Hildegard von Bingen
Two Responsories

Hildegard von Bingen’s cycle of chants for the Divine Office, her *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (Symphony of the harmony of heavenly revelation), contains eighteen long and melodically very elaborate pieces. In the Gregorian chant tradition, pieces with extensive melodic elaboration are known as *prolix* chants. Their melismatic style is reserved for the responsories of *Matins* and *Vespers*, the morning and evening services of the *Divine Office*, respectively. While owing to this tradition, Hildegard’s own responsories introduce a degree of melismatic elaboration and freedom of melodic impetus quite external to the more restrained esthetic of Gregorian Chant. As with all of her Symphonia songs, the two pieces presented here will have issued from the composer’s desire to adorn the liturgical office hours for which her community of Benedictine nuns gathered throughout the day and night, and to do so in the highly artistic manner the abbess brought to all communal celebration to which she added her own *tropes*.

Musically, Hildegard’s responsories represent her most lofty inventions, poetically elaborating on fundamental biblical topics, exploring an exalted, ornate musical style that relied on the vocal range and agility of well-trained singers, and inspiring intense devotion. Her purpose in adding her own chants to the traditional office hours, we may assume, was to share her private experience of the divine which inspired all her poetry and song, as well as to heighten her companions’ experience of spiritual reality thorough the singing in unison of what has recently been termed a “music of ecstasy.”¹

The eight daily services of the Divine Office are composed of psalms and canticles sung with antiphons, lessons read followed by responsories, as well as hymns, versicles, and prayers. The arrangement of these liturgical items followed a fixed pattern determined by the time of day and the season within the Liturgical Year, and for convents such as Hildegard’s was regulated by the monastic *cursus* proclaimed in the Rule of St. Benedict (c. 530)². Anchoring her chants firmly in this tradition which Hildegard sought to enrich with her own music, she adheres to the age-old form of responding in a musical postlude to the reading of the lesson during *Matins* and *Vespers*.

Each responsory starts with a soloist intoning the first part of the chant, after which the choir joins in. This section is the responsorial part of the chant, and is labeled R in the manuscripts.³ Then the soloist sings a single verse, labeled V, followed by the choir repeating the last section of the responsorial part, the *repetendum*. Next comes the doxology (Gloria Patri), and last the chant returns for a second time to the *repetendum*. Traditionally, both the verse and the doxology were sung to one of the eight reciting tones, i.e., the standardized melodic formulae that facilitated recitation of liturgical texts throughout the Middle Ages. Thus, most responsories in the Gregorian repertoire were composed by way of adapting the different clauses of a liturgical text of different well-defined but plastic and adaptable musical stock phrases (*centos*).⁴ Freely composed responsories were very rare, and Hildegard’s pieces stand out in this respect although her style of composition also relies to some degree on the artistic gathering of her own stock melodic turns of phrase in a colorful musical palette, a style not unlike *centonate* chant but infinitely more differentiated and imaginative.

In *Vos flores rosarum* Hildegard honors the martyrs “who surge in the wounds of their blood” as a blessed instrument for the Church, and in *O clarissima mater* she praises the Blessed Virgin Mary as the “mother of sacred healing.” The composer sets both texts in neumatic fashion, with groups of three to five notes for all syllables. But in each setting she also includes several long melismas, groups of up to fifty-six notes that draw out a single syllable of a given word in the poem.⁶
Vos flores rosarum has an unusually low ambitus, ranging from gamma us to d' -- an octave lower than most other pieces in the Symphonia. This suggests that the pieces may have been intended for the monks of the Disibodenberg cloister which Hildegard had left with her nuns when she established her convent at Rupertsberg. The text presents vivid images of rose blossoms symbolizing the martyrs, and modulates from the blood they have shed to the bliss that martyrdom entails for the Church. The piece begins with a fourteen-note melisma on Vos which sets the tone of a very ornate chant. Melismas of similar length (fourteen to seventeen notes) follow in close succession, each separated from the next by only three or four neumes. This makes for a highly embellished musical fabric throughout. But with the forty-three-note melisma on vos in phrase 3b, the piece reaches a climax as this melisma is the longest and covers the largest range of them all, filling out nearly the entire tone space of the responsory as a whole in one swooping melodic gesture.

Considering the relationship between words and melody, one might be puzzled by this extended turn of phrase on vos, a word devoid of affect or imagery, instead of perhaps rosarum which seems to call for adornment. But again honoring tradition, Hildegard emphasizes syntactic over semantic structure so that her melodies are less directly conditioned by meaning or affect of individual works as by syntactic or architectural formal considerations than they are in later periods of music history. Yet, the tone of her music matches that of the text because both display similarly pervasive elaboration.

O clarissima mater celebrates the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is the healer who restores humankind, the life-affirming mother whose nurturing provides joy, and the star of the sea whose light outshines the darkness even of death. In this song, the whole universe rejoices in Mary's splendor and virtue because she rescued it from corruption and decay and restored it to its original pristine state. Each image is traditional and can be traced to biblical or liturgical sources. The exalted tone resides perhaps in their conflation into a dense web of layers of meaning that is so typical of Hildegard's associative poetic style. Once again, the music matches the poem's celebratory tone, and even heightens it by its own ornateness. Unlike Vos flores rosarum, this chant reaches the extremes of its tone space several times. The melody goes beyond the syntactic matching of music with text, and in its contours reflects the poem's visual images which range from “the abyss to the stars.” Long melismas frame and punctuate the neumatic declamation. Infudisti has twenty-seven notes, edificando twenty-four, but maris has fifty-six! On this last word, the voice soars repeatedly to d’, rising in undulating waves, then falling to G, only to surge up again. By way of this melodic elaboration, the repetendum becomes the climax. Again, a listener familiar with word-painting might expect the longest melisma on stella, not maris. Instead, Hildegard saves the climactic moment to the end of the repetendum phrase, motivated perhaps by architectural choices. Placed there, this marvelous melodic surge lends an ecstatic close to each of the three sections of the responsory.

In both Vos flores rosarum and O clarissima mater, the music dramatizes the rhetorical quality of the text, not only intensifying its affect and aiding intelligibility of meaning, but ultimately drawing the faithful through words and song toward a spiritual experience which for Hildegard represents the most direct path to supreme joy. As she states elsewhere, “Eve conceived all weeping in pain; but in Mary joy resounded with the music of the lyre, with the harmony of song.”

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