

Performance of “O Ignis Spiritus Paracliti” by Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179

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May 28, 2016
Middle Kingdom A&S Faire

“O ignis spiritus paracliti” is a liturgical sequence composed by Hildegard of Bingen somewhere between 1140 and 1160, during the period when she composed her “Symphonia et Ordo Virtutum”. It is a liturgical piece for use during the Feast of Pentecost. Born in 1098, Hildegard of Bingen was a German Benedictine abbess, writer, composer, philosopher and botanist. Over the course of her life Hildegard of Bingen wrote two major opus' in which were included seventy-seven works of music and original composition.

I will be performing this piece in liturgical Latin, as it was written and intended. In period, this piece would most often have been performed acapella by four to eight vocalists, members of the clergy or convent participating in the day's Liturgical celebration. As will all Benedictine chant, these works were written to be performed by the unsupported human voice, usually in a choir or by a single chanter depending on the needs of the service. Based on my research, historically this piece would have been performed in a monastery or church.

Gregorian chant is the central tradition of Western plainchant, a form of monophonic, unaccompanied sacred song of the western Roman Catholic Church. Gregorian chant developed mainly in western and central Europe during the 9th and 10th centuries, with later additions and redactions. Monophony is the simplest of musical textures, consisting of a melody, typically sung by a single singer or played by a single instrument player without accompanying harmony or chords.

Because this piece is religious in nature, and composed by a member of the Benedictine order, I am presenting myself as a sister of that same convent, wearing garb from an 12th century Benedictine Convent in Germany in the style of various illuminations and records of the saint in her life. I pulled from multiple icons, illuminations, and documents to obtain proper dress for this performance, and have attached photographs below.

My goal is to perform this piece with a clear and ringing sound. In every book and article I read regarding St. Hildegard's works she is referenced as writing vibrant pieces of music that are meant to bring joy to the soul by worship of the Divine. Unfortunately, as we did not have the ability to record musical performances during the 12th century, many scholars offer conjecture as to what the 'monophonic sound' truly is and what this hymn was intended to sound like. I have drawn my interpretation of the sound from two points. First, professional recordings of Medieval chant choirs such as the 'Venance Fortunat Ensemble' who also recorded this piece on their album *Chants de l'amour divin* and 'Sequentia' from their album *Canticles of Ecstasy*. Second, while researching monophonic chant in the western tradition, it became clear that it contained similarities in nature to the Byzantine chant of the Orthodox Church that I sing on a weekly basis within the liturgical services of my church. Therefore, I drew on 18 years of experience with singing Byzantine Chant to strive for a clear sound. I practiced this piece using proper diaphragm and breathe control as well as proper vowel and consonant pronunciation. I am basing

my knowledge of proper diaphragm and breathe control on over 6 years of professional vocal training, plus 14 years of professional singing.

Included with this documentation is a copy of a modernly transcribed sheet music of this piece which I used for practice. You will note the sheet music specifies the changes made from the extant piece found in the Riesencodex. Due to the lack of meter or notation on dynamics I have conjectured what the piece should sound like. It is possible the composer had a different intent. However, I have attempted to follow it as best as possible based on Hildegard von Bingen's writings and obvious love of her faith.

This particular piece comes across to me as a joyous ringing piece, heralding the great celebration that is to occur during the Feast of Pentecost. I do not speak or read Latin, however, a translation to the lyrics was easily obtained from an internet search, where multiple sources provide the same translation:

O fire of the Spirit and Defender,
the life of every life created:
Holy are you giving life to every form.

O breath of holiness,
O fire of love,
O taste so sweet within the breast,
that floods the heart with virtues' fragrant good.

O clearest fountain,
in which is seen the mirrored work of God:
to gather the estranged
and seek again the lost.

...

From you the clouds flow forth, the wind takes flight,
the stones their moisture hold,
the waters rivers spring,
and earth viridity exudes.

And so may you be praised, who are the sound of praise,
the joy of life, the hope and potent honor,
and the giver of the gifts of light.

When combined with the melody and flow of the music it comes across as not only joyous, but possessed of a deep fervor and intent. I hope to impart some of the liturgical weight to the inherent joy of the music.

SOURCES

- Ardis Butterfield (1997). "Monophonic song: questions of category", *Companion to Medieval & Renaissance Music*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-816540-4.
- *Canticles of Ecstasy*. Sequentia. Deutsche Harmonia Mundi, 1993.
- *Chants de l'amour divin*. Venance Fortunat Ensemble. L'empreinte digitale, 2002.
- *Book of Divine Works of Hildegard of Bingen*. Trans. by Priscilla Throop. Charlotte, VT: MedievalMS, 2009.
- IMSLP Petrucci Music Library. *Symphonia et Ordo virtutum*. Scanned by Hessiche Landesbibliothek, Wiesbaden, 10/01/2010.
- Manuscript, *Riesencodex* Hs.2, n.d.(ca.1175–1190)



Paintings of St. Hildegard of Bingen

Painting (Left) 1152, From the book Scivias by Hildegard of Bingen

Painting (Middle) 13th Century, Painter Unknown

Painting (Right) Mural of Hildegard from the Benedictine Abbey of St. Hildegard near Bingen

Below is an image of the full Riesencodex which is one of the largest collections of Hildegard von Bingen's works. O Ignis Spiritus Paracliti is included in this book, on page 473.



Image from German News Article 8/19/13. The article promoted a recent viewing of the Riesencodex. It was showcased in September 2013. It is housed at the "Hochschulund Landesbibliothek RheinMain"

http://www.nwzonline.de/kultur/selbst-bombardierung-dresdens-heil-ueberstanden_a_8.3.293665739.html