Hildegard abstract

Using Ellie Hisama's theory of secondary narratives in her work on Ruth Crawford Seeger, this paper explores the mysticism and art of the 12th century Benedictine Abbess, Hildegard of Bingen. It examines the ways in which Hildegard was able to attain positions of authority and the ways in which that authority allowed her to encode secondary meanings of feminine strength into her work. At an unconscious level she inserted femaleness into the dominant discourse and, at a conscious level, she actively altered meaning. The paper focuses on secondary narrative as recorded artistically, through poetry, and music (Ordo Virtutum). Because Hildegard claimed that she had not been taught composition, and that her compositions came directly from God, she was free to express herself in opposition to the dictates of the Cistercian Reforms.

The expansion of range that Hildegard utilized in writing for her nuns celebrates the feminine by unabashedly leaping headlong into these “effeminate” ranges, and by allowing women to explore the fullness of their voices in all their tonal varieties. women’s sexual organs were akin to strings that required strumming in the correct way so as to create the openness that for Hildegard, reflected female nature, and which she in turn reflected in her music. Because they stand for the 16 Virtues, and Jesus embodies all of these virtues, Hildegard also inscribes femininity into the body of Christ. For Hildegard, compartmentalization of ideas was unnatural, and so her thoughts about music were rich with thoughts about health; her visions contained elements of music and in her music she frequently depicted her visions. This dual-gendered depiction of the Church re-inscribes womanly power into the very construction of Christianity and subversively feminizes Christ’s body.

Hildegard is best known for her divine visions, which she claimed alone taught her to read and write. this served as further proof that the hand of God was at work through her visions and that she could never have been as prolific a writer nor speaker without divine aid. Though the authenticity of these visions was constantly challenged, when accepted, they positioned Hildegard as exceptional, and allowed her to speak with an authority not granted to others of her gender. Hildegard was able to utilize her visions to great effect, because they were, as Newman puts it, “a source of unmediated truth.”1 We cannot deny the fact that she was all that was seen or heard, thus placing her in a uniquely powerful position, one that must have contributed to a re-imagining of the authority of women and the voice of women in general. Newman writes that her visions, “obliquely sanctioned a role reversal by presenting men as negligent or weak, women as prophetic or powerful, and aspects of God as feminine.”2 That she utilized the tools at her disposal should hardly be seen as deceitful, as Hildegard lived during a time when papal injunction refused women the right to speak in Church, and during a time when women were prohibited from writing without permission from the Pope. Hildegard, who often called herself a “poor little female”,3 capitalized upon the paradoxical Christian notion that the meek inherited the earth to great effect.4 she was careful to strike a balance between claiming authority for herself, and claiming authority for God. Hildegard suffered from painful

1 Ibid. p. 164
4 Storey, “A Theophany of the Feminine,” 16.
migraines. Often migraines would accompany her visions, and she wrote that God would not let her rest until she imparted what he had shown her.

Hildegard's unique casting of her art and power in a feminist light. Through examinations of art, poetry, and music, we come to see how all of Hildegard's art was infused with her distinctly powerful femininity, and how her influence allowed her to refocus the spotlight on women and femininity.
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Music History 24.1  

**Rare Authority: The Secondary Narratives of Hildegard of Bingen**

"...And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength." —Audre Lorde

"I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect."—Audre Lorde

In *Gendering Musical Modernism*, Ellie M. Hisama builds an interdisciplinary argument for “secondary narratives” within Ruth Crawford’s String Quartet based on the work of the literary theorist Elaine Showalter and the anthropologist Edwin Ardener. She theorizes that the subjectivity of women has historically necessitated presenting themselves through the dominant male discourse, but that a deeper subtext can be discerned in women’s artistic work.  

While it seems fair to say that Crawford was more aware of the inequity of her subjugated status than was Hildegard of Bingen, the 12th Century Benedictine abbess, if we read Hildegard’s personal and artistic presentations of self as texts, we discern a voice that refracts meaning through a uniquely female prism both beneath and between the lines of these “texts”. Whether or not Hildegard perceived these secondary meanings, though important, is not a prerequisite for their existence, nor subsequent interpretation.

Hildegard was revered in Germany and beyond as a mystic with extraordinary visions during her lifetime. In this paper, I will examine the ways in which Hildegard was able to attain this position of authority. I will also use Hisama’s ideas of the secondary narrative to look at the ways in which that authority allowed her to encode secondary meanings of feminine strength into her work and her daily discourse at an unconscious level by simply inserting femaleness into the dominant discourse and, at its most conscious level, by actively altering meanings.

Hildegard is best known for her visions. From the age of 14, Hildegard professed to have frequent sacred visions while she was awake, which she called the “Voice of the Living Light.” She claimed to have very little education and not to have been taught to write except by God, himself. She writes, “What I do not see, I do not know, for I am not educated but I have simply been taught how to read. And what I write is what I see and hear in the vision. I compose no other words than those I hear, and I set them forth in unpolished Latin just as I hear them in the vision.”

In another example given by Bruce Holsinger, Hildegard writes:

> When I was forty-two years and seven months old, Heaven was opened and a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and

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6 I am grateful to the research of the theorists used in my bibliography for translations of Hildegard from the German and Latin. In this instance, Barbara Newman, “Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validations,” in *Church History* 54.2 (1985), 164.

7 Ibid. p. 165
inflamed my whole heart and my whole breast, not like a burning but like a warming flame, and the sun warms anything its rays touch. And immediately I knew the meaning of the exposition of the Scriptures, namely the Psalter, the Gospel and the other catholic volumes of both the Old and the New Testaments, though I did not have the interpretation of the words of their text or the division of the syllables or the knowledge of cases or tenses.8

However, as Newman puts it, “This is no mere topos of humility, but a claim to high authority”.9 Hildegard’s formative education makes it difficult to take her word at face value, as she had influential teachers who apparently did teach her how to read and write, at least to some extent.10 It was important that Hildegard remain uneducated in the public eye, however, (and in her own self-perception), because this served as further proof that the hand of God was at work through her visions and that she could never have been as prolific a writer nor speaker without divine aid.

Hildegard was compelled to share these visions and struggled throughout her life to claim and reclaim the space in which to speak about them, or on their behalf. Newman gives an account of one such struggle in her work on divine authority’s role in Hildegard’s voice in which the Flemish Monk Guilbert challenged Hildegard’s visions. After corresponding with Hildegard, though, Guilbert finally concluded that, “No woman since the Virgin Mary had received so great a gift from God.”11 Though the authenticity of these visions was constantly challenged, when accepted, they positioned Hildegard as exceptional, and allowed her to speak with an authority not granted to others of her gender. In fact, Newman posits, “In an age when the Apostles’ command that ‘no woman is to teach or have authority over men’ (I Tim. 2:12) was rigorously enforced, only through visions could a religious or intellectual woman gain a hearing.”12 And Hildegard was able to utilize her visions to great effect, because they were, as Newman puts it, “a source of unmediated truth.”13 These visions lent her a freedom to speak authoritatively on all matters, religious or otherwise.

One example of this occurred when the nuns at Disibodenberg (Hildegard’s abbey) were forbidden to sing as punishment for interring a man who had been excommunicated. In response, Hildegard wrote to the Bishop that “those who silence the music of God on earth will have no part in the songs of the angels in Heaven.”14 Fearful that she was right, the Bishop withdrew the ban. Thus, she used her visions as a tool of persuasion, and only because of her influence, was this considered acceptable practice. We should pause here, because in this moment we encounter our first instance of a sort of holy ventriloquism. While the “narrator” is Hildegard, she is telling God’s story to

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9 Ibid.
12 Ibid. p. 170
13 Ibid. p. 164
buttress her own displeasure with the ban. But at the same time, she is putting her own feelings into the mouth of God. This symbiosis may be seen as a kind of reverse voice-throwing.

Indeed, we can easily envision how Hildegard, speaking corporeally, undeniably present as the earthly bearer of God’s word, would suggest where authority truly lay. We cannot deny the fact that she was all that was seen or heard, thus placing her in a uniquely powerful position, one that must have contributed to a re-imagining of the authority of women and the voice of women in general. Newman writes that her visions, “obliquely sanctioned a role reversal by presenting men as negligent or weak, women as prophetic or powerful, and aspects of God as feminine.”

Hildegard saw the relationship between men and women as symbiotic, a radical perspective for her day. In “Hildegard of Bingen on Gender and the Priesthood,” Augustine Thompson writes that Hildegard is “so emphatic that bringing forth children is a cooperative task between husband and wife that she even misquotes Saint Paul, I Cor. 11:9, to make the point, ‘Woman was created for the sake of man, and man for the sake of woman.’ Each sex needs the other to be complete.” However Hildegard’s public voice is rarely first-person. That she utilized the tools at her disposal should hardly be seen as deceitful, as Hildegard lived during a time when papal injunction refused women the right to speak in Church, and during a time when women were prohibited from writing without permission from the Pope. As for those women, Susan McClary so poignantly writes, “their stories remain untold.” Without this backing by God, Hildegard’s voice would surely never have been so public, only gaining voice within the walls of Disibodenberg.

Why was she, a mere woman, selected to receive these visions? In fact, Hildegard’s gender made her a likely candidate to receive God’s word. After all, women were the “frail sex”, and Hildegard, who often called herself a “poor little female”, capitalized upon the paradoxical Christian notion that the meek inherited the earth to great effect. This was why it was crucial that in acting as God’s voice, she was careful to strike a balance between claiming authority for herself, and claiming authority for God.

Hildegard suffered from painful migraines, temporary paralysis and chronic poor health. This coupled with her gender allowed her to be perceived as closer to God, and Hildegard wielded her poor health often threateningly, at times taking sick to her bed when privileges were revoked, or her authority was questioned. For Hildegard, visions and pain were related. Often migraines would accompany her visions, and she wrote that God would not let her rest until she imparted what he had shown her. If she tried to keep them to herself, she recounts becoming ill.

As was common for her day, Hildegard believed that music existed to harmonize the body with the soul, and as such was integral to the human experience, and also a

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16 Augustine Thompson, “Hildegard of Bingen on Gender and the Priesthood,” in Church History 63.3 (1994), 357.
19 Storey, “A Theophany of the Feminine,” 16.
20 Newman discusses this in Newman, “Hildegard of Bingen.”
powerful tool of communication. She writes, “For the song of rejoicing softens hard hearts….And their song goes through you so that you understand.”

Hildegard exalted both God and Christianity in her art, but she also used her artistic voice to surreptitiously manipulate and challenge the dominant paradigm that oppressed women. June Boyce-Tillman explains that, “In common with many oppressed individuals and groups existing within an established order, she invented a system of ‘double speak’ that could be interpreted a variety of ways.” Hildegard used her God-given, male-sanctioned authority to compose music, create copious visual depictions of her visions, and write poetry. She also wrote on the nature of men and women’s bodies, sex and sexuality, human health, and nature in general. Unfortunately, to discuss each of these areas is far beyond the scope of this paper and so I will focus on the ways in which that secondary narrative was recorded artistically, through poetry, and music, and the way in which she infused her art with all of her other interests.

For our first example of this, let us turn to the sacred antiphonal play Ordo Virtutum. In it, the cast is almost entirely women with the exception of a male devil. Each woman represents a different virtue personified. In keeping with their characters, they resist the temptations of the devil repeatedly. In so doing, Hildegard conceives them as pillars of strength, united against the male figure of the devil, and though they are representational, corporeally they remain women, while the devil remains a man. Additionally, Hildegard revokes the freeing power of song from the devil, a right she only reserves for the women. Thus, while the Virtues make music, the Devil can only make noise. The Devil cannot sing because Hildegard believed that one’s spiritual life was a song, and that music is life-giving. God breathed his “word” through the holy like breathing through a trumpet to produce sound. Thus, while the devil is relegated to the low registral range of the male speaking voice, the women’s voices soar, unrestricted by register.

Additionally, in all Hildegard’s music she employed a much larger range than was common for others of her day. Indeed, she was fond of beginning forthrightly with leaps of fifths and then leaping even higher. Often spreading a single composition across ranges of a 12th or more, the resulting soaring voices were typical of Hildegard’s compositional style, which was unique in this respect, and which acted in direct defiance of the Cistercian Reforms that were put in place just a few years before she began composing. These reforms were enacted because of a literal reading of a biblical passage which mentioned an instrument being played with only 10 strings. Thus, the Reforms limited the range of a single composition to within 10 notes. However, because Hildegard claimed that she had not been taught composition, and that her compositions came directly from God, she was free to express herself in this atypical fashion.

The Cistercian reforms had a second function. The subject of range at that time was a gendered one. Great spans of range into the upper octaves forced monks to sing

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21 For an excellent discussion of this point, see Holsinger, “The Flesh of the Voice.”
22 Ibid. p. 98.
notes that sounded “feminine”, and the Reforms set out to suppress the widening vocal ranges that they saw as causing an increasing effeminization of the male clergy. While research is scarce on restrictions of the same kind for nuns of the time, the vocal ranges employed in the music written for women were equally restrictive.

Oppositionally, the expansion of range that Hildegard utilized in writing for her nuns celebrates the feminine by unabashedly leaping headlong into these “effeminate” ranges, and by allowing women to explore the fullness of their voices in all their tonal varieties. These varieties, Hildegard believed, were like the Virgin Mary, who had “planted in [her] innards all varieties of music in all its florid tones.”27 Holsinger writes, “In stark contrast to the limiting dictates of the Cistercian treatises, Hildegard’s melodies allow the many bodies she describes in the texts to open up and resound in music. When sung, Hildegard’s music captures in sound her poetic meditations on the female body and the voices she clearly saw as capable of performing well beyond conventional range.”28

The use of this notational “openness” had its roots of significance for Hildegard in its connection to the structure of the female body, especially in the sexual and reproductive areas. Conflating music and women’s health, Hildegard explains that, “women’s bodies are ‘open like a wooden frame, in which strings have been fastened for strumming.’”29 This integrative language was typical: women’s sexual organs were akin to strings that required strumming in the correct way so as to create the openness that for Hildegard, reflected female nature, and which she in turn reflected in her music.

Other compositional aspects of Hildegard’s music, too, have been viewed by scholars as distinctly feminine: Her changes of modes and use of the tritone “challenge the idea of closure,” which Boyce-Tillman posits is a distinctly feminine trait.30 And in Ordo, Hildegard takes great care with where she places her highest and lowest note, assigning them to important functions related to words with low or high imagery or importance. For instance, in Ordo, she chooses to place the highest note, a g, on the words “your eyes,” and touches a low c on the melismatic “whither”.31 In this way, she employed techniques of word painting that were uncommon for her time, and which further emphasized her notational range choices.

We must not overlook the unique setting of Ordo, either, which imagines a world filled with women entitled to judge aloud and to express their opinions freely. As such, they exist in an alternate world where women are powerful, and sit above, casting judgment down. Because they stand for the 16 Virtues, and Jesus embodies all of these virtues, Hildegard also inscribes femininity into the body of Christ. In this way, James J. Paxson writes, the Virtues “proclaim themselves to be the illuminational source of Christ himself, as the building blocks of their heavenly groom’s very limbs.”32 In other words, Hildegard casts these women as making up the very body of Christ, thus feminizing him, corporeally.

Another aspect of Hildegard’s morality play softens this bold statement, however, for while the devil is, the women are merely representational. Thus, this representational form suggests power without claiming it forthrightly. Hildegard plays it safe. Power represented through metaphor is less easily discernable for those who are not looking for it. This is just another aspect of secondariness employed in Hildegard’s work. Even so, though these women are metaphors for the virtues in all humankind, we still see them as women, because the music is acted out in play form. Therefore, we interpret, through metaphor, that women not only have these virtues, but that these virtues strengthen them compared with men, who appear impotent and immoral, as represented by the devil.

Hildegard had a unique brand of artistry which valued integration. In Boyce-Tillman’s article, she draws upon the work of the feminist psychologist Mary Field Belenky, who, she explains, defined one aspect of a “woman’s way of knowing” as being a constructed knowledge, “in which the woman attempts to move outside the given boundaries of the group in which she has been tutored. It is marked by an effort to reclaim the self by integrating knowledge that she feels to be personally important with knowledge that she has learnt from others.” Boyce-Tillman concludes, “Sometimes attributed to lack of education, these features may equally well be seen as reflecting the free-flowing interconnectedness of [Hildegard’s] thinking.”

For Hildegard, compartmentalization of ideas was unnatural, and so her thoughts about music were rich with thoughts about health; her visions contained elements of music and in her music she frequently depicted her visions.

Thus, it also stands to reason that Hildegard liked to use nature imagery in her poetry and music. Some of her most beloved metaphors, were of greenness, and sunlight. We see this in her choice of language in one stanza of Ordo Virtutum:

The Virtues sing:

In the beginning all creatures flourished,
They bloomed in the middle of flowers:
After that greenness declined.

We may make note here of Hildegard’s frequent choice of metaphor rather than simile, for this is a further demonstration of Hildegard’s feminine sense of all connectedness and inclusiveness. Bruce Holsinger gives another example of Hildegard’s distinctly feminine integrative thinking in “Sine Tactu Viri: The Musical Somatics of Hildegard of Bingen,” in which Hildegard explains that the body is an instrument that will only sound properly if it is fed a proper, moderate diet. Here she integrates her scientific knowledge of the body seamlessly with her belief in the harmony within all living things.

In all Hildegard’s compositions and poetic imagery, Holsinger makes strong arguments for the sensual and erotic, made no less so by the performance practice of singing together within the abbey—which Hildegard considered to be the womb of the Church. Because much of Hildegard’s music exalts in the feminine, Holsinger concludes that there is a strongly lesbian component to her composition. He writes, “Music, always a somatic phenomenon for Hildegard, allows women to voice their fleshly and spiritual

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34 Burkholder, Norton Anthology of Music, 37.
desires for the female body in a way that transgresses—textually and musically—the careful devotional boundaries established by the medieval Church.”

Though the applicability of modern conceptions of sexuality written onto a 12th century nunnery may have its dissenters, it cannot be denied that through the simple act of singing together the bond among women is certainly reinforced.

There is yet another secondary reading of Hildegard’s music. Thompson writes that in Hildegard’s vision, the Church, like the earth, and like the fertility of women, only begets new generations of the devout when it is “plowed by the faithful”. He builds upon this idea of a female Church by explaining that through the Eucharist, Christ and the Church are married. Hildegard contends that because women are equally important as a counterbalance for men, where the church is concerned, they share authority with the priests. He concludes by writing, “In the same way [the Church] mysteriously participates in her Bridegroom’s priesthood, its ministry, and its benefits, even though she does no hold Christ’s priestly office herself. The consecrated virgin, married to Christ, likewise shares his priesthood.” This picture of feminine power and equality is certainly a difficult one to discern within Hildegard’s writings at first glance, however, it is a subtext that runs beneath much of her religious poetry and song.

Holsinger shows this subtext in a Marian piece in Hildegard’s *Symphonia*:

O how precious is the virginity of this virgin who has a closed gate, and whose womb holy divinity suffused with its warmth, so that a flower grew in her.

And the Son of God came forth like the dawn through her secret.

Hence the tender shoot, which is her Son, opened paradise through the cloister of her womb.

And the Son of God came forth like the dawn through her secret.

Here we see both this architectural subversion, which Holsinger calls a “woman-identified appropriation of architectural authority,” and her use of natural imagery.

Additionally, whereas Ecclesia, or the Church, was usually thought of as the body of Christ, Hildegard often personifies Ecclesia as the blushing bride of Christ in her poetry and music. This dual-gendered depiction of the Church re-inscribes womanly power into the very construction of Christianity and subversively feminizes Christ’s body. Holsinger concludes, “Hildegard’s double feminization of Christ as both body and bride allows Heaven’s *symphonia* to echo within a specifically female body.”

June Boyce Tillman argues that though Hildegard made a distinct imprint on all things she touched, her underlying reason was through a desire to belong to the great spiritual tradition. She writes, “Her fundamental desire is not the individualism of modernism but to belong.” If the oppressed take on the dominant mindset of the oppressor, then perhaps the only way Hildegard, herself, could reconcile her own worth and the belief that she deserved to be heard was by seeing her work as demonstrative of that desire for belonging. Nonetheless, she used this authority of the voice of God to

37 Thompson, “Hildegard of Bingen on Gender and the Priesthood,” 358.
38 Holsinger, “*Sine Tactu Vini,*” 104.
39 Ibid.
speak her heart, and she could not help but inscribe into this voice her uniquely feminine perspective, a perspective that strove to alter common perceptions of women. This voice wrote a second narrative, that demonstrated itself quite effectively in a musical idiom that was all Hildegard’s own.


Thompson, Augustine. “Hildegard of Bingen on Gender and the Priesthood.” *Church History* 63.3 (1994): 349-64.