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Sequentia performs Hildegard: stunning vocal elegance.

Virtue Squad

Sequentia

Church of St. Paul the Apostle

Hildegurles

Clark Studio Theater, Rose Building

BY KYLE GANN

Poet, mystic, healer, potential saint, voluminous writer, adviser to popes and archbishops, and innovative composer, Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) has belatedly become a hot property. Her music is in plainchant style, meaning that it consists of streams of square, unrhythmed notes denoting unadorned melody. Most plainchant composers were anonymous, but Hildegard isn't the only exception; among others, there was her contemporary Peter Abelard, who lost his manhood pursuant to his famous affair with Heloise. In the last 10 years, though, thanks to feminist currents in musicology (and analogous ones in the history of science), Hildegard has turned into the composer of the decade. After all, it's not every year you get to celebrate someone's 900th birthday.

We could stand to keep the old girl in perspective, lest the New Ageists who've adopted her turn her into some sort of Beethoven-innun's-habit. She's being given credit for the first opera, *Ordo Virtutum*—actually a morality play, an allegory in which different moral principles are represented by different singers. *Grove Dictionary*, however, calls the work a "sung dramatic debate," while the liturgical drama, with implied dialogue in music, goes back at least a century earlier. Extending to almost 90 minutes and predating any other surviving morality play by a century, it's a stunning enough achievement without arguable historical claims.

Thirty years ago, *Ordo Virtutum* would have been performed like Gregorian chant, in a monotonously uninflected rhythm and without instruments. But early-music performance has matured in the last 15 years, largely due to a few European groups of whom Sequentia is one of the most pioneering. They have a reputation for taking an intelligent middle path between the dull, old style of performance on one hand, and on the other, experimental groups like the Clemencic Consort that go way out on a limb with drones, tambourines, Arabic-style improvisation, and such. Bearing out that reputation, Sequentia gave us a pure, non-anachronistic, but rhythmically fluid performance of stunning vocal elegance.

OF COURSE, THAT'S NOT the only way to play Hildegard, and this week will bring a very different reading. The Hildegurles are coming: four Downtown women composers who've collaborated on their own version of *Ordo Virtu-*

tum. The work is in four scenes, and each composer—Eve Beglarian, Kitty Brazelton, Lisa Bielawa, and Elaine Kaplinsky—has written her own music for one scene, though still keeping Hildegard's original melodies. Even more important is the text, for while Sequentia concentrated on vocal polish, the Hildegurles are determined to bring out all the operatic passion behind Hildegard's words.

Ordo Virtutum—*The Play of the Virtues*—is a scenario in which the Soul (Anima) is tempted by the Devil and brought back to God by a daunting cast of Virtues: Knowledge of God, Charity, Heavenly Love, Patience, Faith, Mercy, Victory, Innocence, Chastity, Hope, Modesty, Obedience, Discipline, Fear of God, World-Rejection, and Discretion. (Sixteen virtues, when there are only seven vices? It's a cosmic rip-off.) In scene 1, the Soul listens to the Virtues but, tempted by the Devil, embraces the world. Scene 2 gives each virtue a solo to explain her qualities. In scene 3, the Soul returns and appeals to the Virtues for help. Finally, the Devil appears in search of the Soul, and the Virtues bind him down. Hildegard set no melody to the Devil's lines; all music, she felt, comes from God.

Visually, the ancient neumes (medieval notes) suggest more fluid melodic movement than is traditionally given chant, and Sequentia sang Hildegard's lithe lines with a spontaneous emotionality all the more powerful for involving nine voices in unison. The richest voices sang the two major parts: Pamela Delal as the Soul, who left the choir down the church's middle aisle for her temptation and returned at the end, and Lena Susanne Norin, who, as Humility, led the dialogue for the other Virtues in a dark but voluptuous alto. The audience was startled by spoken outbursts from Franz-Josef Heumannskamer (the stage director) as a suitably boorish Devil. The sonorities were sumptuously complemented by the church's several-second acoustic echo, and you could tell at times that the singers were playing sensitively against the sustained echoes of their own voices.

Hildegurles promise a very different performance, but one with its own acoustic anomalies: jazzed up by hand-held percussion and a plethora of live electronics, including electronic batons that will cause thunder as Beglarian waves them around. Banging an electric guitar, Brazelton will sing the part of Humility, while Kaplinsky's keyboard will elicit the voices of the various Virtues from a digital sampler. On the day I saw them rehearse, Beglarian's knees were all bruised from rolling around on the floor as the Devil. "We may be ragged and funky as singers," she admits, "but we're trying to tell the story as vividly as we can." V