

THEORY INTO PRACTICE

# A Contemporary Artist

APPROACHES A REPERTOIRE  
FROM THE XII CENTURY

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## Abstract

When I became a student of the M A in Ritual Chant and Song at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance (2015-2016) I did not have any previous formal music education or any academic Gregorian chant background. Therefore, I offer here a description of the experience that reveals the moments when I started to embody and recognize through practice the basic modal elements of western chant. The paper begins with a literature review that informs the reader about Hildegard von Bingen's life, her theology of music and her cycle of songs, *Symphonia armonie celestium revelatorium*. Then, I depict the auto ethnographic exploration of understanding theory through practice and, finally, I present my conclusions.

**Keywords:** Auto ethnography, practice-based research, Hildegard Von Bingen, lchant

## Teoría puesta en práctica. Una artista contemporánea indaga en un repertorio del siglo XII

### Resumen

Sin haber cursado estudios formales de música y sin ninguna formación académica en canto gregoriano, entré a estudiar una Maestría en Canto y Canción Ritual en la Academia Irlandesa de Música y Danza (2015-2016). Por consiguiente, en este artículo ofrezco una descripción de la manera en que empecé a encarnar y reconocer a través de la práctica los elementos básicos del repertorio de canto occidental. El artículo empieza con una revisión de literatura en la que se informa al lector sobre la vida de Hildegarda de Bingen, su teología musical y su ciclo de canciones *Symphonia armonie celestium revelatorium*. A continuación, represento la autoexploración etnográfica de la teoría de la comprensión a través de la práctica y, finalmente, se presentarán las conclusiones.

**Palabras clave:** auto etnografía; investigación basada en la práctica; Hildegarda de Bingen; canto

## Da teoria à prática. Um artista contemporâneo aborda um repertório do século XII

### Resumo

Quando comecei minha formação no Mestrado em Cantos e Canções Rituais na *Irish World Academy of Music and Dance* (2015-2016) não tinha formação musical formal prévia ou conhecimentos acadêmicos sobre o canto Gregoriano. Portanto, apresento aqui uma descrição da experiência que revela os momentos quando comecei a incorporar e reconhecer através da prática os elementos modais básicos do repertório do canto ocidental. O artigo começa com uma revisão da literatura que informa ao leitor sobre a vida de Hildegard von Bingen, sua teologia da música e seu ciclo de canções, *Symphonia armonie celestium revelatorium*. Em seguida, represento a exploração autoetnográfica através da prática e, finalmente, apresento as minhas conclusões.

**Palavras-chave:** autoetnografia; pesquisa baseada na prática; Hildegard von Bingen; canto.

## Introduction

It was the year 2013; I was part of the Ensemble for Vocal Exploration of the Andes (EEVA, for its initials in Spanish) of the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia. The director of the ensemble, Carolina Gamboa, gave each member of the group a copy of a modern transcription of Hildegard of Bingen's "O virtus sapientiae." She introduced Hildegard as a German Abbes from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a theologian, a visionary, a composer, a scientist, a writer. I remember finding different translations of the poem, the antiphon within the PDF file of the facsimile and realizing the importance of monk Volmar in her work. The medieval score was a beautiful image that I did not know how to read. Moreover, singing this chant with the ensemble made clear to me that Hildegard's work offered something dear to my heart: the fusion of acoustic and graphical images and the possibility to learn about how one author developed an interdisciplinary work.

During the year (2015–2016) I studied the MA in Ritual Chant and Song at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance. When I started this course, I did not have any previous formal music education or academic background in religious, western chant. Therefore, I must be stated that the practice described here started when exploring the following question: Could I give life to the words and music that I had briefly encountered, forgotten or indeed that I had never heard? In other words, How does an eclectic contemporary scribe-singer could attempt an exploration from scribbles, transcriptions and translations to the voice? Thus, this paper offers the description and analysis of an open exploration that stems from intuition. Long before writing this paper I choose Hildegard of Bingen's *Symphonia armonie celestium revelatorium* as a vehicle to get involved with a distant repertoire. Then, the problem was how to become familiar with the pneumatic notation of the manuscripts, to be able to transcribe it and sing it. Therefore, the second stage of my process was to write a literature review that informed me about the context of Hildegard's through. To sum up, this paper depicts the experience of a contemporary artist that merged theory into practice while exploring the above-mentioned question.

## Hildegard von Bingen's Biographical Overview

Hildegard von Bingen was born in 1098 to the noble family of Hildebert von Gut Bermersheim, in the diocese

of Mainz. Her parents "dedicated her to God as a tithe" (Guibert, as cited by Newman, 1989, p. 5), by giving the child to a religious woman named Jutta von Spanheim. The gesture was also intended to strengthen the relationship between their noble families. Jutta raised the girl under the rule of St. Benedict, teaching her how to read Latin and chant the Psalter, the centerpiece of monastic prayer, in an elementary way. It is possible that, during this period of time, Hildegard's education commenced "in the house of Lady Uda, a widow of Göllheim" (Newman, 1998, p. 5). However, what it is known as a fact is that Jutta and three girls (one of whom was Hildegard) received their monastic vows on November 1, 1112 from Otto, bishop of Bamberg. Therefore, officially joining the community near Disibodenberg, that was based on an ancient site that had been founded by an Irish hermit in the seventh century. This place had been abandoned for a time and was refunded in 1108 by monks. When the four girls moved into the building; it was being restored. (Newman, 1998, p. 1-5). By the year 1136 the small cluster had grown into the monastery and Jutta had passed away. Consequently, Volmar of St. Disibodenberg, the monk "who would become her lifelong friend, secretary and confidant," (Newman, 1998, p. 8) was the person entrusted with her further education.

After Jutta's death, the other nuns in the monastery elected Hildegard as their *magistra*. It is noteworthy that Hildegard would always refer to herself as an "uneducated" creature. On the grounds of being a woman, she did not have the facilities a young man of her vocation and status would receive, nor was she given a cathedral school education or the opportunity to "follow itinerant masters as a wandering scholar" (Newman, 1998, p. 6–7). Therefore, the mixture of her insecure command of Latin grammar with the fact that throughout her lifetime she cited divine revelations as her only source of wisdom; her declarations of being constantly afflicted by illnesses because she felt terrified of writing the divine command; are some of the reasons that gave her a voice as a prophet, as an author. Otherwise, her work would have been unthinkable during the twelfth century (Newman, 1998, p. 6–7).

In 1141, she experienced the divine call that commanded her to "tell and write what she saw and heard in her visions" (Newman 1998, p. 3) She called the gift of *visio* "the reflection of the living light," (Hildegard, as cited by Newman 1989, p. 7) a divine voice that addressed her in Latin and dictated the complex liturgical weave of symbolic

forms that are evident in her visions, writings and music (Caviness in Newman 1989, p. 115).

Around 1147–1148, Pope Eugenius III recognized her as a visionary and as a prophet, by publicly reading an incomplete version of *Scivias* before a synod of bishops. (Newman, 1998, p. 11) As a response to the reading, Hildegard received a letter that gave her the Holy license to keep on writing and became a celebrity throughout Europe. The effect was that she received and answered floods of correspondence regarding God's advice. The letters came from "emperors, kings, queens, and popes through archbishops, abbesses and abbots, to nuns and monks, laywomen and laymen" (Ferrante in Newman, 1998, p. 92). Another effect was that the Monastery of Disibodenberg could not accommodate the numerous postulants it started to attract, and by 1148 she received a revelation from the Holy Spirit (Van Engen in Newman, 1998, p. 42), declaring that she must found a convent near Bingen on Mount St. Rupert (Newman, 1998, p. 12).

She moved to new convent sometime around 1150 and published *Scivias* in 1151. We know that, during the years she was finishing *Scivias*, she started to collect the cycle of songs titled *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations; the excerpts of her medical books: *Physica* (The Book of Simple Medicine, or Nine Books on the Subtleties of Different Kinds of Creatures) and *Causae et curae* (The Book of Compound Medicine or Causes and Cures. In 1158 she started writing *Liber vite meritorium* (The Book of life's Merits). From 1163 to 1173 she witnessed the composition of her *Liber divinorum operum* (Book of Divine Works). Around 1165, she also founded a daughter house for the Rupertsberg nuns in Eibingen. In the year 1173 she suffered a great loss with Volmar's death, and the *Book of Divine Works* came to a standstill. The priest Godfrey was then, to continue Volmar's duties and became her secretary until his death in 1176. It is important to note that "he took advantage of his office and started to begin composing the saint's Vita" (Newman, 1989, p. 14). In 1978 the monk Guilbert of Grebloux, "inspired by the correspondence with the seer (...) became her secretary (...) remaining in the convent until her death" (Newman, 1989, p.4). We owe to this monk the project of preserving all of her writings (except her medical works) in a single enormous volume, the so called *Riesenkodex*, or "giant book" of Wiesbaden. In 1178 an interdict was imposed on her community, for burying

an excommunicated man in the grounds of the monastery. This event motivated Hildegard to write a lengthy epistle (Strunk, 1998, p. 183-186) in defense of the importance of liturgical music, giving proof of her theology of music. Six months before her death the interdict was lifted. She died on September 17 of the year 1179. The veneration cult to the saint has survived to the present, and in October 7, 2012, she was named Doctor of the Church by Pope Benedict XVI.

### Her Theology of Music

Hildegard's role model was the legend of Gregory the Great (590–604). The pope, who was attributed with unifying the tradition of Gregorian chant, wrote the homilies on the Gospels, a pastoral rule; the man who had founded a *schola cantorum*, and had built two dwellings for it (Treiler, 2003, p.155). The monk that when writing his commentary on Ezequiel, was inspired by the dove (Holy Spirit) to record the melodies. Like Gregory, Hildegard's music and her words come from God and envisage a reformation of the church. Accordingly, Hildegard's claim to prophetic authority stands out in the *Book of Ezequiel* and his words permeate her work (Kienzle & Stevens, 2014, p. 137).

In the essay *Angels and Ideas- Hildegard's Musical Hermeneutic as Found in Scivias and Reflected in O splendida gemma*, professor Fassler points a path to gain a basic understanding of Hildegard's theology of Music. Hence, in the text she explains that virtues, angels and humans are the characters that resonate, and interrelate theologically and educationally within the *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations) and the play *Ordo Vitutum* (Play of the Virtues) (Fassler in Newman, 2008, p. 150) and in this way joining a common quest to inspire redemption (Fassler, 2015, p. 205).

Fassler (2015) differentiates two kinds of virtues by using the upper case (V) and the lower case (v). Virtues (with upper case V) are the third rank of angels that help humans "bring enlightenment of the creators will, and so help elect to fight against the Devil" (Fassler, 2008, p. 194). For example, if a person asks themselves whether or not there is a God, the doubt implies that the strength of God's will is still within themselves, and therefore the Holy Spirit can deliver an answer to that person. This answer can only be revealed through penitence, which is defined here as the action where a human being "becomes filled with humility"

(Fassler, 2015, p. 194). Now, virtues with lower case (v) alike Virtues bring enlightenment, they merge with their human counterparts and hereby create the post-incarnational theology of her music. (Fassler, 2015, p. 211). In other words, the main difference is that virtues are not angels or spirits, but they are sparks of light, divine ideas, and good deeds that need to be worked on because they "do not work in a person by themselves, for a person works with them and they work with the person" (Fassler cites Scivias, 1995, p. 198). Simply said, both virtues (ideas) and Virtues (angels) "cooperate" in this human restoration work.

To this end, Fassler (2015) explains that Hildegard's sacred songs are incarnational works of art and, like the birth of Christ, represent the space where humanity and divinity merge. Therefore, this music was created as the possibility for humans to enlighten and recover their place in heaven. For Hildegard, praise through chant is an act of theological importance, an incarnational act

according to celestial harmony through the holy spirit; for the body is in truth the clothing of the soul, which has a living voice, and thus it is fitting that the body, together with the soul, sing praises to god through its own voice. (Hildegard, as cited in Treiler, 1998, p. 185).

To sum up, the songs in one way or the other are like virtues—that is, divine ideas that can be worked in the human mind.

### *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum*

*Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum*<sup>1</sup> (Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations) is the biggest chant repertoire of the Middle Ages collected by an author (Fassler, 2017 Music in the Medieval West). The title of the compilation expresses Hildegard's belief that the harmonious order of the universe<sup>2</sup> could be revealed through song to humans. It is a medieval and classical idea of the universe ordered according "to number and proportion, and the reflection of this order in sound led to the dictum that to understand music is nothing other than to have knowledge of the ordering of the universe" (Pfau, 1990, p. 71). These chants intended for mass and the divine office at her monastery grew out of her visionary experience, revealed from the divine and happened to be the medium where soul and the body united. In different writings, Dronke, Newman, Richert Pfau and Fassler state that this compilation of music, like all of Hildegard's works, celebrate incarnation, the mystery of the divine becoming a man as the son of Mary. In the abbess's words, "thus the word designates the body, but music manifests the spirit. For the harmony of heaven proclaims the divinity of God's Son, and the word makes known his humanity"<sup>3</sup> (Hildegard as cited by Newman, 1998, p. 27).

### Theory into Practice

After about eight months of academic immersion into the immense amount of information that western plainchant offers, I took a workshop about Hildegard von Bingen. The fact that she is recognized composer, poet, a woman, made the difference to me. Her name was a concrete reference to study and sort out the historical context of chant. In other words, she became the

<sup>1</sup> "armonia is the key concept that designates both the celestial harmony she envisioned and longed for in eternity, and the earthly harmony between body and soul within the human being" (Pfau, 1990, p. 69).

<sup>2</sup> For further studies, see Strunk et al. (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Newman explains that when Hildegard used the term *harmony* she was appealing to a Pythagorean insight transmitted by Boethius: "The whole structure of the soul and body is united by musical harmony" (Newman, 1988-1998, p.19). However, her point of view seems more of a Neoplatonic nature, "matching the qualities of the sounds to the given material of the moral characters" (Plato, as cited by Strunk, 1965, p. 5.)

detonator for me to identify and learn the similarities and differences between her musical work and Gregorian chant.

Nevertheless, the process I followed commenced when observing the Dendermonde Codex (c. 1175) and the Riesenkodex (c. 1180–1190) with the sensibility of someone that once had made transcriptions from Old Spanish to modern Spanish. This means, that I knew that comparing the Gothic musical script with a modern transcription and the translations of the poems in a language I understood was a good exercise to continue my familiarization with Latin language while learning how to read the words when glimpsing at the codex. As a result, I did various readings and transcriptions of the translations of the poems offered by Barbara Newman's (1998) critical edition of the *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations). The objective of transcribing some of the poems into my computer was to read carefully the words in English in order to connect the meanings from Latin to English and learn by heart their meanings. Now, by superficially understanding the meanings of the poems, I had found selection criteria to choose through affinity the words, phrases and verses of the sacred songs I would sing. It is worth noting that I could not elect the passages by looking at the music because I am not able to sight read. Moreover, one of my objectives was to learn how to read the notation. Therefore, the possibility of hearing recordings in order to choose the pieces was not an option at this stage, the reason was that I wanted to discover the sound while learning how to read.

To recapitulate the first steps of my process, first, I organized a document with the digital images of the sacred songs of both the Dendermonde Codex 9. (c. 1175) and the Riesenkodex (c. 1180–1190) accompanied with the text in Latin and the English prose and verse translations offered in Von Bingen Hildegard S. & Newman B. (1998). Consequently, I chose to transcribe to modern notation precise songs, verses, lines or words of the chosen sacred songs to modern notation.

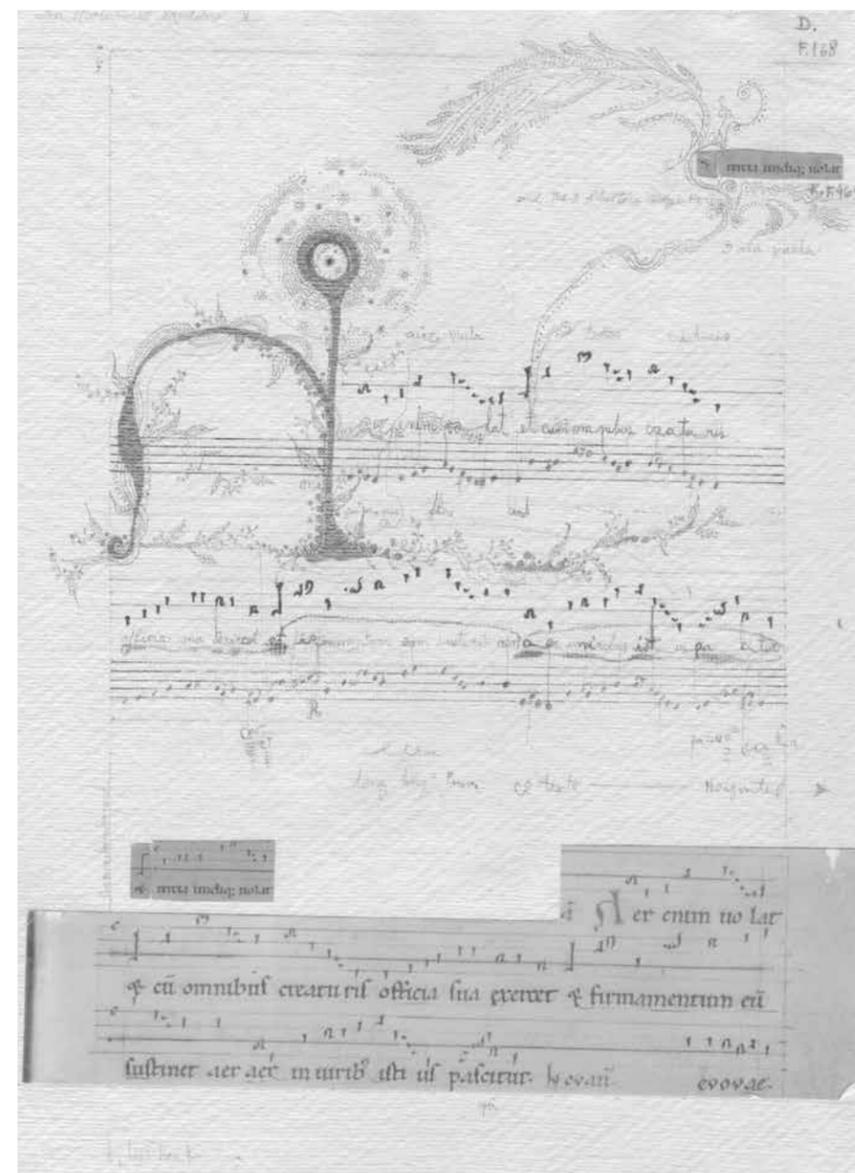
Somewhere in the process of learning a selection of the lines of the psalm antiphon *Aer enim volat* by heart, I found that in the precise moment when I was waking up I would be singing in my head "*Aer enim volat et tertia undique volat*"<sup>4</sup> (Figure 1). As I became conscious of the action, I realized that the musical text "*et tertia undique volat*" (Figure 2). was replacing the words "*et cum omnibus*." (Figure 3). In other words, I was mixing two different text lines from different antiphons. I was putting together a line of the song that I had been rehearsing the day before with a line that I had learned in the year 2013, when I was part of EEVA.

After revising the scores, I understood that both antiphons had an E as the final note. This means that antiphons *Aer enim volat* and *O virtus Sapientie* are both in the E mode. Moreover, if we observe the lines in question carefully, we find that both fragments share almost the same melody (Figure 4):

As you can see above, the elements encircled are identical in pitch and in pneumatic notation. Noteworthy, when referring to the word pitch, while studying medieval chant :

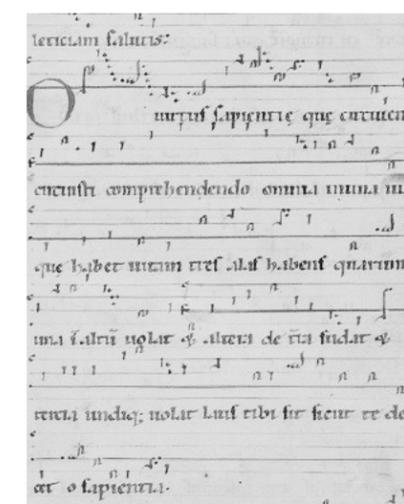
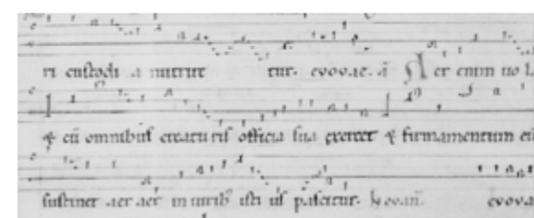
"We should remember that in this literature pitch is a relative concept, a matter of whole—and half-step relationships in modal formulas, rather than 'absolute' pitch or measurable frequencies, as is the case of contemporary music. So instead of saying D, meaning a particular sound or pitch class, we should say 'protus quality,' relating to maneriae (or pairs of scales) and mode (...) For sake of convenience, however, we will use the term pitch throughout our discussions" (Fassler, 2014, p. 3–4).

<sup>4</sup> "And the third flutters everywhere," from O virtus Sapientiae, votive antiphon for Divine Wisdom, translated by Newman (1998).

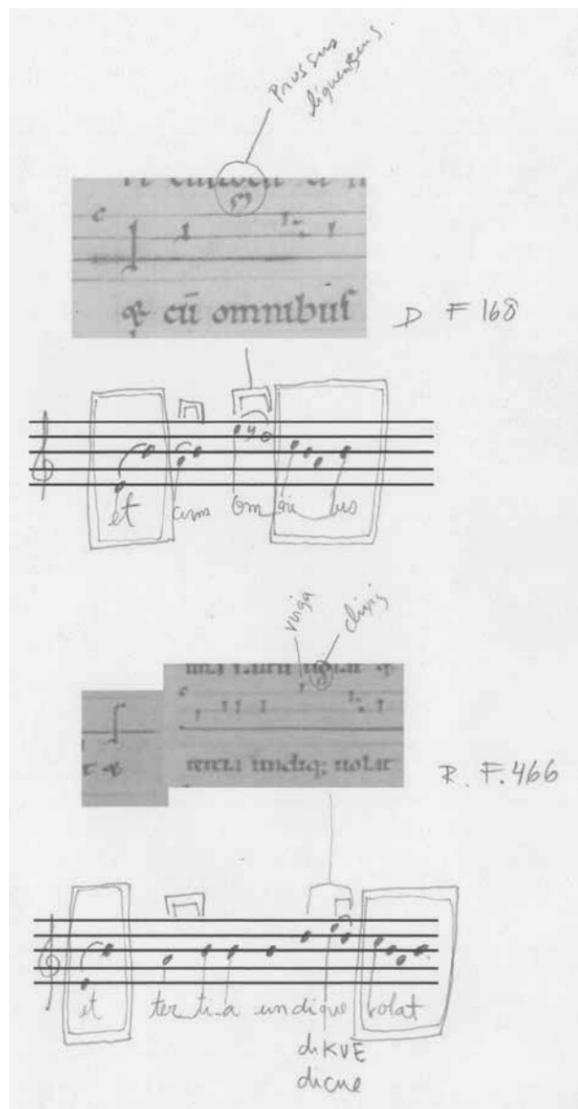


**Figure 1.** *Aer Enim Volat et tertia undique volat* Collage, 21cm x 29 cm, 2016  
Source: Own elaboration.

**Figure 2.** *Aer Enim Volat* D. Codex F168  
Source: Hildegard von Bingen



**Figure 3.** *O Virtus Sapientie*  
Source: Von Bingen Hildegard: *Dendermonde* (ca. 1174-75) F168 *Riesenkodex* Hs. 2 (1180-90) F 466



**Figure 4.** Musical Cell in the E mode. Transcription from Von Bingen Hildegard Codex F118. *Et cum omnibus* and Von Bingen Hildegard R. Codex F 466 *et tertia undique volat*  
Source: Own elaboration.

Therefore, the first two notes of both musical cells (Figure 4) correspond to the intonation, the characteristic fifth in Hildegard's pieces, "a pure and perfect interval for medieval ears" (Fassler, 2014, p. 4). Observe that the use of the identical signs was placed in the intonation and at the end of the line. The middle part of the musical text shares pitch notes A, B, D, and E. Moreover, the number of times each pitch is used and how they are represented through the pneumatic notation<sup>5</sup> varies. Therefore, the different use of the pneumatic signs points out that the rhythm or the expression is ingrained in the "performed reality of sound, either as poetry to be read out aloud or as song to be sung" (Pfau, 1998, p. 83).

To this end, the two variations of this written line helped me understand that I had started to embody the modal language. This fact might seem obvious or silly to a medieval musicologist, to a professional singer or a monk. Nonetheless, as my training came from outside tradition and I had decided to approach the repertoire experientially, first, and then informing the experience through scholarship, the collage, the cento was allowing me not only to understand the modes theoretically, but in my body. I was feeling them, hearing them in my inner ear; I was embodying them as a singer. A close examination reveals that the modes should be perceived as:

A collection of gestures, codes, and signs which can be interiorized, varied, combined and used as a font to create musical "texts" which can be completely new while possessing the authentic integrity of the original material. (Here, the word authentic—the dreaded A-word of early music—is not used in a historical sense, but in the sense of recognition: in a crowd of strangers and imposters you would always recognize an authentic member of your own family). (Bagby in McKinnon, J., & Treitler, L., 2005, p. 185).

Hence, as the neumes in both fragments differ, and I was singing a variation by replacing the text and maintaining the integrity of the mode, I had been able to perceive, hear, sing and recognize a grouping, an authentic musical cell in the E mode. Vocalist Barbara Thornton

<sup>5</sup> Regarding the neumatic notation and rhythm, Richert sustains that Hildegard's music matches the textual structure rather than the "medieval tradition in which the composition and analysis of melodies follows the segmentation of language, establishing a phrase hierarchy articulated by the counterparts of the commas, colons and periods" (Jhonson & Treiler, as cited by Pfau, 1998, p. 81), which could recall Cardine's Gregorian semiology.

explained that the melodic cells or types are the constructional elements of this musical language, "concretizations of archetypal forms within a tradition" (Thornton paraphrases Trailer, 1982, p. 13). She also defined the mode as an "arrangement of intervals within a sound-spectrum, the range within the tessitura of pitches, the position of the primary tone and its related tone-series, the handling of the analogy of a musical system functioning as a language" (Thornton paraphrases Trailer, 1982, p. 13). It is important to notice this, because it was the first time over the course of the year that I was starting to feel inter-textual correspondences of a mode, of a theme in a natural, unconscious manner. The words themselves thus correspond to the breath of life: air and the third wing and convey the information about note grouping while supporting my memory (Treitler, 2003, p. 139).

## Conclusions

While "Hildegard would have known each psalm text in several guises: each psalm was sung in its entirety in the office, framed by interpretive antiphon, and various psalm verses were employed in Mass and Office liturgies in accord with a feast and its themes" (Fassler, 2004, p. 219), I was embodying the medieval thought as someone from the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Feeling the modes and understanding the connection of the meaning of both words and music came randomly to me. It was the happy coincidence of having learned a song by heart years ago and unexpectedly studying another antiphon that had these precise characteristics. Therefore, it is clear that the traditional practice to acquire the sensation of the modes by following the order of the liturgical actions—for instance learning an antiphon first, then the psalm verses, and finally the doxology—was, at that time, and is still now, an idea, a way to proceed in a long term, in order for me to join the chant repertoire.

Nonetheless, while reflexing upon the fact that I am not interested in learning the order of the liturgical rite because I am not a religious person, I note that, after an intense year of imperfect timing, only through the order of the cento "Aer enim volat et tertia undique volat" had I started to feel the basic objective of intoned psalmody. In other words, I was embodying the theory by "feeling the purpose of the musical-textual (...) standard pedagogy of the middle ages (...) [That was] so much part of the culture that a chorister, canon, monk, or nun could sing the entire psalter using all nine tones as adapted in his or her local

practice" (Fassler, 2014, p. 20). Analogically speaking, the melody had found its way through the text and into me, — the text was delivering a message.

The message pointed out that I was to work under the theme of: the breath of life, the Holy Spirit, air and develop what I see in my inner thoughts and believe to be emerging naturally as my creative work: that is known in literature as a *cento*, what draftsmen refer to as a *collage* and what composers think of as *music centonation*. To sum up, this cento triggered the idea to compose a praise one can sing everywhere. This piece is in process and is titled "Vivificando formas."

Therefore, in order to develop the piece, I read Thornton's writings about her experience as an interpreter as advice,<sup>6</sup> and understood that it is indispensable to unravel the symbols in pursuance of familiarizing myself with Hildegard's thought, with all her written legacy. This thoughtful process has continued; for instance, I did a musical analysis of Hildegard's sequence for the Holy Spirit, "O ignis spiritus paracliti," and learned it by heart. The experience has helped me to understand Hildegard as a generative composer who takes musical cells and plays with them by contracting and expanding the material to unravel the melodies. In addition to this, I have been carefully identifying and transcribing musical cells in Symphonia to observe the links between music and words, the intertextuality, to see if I can perceive "the hierarchical and largely chronological image of the created universe, prefiguring in many respects her deepest cosmological perceptions" (Gaze in Newman, 1998, p. 134). Additionally to this, I have continued finding the synonyms of the words that relate with the Breath of life in order to develop my modal language and the song that I have envisaged. Finally I have and will continue reviewing literature, hearing recordings, and singing to enrich this project.

<sup>6</sup> This is the exercise that Thornton mentions, it helped me develop the exercise that I developed: "I compiled a lexicon of her words in their musical settings—in E mode all of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular verbs, all the proper nouns, all the gerundive phrases, etc. Likewise for D-mode, C-mode, etc. (...) I divided them into groups corresponding to the way she had divided up the cosmos: Heavenly, Infernal, Earthly, etc. Areas which had special interest for me—the natural world, the feminine world—seemed to have had special interest for her, for she took particular care in her tone settings of words of these genres. I discovered there was a place within this cosmos for every idea, and that every modal gesture contributed to this gigantic matrix of meaning and tone. One merely had to do know where to locate one's self at any given moment. If a rhetorical event is cast in the Heavenly, Earthly, or Infernal, one must be aware of its manner and usage; if a mode is being used in conjunction with or in conflict with its own nature, this knowledge will affect one's thinking and performance" (Thornton, as cited by Duffin, 2000, p. 286).

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