EASTWOOD

### PRE-RECORDED SINGING ROLES

*Scientia Dei* (Knowledge of God) PIPPA HYDE

*Anima illa* (Soul) MEA JENKINS

*Spes* (Hope) PIPPA HYDE

*Timor Dei* (Fear of God) SARAH DACEY

*Fides* (Faith) ANNA MOLYNEUX

*Obedientia* (Obedience) JENNY DUNFORD

*Puer* (Child) BRYONY CLARK

*Virtutes* (Virtues) SOPRANOS OF THE NEW LONDON CHAMBER CHOIR

### PRE-RECORDED INSTRUMENTAL ROLES AND SAMPLING

Trumpets 2, 3 and 4 TORBJÖRN HULTMARK

(*Edifice of Salvation*)

Cor anglais samples HUW CLEMENT-EVANS

Viol samples JOANNA LEVINE

### PRE-RECORDED SPEAKING ROLES

Voice of Hildegard RONA EASTWOOD

Voice of Mistress Tengswich ROS HOGBIN

NEW LONDON CHAMBER CHOIR

CRITICAL BAND

PERCUSSION GROUP THE HAGUE

*Conductor* JONATHAN STOCKHAMMER

*Assistant Conductor* DAVID LAWRENCE

*Director* JAMES WOOD

*Lighting Designer* JO JOELSON

*Sound Projection* DAVID SHEPPARD (SOUND INTERMEDIA)

PLEASE ENSURE THAT DIGITAL WATCH ALARMS, PAGERS AND MOBILE PHONES ARE SWITCHED OFF.

*Hildegard* was written in response to an idea originally proposed to me by Percussion Group The Hague. Co-commissioned by them, the New London Chamber Choir and the Belgian Ensemble, Champ d'Action, it was originally conceived as a modern-day medieval liturgical drama, based on the life and visions of the celebrated twelfth-century writer, composer and mystic, Hildegard von Bingen. The direct precursor of the later medieval mystery play (which developed later still into opera), liturgical drama was a popular art form in the early Middle Ages, often composed jointly by groups of singers, rather than by a single composer. Liturgical dramas were not, in fact, liturgical, but rather musical plays on a religious subject, normally performed in the abbey or cathedral of the performing group. *Hildegard*, too, is designed to be performed in abbeys and cathedrals, for the reason that these magnificent buildings provide both the architectural beauty and spiritual ambience that is most in keeping with a medieval visionary such as Hildegard, and this in turn can bring us closer to the phenomenon of divine revelation, which is so essential to the understanding of Hildegard, and mysticism in general.

The composition and realization of *Hildegard* was begun in November 2002, and is still, even now, work in progress. Once complete, *Hildegard* will become an opera comprising twenty-two scenes divided into two acts, and lasting about two hours. The version to be heard tonight, which has been tailored to suit the resources and conditions of the performance locations, consists of a continuous sequence of seventeen out of the twenty-two scenes which concentrate more on the 'spectacular' and less on the narrative aspects of the work. It employs the full scoring of two soloists, mixed ensemble of ten players, percussion ensemble of six players, chamber choir and electronics, and lasts about one hour and twenty minutes.

There is no libretto in the conventional operatic sense – rather a patchwork of texts from Hildegard's own Visions, *Sequentia* and *Ordo Virtutum*, letters written to and by Hildegard, as well as a wide variety of related biblical and medieval texts. These are sung sometimes in their original Latin and sometimes in a kind of re-invented language composed of words from the extraordinary Dictionary of the *Lingua Ignota* (Unknown Language), the language in which Hildegard claimed to have received her visions. In certain narrative passages (most notably the letters to and from Hildegard), English translations are woven into the musical fabric by means of a particular kind of recitative technique or 'voice-over'.

The drama unfolds in a manner not unlike the layout of panels in a stained-glass window, where a chronological sequence of 'snapshots' is presented by panels laid out in three columns. Each of these three columns has a distinctive function and musical style. The left-hand column presents the narrative, where letters to and from Hildegard, framed by sections of ceremony or ritual, underline and connect significant events in her life. The right-hand column presents a kind of play-within-a-play using texts from *Ordo Virtutum* (Play of Virtues), Hildegard's own liturgical drama on the perennial fight of Good against Evil, and the central column reveals the spectacular representations of visions from Hildegard's first book, *Scivias* (Know the Way). All three columns are intricately

related, as the often fantastic and surreal images in the visions appear to reflect Hildegard's perception of certain real events, and passages from *Ordo Virtutum* seem to present a stylized allegory of her own life and personal crusade.

The musical style in *Hildegard* is characterized by three distinct types of harmonic language. This is not unlike the ancient Greek musical technique where three types of modes – diatonic, chromatic and enharmonic, are designed to touch the soul with different types of emotion, or indeed Wagner's *Leitmotif* technique, where motifs and harmonies represent specific characters or ideas. In *Hildegard*, the three types of harmonic language are used to symbolize, broadly speaking, three qualities of living beings to which Hildegard often alluded.

The first and highest quality is Virginity. Originating from the concept of the immaculate conception, this virtue is constantly idolized and praised in Hildegard's letters, visions and poems, often in the context of some of her most richly sensuous imagery. Virginity is represented in musical terms by the natural harmonic spectrum (an example of which can be heard at the very opening of *Hildegard*), since this is a natural acoustical phenomenon, both perfect and 'unpolluted' by academic or other human intervention. Accordingly, much of the plainchant-like *Ordo Virtutum* sections are sung in spectral intonation by the sopranos, who represent not only the mythical Virtues in the *Ordo*, but also Hildegard's community of nuns. The natural spectrum is also especially apparent in the recitative-like passages of Hildegard's letters, where the 'Voice of Hildegard' is coloured by a kind of spatialized, spectral aura, supported by very quiet plainchant-like lines from the live Hildegard (singing extracts from the original Latin text) and the viola providing a kind of continuo.

The lowest form of being is, of course, the Devil, and all manifestations of Evil. This is represented by 'inharmonic' sounds (sounds not conforming to the natural spectrum, such as unpitched percussion instruments, drums, rattles, and also wind instrument multiphonics). This symbolism is in fact in keeping with traditional liturgical drama (of which *Ordo Virtutum* is a good example), where the role of the Devil is always spoken, and associated with some 'noise' or rattle (*strepitus diaboli*). This tradition arose out of the belief that Adam 'lost his singing voice after the Fall'. In *Hildegard*, the spoken voice is used not only by the Devil himself, but also in instances where a character or characters have become possessed by an evil or demonic spirit. The most obvious example of this can be heard in the *The Last Days and the Fall of the Antichrist*, where the Devil leads the male chorus in a demonic ritual against the faithful (female chorus). A more subtle example can also be heard in *Edifice of Salvation*, when Monk Arnold tries to stop Hildegard from leaving Disibodenberg. Here his sung voice gradually becomes spoken as his actions gradually become controlled by evil forces. But the crucial notion of the Devil as an evil spiritual force capable of perverting any human being is underlined still further by casting the baritone soloist in conflicting roles both as benign characters (Pope Eugenius, Bishop Otto, Monk Arnold), and malevolent characters (Heinrich, Bishop of Mainz and the Devil himself).

Between these two extremes lies the major part of humanity, represented by more conventional tempered chromatic modes,

as they struggle to maintain favour with God (harmonic) without falling into sin (inharmonic).

Central to the original conception of *Hildegard* is not only its performance in abbeys and cathedrals, but also the use of space to immerse the audience in the drama as singers, players, spatialized electronic sounds and light are deployed around the whole performance area. The resulting choreography of sound and light invites the audience to witness the force of Hildegard's visions as if they were seen today, thereby gaining a greater understanding of their meaning. The electronic sounds are spatialized using a sophisticated computer-controlled technique known as the Spatialisateur, developed in the mid-1990s at the acoustical research centre, IRCAM, in Paris. With this technique, a wide range of acoustical parameters of sound can be controlled with infinite precision to simulate their perceived position in space. Thus sounds can be placed with great accuracy at any distance and at any angle from the listener, and can also be moved around at any speed, spiralling round in

circles or flying overhead. Thus in the *Ordo Virtutum* sections for example, the ghostly characters of *Scientia Dei*, *Anima illa*, *Spes*, *Timor Dei*, *Fides* and *Obedientia* are made to appear as if from a world of spirits, suspended in time and space. In this way, any distinction between the real world and the spirit world soon disappears, as the two worlds become a single reality.

I would like to thank Fiona Maddocks, whose book, *Hildegard of Bingen, The Woman of Her Age* first gave me the idea for the opera, and for her help during the early stages of its conception. I would also like to thank Peter Brown for his Latin translations of *Veni ad nos* (Edifice of Salvation), and certain other adaptations of original Latin texts. I would like to thank Rona Eastwood for her help with my English translations of all the Latin texts.

JAMES WOOD  
March 2005

## HILDEGARD OF BINGEN 1098–1179

Today, for most of us, the name Hildegard of Bingen means one thing: a medieval composer of ethereal chant. It's taken nearly a thousand years for this German abbess to find her rightful place in the canon. Until not so long ago, dictionaries of music failed to mention her at all. Surprising though it now seems, she was better known for her other polymath talents: as physician, botanist, writer, mystic. She was all those things and more: a religious leader who founded her own monastery and challenged the Church, often a lone voice speaking out against corruption and heresy as few others dared.

As far we can establish, Hildegard was the tenth child of a well-connected and prosperous family in the Rhineland. Following the customs of the time, her parents tithed her to God when she was a child, which meant placing her in a male monastery with just one other girl, probably a few years older, named Jutta. The two were not allowed to mix with the monks, and underwent the ritual known as 'anchorage', in effect removing themselves from daily life and living in a cell, cut off from the world.

It can't have been quite as simple or gruesome as it sounds; others in the vicinity heard about the two young women, one of whom – Hildegard – was already said to be having extraordinary visions. So impressive was her reputation for holiness that parents began sending their daughters to join them (complete with generous dowry, much to the monks' delight). Soon, there were some eighteen nuns living in their own cramped quarters at the monastery of Disibodenberg, hidden away on a remote hillside some half a day's journey from the great cathedral city of Mainz.

Not surprisingly, given all we know about Hildegard's later spirited activities, she found herself in charge, eventually becoming abbess. Soon, following the word of God, she decided to leave the monks, taking her girls with her, and their dowries too, and found her own establishment at nearby Bingen, strategically placed on the banks of the Rhine where that noble river meets the somewhat less glamorous Nahe.

The story of how she built her monastery on the Rupertsberg (just above Bingen), with plumbing and all twelfth-century mod cons, dressing her nuns in white robes with long flowing hair and coronets, is one of the most fascinating sagas of the Middle Ages. Fortunately, her life is well documented. She was efficient, awkward, financially canny, and relentlessly litigious when it came to disentangling herself from the pedantic thrall of the monks. She was also, by all accounts, neurotic, probably a migraine sufferer who was chronically and mysteriously ill, and a profoundly holy woman.

She rapidly became something of a celebrity, heralded as the Sybil of the Rhine, though others, inevitably, dismissed her as a dangerous crackpot. She lectured and hectored, tirelessly, in sermons and letters to her fellow churchmen and women, to emperors, bishops, kings, popes. Her potent, almost lurid, visions, written down by her faithful (male) secretary Volmar, belong to the annals of Christian mystic literature. Illuminated manuscripts depicting her visions not necessarily done by her hand but under her influence, show how potent heaven and hell were to a medieval mind. When Hildegard of Bingen died, according to contemporary witnesses, a full moon shone and two arcs of brilliant light crossed the sky, as 'the holy virgin gave up her happy soul to God'. Who are we to question? Even in death, she had style.

Beyond all this, there was the music. We can never be sure she wrote it, only that it came from her monastery at the time she was there. Perhaps she sang it and someone else notated it. Yet her name has forever been associated with it and, ten centuries later, that's evidence enough. Composers, especially in our own times, have long found inspiration in her music, in its purity and its originality. None has had so ambitious a concept as James Wood.

FIONA MADDOCKS

Fiona Maddocks is the author of *Hildegard of Bingen* (Headline/Doubleday, 2001) available through [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)