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Hildegard of Bingen and Musical Reception: The Modern Revival of a Medieval Composer (Book Review)

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Hildegard of Bingen and Musical Reception: The Modern Revival of a Medieval Composer (Book Review)

Abstract

Reviewed Title: *Hildegard of Bingen and Musical Reception: The Modern Revival of a Medieval Composer* by Jennifer Bain. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 235 pp. ISBN: 9781107076662.

Keywords

book review, Jennifer Bain, Hildegard of Bingen and Musical Reception, modern, revival, medieval, composer

Disciplines

Music

Comments

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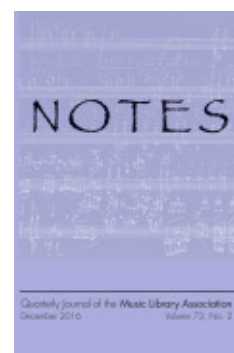
by Jennifer Bain (review)

John MacInnis

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As much as this reviewer hopes that Symonds's next volume will take a more critical approach, there is much to admire about *We'll Have Manhattan*. Due to its technical vocabulary, this overdue survey of Rodgers and Hart's early works will probably be most useful to scholars. The book

invites further research, and as that research is conducted in the years to come, *We'll Have Manhattan* will provide a strong foundation.

CHRISTOPHER LYNCH
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COMPOSERS

Hildegard of Bingen and Musical Reception: The Modern Revival of a Medieval Composer. By Jennifer Bain. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. [xiii, 235 p. ISBN 9781107076662 (hardcover), \$99.99; ISBN 9781316309711 (e-book), \$80.] Music examples, illustrations, discography, bibliography, index.

In 2001, the Swedish folk-rock band Garmarna released an album titled *Hildegard von Bingen*, which featured modern, upbeat renderings of her medieval chants using electronic instruments and sequencers. The creativity of these settings by Garmarna is striking, and it is noteworthy that the author of the lyrics is the same Doctor of the Church celebrated by Pope Benedict XVI as a theologian, a teacher, and a model for Christians today. In fact, as Jennifer Bain makes plain in this straightforward and engaging book, it seems as though every generation has its own Hildegard.

Bain begins by describing her own introduction to Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179) while a music student in the 1990s. She recalls that, at that time, it was hard to imagine that a woman composed music in the Middle Ages, and it was easy to assume that Hildegard had been rediscovered in the late twentieth century (p. 1). In fact, Bain's encounter with the significant body of evidence testifying to Hildegard's pronounced importance throughout the centuries after her death was the impetus for this book; she concluded that "the trope of the forgotten female figure" does not apply here (p. 35).

Bain demonstrates that though Hildegard's story and her scholarship were known and cherished, especially in German-speaking lands, Hildegard's music was first performed and promoted in the mid-nineteenth century, through the efforts of Ludwig Schneider, who witnessed the dissolution of Hildegard's convent in 1814 and who served as a priest for the

church housing Hildegard's relics in Eibingen. Bain tells the story of the revival of Hildegard's music in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and her reception in those eras. As the author explains, reception reveals ideology, and studying the dynamics at play with regard to when and how Hildegard's writings and music were championed discloses both the personal agendas and the larger cultural forces at work. Although discussion of specific compositions by Hildegard is present in this volume, the primary emphases for this book are cultural and historical.

After summarizing Hildegard's legacy, which was never truly forgotten in German-speaking lands, from her death until the 1850s, Bain emphasizes two revivals of Hildegard's music. The initial musical revival began in 1857, with the first modern performance of Hildegard's song "O virga ac diadema" ("O branch and diadem"). Ludwig Schneider, himself a scholar and musician, transcribed "O virga ac diadema" directly from the Riesencodex (a.k.a. the Wiesbaden Codex) so that it could be sung at a special service celebrating both the authentication of Hildegard's relics and Hildegard's own feast day on 17 September 1857 (also the anniversary of her passing). The Riesencodex dates from around the time of Hildegard's death, and it contains Hildegard's letters and writings as well as her *Ordo virtutum* and seventy-five of her seventy-seven chants. (Bain notes that the Riesencodex is freely accessible online at <https://www.hs-rm.de/de/service/hochschul-und-landesbibliothek/suchenfinden/sondersammlungen/der-riesen>

codex-hildegards-von-bingen/ [accessed 27 June 2016].)

Throughout her narrative, Bain quotes extensively from current literature on Hildegard as well as from historical sources. For example, Bain cites specific liturgical elements included in the 1857 service, such as the song "O Sancta Hildegardis," which was sung to the same tune as "Ave Maria Klare," and Schneider's own two-stanza antiphon "Ave Hildegardis" using Hildegard's name as an acrostic.

Schneider's tireless efforts in studying and promoting of Hildegard in the nineteenth century can be understood in several lights. The erudite revival of liturgical chant championed by the Monks of Solesmes is well known, but a revival of chant was also underway in German areas, in the Cecilian movement, when Schneider presented Hildegard's "O virga ac diadema" in 1857. Bain describes how the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) was disruptive to the practice of German Catholicism and resulted in "a collective loss of association with the Latin liturgy and plainchant" in German churches, which tended to use the German vernacular and drew on the German hymn tradition (p. 122). Because of this disassociation with the Latin chant tradition, Schneider published "O virga ac diadema" and other of Hildegard's chants using a five-line staff and modern rhythmic notation. Bain explains that this sort of musical accommodation was necessary.

Schneider was succeeded by Johann Philipp Schmelzeis as parish priest in Eibingen. Schmelzeis took up Schneider's efforts promoting Hildegard, and even published a large book describing Hildegard's life and accomplishments, drawing upon Schneider's extensive research. In this biography, Schmelzeis included a chapter by Raymund Schlecht dedicated to Hildegard's music. Schlecht was a church music scholar who also transcribed several of Hildegard's chants for inclusion in this volume.

Confessionalization and national identity were bound together in the civil lives of Catholics and Protestants in Germanic countries in the nineteenth century. Thus Schneider and Schmelzeis's activities can be understood as personal exercises of that identity. The *Reichsdeputationshauptschluss* of 1803 had secularized ecclesiastical states by

incorporating them into nearby principalities, which, in some cases, placed Catholics under Protestant rule. In this reorganization, abbey properties, such as Hildegard's, were sometimes given over to the new ruler. The repercussions from such drastic restructuring were felt for decades, and, in the 1870s, state regulation of religious institutions resulted in strong resistance from clergy and bishops, who were sometimes jailed and exiled.

These historical and cultural details are significant, as Bain emphasizes, because they inform how we should understand Schneider's and Schmelzeis's presentation of Hildegard preeminently as a German Catholic. Both men lived at a time when it seemed that to be German was to be Protestant, and their work pushed back on that notion. In contrast, Bain reminds us that we are inclined to emphasize Hildegard's womanhood; for many twenty-first-century music students, Hildegard is preeminently a female composer. In either case, our reception says something about our cultural and historical context as well as our priorities.

The revival of Hildegard's music in the twentieth century was dazzling in its breadth and the ingenuity of those who engaged with her creations. A prime difference between this more recent revival, diverse as it was, and the nineteenth-century revival, was their mediums. Whereas Schneider, Schmelzeis, and the Monks of Solesmes used print media, twentieth-century Hildegard enthusiasts engaged and shared her music through recordings. In her introduction, Bain states that this book is weighed heavily toward the nineteenth century, and those interested in reading more about the more recent revival of Hildegard's music should consult two other articles by Bain: "Hildegard on 34th Street: Chant in the Marketplace," *Echo: A Music-Centered Journal* 6, no. 1 (2004) and "Hooked on Ecstasy: Performance 'Practice' and the Reception of the Music of Hildegard of Bingen," in *The Sounds and Sights of Performance in Early Music*, ed. Brian E. Power and Maureen Epp (Farnham, Surrey, Eng.: Ashgate, 2009).

While other examinations of Hildegard's reception, in various eras, are available, Bain's contribution in this book is musical: this is the story of the modern revival of a

medieval *composer*. This volume is especially relevant for medievalists and musicologists and would make an excellent inclusion in academic libraries. In addition to being an admirable resource for Hildegard scholars, this book is also helpful for those concerned with the history of church music, chant revival in the nineteenth century, and the work of Ludwig Schneider, a worthy scholar and a selfless man.

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Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph; A Biography. By Jan Swafford. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014. [xxi, 1077 p. ISBN 9780618054749. \$40.] Music examples, illustrations, appendix, bibliography, index.

Beethoven was a man of contradictions. Generous to a fault, he was often petty and could be duplicitous in his business affairs. He cared deeply for his nephew Karl but often treated him miserably. He made supreme declarations of faith in his music but disdained church dogma. He devoted himself to women he could not attain and, most heartrendingly of all, to an art that for much of his adulthood, he was unable to experience.

These contradictions come to the fore in Jan Swafford's *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph*, a vivid and sympathetic portrayal of Beethoven's life and music. His biography joins an impressive corpus of English-language biographies that includes those by Maynard Solomon (1977, 1998), William Kinderman (1995, 2009), David Wyn Jones (1998), Lewis Lockwood (2003), and Barry Cooper (2008), among others. It draws on several of these, but distinguishes itself in its more comprehensive scope and overall tone, geared more for music lovers than for scholars or performers. This is not to say that the book lacks scholarly rigor, only that much of the nitty-gritty—both biographical and musical—is relegated to the copious endnotes section, and that the ebb and flow of the text is considerably more narrative compared to these earlier biographies.

Written, according to the author, in the spirit of Alexander Wheelock Thayer's magisterial *Life of Ludwig van Beethoven* (the

Victorian-era biography that, in its most recent edition by Elliot Forbes, remains unsurpassed for richness of detail and documentary rigor), Swafford's book aims to present an unbiased view of its subject that prefers "objective fact" to "interpretation" (p. xv). Elusive though this goal may be, the book deftly navigates Beethoven's family history, political environment, and professional life to create a rich portrait of an individual whose reality has often been obscured by his legacy. Swafford's handling of Beethoven's Bonn years is especially effective and sets the tone for the biography. Rather than a mere prelude to the more musically interesting Vienna years, the Bonn chapters serve to establish Beethoven's lifelong investment in the ideals of the German *Aufklärung*, ideals that—as Swafford details—stayed with Beethoven throughout his career and marked him as an Enlightenment thinker in an increasingly romantic and politically repressive world.

The importance of Beethoven's *Bildung* is echoed in Swafford's conception of his music. Beethoven was not so much a revolutionary as a "radical evolutionary" who "based much of what he did on tradition, models, and authorities" without ever intending "to overthrow the past" (p. 365). Swafford supports this notion through clear and at times extensive analyses of individual works that occasionally make reference to Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and others (although, as he admits in the introduction, he does not "play the influences game as much as many writers do" [p. xvii]). A noted composer in his own right, Swafford brings his professional expertise to bear on his analyses, several of which proceed from a composer's-eye perspective. The lengthy analysis of the "Eroica" (chapter 17), for instance, shifts into present tense, makes frequent reference to the sketches, and involves a bit of creative speculation about Beethoven's compositional process. Purists may balk at the somewhat florid literary style of these passages, but they are arguably effective in simulating the creative moment for the reader.

Swafford treats the complexities of Beethoven's life with the sure hand of an experienced biographer (his previous writings include biographies of Ives and Brahms). To give just one example, in light