

Hildegard of Bingen was born in 1098, and whilst still a child she joined the monastery in Disibodenberg to live in seclusion until she was forty-three. By her own account, she had visions and auditions (in which she heard music) from the age of three. Then she decided to go out into the world, establish her own monastery and appear in public as a visionary. By the time she died in 1179 she had published books on a great variety of subjects, had 77 songs and the sacred drama *Ordo virtutum* notated, preached in public and actively corresponded with leading personalities of her time. Much, perhaps too much, has been written about Hildegard in the last three decades. Being musicians and performers of her works, we would sometimes be happier to be as unlearned as Hildegard, who described herself as *indocta*.

I therefore merely add a few personal notes about my involvement with the musical legacy of the visionary who has been made a saint. Even at the beginning of my involvement with early music, the mysterious uniqueness of Hildegard's songs made them stand out from those of her contemporaries. Neither precursor nor resultant works exist, let alone a "Hildegard school". This music seems to have appeared out of the blue and then disappeared again. We performed a few songs with the Estampie ensemble in our programme and on CD in the 1980s, but they seem to militate against being coupled with other medieval music. My respect and a certain awe of the singularity and formal unity of Hildegard's oeuvre (Hildegard's songs are unmistakable) caused me in the ensuing years to limit my approach to her to adaptations and alienations. We then set about two large projects: a partly modernized version of the *Ordo virtutum* with dancers, chorus, chamber orchestra and our Estampie ensemble was premiered at the Abbey of St Hildegard in Eibingen in 1991, while the dance performance *Materia Mystica* was premiered in Munich in 1998 and recorded on CD. The latter project was an attempt to confront Hildegard's philosophy of nature with modern science.

The formation of the VocaMe ensemble in 2008 changed the situation once again. Recording a CD of ninth-century songs by the Byzantine composer Kassia returned our attention to the subject of medieval women composers. I again studied Hildegard's works and the literature on her and this time was particularly struck by the incredibly inspired and inspiring power of the melodies, irrespective of whether and to what extent Hildegard herself had actually written them. After all, is experiencing melodies directly by "audition" any different from what we today call being "inspired" (which literally means "breathed into")? We in the ensemble saw our recording in that way.



Without meaning to compare ourselves with the great Hildegard, we wanted the recording itself to be a source of inspiration and creativity. And it was intended to convey, in addition to the genius of the original tradition, a small portion of our individual involvement with the work – in the form of a new sound. The road that finally led to this recording has been long and rich in experience and artistically informative and satisfying. I hope that we have succeeded in opening your heart and spirit for these experiences and – more important – for the inspiration, creativity and spirituality of Hildegard's music.

-Michael Popp