



Genre and Hildegard of Bingen's *Ordo virtutum*

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Introduction

The genre of Hildegard of Bingen's 12th-century work, *Ordo virtutum* (The Order of the Virtues), is one of its most puzzling aspects. It has been referred to as a play (Dronke and Fassler), a morality play (Corrigan), a music drama (Davidson), and a liturgical drama (Ricossa).¹ More popular writing frequently refers to it as the first opera, which is the least accurate description of the work.² While these genres are distinct in many ways, they share two things: they suggest that the work has a story and that it is meant for dramatic presentation. To understand the genre of the work and why it is so puzzling, this essay considers various elements, including the work's text, its notation in the manuscript, its musical construction, and its cultural context.

Hildegard's *Ordo virtutum*: Background

The story told in the *Ordo virtutum* has a large narrative arc about a young soul, *Anima*, who is tempted by the Devil and ventures away from the support of seventeen Virtues into the sins of the world. Feeling ashamed about her festering wounds inflicted by the Devil [*“quoniam in vulneribus feteo, quibus antiquus serpens me contaminavit”*], she returns to the welcome embrace and aid of the virtues (Humility, Chastity, and Mercy among them). The Devil is furious that the Soul has turned her back on him, but the Soul and the Virtues defeat him. He is tied up and Chastity stomps on his head. One possible source of Hildegard's inspiration for the story, in all likelihood, is the *Psychomachia*, a fourth-century poem by Prudentius (b. 348 AD).³ The approximately 1000-line poem describes a series of battles between personified Virtues and Vices, such as Faith and Idolatry, and Chastity and Lust. In each battle, a particular virtue conquers the vice it confronts. On a much larger and dramatic scale, Hildegard's *Ordo virtutum* is the story of a battle between a veritable army of Virtues against the personification of all Vices: The Devil. Just as Chastity in the *Ordo virtutum* crushes the head of the Devil (no. 82 in the accompanying score: *“caput tuum conculcavi”*),⁴ in the *Psychomachia* Faith treads on the

¹ Peter Dronke, ed., *Nine Medieval Latin Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 147; Margot E. Fassler, “Allegorical Architecture in *Scivias*: Hildegard's Setting for the *Ordo Virtutum*,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* vol. 67, no.2 (2014): 319; Vincent Corrigan, “Introduction to the Sources,” in Hildegard of Bingen: *Ordo virtutum: A Comparative Edition*, edited by Vincent Corrigan (Lions Bay, Canada: The Institute of Mediaeval Music), ix; Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, “Introduction,” in Hildegard of Bingen: *Ordo virtutum*, edited with English translation by Audrey Ekdahl Davidson (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985), i; and Luca Ricossa, “Préface,” in Hildegard von Bingen: *Ordo Virtutum*, edited by Luca Ricossa (Genève, 2013), 1.

² Rosalind Miles, *Who Cooked the Last Supper? The Women's History of the World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 132.

³ For an evocative, rhyming 18th-century English translation of the poem, see: Prudentius, *Psychomachia; The war of the soul: or, the battle of the virtues, and vices*, translated from Aur. Prudentius Clemens (London: 1743).

⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, *Ordo virtutum*. [A-R Online Music Anthology](#) (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, Inc., 2007–). Login required for full functionality

neck of Idolatry.⁵ And although written in the fourth century (eight centuries before Hildegard was writing her works), Prudentius' poem was very popular from the ninth through the thirteenth centuries (more than 300 manuscript copies of the poem survive), including some in the area that Hildegard lived, the Rhineland.⁶

The Reception of Hildegard's *Ordo virtutum*

The *Ordo virtutum* has an interesting reception history even within Hildegard's own lifetime, since it appears in two different parts of her oeuvre.⁷ It appears as text only in a shorter form at the end of her large visionary work, *Scivias*, which Hildegard completed in the early 1150s.⁸ Its second appearance is in expanded form as a musical work at the end of her collection of music in one of two manuscripts containing her musical corpus, a twelfth-century manuscript held today in Wiesbaden and often referred to as the "*Riesencodex*."⁹ While the *Ordo virtutum* was copied in the fifteenth century, most likely by the Abbot Trithemius who had a particular interest in her life and works, it really did not become widely known until the late twentieth century. While nuns at the modern Hildegard Abbey in Eibingen began the modern circulation of this work through a complete German translation and edition in modern notation in 1927, the 1982 Harmonia Mundi recording and international performances of Sequentia Ensemble firmly established the *Ordo virtutum* as a major work in the medieval repertory.¹⁰

Even with extensive research on the *Ordo virtutum*, it is unknown when it was, or ought to be, performed. It is usually not difficult to determine the occasions most chant should be sung. The genre of chant is evident from the text and the textual-musical structure, with the content of the text suggesting a particular date or celebration in the Church calendar. Moreover, medieval church manuscripts include rubrics (instructions) that are detailed and specific about when individual chants are to be performed. Customarily inscribed in red ink ("rubric" comes from the Latin "*ruber*" for red), these instructions denote the liturgical feast day (Christmas Day, for example), the liturgical hour when applicable (Vespers, Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, etc.), and the type of chant (a responsory, a hymn, an antiphon, etc.). The opening rubric for the *Ordo virtutum* in the Wiesbaden manuscript is less informative, indicating only that, "The *Ordo virtutum* begins [*Incipit Ordo virtutum*]."¹¹ Nevertheless, the subsequent rubrics reveal much about the function of the *Ordo virtutum*. Instead of indicating a specific feast day or chant genre

⁵ Prudentius, *Psychomachia*, 10.

⁶ Sinead O'Sullivan, *Early Medieval Glosses on Prudentius' Psychomachia: the Weitz tradition* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2004), xix. O'Sullivan states further that the *Psychomachia* "attracted more Old High German glosses than any other non-biblical author in the early Middle Ages." 5.

⁷ For an extended essay on the relationship between the two versions, see Margot E. Fassler, "Allegorical Architecture in *Scivias*: Hildegard's Setting for the *Ordo Virtutum*," 317–78.

⁸ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, translated by Mother Columbus Hart and Jane Bishop (New York, Paulist Press, 1990), 529–32.

⁹ Wiesbaden, Hochschul- und Landesbibliothek RheinMain, Manuscript 2 (D-WI1 2). The *Ordo virtutum* is found on ff.478v–81v.

¹⁰ [Böckeler, Maura and Pudentiana Barth], *Der heiligen Hildegard von Bingen. Reigen der Tugenden, Ordo Virtutum. Ein Singspiel*, edited with German translation by the Hildegard Abbey (Berlin: St. Augustinus-Verlag, 1927); Sequentia, *Hildegard von Bingen: Ordo virtutum*, CD, Deutsche Harmonia Mundi 77051-2-RG, 1982/1998.

¹¹ D-WI1 2, f.478v.

as the rubrics do for Hildegard's other music, the manuscript rubrics in the *Ordo virtutum* provide instead the names of the singing characters similar to those in modern scripts for plays: *Anima* ("Soul"), *Humilitas* ("Humility"), *Virtutes* ("Virtues"), *Victoria* ("Victory"), *Diabolus* ("Devil") etc. Several manuscript rubrics suggest explicit kinds of emotional reaction and perhaps movement. *Anima* is sometimes described as "The Soul, rejoicing [*Felix anima*]" (no. 5 in the score, p. 2) or as "The Soul, unhappy [*Infelix, anima*]" (no. 13, p. 4).¹² Another rubric occurs when *Anima* is responding to the virtues and it reads (no. 9, p. 3): "The troubled soul, lamenting [*Sed, gravata, anima conqueritur*]," followed by a rubric telling us that the Virtues are responding directly to *Anima* (no.10, p. 3): "Virtues to the Soul [*Virtutes ad animam illam*]." "To the Soul" occurs repeatedly, and when *Anima* returns to the Virtues, the rubric reads (no. 59, p. 15), "The Soul, lamenting and penitent, invoking the virtues [*Querele anime penitentis et virtutes invocantis*]." The first time that the Devil speaks (no. 17, p. 4), the accompanying rubric indicates "The loud voice of the Devil to the Soul [*Streptus diaboli ad animam illam*]." Taken as a whole, all of these rubrics suggest a dramatic realization.

Dramatic Rendering

In the Middle Ages, this kind of dramatic rendering was a feature of some Christian liturgical services.¹³ The earliest of these representations developed from tropes, which are special and newly written verses combined with a traditional liturgical chant. These embodied representations of sung versions of biblical stories or the lives of saints functioned much like the other visual story-telling media in churches and cathedrals, such as sculpture, stained glass, frescoes, and paintings. A sung celebration involving movement and vestments (clothing worn by the clergy) can make stories visible and comprehensible, even to those with minimal or no Latin. The earliest trope of this type is an Easter story, the popular biblical story of the three Marys visiting the tomb of Christ to anoint his body, recounted in three of the four gospels (see, for example, the Gospel of Mark 16:1–7). Visual depictions of this scene abound in the Middle Ages and later.

Similarly, hundreds of examples of the trope based on the story appear in medieval manuscripts for Easter, and are often described as the *Visitatio sepulchri* (Visitation of the Tomb; called the "[Quem quaeritis in sepulchro](#)" in the A-R Online Music Anthology).¹⁴ A late tenth-century Winchester manuscript version of the *Visitatio sepulchri* includes very detailed instructions about movement and vestments:

While the third lesson [of the Night Office] is being read, four of the brethren shall vest, one of whom, wearing an alb [a white vestment] as though for some different purpose, shall enter and go stealthily to the place of the "sepulchre" and sit there quietly, holding a palm in his hand. Then, while the third respond is being sung, the other three brethren,

¹² While the rubrics are in the manuscript, the numbering is a modern editorial addition.

¹³ Michael Norton has argued persuasively about abandoning the term "liturgical drama" and moving away from thinking about these rites as "dramatic" in a modern sense, and instead thinking about them as "representational." See Michael Norton, *Liturgical Drama and the Reimagining of Medieval Theatre* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2017), 1–18.

¹⁴ Anonymous, "Quem quaeritis in sepulchro" ([A-R Online Music Anthology](#) [login required for full functionality], 2007–).

vested in copes [ceremonial cloaks] and holding thuribles [incense holders] in their hands, shall enter in their turn and go to the place of the “sepulchre,” step by step, as though searching for something. Now these things are done in imitation of the angel seated on the tomb and of the women coming with perfumes to anoint the body of Jesus.¹⁵

The instructions continue and describe when “the brethren” should sing, and provide further directions such as the carrying of linens.

Other stories from the life of Christ similarly emerge as newly written chant texts that include sung dialogue.¹⁶ In the eleventh century, the same kind of construction found in the Easter story trope is adapted to accompany the Introit at Epiphany, commemorating the “Adoration of the Magi,” the visit of the three wise men to the infant Jesus (called “*Quem quaeritis in praesepe*” in the A-R Online Music Anthology).¹⁷ Paired with the introit *Puer natus est* [A child is born]” an angel asks the royal deputation: “Whom do you seek in the manger?” In the twelfth century, many new dramas appear including stories from the life of Christ, as well as various Christmas plays, such as the lament of Rachel over the slaughter of the innocents, a set of miracles of St. Nicholas, and a drama for Christmas Day called the *Ordo prophetarum*, focusing on biblical prophets announcing Christ’s birth. The *Ordo prophetarum* is based on a sermon from the fifth or sixth century (which used to be ascribed to Augustine), and it is an odd work. Ostensibly an address to the Jews (who were unlikely to attend the Christmas rite and hear the sermon), it uses words of the Old Testament prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel etc.) and those from the New Testament, including Elizabeth, to show the Jews their erroneous ways.¹⁸ It was a standard reading or “*Lectio*” for Matins during the Christmas season, and includes a procession of prophets carrying their characteristic symbols, such as Daniel with a spear.

Echoes of these texts are found in Hildegard’s *Ordo virtutum*, which begins with the Patriarchs and Prophets, an allusion to the *Ordo prophetarum*. Just as the Easter and Epiphany dramas begin with a question, the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets in the *Ordo virtutum* initiate the story by asking about the virtues, “*Qui sunt hi, qui ut nubes?* [Who are these, who come like clouds?]” Even though it contains many biblical references, the *Ordo virtutum* is neither a biblical story nor the story of a saint (to be used on his or her feast day), and so does not belong to an obvious liturgical occasion.

¹⁵ David Hiley, *Gregorian Chant*, Cambridge Introductions to Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 146.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 141–53.

¹⁷ Anonymous, “*Quem quaeritis in praesepe*” ([A-R Online Music Anthology](#) [login required for full functionality], 2006).

¹⁸ Edward Noble Stone, *A translation of chapters XI–XVI of the Pseudo-Augustinian sermon against Jews, Pagans and Arians, concerning the creed. Also of the Ordo Prophetarum of St. Martial of Limoges*, University of Washington Publications in Language and Literature Vol. 4, No. 3, 195–214 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1928).

Performative Considerations

As to its musical style, the work is similar to the rest of Hildegard's musical output, grounded in the modal system of her era. Just like other chant from the period, the *Ordo virtutum*, in its manuscript format, is notated as melody alone, with neumes on 4-line staves. This system of notation is precise about pitch, but not about rhythm, leaving rhythmic interpretation open for performers.

Hildegard uses a number of large-scale conceptual devices to structure the work. One of the most striking of these devices is that the Devil (*Diabolus*)—is given speech but not music. By assigning the Virtues melody and denying the Devil musical enunciation, Hildegard projects a strong opposition between the Virtues and the Devil, aligning the Virtues aurally and theologically with the celestial harmony of heaven and Satan with the noise of hell. Unable to sing celestial music because he is barred from heaven, the Devil can only speak or shout. Another large-scale device is the framing of the work by large “choruses.” The *Ordo virtutum* begins with the patriarchs and prophets together in alternation with the Virtues as a group, and ends with all of the Virtues, and presumably *Anima*, singing together in unison. Throughout the work, the Virtues sing sometimes individually, and sometimes as a group, always indicated clearly through the rubrics.

Modern editions often divide the work into four large sections, as it is here in the [accompanying score](#). In Part 1 the Soul sings in alternation with the Virtues as a group until *Scientia Dei* (“Knowledge of God”) enters as an independent voice addressing the Soul, who leaves with the Devil (no. 12 in the score, pp. 3–4). In Part 2 the Virtues introduce themselves individually following a formula: “*Ego Humilitas* (I am Humility),” “*Ego Karitas* (I am Charity),” etc., singing in alternation with the Virtues as a group (pp. 6–14 in the score). The Soul returns to the Virtues in Part 3 (pp. 15–19) singing in alternation with them again, and together they defeat the Devil in Part 4 (pp. 19–22). Throughout the work, beyond the distinguishing features of spoken text, solo singing, and group singing, the various dramatic entries are distinguished from each other as well through modal changes, frequently through shifts between D and E mode melodies. Part 2, when the individual Virtues are introducing themselves, includes the most variety in the modal designations, while all of the other sections (Prologue, Parts 1, 3, 4, and Epilogue/Procession) mostly use modes 1–4 (the authentic and plagal versions of D and E modes).

All of these elements work together in Part 4 to support the story's dramatic culmination: the binding of the Devil. The Devil begins this section (no. 72, p. 19 in the score) by speaking in anger with *Anima* for turning her back on him. The next four entries are all in D mode, beginning with mode 2 (D plagal) and continuing with mode 1 (D authentic), until the Virtues respond as a group (no. 77, p. 20 in the score), and audibly shift to mode 4 (E authentic). Modes 2 and 1 return when Humility orders the Virtues to bind the Devil, and the Virtues do as they have been asked: “*O regina nostra, tibi parebimus* [O our queen, to you we will be obedient]” (no. 79, p. 20). To emphasize this significant moment in the narrative, Victory enters (no. 80, p. 20) and not only changes to the C mode (transposed mode 6 or 8), but rather than shift down by step to C to begin, she leaps up a minor seventh, suddenly shifting to an upper register to achieve an exciting

musical climax, “*Gaudete, o socii, quia antiquus serpens ligatus est* [Rejoice, O companions, because the old serpent has been bound!].”

Conclusion

This essay began by considering the genre of Hildegard of Bingen's *Ordo virtutum*. The difficulty with most of the terms that have been used to describe it is their association with much later cultural innovations. The “morality play,” for example, became an important genre in the fourteenth century,¹⁹ “opera” was not invented until the late sixteenth-century, the “music-drama” is associated with 19th-century composer Richard Wagner, and the term “liturgical drama” was introduced first in the nineteenth century.²⁰ The terms “play” and “drama” on their own suggest text alone as well as a theatrical public performance, a concept not appropriate to a work that came out of a monastic institution. The *Ordo virtutum* does not belong to any specific liturgy, so even the historically appropriate term “rite” is not correct either. Presumably the work was sung at Rupertsberg, the convent founded by Hildegard, as some kind of devotional practice not for public consumption. As a non-liturgical and non-biblical work, its genre is best described as a “religious representation” (a useful term introduced recently by Michael Norton), because it has a religious theme and involves a visual representation.²¹

¹⁹ Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 147.

²⁰ Norton, *Liturgical Drama and the Reimagining of Medieval Theatre*, 10–11 and 19–53.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

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For further recordings of the *Ordo virtutum*, see the online discography of Hildegard's music at: <http://www.medieval.org/emfaq/composers/hildegard.html>