

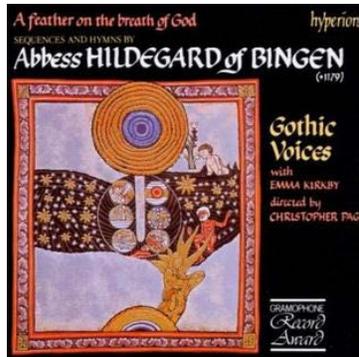
“A Feather on the Breath of God: Sequences and Hymns by Abbess Hildegard of Bingen”--Gothic Voices with Emma Kirkby; directed by Christopher Page (1982)

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Essay by Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, EdD, PhD (guest post) *



Emma Kirkby



Album cover



Christopher Page

Listen: a king sat upon his throne, surrounded by lofty and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king proudly to all. Then it pleased the king to lift a small feather from the ground, and he commanded it to fly. Yet a feather does not fly because of anything, but because the air bears it along. Thus, I am a feather on the breath of God, not gifted with great powers or education, nor even with good health, but I rely completely on God.

--Hildegard of Bingen to Odo of Paris, 1148-1149, *Epistolarium*, 40R

“A Feather on the Breath of God: Sequences and Hymns by Abbess Hildegard of Bingen” is an award-winning album of sacred music originally released by Hyperion on Vinyl LP in 1982 and re-released as a CD in April 1985. The album features the plainchant written by Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and was recorded by the vocal ensemble Gothic Voices with soprano Dame Emma Kirkby as a soloist. Musician and scholar Sr. Christopher Page, founder of Gothic Voices, directed the recorded performance at St. Jude’s Church, Hampstead Garden, London, in September 1981. The music and Latin hymns and sequences were taken from Hildegard’s “Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum,” compiled at Bingen under her supervision (1175-1190) and edited by Christopher Page from the manuscript, Riesenkode, Wiesbaden, Hessische Landesbibliothek, Hs. 2 (ca. 1180-85).

Dame [Carolyn] Emma Kirkby, DBE (b.1949) is an English early music specialist voted one of the “20 greatest sopranos” by “BBC Music Magazine” in 2007. She joined the Schola Cantorum of Oxford while a university student and was deeply involved in the early music revival of the 1970s. To date, Kirkby has made over 100 recordings. Her many honors and awards include Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (2007); The Queen’s Medal for Music (2011); the REMA Early Music Award for her contributions to mentoring young early music

performers (2018); and, the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Gramophone Classical Music Awards ceremony (2019).

Sr. Christopher Page (b.1952) is a musicologist and author of numerous books on medieval music. In addition to his work as the founder and director of Gothic Voices he is a fellow of the British Academy, and an emeritus professor at Cambridge University. He has held leadership roles in both the Plainsong and Medieval Music Society and the National Early Music Association. For eight years he was presenter of the early music program, "Spirit of the Age" on BBC radio 3.

Hildegard of Bingen was one of the most accomplished women in the history of Christianity, the first German mystic, and the precursor to many of the great women mystics. She was a mystic, visionary, abbess, writer, composer, dramatist, adviser, poet, preacher, scientist, political commentator, and healer. Hildegard of Bingen was the first composer of her era known by name, and music was an integral expression of her spirituality. Hildegard was also the first European composer known to supervise the copying of her complete musical works. Hildegard believed that music was not only a form of prayer, but a reflection of the songs of the angels in the celestial harmony, and one of the means whereby humanity could capture a glimpse of the joy of paradise. Like her visions, Hildegard claimed that most of her music came to her directly from God. Until the last 30 years, Hildegard's music was largely ignored by musicologists because her unique style made it hard to reconcile with other medieval composers. The poetry of her texts is infused with the images found in her visions, vibrant with light and color, and the music constructed of varying formulas over an extremely wide vocal range (up to two octaves), large leaps, and complicated melodies, especially suited to her nuns. The texts and the music of Hildegard's songs are said to be inseparable, focusing upon the deeper meaning behind both words and music. As such, the songs are designed as a form of contemplative practice.

For Hildegard, midlife was a period of intense generativity. Her body of work is unusually expansive in terms of genre and subject matter for any theologian of the period. For Hildegard, God was Love, and she had a direct and intimate relationship. The impact of Hildegard's experiences of "the living light" reveal a wide range of feelings and emotions--love, joy, wonder, awe, fear, despair, hope--and for a time, euphoria, the absence of all pain and sadness. An important concept found in Hildegard's work is *viriditas* or "greenness" which is used in relation to spiritual and physical vitality and growth. Greenness is a sign of great harmony in creation, and the power and unity of the Holy Spirit. Though used by other writers, the term is most associated with Hildegard, perhaps inspired by the lushness of nature around her convent.

Now over 900 years after Hildegard's birth, there is renewed interest in her writings and in her chants. She desired in her compositions to bring together the heart, mind, and body while celebrating celestial harmony in heaven and on earth. Hildegard's words and music reach across the centuries to enrich hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits today. Her texts deserve to be read and re-read. Her music can transport the listener to the gates of paradise. Her recent and overdue canonization opened the world of Hildegard of Bingen to a new generation interested in spirituality and mysticism from many traditions, as well as feminist and eco-spiritualities. The wisdom of this 12th-century mystic has much to share with those on spiritual journeys today.

“A Feather on the Breath of God” includes eight compositions by Hildegard of Bingen:

- Columba aspexit (5:18). A sequence in honor of St Maximinus, patron of the Benedictine abbey at Trier.
- Ave generosa (4:16). A hymn of devotion to the Virgin Mary.
- O ignis spiritus (4:48). A sequence to the fiery Holy Spirit.
- O Jerusalem (8:02). A sequence in honor of St. Rupert, the patron of Hildegard’s monastery.
- O Euchari (5:43). A sequence dedicated to St Eucharius, a third-century missionary and bishop of Trier.
- O viridissima virga (3:13). A hymn describing the Virgin Mary as the greenest branch and the root of the tree of Jesse.
- O presul vere civitatis (6:12) A sequence celebrating the patron of the monastery where Hildegard was raised, the hermit St. Disibod.
- O Ecclesia (6:11). A hymn in honor of the legend of St. Ursula, who was martyred with 11,000 companions at Cologne.

“A Feather on the Breath of God” was widely acclaimed and is one of the best-selling early music albums ever released. The album received a five-star rating from AllMusic, as well as the 1982-1983 Early-Medieval Gramophone Award. A 30th Anniversary reissue of the album was released on June 2010. In 2020, “A Feather on the Breath of God” was selected by the Library of Congress for inclusion into the National Recording Registry.

Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, EdD, PhD is the author of “Hildegard of Bingen: Essential Writings and Chants of a Christian Mystic--Annotated & Explained” (2016), among other works on Christian spirituality and history.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.