

Introduction: *O virga ac diadema* – historiography of a song

The first time I came across the name of the twelfth-century visionary and composer Hildegard of Bingen, I assumed that she was a twentieth-century composer writing in the style of medieval chant. It was an easy mistake to make. It was 1991. I had read her name on the back of a cassette tape, and space was so limited on the liner that little information was included. As well, of all of the music I had studied in the Bachelor of Music degree that I had just completed, only a single work had been composed by a female (and living) composer; the idea that a woman might have composed music in the Middle Ages was unimaginable to me.

It would be another six months before I realized my error, and on further investigation I was astonished by how much had already been written about this composer I had just “discovered.” Most of the English-language literature on Hildegard, however, appeared in either New Age publications or in collections devoted to women’s history in some way. (One of my professors warned me, in fact, that Hildegard might be “too trendy” to choose as a thesis topic.) While seemingly rather unrelated, New Age writers and feminist scholars from the 1970s and 1980s did have something in common: they both sought to overthrow the ruling order, the hierarchy of organized religion and the constraints of monotheism for New Agers, and a patriarchal and evolutionary view of the world for feminist scholars. Both groups also looked to the past, seeking historical precedents for their current causes. Hildegard, who, as both groups emphasized, criticized the religious and political leaders of her day, and who was a prolific writer at a time when women generally were not, suited their purposes well.

This association of Hildegard with New Ageism and with feminism, however, gave rise to a certain skepticism surrounding Hildegard scholarship, manifested in print in Richard Witts’ scathing (and problematic) *Early Music* article, “How to Make a Saint.”¹ The disgruntled Witts claimed that the scholarly groundwork needed to establish even Hildegard’s very authorship had not been done, and complained that the Hildegard revival was more

¹ Richard Witts, “How to Make a Saint: On Interpreting Hildegard of Bingen,” *Early Music* 26/3 (1998): 479–485.

about hype than substance. I have heard similar reactions to Hildegard and her revival expressed anecdotally and in subtler terms. In the late 1990s, for example, when I presented a paper about recordings of Hildegard’s music, the session chair admitted that her organization “always gets nervous when we receive Hildegard proposals.” A few years later, a chant scholar told me that he “stays away from Hildegard,” and one of my colleagues in a medieval and early modern reading group announced that she “of course had no interest in reading the Hildegard chapter” in the collection of essays we had read for that week. More recently, a member of a program committee confided that “When the program committee read through the abstracts I remember some of us groaning about yet another Hildegard paper.” It is as though Hildegard has become too big for her breeches, and the more her popularity has increased, the more distasteful she has become to many scholars. Because Hildegard studies have become so ideologically charged, there is a suspicion of fandom, and its effect on a scholar’s ability to be objective.

Annette Kreuziger-Herr sums up the situation clearly:

In recent years Hildegard has been pushed to public attention, mainly as a medieval witness to modern ecological, esoteric or alternative trends, but also as the originator of an especially individual corpus of music ... In countless books her music is being described as the product of a highly original thinker, turning her into “our” woman in the twelfth century and presenting her as the missing link between the past and a politically correct view of Western music history.²

She continues later:

it is clear why most medievalists have been cautious about diving into Hildegard research. This highly ideological topic seems to be a minefield with little of substance to latch on to. The risks of being pushed, as a scholar, into “the esoteric corner” are high. And there has seemed to be little interest in filling in the gaps in our knowledge with fragments of truth about her historical presence.³

While the “esoteric corner” still exists, the status of our understanding of Hildegard historically has changed significantly in the last decade or two, with, among other things: a meticulous Latin edition and critical commentary of Hildegard’s letters (followed by English translations based on that edition); an excellent English translation of her visionary work, *Scivias*; an

² Annette Kreuziger-Herr, review of Hildegard von Bingen, *Lieder: Faksimile Riesencodex (Hs.2) der Hessischen Landesbibliothek Wiesbaden, fol. 466-481v*, ed. Lorenz Welker, commentary by Michael Klaper, *Elementa musicae 1* (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1998), *Plainsong and Medieval Music* 9/1 (2000): 59–62 (59).

³ *Ibid.*, 60.

exceptional English edition of biographical sources relating to Hildegard; an updated bibliography of scholarship on Hildegard; an up-to-date online discography; two books in German on Hildegard's music; a collection of in-depth essays that came out of the 1998 International Congress on Hildegard; a book that reviews historiographical sources on Hildegard; and an annotated catalogue of 363 manuscripts containing works attributed to Hildegard.⁴

When I began my research on Hildegard, it quickly became apparent to me that while the surge of English-language literature on Hildegard started in the 1970s and 1980s, literature in other languages on Hildegard went back much, much further, and had waves of proliferation over the centuries. This study really began with that observation, and with a curiosity born of it about who in the past was interested in Hildegard and what drew them to her. If, in the late twentieth century, New Agers were drawn to Hildegard as a spiritual renegade, a critic of the Church as well as visionary, artist, and healer, and feminists were drawn to her as a proto-feminist, powerful historical figure, and influential and prolific writer, how did earlier writers see her? What part of her output or her personality did they highlight or draw on? How were she and her work interpreted, before she was viewed as a feminist and a New Age icon?

The nineteenth century in particular is a compelling period in which to explore these questions about the reception history of Hildegard and her

⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, ed. Lieven van Acker, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 91–91A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991, 1993); Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard von Bingen*, 3 vols., trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994–2004); Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990); Anna Silvas, trans. and intro. *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, Brepols Medieval Women Series (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Marc-Aeilko Aris, Michael Embach, Werner Lauter, Irmgard Müller, Franz Staab, and Scholastica Steinle, OSB, eds., *Hildegard von Bingen: Internationale wissenschaftliche Bibliographie unter Verwendung der Hildegard-Bibliographie von Werner Lauter*, Quellen und Abhandlungen zur mittelrheinischen Kirchengeschichte 84 (Mainz: Gesellschaft für Mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte, 1998); Pierre-F. Roberge, “Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179): A Discography,” www.medieval.org/emfaq/composers/hildegard.html (accessed November 29, 2014); Marianne Richert Pfau and Stefan J. Morent, *Hildegard von Bingen: Der Klang des Himmels* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2005); Barbara Stühlmeyer, *Die Gesänge der Hildegard von Bingen: Eine musikologische, theologische und kulturhistorische Untersuchung* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2003); Alfred Haverkamp, ed., *Hildegard von Bingen in ihrem historischen Umfeld: Internationaler wissenschaftlicher Kongreß zum 900jährigen Jubiläum, 13.–19. September 1998, Bingen am Rhein* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2000); Michael Embach, *Die Schriften Hildegards von Bingen: Studien zu ihrer Überlieferung und Rezeption im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003); and Michael Embach and Martina Wallner, *Conspectus der Handschriften Hildegards von Bingen* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2013).

music. While my primary focus as a musicologist has been on Hildegard's status as a composer and on the reception and revival of her music in particular, I have necessarily ventured beyond just the musical realm into religious and political history. Just as the feminist and the New Age movements grew out of the counter-culture movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the increase in the veneration of Hildegard and the revival of her music grew out of the charged religious and political conflicts in Europe in the nineteenth century. As I will argue throughout this book, I see a clear trajectory from the Reich's decision to close Hildegard's remaining convent in Eibingen in 1803 through to the establishment of a new convent in her honor in 1904 as fundamentally linked to the increase of her veneration. As well, as I will describe in Chapter 2, it was a major local, religious event that occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century that marked the earliest modern (post-medieval) reference to the performance of any of Hildegard's music that I have found. The performance occurred at the end of a lengthy service in which Hildegard's newly and officially authenticated relics were moved to a new altar; the service was designed to celebrate Hildegard as a local saint, and to give her cult a new authority, and for Catholics in the region it held tremendous religious and political significance. As I will argue throughout the subsequent chapters in the book, after this well-attended event, Hildegard's music found a following amongst Catholic clerics, monks, and church musicians.

In the last few decades, scholars and popular writers have frequently described Hildegard's musical and literary output as once forgotten but now rediscovered. As I outline in Chapter 1, however, the veneration of Hildegard continued from the time of her death, and her writings resurfaced frequently in the centuries that followed. While evidence of the circulation of her music is sparser during the intervening period, the middle of the nineteenth century began its modern revival. As I maintain throughout this book, the motivations of the men involved in Hildegard's increased veneration and in the revival of her music were deeply rooted in the plainchant revival movement and the reform of Catholic musical practices, as well as in the related historical and contemporaneous political, religious, and national struggles in the German lands, from the Reformation through the Thirty Years' War to the *Kulturkampf* of the second half of the nineteenth century.

Revival and reception

This book addresses both the history of the revival of Hildegard's music, and the history of the reception of Hildegard and her music. While not

the same thing entirely, revival and reception are in this case inextricably related. Those who were involved in reviving Hildegard's music in the nineteenth century also provided commentary in a variety of media – letters, leaflets, booklets, musical editions as part of books and articles, and biographies – that give us insight into their social and cultural response to her music and to her as a historical figure. While Harry Haskell describes a revival as being a term applied to the production of a work “that has disappeared from the active repertory,” Jim Samson describes a reception study as something that “can light up the ideology concealed in the corners of music history.”⁵ In the specific cases presented in this book, my underlying goal is to uncover not only how Hildegard has been shaped by the political and cultural agendas of her revivalists, but also how our current view of Hildegard and her historical context has been shaped in turn by these earlier understandings of her.

It has been a common occurrence in the production of music over the last two centuries for the work of a certain neglected composer or school to be revived. As Thomas Kelly contextualizes in his book on early music, “An interest in the music of the past has been characteristic of a part of the musical world since the early nineteenth century – from about the time of the rise of museums.”⁶ Bach was famously revived by Mendelssohn in the nineteenth century, and Mahler by Bernstein and other conductors in the twentieth. Once revived, the “restored” repertory often becomes assimilated in the western musical canon. It is only recently that we have begun to consider the context of the revivals themselves and investigate the motivations of the individuals behind them; some of the chief aims of the “New Musicology” have been to address this aspect of canon formation and to question the centrality of certain repertories, both by broadening the canon to include other repertories and by addressing the cultural contexts in which music of the past has been created.⁷

Music revivals – the restoration of previously unknown or little-known musical repertories – are usually instigated by individuals or groups with

⁵ Harry Haskell, “Revival,” *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O007633 (accessed December 10, 2014); and Jim Samson, “Reception,” *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40600 (accessed December 10, 2014).

⁶ Thomas Forrest Kelly, *Early Music: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

⁷ See, for example, two recent and important volumes about the revival of medieval music: John Haines, *Eight Centuries of Troubadours and Trouvères: The Changing Identity of Medieval Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, *The Modern Invention of Medieval Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

specific cultural or political agendas. As Tamara Livingston suggests, revivals can play an important role in the formation and maintenance of identity, particularly for groups who are in some way marginalized.⁸ She maintains that revivalists “position themselves in opposition to the contemporary cultural mainstream, align themselves with a particular historical lineage, and offer a cultural alternative in which legitimacy is grounded in claims of authenticity and historical fidelity.”⁹ Throughout this book I will examine how different individuals and groups have appropriated Hildegard and worked towards her musical revival, and in so doing will shed light on the ideology underpinning their representations of Hildegard. As I illuminate in Chapter 2, for example, a series of parish priests in the village of Eibingen, who had lived through the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars in which the land directly across from them on the Rhine was appropriated by the French and Hildegard’s convent in their own village was closed by the state, clung to her as a local saint, working towards an increase in her veneration by their parishioners. In contrast, as I detail in Chapter 4, the author of what became the standard “life and works” of Hildegard, published in 1879 at the height of the *Kulturkampf* and just as the new Empire came into being, presented Hildegard as an “ornament of the Fatherland,” a hero for all Germans.

In musicology, the Hildegard revival is in a sense complete. Her music achieved canonic status when she became a featured composer in the 1996 edition of the most widely used undergraduate music history textbook in Canada and the USA, Grout and Palisca’s *A History of Western Music*.¹⁰ Hildegard scholar Sabina Flanagan similarly describes the mainstreaming of Hildegard scholarship in the foreword of a 1998 book. Making reference to a “second wave” of scholarship and the “secularization” of Hildegard studies, Flanagan’s language not only points to the shift in anglophone scholarship from the revival mode to the mainstream mode, but also points to the difference between the late-nineteenth-century view of Hildegard as a religious icon, and the late-twentieth-century view of her as a feminist and New Age icon.¹¹ In the earlier German revival of Hildegard more generally, that shift from being revived to becoming mainstream emerged in about 1930. It was then that studies of her work started skipping the preliminaries

⁸ Tamara E. Livingston, “Revivals,” in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Vol. III: *The United States and Canada* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2001), 55–59 (55).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Donald Jay Grout and Claude Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 5th edn. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

¹¹ Sabina Flanagan, “Preface,” in *Hildegard of Bingen: A Book of Essays*, ed. Maud Burnett McInerney (New York: Garland, 1998), xiii–xv.

of introducing her or talking about her life story, instead moving directly into interpretation, a sure sign of canonic status. (No scholar begins an essay on Beethoven's music with accounts of his birth, his childhood, and his education.)

Having explored the more recent revival of Hildegard's music in a pair of articles, my focus in this book is on the nineteenth century to consider how revivalists can represent the same figure and the same music in very different ways in order to support their individual cultural or political agendas.¹² Perhaps the most obvious but important difference between the two revivals is that the first was propelled through print, and the second through the medium of the audio recording. My first encounter with the music of Hildegard was typical for the late twentieth century: I heard it on a cassette. As I (and others) have described in greater detail elsewhere, the variety in approach to the performance of Hildegard's music is astonishing in its breadth. Recordings range from several different styles of New Age music (from synthesizers to clarinet solos to Tibetan singing bowl accompaniment), to Celtic, to World Music renderings by a folk-rock group, to early music recordings with and without instruments, to groups of monks and groups of nuns, to classically trained soloists, and to choral arrangements. Some singers place the music in the upper registers, and some do not. Some use plodding rhythms; and others interpret the music in a metric way; or in fluid, animated, and rapid rhythmic runs. The style of musical presentation itself, as I will elucidate, can shape the image of who Hildegard was for anyone listening.

It would be easy to dismiss some of these interpretations as unimportant or uninteresting or even superficial. For many scholars and classical musicians, for example, New Age philosophy, writing, and music in particular are a niche part of popular culture best ignored. Yet, the New Age industry has done much to propagate Hildegard's name in the last few decades,

¹² See Jennifer Bain, "Hildegard on 34th Street: Chant in the Marketplace," *Echo: A Music-Centered Journal* 6/1 (2004), www.echo.ucla.edu/Volume6-issue1/bain/bain1.html (accessed December 2, 2014); and Jennifer Bain, "Hooked on Ecstasy: Performance 'Practice' and the Reception of the Music of Hildegard of Bingen," in *The Sounds and Sights of Performance in Medieval and Renaissance Music: Essays in Honour of Timothy J. McGee*, ed. Brian Power and Maureen Epp (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 253–273. Richard Witts, of course, also examines the recent Hildegard revival in "How to Make a Saint," and there are numerous references to her revival in newspaper reviews and articles, and on various blogs. Two other recent in-depth studies of the phenomenon include Laura Patterson, "The Late 20th-Century Commercial Revival of Hildegard of Bingen," M.A. thesis (Washington University in St. Louis, 2010); and Daniel DiCenso, "Hildegard on Trial: A Note Regarding the Narrow Reception of a Medieval Abbess-Composer," *Marginalia* 5 (2007), www.marginalia.co.uk (accessed December 2, 2012).

and has been incredibly influential in the reception of Hildegard in the twentieth century. The first two English translations of her visionary writings were published by a New Age press, and they have circulated widely.¹³ Matthew Fox, a leading New Age author, has done much and continues to do much to spread Hildegard's name. As recently as 2012 he published another book about Hildegard, and appeared in a documentary about her prophecies on the Vision Network in the USA.¹⁴ It is important to assess the underlying ideologies of this New Age appropriation of Hildegard, and it is impossible to talk about the recent revival without thinking of the New Age influence.

To put in perspective the comparison of the more recent anglophone revival with its earlier German counterpart, I will proceed in this introduction with an overview of the revival of Hildegard's music refracted through a historiography of one specific chant, *O virga ac diadema*.¹⁵ While Honey Meconi in her recent study of this sequence focuses on editorial styles of the myriad editions of the chant, I focus here instead on the cultural and historical significance of each iteration, and will trace the story of this sequence from the inaugural, modern performance of any of Hildegard's music in 1857 in the village church in Eibingen, to its recording by New Age artist Richard Souther in his 1994 *Vision* release.¹⁶ In the telling of the story of *O virga ac diadema*, I will spend some time dealing with a few recordings and investigating the relationship between Hildegard and New Ageism. I consider why this sequence out of all of Hildegard's music was selected for the first performance in 1857, and examine the continued popularity of both the sequence and the story that became attached to it over the following 150 years.

¹³ Hildegard of Bingen, *Hildegard of Bingen's "Scivias,"* trans. Bruce Hozeski (Santa Fe: Bear, 1986); and *Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs* (Santa Fe: Bear, 1987).

¹⁴ Matthew Fox, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Saint for Our Times. Unleashing Her Power in the 21st Century* (Vancouver: Namaste Publishing, 2012); and Ruby Tree TV, *I Prophecy. Hildegard: Mystic of the Rhine* (broadcast on the Vision Network, November 28, 2012).

¹⁵ I presented a version of the earlier history of the reception of this chant at the American Musicological Society in November 2009 in Philadelphia, and of the more recent New Age history of the chant at the International Congress of Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo in May 2013.

¹⁶ Honey Meconi, "The Unknown Hildegard: Editing, Performance, and Reception (An *Ordo virtutum* in Five Acts)," in *Music in Print and Beyond: Hildegard von Bingen to The Beatles*, ed. Craig A. Monson and Roberta Montemorra Marvin (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 258–305. See also Peter Jost, "Zu den Editionen der Gesänge Hildegards von Bingen," in *Mittelalter und Mittelalterrezeption: Festschrift für Wolf Frobenius*, ed. Herbert Schneider (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2005), 22–53.

O virga ac diadema

Richard Souther's *Vision* CD, a New Age recording of Hildegard's music, contains seventeen tracks – arrangements of her chant – using singers, electronic sampling, and Souther playing a synthesizer. David Foil's liner notes relate a story about one of Hildegard's seven sequences, *O virga ac diadema*, beginning with a description of the atmospheric session in which the team recorded it:

The wind howled outside the stone walls of St. Andrew's Church in Toddington, England, and the minimal electrical lighting inside had taken the edge off the gothic atmosphere. People were tired. It was 12:30 a.m., on the back end of a long recording session for *Vision: The Music of Hildegard von Bingen*. An adjustment was called for. Maybe the singers who were recording Hildegard's "Praise for the Mother" (*O Virga Ac Diadema*) might try speaking or chanting the text before the next take. And why not move everything down to [the] crypt – beneath the chapel and pitch-black at this late hour – for the experiment? The acoustic there has the reverberant energy that heightens the impact of speaking or singing, and it seized the senses the moment the chanting began. When it ended and the sound faded finally into an electric silence; no one moved or spoke. Something had happened. Something touched them. And they could not release the moment that had, somehow, changed them and their work in this dark and brooding place.¹⁷

Foil goes on to attribute their heightened sensory experience to a story about Hildegard, suggesting obliquely that Hildegard's spirit may have been present that night:

Only later, in the course of research, would producer Tony McAnany learn something that no one knew that night. Not long after Hildegard's death in 1179, Church inquisitors traveled to the abbey at Bingen along Germany's Rhine River, to investigate a petition for her canonization. Three nuns in her order testified that they saw the spirit of Hildegard moving through the cloister late at night. She was radiant, they recalled, and she was chanting. They even remembered what she was chanting, for it was one of her finest creative efforts – "Praise for the Mother" (*O Virga Ac Diadema*).¹⁸

Although exaggerated in McAnany's version, the original account of the early history of *O virga ac diadema* found in the 1233 *Acta inquisitionis de virtutibus et miraculis S. Hildegardis* is one that has appealed to many modern Hildegard biographers.

¹⁷ David Foil, liner notes to *Vision: The Music of Hildegard von Bingen* (Angel Records, CDC 7243 5 5524621, 1994), 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

The *Acta inquisitionis* was completed in 1233, as Anna Silvas confirms, “as part of the diocesan enquiry undertaken with a view to Hildegard’s canonization.”¹⁹ As the opening lines of the document indicate, the three canons at Mainz Cathedral who authored it (Gerbodo, Walter, and Arnold) did so at the request of Pope Gregory IX. In 1228 Pope Gregory had ordered an investigation to take place concerning the virtues and miracles of Hildegard in response to a request he had received from the abbess and nuns at Hildegard’s Rupertsberg monastery to canonize Hildegard.²⁰ The *Acta inquisitionis* documents the investigation undertaken by the canons and includes numerous colorful stories about Hildegard and the miracles she had wrought in the years following her death. (My favorite of these claims is the story that the Lord Archbishop had to order Hildegard in her tomb to stop her miracle-working because it was proving disruptive to “the monastic life and divine office.”)²¹ But the story to which Tony McAnany referred is not quite as fantastic as David Foil relates. Gerbodo, Walter, and Arnold – “Church inquisitors” as described in the liner notes – interviewed priests, nuns, lay sisters, and local people in their investigation. One lay sister, Hedwig of Alzey, who was already at Rupertsberg during Hildegard’s lifetime some fifty years earlier, recalls that (the living) Hildegard “would walk about the monastery singing that sequence inspired by the Holy Spirit which begins: ‘O virga ac diadema.’”²² Two nuns, the cellarer and the guardian, confirmed the lay sister Hedwig’s statement.²³ That is the story. While less spectacular than a story of Hildegard’s radiant spirit chanting in the cloisters, the original account is certainly fascinating, particularly as the only reference to a specific chant of Hildegard’s in the document, and as a reference to Hildegard singing her own music as she walked about. But Foil’s version of the story in the liner notes and the meaning he attaches to it are worth examining further for what they tell us about a New Age representation of Hildegard.

New Age proponents advocate a holistic approach to life, often embracing alternative medical practices and a spiritual life that exists beyond the boundaries of contemporary organized religion, but drawing, nevertheless,

¹⁹ Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard*, 253.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 228–229. ²¹ *Ibid.*, 269.

²² Latin edition in Hildegard of Bingen, *Sanctae Hildegardis Abbatissae opera omnia*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 197 (Paris: Migne, 1855), 133c; and in Petrus Bruder, ed., *Acta inquisitionis de virtutibus et miraculis S. Hildegardis, magistrae sororum ord. S. Benedicti in Monte S. Ruperti iuxta Bingium ad Rhenum*, *Analecta Bollandiana* 2 (1883): 116–129. Silvas’ English translation is based on Bruder, and I include her translation here slightly modified (Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard*, 263).

²³ Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard*, 263.