

Ordo Virtutum

Ordo Virtutum (Latin for *Order of the Virtues*) is an allegorical morality play, or sacred music drama, by St. Hildegard, composed c. 1151, during the construction and relocation of her Abbey at Rupertsberg. It is the earliest morality play by more than a century, and the only Medieval musical drama to survive with an attribution for both the text and the music.

A short version of *Ordo Virtutum* without music appears at the end of *Scivias*, Hildegard's most famous account of her visions. It is also included in some manuscripts of the *Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum* ("Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations"), a cycle of more than 70 liturgical songs. It may have been performed by the convent nuns at the dedication of the St. Rupertsberg church in 1152^[1] or possibly before the Mass for the Consecration of Virgins at the convent.^[2]

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Plot

The subject of the play is typical for a musical drama. It shows no biblical events, no depiction of a saint's life, and no miracles.^[3] Instead, *Ordo Virtutum* is about the struggle for a human soul, or Anima, between the Virtues and the Devil. The idea that Hildegard is trying to develop in *Ordo Virtutum* is the reconnection between the "creator and creation"^[4]

The piece can be divided as follows:^[5]

Part I: Prologue in which the Virtues are introduced to the Patriarchs and Prophets who marvel at the Virtues.

Part II: We hear the complaints of souls that are imprisoned in bodies. The (for now) happy Soul enters and her voice contrasts with the unhappy souls. However, the Soul is too eager to skip life and go straight to Heaven. When the Virtues tell her that she has to live first, the Devil seduces her away to worldly things.

Part III: The Virtues take turns identifying and describing themselves while the Devil occasionally interrupts and expresses opposing views and insults. This is the longest section by far and, although devoid of drama or plot, the musical elements of this section make it stand out.

Part IV: The Soul returns, repentant. Once the Virtues have accepted her back, they turn on the Devil, whom they bind. Together they conquer the Devil and then God is praised.

Part V: A procession of all the characters.

Roles

- The Soul (female voice)
- The Virtues (sung by 17 solo female voices): Humility (Queen of the Virtues), Hope, Chastity, Innocence, Contempt of the World, Celestial Love, Discipline? (the name is scratched out in the manuscript) Modesty, Mercy, Victory, Discretion, Patience, Knowledge of God, Charity, Fear of God, Obedience, and Faith^[6] These Virtues were seen as role models for the women of the Abbey, who took joy in overcoming their weaknesses and defeating the Devil in their own lives.
- Chorus of the Prophets and Patriarchs (sung by a male chorus)
- Chorus of Souls (sung by a women's chorus)
- The Devil (a male voice --^[7] the Devil does not sing, he only yells or grunts: according to Hildegard, he cannot produce divine harmony).^[8]

Background

The meaning and emphasis of the Ordo Virtutum in Hildegard of Bingen's community is affected by which persons in the community played which roles, and how they related to each other at the time of the performance.^[9] It has been suggested that the soul represents Richardis von Stade, Hildegard's friend and fellow nun, who had left to become abbess of another convent. Hildegard was upset by this appointment and tried to have it revoked, appealing even to Pope Eugene III. However, Hildegard was unsuccessful and Richardis departed, only to die shortly thereafter on October 29, 1151. Other scholarship propose an allusion to Hildegard's brother Bruno.^[10] Before dying Richardis told her brother that she wanted to return to Hildegard, not unlike the returning, repentant Soul of Ordo Virtutum.^[11]

Composition

Hildegard of Bingen was never classically trained in composition, nor was she trained to play instruments. She was "self-taught", although not in a way that many people would expect. Her whole life Hildegard of Bingen claimed to be both Clairvoyant and Clairaudient. The music came to her in her trances and that is how she was able to compose that many pieces without any formal training. She also attempted to describe what she was going through in her works such as Ordo Virtutum.^[12]

Life in the Abbey

The performance of non-liturgical music of any kind in the abbeys of the medieval era would be a cause for celebration. The majority of the life of nuns would have been led without speaking, due to their vow of silence. The sisters dedicate their lives to poverty and would not indulge in human wants. The lives of women in this life would have been dedicated to the service of their community and God the Father. Speaking any idle words would have been seen as offensive. The performance of Ordo Virtutum would be a chance to use the human voice as a vessel for praise. The play was seen as a spiritual celebration and the joy of overcoming human weakness. A moment of religious celebration, at the consecration of an abbey, would have allowed the women to enjoy the joy of music while still worshiping God.

The Healing Properties

In addition to the use of the human voice as a vessel for praise, it was found that music and rhythm had healing properties and could be used for good. Hildegard of Bingen believed that music had a direct correlation with the opening of Dysanaesthesia (which is also known as the Third State of Consciousness).^[13] Music was used as a way to enlighten yourself and bring joy and positivity into your soul. It was a type of meditation that promoted relaxation. The manner in which this was practiced highly resembles the way buddhist meditation techniques are performed. Up until 2015 neurologist Oliver Sacks was researching Hildegard's 12th century belief that music can bring a whole brain connection between the two hemispheres, to heal and calm the body.^[14]

Musical elements

Ordo Virtutum is written in dramatic verse and contains 82 different melodies, which are set more syllabically than Hildegard's liturgical songs. All parts are sung in plainchant except that of the Devil.^[15] There is an alternation between solo and chorus parts as well as melismatic versus syllabic lines.^[16]

The main "acts" in the play are set in allegorical towers and the musical dimensions are driven by the architectural understanding, for example, the development of processional chants that link the action in one tower to that of the other.^[17]

The final verses of the play move into a mystical mode and describe the crucifixion of Christ, asking the audience to bend their knees so that God may "stretch out his hand to you" (*genua vestra ad patrem vestrum flectite / ut vobis manum suam porrigat*, pp. 36–37). The final word, *porrigat* ("stretch out"), is set to thirty-nine notes, it is the longest melisma in the play. It is meant to illustrate the stretch of a divine hand toward humanity.^[18]

Editions

- Pitra, Jean-Baptiste-François, ed. (1882). "Ordo Virtutum". *Analecta Sanctæ Hildegardis, opera Spicilegio Solesmensi parata*. Analecta sacra Spicilegio Solesmense (in Latin). **8**. Paris: A. Jouby & Roger. pp. 457–465. OCLC 633575447 (<https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/633575447>).
- Dronke, Peter, ed. (1970). "Ordo Virtutum". *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry 1000–1150* (in Latin) (1st ed.). Oxford Clarendon Press. OCLC 807267992 (<https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/807267992>).
 - Dronke, Peter, ed. (1986). "Ordo Virtutum". *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry 1000–1150*. Westfield publications in medieval studies (in Latin). **1** (2nd ed.). Westfield College University of London Committee for Medieval Studies. pp. 180–192. ISBN 978-1-870059-00-8. OCLC 715235014 (<https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/715235014>).
- Feiss, Hugh; Evans, Christopher Francis; Kienzel, Beverly Mayne; Muessig, Carolyn Anne; Newman, Barbara Jane; Dronke, Peter, eds. (2007). "Ordo Virtutum". *Opera minora I. Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* (in Latin). **226**. Brepols. pp. 505–521. ISBN 978-2-503-05261-8. OCLC 237241526 (<https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/237241526>).

Translations

- Dronke, Peter, ed. (March 2008). "Ordo Virtutum" [The Play of the Virtues]. *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*. Cambridge Medieval Classics (in Latin and English). **1**. Cambridge University Press. pp. 147–184. ISBN 978-0-521-72765-5. OCLC 190967426 (<https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/190967426>).
- "Ordo Virtutum (The Play about the Virtues)" (<https://english.boisestate.edu/lindamariezaerr/translations-and-adaaptations/ordo-virtutum/>) (PDF). Translated by Linda Marie Zaerr. Boise State University, English department. 2013-05-29. Retrieved 2018-01-15.

Performing edition

- Davidson, Audrey Ekdahl, ed. (1985). *Hildegard von Bingen: Ordo Virtutum* (Musical score) (in Latin and English). Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications. ISBN 978-0-918720-62-7. OCLC 729364408 (<https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/729364408>).

Musical edition

- Ricossa, Luca Basilio, ed. (2013). *Hildegard von Bingen: Ordo Virtutum* (Musical score in original notation) (in Latin and French) (1st ed.). Geneva: Lulu. OCLC 985455640 (<https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/985455640>). (2nd, corrected ed.: 2014-09-04.)

Recordings

- Sequentia. *Hildegard von Bingen: Ordo virtutum*. LP: Deutsche Harmonia Mundi 20.395/96; CD: CDS 7492498; MC: 77051-4-RG (1982). Includes translation by Peter Dronke.
- Vox Animae. *Hildegard von Bingen: Ordo virtutum*. CD: Etcetera Record Company BV KTC1203 (1995). Includes translation by Ansy Boothroyd and Michael Fields.
- Sequentia. *Hildegard von Bingen: Ordo virtutum*. CD: Deutsche Harmonia Mundi 05472 77394 2 (1997). Includes translation by Peter Dronke.
- Vox Animae. *Hildegard von Bingen in Portrait*. Double DVD: BBC / OpusArte OA 0874 D (2003). Includes *Hildegard*, dramatised BBC documentary starring Patricia Routledge; *A Real Mystic*, interview and lecture with Professor Michael Fox; *A Source of Inspiration*, Washington National Cathedral documentary on her life and times; *Illuminations*, art gallery of her mystic visions with comments by Professor Michael Fox. Translation of *Ordo Virtutum* by Ansy Boothroyd and Michael Fields.

See also

- *Canticles of Ecstasy*

Notes

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2. Pamela Sheingorn. "The Virtues of Hildegard's Ordo Virtutum; or, It Was a Woman's World". *The Ordo Virtutum of Hildegard of Bingen: Critical Studies*. ed. Audrey Ekdahl Davidson. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992. Page 52.
3. Potter, Robert (Fall 1986). "The "Ordo Vitutum": Ancestor of the English Moralities?". *Comparative Drama*. **20** (3): 201–210. doi:10.1353/cdr.1986.0017 (<https://doi.org/10.1353%2Fcdr.1986.0017>). JSTOR 41153244 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41153244>).
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12. "Hildegard Music - HealthyHildegard.com" (<https://healthyhildegard.com/hildegard-music/>). *HealthyHildegard.com*. 2016-11-28. Retrieved 2017-12-05.
13. Jaideep J. Pandit (<https://www.sjc.ox.ac.uk/discover/people/professor-jaideep-pandit/>) at St. John's College in Oxford uses this term in the same sense, but without reference to its medieval origin: Pandit JJ, et al. (37 participants) (2014-09-09). "5th National Audit Project (NAP5) on accidental awareness during general anaesthesia: summary of main findings and risk factors" (<https://academic.oup.com/bja/article/113/4/549/2920161>). *British Journal of Anaesthesia*. **113** (4): 549–559. doi:10.1093/bja/aeu313 (<https://doi.org/10.1093%2Fbja%2Faeu313>). hdl:10026.1/8155 (<https://hdl.handle.net/10026.1%2F8155>). PMID 25204697 (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25204697>). Retrieved 2018-01-13.
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