

ARSIS

*The Hildegard Organ Cycle
based on her visions*

HILDEGARD
FERKO

*music by Frank Ferko
performed by the composer*

Hildegard von Bingen

Hildegard was born in Bermersheim (Germany) in 1098, the tenth child of a noble family. When she was eight years old, her family gave her, as an offering of thanksgiving, to the monastery of St. Disibod to live with a noble-woman named Jutta, who was able to teach the child elementary reading in Latin and singing. Hildegard took monastic vows during her teens, and in 1136, following the death of Jutta, was chosen to be abbess.

From the age of three Hildegard had had visionary experiences: an ability to see hidden things and to foretell the future. The visions came in a brilliant light, the “living Light,” which also contained various symbols and even the sound of a voice which, she said, dictated everything in her books. Her principal visionary writings are contained in three books: *Scivias* (completed in 1151), *Liber vitae meritorum* (completed in 1163), and *De operatione Dei* (completed in 1173). In the monastery scriptorium Hildegard also oversaw the drawing of numerous illuminations which depict her visions. It was after having read several portions of *Scivias*, however, that Pope Eugenius III gave Hildegard a letter of apostolic blessing and protection.

In 1150 Hildegard and the St. Disibod nuns moved to a new monastery at Rupertsberg, and in 1165 Hildegard founded yet another abbey at Eibingen — this last convent, now called the Abbey of St. Hildegard, is still in existence (the Rupertsberg monastery was destroyed during the Thirty Years’ War). During the last thirty years of her life, Hildegard became a prolific writer of letters, to such diverse members of society as popes, priests, emperors, abbesses and lay people. She traveled and preached — very rare for a woman of her day — and furthered the cause of clerical and monastic reform.

Hildegard’s era was the time of the Second Crusade, political upheaval and schism in the Church, so it is not surprising that the Abbess had her share of problems in dealing with political leaders, as well as with those in the Church who imposed an interdict on her community in 1178 which lasted for about one year, and was lifted only six months before her death on September 17, 1179.

Proceedings to canonize Hildegard were begun in 1233, but for various reasons they were never completed; nevertheless, to this day she is called St. Hildegard. Her commemoration is observed on September 17.

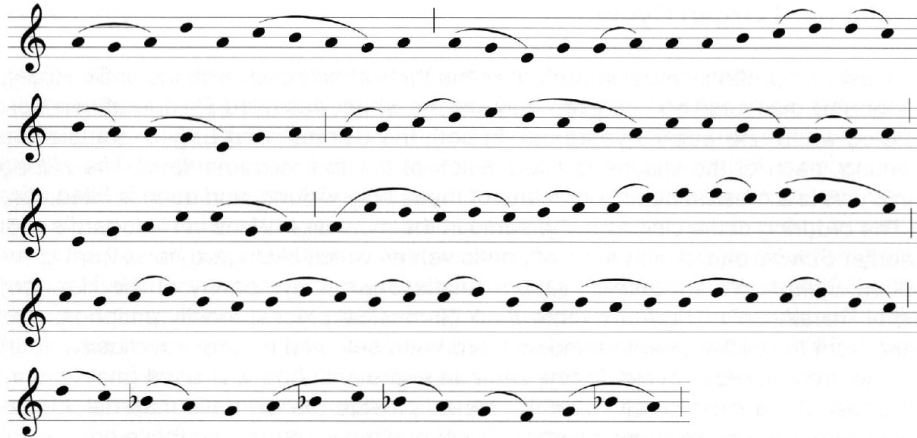
The Hildegard Organ Cycle

The last and probably most important of the three theological writings of St. Hildegard was a lengthy discourse on ten of her holy visions which was titled *De operatione Dei* and completed when she was 75 years old. In both the German and English translations of this writing, each of the visions is titled. Each of the ten movements of *The Hildegard Organ Cycle* is a musical depiction of one of these holy visions, and each is titled accordingly. The ordering of the visions is the same in the musical work as in Hildegard’s writing. The earlier *Scivias* ended with a set of poetic verses which Hildegard herself set to music and titled *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (“Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelation”). There are more than 70 musical pieces, mostly antiphons, in this set, and from these five chant melodies have been selected to form the musical foundation of the present organ cycle. In one case an entire antiphon was used (movement VI), but for most of the cycle small chant fragments provide the thematic material. Originally composed themes complement the chant in several movements, and these are described below.

I. The Origin of Life

“With wisdom I have rightly put the universe in order.”

The images of water and greenery, symbolic of an on-going creation, occupy a prominent place in Hildegard’s writing: God has created but continues to replenish and refresh the earth. The cycle begins with the chant *O Magne Pater* (“O Mighty Father”), presented in fragmented form but with each note sustained, as in a pool, forming small note clusters. The density of each cluster is dependent upon the pitches contained in each phrase of the chant.



II. The Construction of the World

"Then a wheel of marvelous appearance became visible."

Three musical panels are presented. The first panel begins with the opening phrase of *O magne Pater*, which then becomes a refrain throughout the movement. The first statement is followed by a highly chromatic commentary on the chant in 2-voice counterpoint played on foundation stops. A small cluster (derived from the chant) forms a backdrop for a variant of the chant melody played on a solo trumpet stop, and this, in turn is developed in the succeeding 16th-note commentary. The second panel is comprised of the same order of events as the first, except that following the trumpet stop variation a new theme is introduced. This theme is derived from the "Communicable Language" of the French contemporary composer Olivier Messiaen — a complete musical alphabet which makes possible the construction of words, phrases, and even whole sentences in musical notes. In this case, the new theme is the Old Testament name for God: YAHWEH. It is presented on the trumpet stop, transposed, and even inverted. The third panel, a coda, is introduced

with a harmonization of *O Magne Pater* which ends on a low D-flat pedal note which leads into the final section consisting of alternating chords moving in a slow *accelerando* depicting the spinning of the newly-constructed world through the universe. (In Hildegard's day the world was still thought to be flat. But it's not.)



III. Human Nature

"God, who has created me, and who has power over me like a ruler, is also my own power because without God I am unable to do any good deed and because I have only through God the living spirit through which I live and am moved, through which I learn to know all my ways."

The entire movement is written for the pedals alone and is therefore played by the performer's feet. A new rhythmic theme is introduced:



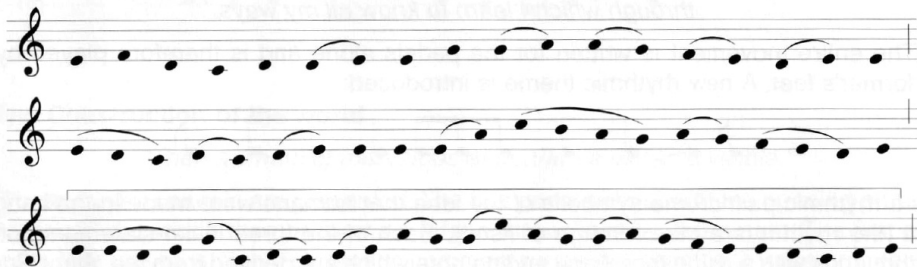
It is a rhythmic palindrome symbolic of the idea that humans were made in the image of God (the rhythm is a mirror image of itself). Each of the three initial statements of this rhythm ends with a rising triplet and ending note which are derived from the chant *Spiritus Sanctus, vivificans vita* which eventually is presented on a high pedal flute stop. Borrowing from the 14th-century concept of the isorhythm, the movement develops through the repetition of the principal rhythmic themes but with new pitches used in each repetition. The triplets take prominence in the final development section, accelerating into a flourish of notes alternating between the feet and ending in a brilliant descent down the pedal board: the Spirit of life has been breathed into humanity. (The entire chant *Spiritus Sanctus, vivificans vita* is shown in the description of movement VI.)

IV. Articulation of the Body

"And thus the soul, too, is praised for its good deeds by God's angels."

A meditation in D major based on two ideas: ". . .thus the soul, too, is praised for its good deeds by God's angels" as depicted in one phrase of the chant *O gloriosissimi lux vivens, Angeli* (the bracketed portion of the example below); and also the idea that the body itself is imperfect, as depicted by the prominent use of melodic and harmonic sevenths — a very imperfect musical interval for medieval musicians. There are two statements of the chant and some brief intermittent development. Following these, the movement concludes with a hymn-style presentation of the chant, ending in G major, but retaining F-sharp in the final chord, reminding us of the opening pitch of the angelic chant and also maintaining the interval of the major seventh.

O gloriosissimi lux vivens, Angeli

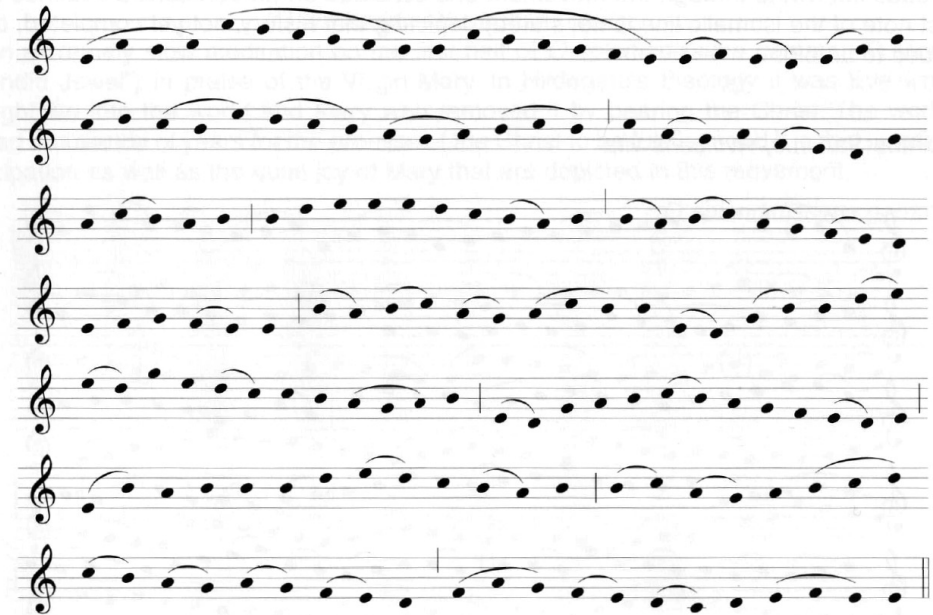


V. Places of Purification

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . ."

In this movement purity begins with a solitary, lone middle C. This pitch is gradually added to, and massive clusters are formed which change continuously in pitch content and density. Nine fragments of the chant *O Virtus Sapientiae* ("O Energy of Wisdom") push their way into the violent texture. In the fifth vision Hildegard speaks of the judgment of God: the Flood, the Apocalypse. And thus, she comments on the final restoration of order and perfection that existed "In the beginning..."

O Virtus Sapientiae



VI. Meaning of History

*"Nothing that has existed from the very beginning of the world
until its end is hidden from God."*

A piece in trio style: the lowest voice quotes a portion of *O Magne Pater* (in long note values), the middle voice states completely *Spiritus Sanctus, vivificans vita* — the two chants symbolic of the constantly active forces of the creating Father and the sanctifying Spirit throughout all history. The topmost voice is an isomelic construction (the order of

itches which is repeated with different rhythmic values on each repetition). These three threads intertwine through the movement and conclude on an unresolved cadence (the last note of the isomelic line is not stated) depicting that history, not yet completed, continues to unfold.

Spiritus Sanctus, vivificans vita

A musical score consisting of ten staves of music. The notation is a single melodic line with various rhythmic values and phrasing, including slurs and ties. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is not explicitly shown but appears to be common time. The piece concludes with an unresolved cadence.

VII. Preparation for Christ

*“Under your protection and shield, O God, I shall rejoice
if I am freed of the burden of sin.”*

An extremely slow meditation on the first half of *O splendidissima gemma* (“O Most Splendid Jewel”) in praise of the Virgin Mary. In Hildegard’s theology it was Eve who brought sin into the world and Mary who removed it by bearing the Christ. The world waited thousands of years for the promise of the Christ to be fulfilled, and it is that lengthy anticipation as well as the quiet joy of Mary that are depicted in this movement.

O splendidissima gemma

A musical score consisting of ten staves of music. The notation is a single melodic line with various rhythmic values and phrasing, including slurs and ties. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is not explicitly shown but appears to be common time. The piece concludes with an unresolved cadence.

VIII. The Effect of Love

"I am Love, the Splendor of the living God."

Certainly sacred chant was not the only existing music in Hildegard's day; there was much folk music as well. This movement presents a folk-like tune (albeit composed for this piece) which may evoke images of the vineyard workers in the Rhine valley where the Abbey at Bingen is located. The folk tune is restated in counterpoint with a fragment of *Spiritus Sanctus, vivificans vita* (beginning with the words *suscitans et resuscitans omnia* ("you waken and reawaken everything that is")), indicated by the bracket in the example given with movement VI. Eventually, a quiet accompaniment played on the organ celeste stops forms a backdrop for the two very simple melodies and encompasses them. In her description of this vision, Hildegard speaks of God as Love, having been influenced by both humility and peace.

IX. Completion of the Cosmos

"I will let all my splendor pass in front of you, and I will pronounce before you the name of Yahweh."

This quotation from Exodus 33:19, used by Hildegard in her description of the ninth vision, provided the basis for the music in this movement. It begins and ends with a two-voice contrapuntal exposition of the chant *O gloriosissimi lux vivens, Angeli*: the (quiet) splendor of God. A sudden re-introduction of the rhythmic pedal theme from the third movement forms accompaniment to the declaration of the name of Yahweh as that theme from the second movement is restated. A thunderous battle begins, and the force of Wisdom is revealed (*O Virtus Sapientiae*). (The chant used in this movement is shown in the notes to movement IV.)

X. The End of Time

"After the fall of the Antichrist the glory of the Son of God will be seen to its full extent."

Beginning firmly in C minor, this movement presents harmonic clashes juxtaposed with phrases of the chant *O Magne Pater* (from Movement I). Chord repetitions correspond with the mystical numbers 12, 7 and 5 — except for three chords which are presented each in 6 repetitions (depicting the Antichrist), one of which is accompanied by the F-sharp to C tritone interval, the ancient *diabolus in musica*. After a silence (though *not* for a half an hour as stated in the Book of Revelation), the piece concludes in the *stilo improvisatorio* using the chants *O gloriosissimi lux vivens, Angeli* and *O Virtus Sapientiae*. As St. Hildegard has pointed out, Wisdom will prevail at the end of time, and the angels continue to glorify God through all eternity.

— Frank Ferko

The quotes following each title are from Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works (with Letters and Songs), edited by Matthew Fox, O.P., © 1987 by Bear & Company, Inc., Santa Fe, New Mexico, and are used by permission of the publisher.

The Instrument

Throughout its two hundred year history, St. Patrick's Church in Washington, D.C. has had a tradition of musical excellence. In recent years the church building, which had suffered from wear and deterioration, has been magnificently renovated. Under the guidance of its clergy and musicians, the building now provides a wonderful acoustic for the ear as well as a ravishing delight for the eye. As part of the renovation, a new organ built by the firm led by Mark Lively and Paul Fulcher was installed and dedicated in 1994. The new Lively-Fulcher instrument uses, in slightly altered form, the facade of the 1895 Barkhoff organ, with pipes attractively stenciled in a style sympathetic to the renovated room.

Messrs. Lively and Fulcher have crafted a rather hefty instrument, a large two-manual and pedal instrument with the addition of a French-style Bombarde division. With an economy of means, using an abundantly live acoustic, the organ and the building yield a very large cathedral sound, and the sound of the full organ is reminiscent of large, gothic, French cathedrals. It is the perfect vehicle for Frank Ferko's music, and, with that in mind, the location and the organ were specially chosen for this recording.

Certain aspects of this music would tax any organ. Particularly, the massive clusters in No. 9, played by both fore-arms, and the massive chords in No. 10 are enough to test fully the wind system of even the best of instruments without either failing completely or sagging desperately. And the rapidly repeated chords throughout No. 5 require quick speech of the pipes to fully sound, a severe test of the organ voicer's art. Then too, the slow, static singing of melodies in Nos. 6 and 7 requires a most vocal quality, rare among organs, and lovingly provided in abundance by this magnificent instrument.

The Lively-Fulcher Organ at St. Patrick's Church Washington, D.C.

Grand Orgue (Manual I)

Montre 16'
Montre 8'
Bourdon 8'
Salicional 8'
Flûte harmonique 8'
Prestant 4'
Flûte ouverte 4'
Quinte 2-2/3'
Doublette 2'
Fourniture IV
Trompette 8'
Clairon 4'
Trémolo G.O.
Récit - G.O.
Solo - G.O.
G.O. octaves graves

Pedale

Soubasse 32' (ext.)
Flûte 16'
Soubasse 16'
Montre 16' (G.O.)
Basse 8'
Bourdon 8' (ext.)
Octave 4' (ext.)
Flûte 4'
Contre bombarde 32' (ext.)
Bombarde 16'
Trompette 8' (ext.)
Tirasse G.O.
Tirasse Récit
Tirasse Solo

Récit Expressif (Manual II)

Bourdon 16'
Diapason 8'
Viole de Gambe 8'
Voix céleste 8'
Cor de nuit 8'
Prestant 4'
Flûte octavante 4'
Nasard 2-2/3'
Octavin 2'
Tierce 1-3/5'
Plein jeu IV
Basson 16'
Trompette harmonique 8'
Basson-hautbois 8'
Voix humaine 8'
Trémolo Récit
Octaves graves

Solo (Manual III)

Bombarde 16' (ext.)
Trompette 8'
Clairon 4' (ext.)
Cornet (tenor g) V

FRANK FERKO inhabits a unique and unusual musical world. In the background is his love of the music of Olivier Messiaen. In the foreground appears mystery, and thus his intense interest in the visions of Hildegard, her music, and the world of medieval chant. None of this is unique or unusual in the decade of the 1990's, but his vivid musical imagination, sometimes terrifying, in other instances timelessly static and meditative, *is* unique.

The Hildegard Cycle for organ is the first in a trilogy of works inspired by Hildegard; the second part is a cycle of nine motets, *The Hildegard Motets*, and the third is a yet unfinished work for large chorus and orchestra.

Frank Ferko lives in Chicago. His music is published by E. C. Schirmer Music Company, a division of ECS Publishing, Boston, Massachusetts.

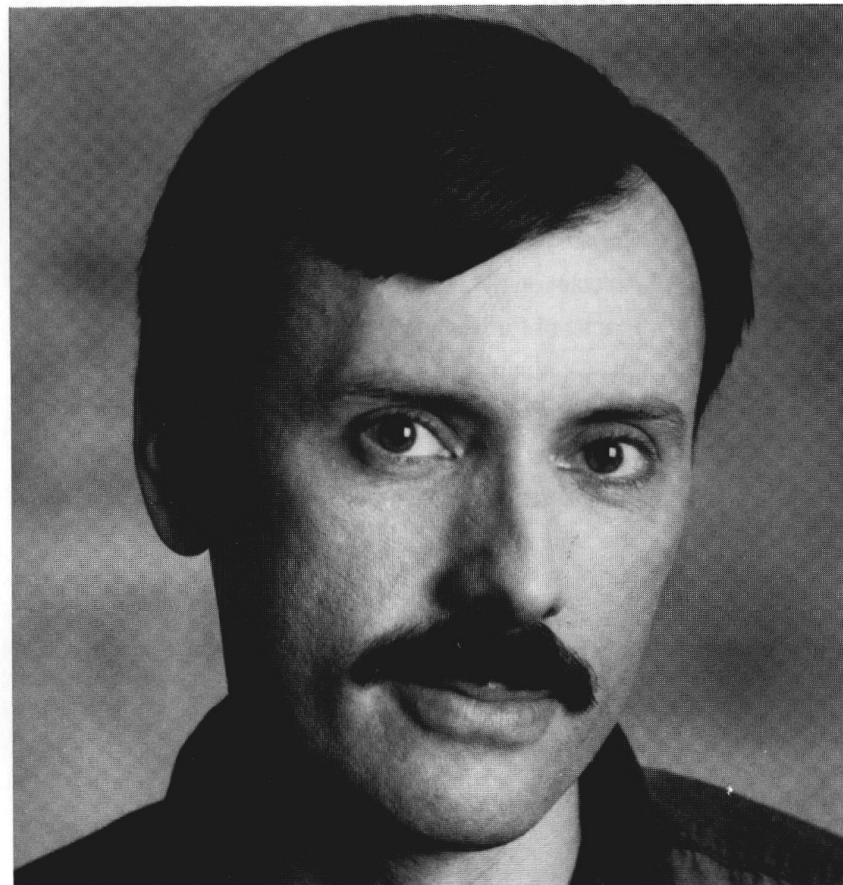
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Frank Ferko