A Contemporary Artist

APPROACHES A REPERTOIRE FROM THE XII CENTURY

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Artículo recibido en agosto de 2017 y aceptado en septiembre de 2017
Abstract

When I became a student of the M A in Ritual Chant and Song at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance (2015-2016) I did not have any previous formal music education or any academic Gregorian chant background. Therefore, I offer here a description of the experience that reveals the moments when I started to embody and recognize in practice the basic modal elements of western chant. The paper begins with a literature review that informs the reader about Hildegard von Bingen’s life, her theology of music and her cycle of songs, Symphonia armonica celestium revelatorium. Then, I depict the auto ethnographic exploration of understanding theory through practice and, finally, I present my conclusions.

Keywords: Auto ethnography, practice-based research, Hildegard Von Bingen, chant

Teoría puesta en práctica. Una artista contemporánea indaga en un repertorio del siglo XII

Resumen

Sin haber cursado estudios formales de música y sin ninguna formación académica en canto gregoriano, entre a estudiar una Maestría en Canto y Canción. Rituales en la Academia Irlandesa de Música y Danza (2015-2016). Por consiguiente, en este artículo ofrece una descripción de la manera en que empecé a encarnar y reconocer a través de la práctica los elementos básicos del repertorio de canto occidental. El artículo empieza con una revisión de literatura en la que se informa al lector sobre la vida de Hildegarda de Bingen, su teología musical y su ciclo de canciones Symphonia armonica celestium revelatorium. A continuación, represento la autoexploração etnográfica de la teoría de la comprensión a través de la práctica y, finalmente, se presentarán las conclusiones.

Palabras clave: auto etnografía; investigación basada en la práctica; Hildegarda de Bingen; canto

Da teoria à prática. Um artista contemporâneo aborda um repertório do século XII

Resumo

Quando comecei minha formação no Mestrado em Cantos e Canções Rituais na Irish World Academy of Music and Dance (2015-2016) não tinha formação musical formal prévia ou conhecimentos académicos sobre o canto gregoriano. Portanto, apresento aqui uma descrição da experiência que revela os momentos quando comecei a incorporar e reconhecer através da prática os elementos modais básicos do repertório do canto occidental. O artigo começa com uma revisão da literatura que informa ao leitor sobre a vida de Hildegard von Bingen, sua teologia da música e seu ciclo de canções, Symphonia armonica celestium revelatorium. Em seguida, represento a exploração autoetnográfica através da prática e, finalmente, apresento as minhas conclusões.

Palavras-chave: auto etnografia; pesquisa baseada na prática; Hildegard von Bingen; canto

Introduction

It was the year 2013, I was part of the Ensemble for Vocal Exploration of the Andes (EEVA, for its initials in Spanish) of the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia. The director of the ensemble, Carolina Gambiao, gave each member of the group a copy of a modern transcription of Hildegard of Bingen’s “O virtus sapientia” She introduced Hildegard as a German Abbess from the 12th century, a theologian, a visionary, a composer, a scientist, a writer. I remember finding different translations of the poem, the antiphon within the PDF file of the facsimile and realizing the importance of monk Volmar in her work. The medieval score was a beautiful image that I did not know how to read. Moreover, singing this chant with the ensemble made clear to me that Hildegard’s work offered something dear to my heart: the fusion of acoustic and graphical images and the possibility to learn about how one author developed an interdisciplinary work.

During the year (2015–2016) I studied the MA in Ritual Chant and Song at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance. When I started this course, I did not have any previous formal music education or academic background in religious, western chant. Therefore, I must be stated that the practice described here started when exploring the following question: Could I give life to the words and music that I had briefly encountered, forgotten or indeed that I had never heard? In other words, How does an eclectic contemporary scribe-singer could attempt an exploration from scribbles, transcriptions and translations to the voice? Thus, this paper offers the description and analysis of an open exploration that stems from intuition. Long before writing this paper I choose Hildegard of Bingen’s Symphonia armonica celestium revelatorium as a vehicle to get involved with a distant repertoire. Then, the problem was how to become familiar with the pneumatic notation of the manuscripts, to be able to transcribe it and sing it. Therefore, the second stage of my process was to write a literature review that informed me about the context of Hildegard through. To sum up… this paper depicts the experience of a contemporary artist that merged theory into practice while exploring the above-mentioned question.

Hildegard von Bingen’s Biographical Overview

Hildegard von Bingen was born in 1098 to the noble family of Hildebert von Gut Bernersheim, in the diocese of Mainz. Her parents “dedicated her to God as a tithe” (Guibert, as cited by Newman, 1989, p. 5), by giving the child to a religious woman named Jutta von Spanheim. The gesture was also intended to strengthen the relationship between their noble families. Jutta raised the girl under the rule of St. Benedict, teaching her how to read Latin and chant the Psalter, the centerpiece of monastic prayer, in an elementary way. It is possible that, during this period of time, Hildegard’s education commenced “in the house of Lady Uda, a widow of Göllheim” (Newman, 1998, p. 5). However, it is known as a fact that it was Jutta and three girls (one of whom was Hildegard) received their monastic vows on November 1, 1112 from Otto, bishop of Bamberg. Therefore, officially joining the community near Disbodenberg, that was based on an ancient site that had been founded by an Irish hermit in the seventh century. This place had been abandoned for a time and was refounded in 1108 by monks. When the four girls moved into the building, it was being restored. (Newman, 1998, p. 1-5). By the year 1136 the small cluster had grown into the monastery and Jutta had passed away. Consequently, Volmar of St. Disbodenberg, the monk “who would become her lifelong friend, secretary and confidant,” (Newman, 1998, p. 8) was the person entrusted with her further education.

After Jutta’s death, the other nuns in the monastery elected Hildegard as their magistra. It is noteworthy that Hildegard would always refer to herself as an “uneducated” creature. On the grounds of being a woman, she did not have the facilities a young man of her vocation and status would receive, nor was she given a cathedral school education or the opportunity to “follow itinerant masters as a wandering scholar” (Newman, 1998, p. 6-7). Therefore, the mixture of her insecure command of Latin grammar with the fact that throughout her lifetime she cited divine revelations as her only source of wisdom, her declarations of being constantly afflicted by illnesses because she felt terrified of writing the divine command, are some of the reasons that gave her a voice as a prophet, as an author. Otherwise, her work would have been unthinkable during the twelfth century (Newman, 1998, p. 6-7).

In 1141, she experienced the divine call that commanded her to “tell and write what she saw and heard in her visions” (Newman 1998, p. 5). She called the gift of the reflection of the living light,” (Hildegard, as cited by Newman 1989, p. 7) a divine voice that addressed her in Latin and dictated the complex liturgical weave of symbolic
forms that are evident in her visions, writings and music (Carisius in Newman, 1998, p. 315).

Around 1167–1168, Pope Eugene III recognized her as a visionary and as a prophet, by publicly reading an incomplete version of Scivias before a synod of bishops. (Newman, 1998, p. 11). As a response to the reading, Hildegard received a letter that gave her the Holy license to keep on writing and became a celebrity throughout Europe. The effect was that she received and answered floods of correspondence regarding God’s advice. The letters came from “emperors, kings, queens, and popes through archbishops, abbesses and abbots, to nunns and monks, laywomen and laymen” (Ferrante in Newman, 1998, p. 92). Another effect was that the Monastery of Disibodenberg could not accommodate the numerous postulants it started to attract, and by 1148 she received a revelation from the Holy Spirit (Van Engen in Newman, 1998, p. 42), declaring that she must found a convent near Rigenen on Mount St. Rupert (Newman, 1998, p. 12).

She moved to new convent sometime around 1150 and published Scivias in 1151. We know that, during the years she was finishing Scivias, she started to collect the cycle of songs titled Symphonia armonie celestium revelatorii (Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations; the excerpts of her medical book Physica (The Book of Simple Medicine), or Nine Books on the Subtleties of Different Kinds of Creatures) and Causae et curae (The Book of Compound Medicine or Causes and Cures). In 1158 she started writing Liber divinorum operum (The Book of Life’s Works). Around 1165, she also founded a daughter house for the nuns of Redemption in the diocese of Worms, which later with the soul, sing praises to god through its own voice. (Hildegard, as cited in Teitler, 1998, p. 185).

To sum up, the songs in one way or the other are like virtues—that is, divine ideas that can be worked on in the human mind.

Symphonia armonie celestium revelatorium

Symphonia armonie celestium revelatorium (Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations) is the biggest chant repertoire of the Middle Ages collected by an author (Fassler, 2017 Music in the Medieval West). The title of the compilation expresses Hildegard’s belief that the harmonious order of the universe could be revealed through song to humans. It is a medieval and classical idea of the universe ordered according “to number and proportion, and the reflection of this order in sound led to the dictum that to understand music is nothing other than to have knowledge of the ordering of the universe” (Plut., 1996, p. 7). These chants intended for mass and personal office at her monastery grew out of her visionary experience, revealed from the divine and happened to be the medium where soul and body united. In different writings, Drooke, Newman, Richter Plass and Fassler state that this compilation of music, like all of Hildegard’s works, celebrate incarnation, the mystery of the divine becoming a man as the son of Mary. In the abedus words, “Thus the word designates the body, but music manifests the spirit. For the harmony of heaven proclaims the divinity of God’s son, and the word makes known his humanity” (Hildegard as cited by Newman, 1998, p. 27).

Theory into Practice

After about eight months of academic immersion into the immense amount of information that western plainchant offers, I took a workshop about Hildegard von Bingen. The fact that she is recognized composer, poet, a woman, made the difference to me. Her name was a concrete reference to study and sort out the historical context of chant. In other words, she became the...
detonator for me to identify and learn the similarities and differences between her musical work and Gregorian chant.

Nevertheless, the process I followed commenced when observing the Dendermonde Codex (c. 1175) and the Riesenkodex (c. 1180–1190) with the sensibility of someone that once had made transcriptions from Old Spanish to modern Spanish. This means, that I knew that comparing the Gothic musical script with a modern transcription and the translations of the poems in a language I understood was a good exercise to continue my familiarization with Latin language while learning how to read the words when glimpsing at the codex. As a result, I did various readings and transcriptions of the translations of the poems offered by Barbara Newman’s (1998) critical edition of the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum (Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations). The objective of transcribing some of the poems into my computer was to read carefully the words in English in order to connect the meanings from Latin to English and learn by heart their meanings. Now, it is worth noting that I could not elect the passages by looking at the music because I am not able to sight read. Moreover, one of my objectives was to learn how to read the notation. Therefore, the possibility of hearing recordings in order to choose the pieces was not an option at this stage, the reason was that I wanted to discover the sound while learning how to read.

To recapitulate the first steps of my process, first, I organized a document with the digital images of the sacred songs of both the Dendermonde Codex (c. 1175) and the Riesenkodex (c. 1180–1190) accompanied with the text in Latin and the English prose and verse translations offered in Von Bingen Hildegard S. & Newman B. (1998). Consequently, I chose to transcribe to modern notation precise songs, verses, lines or words of the chosen sacred songs to modern notation.

Somewhere in the process of learning a selection of the lines of the psalm antiphon Aer enim volat by heart, I found that in the precise moment when I was waking up I would be singing in my head “Aer enim volat et tercia undique volat” (Figure 2). As I became conscious of the action, I realized that the musical text “et tercia undique volat” (Figure 2) was replacing the words “et cum omnibus.” (Figure 3). In other words, I was mixing two different text lines from different antiphons. I was putting together a line of the song that I had been rehearsing the day before with a line that I had learned in the year 2013, when I was part of EEVA.

After revising the scores, I understood that both antiphons had an E as the final note. This means that antiphons Aer enim volat and O virtus Sapientie are both in the E mode. Moreover, if we observe the lines in question carefully, we find that both fragments share almost the same melody (Figure 4):

As you can see above, the elements encircled are identical in pitch and in pneumatic notation. Noteworthy, when referring to the word pitch, while studying medieval chant:

“We should remember that in this literature pitch is a relative concept, a matter of whole—and half-step relationships in modal formulas, rather than ‘absolute’ pitch or measurable frequencies, as is the case of contemporary music. So instead of saying D, meaning a particular sound or pitch class, we should say ‘protus quality,’ relating to mannerie (or pairs of scales) and mode (…) For sake of convenience, however, we will use the term pitch throughout our discussions” (Fassler, 2014, p. 3–4).

Therefore, the first two notes of both musical cells (Figure 4) correspond to the intonation, the characteristic fifth in Hildegard’s piece, “a pure and perfect interval for medieval ears” (Fassler, 2014, p. 13). She also defined the mode as an “arrangement of intervals within a sound-spectrum, the range within the tessitura of pitches, the position of the primary tone and its related tone-series, the handling of the analogy of a musical system functioning as a language” (Thornton paraphrases Trauter, 1982, p. 13). It is important to notice this, because it was the first time over the course of the year that I was starting to feel inter-textual correspondences of a mode, of a theme in a natural, unconscious manner. The words themselves thus correspond to the breath of life: air and the third wing and convey the information about note grouping while supporting my memory (Trentler, 2003, p. 139).

Conclusions

While “Hildegard would have known each psalm text in several guises: each psalm was sung in its entirety in the office, framed by interpretive antiphon, and various psalm verses were employed in Mass and Office liturgies in accord with a feast and its themes” (Fassler, 2004, p. 219), I was embodying the medieval thought as someone from the 21st century. Feeling the modes and understanding the connection of the meaning of both words and music came randomly to me. It was the happy coincidence of having learned a song by heart years ago and unexpectedly studying another antiphon that had these precise characteristics. Therefore, it is clear that the traditional practice to acquire the sensation of the modes by following the order of the liturgical actions—for instance learning an antiphon first, then the psalm verses, and finally the doxology—was, at that time, and is still now, an idea, a way to proceed in a long term, in order for me to join the chant repertoire.

Nevertheless, while reflecting upon the fact that I am not interested in learning the order of the liturgical rite because I am not a religious person, I note that, after an intense year of imperfect timing, only through the order of the cento “Aer enim volat et tersa undique volat” had I started to feel the basic objective of intoned psalmody. In other words, I was embodying the theory by “feeling the purpose of the musical-textual (…) standard pedagogy of the middle ages (…) [that was] so much part of the culture that a chorister, canon, monk, or nun could sing the entire psalter using all nine tones as adapted in his or her local practice” (Fassler, 2014, p. 20). Analogically speaking, the melody had found its way through the text and into me, —the text was delivering a message.

The message pointed out that I was to work under the theme of the breath of life, the Holy Spirit, air and develop what I see in my inner thoughts and believe to be emerging naturally as my creative work: that is known in literature as a cento, what draftsmen refer to as a collage and what composers think of as music cmentation. To sum up, this cento triggered the idea to compose a praise one can sing everywhere. This piece is in process and is titled “Vivificando formas.”

Therefore, in order to develop the piece, I read Thornton’s writings about her experience as an interpreter as advice, and understood that it is indispensable to unravel the symbols in pursuance of familiarizing myself with Hildegard’s thought, with all her written legacy. This thoughtful process has continued; for instance, I did a musical analysis of Hildegard’s sequence for the Holy Spirit, “O ignis spiritus paracutis,” and learned it by heart. The experience has helped me to understand Hildegard as a generative composer who takes musical cells and plays with them by contracting and expanding the material to unravel the melodies. In addition to this, I have been carefully identifying and transcribing musical cells in Symphonia to observe the links between music and words, and to recognize the analogy of a musical system functioning as a language” (Gaze in Newman, 1998, p. 134). Additionally to this, I have continued finding the synonyms of the words that relate with the breath of life in order to develop my modal language and the song that I have envisaged. Finally I have and will continue reviewing literature, hearing recordings, and singing to enrich this project.

5 Regarding the neumatic notation and rhythm, Ricketts maintains that Hildegard’s music matches the textual structure rather than the “medieval tradition in which the components of a musical phrase follows the segmentation of language, establishing a phrase hierarchically articulated by the counterparts of the common, colons, and parentheses” (Ricketts, 2010, p. 105).

6 This is the exercise that Thornton mentions, it helped me develop the exercise that I developed: “I compiled a lexicon of words in their musical settings—E mode all of the 3rd person singular verbs, all the proper nouns, all the gerundive phrases, etc—looking for D-mode, C-mode, etc. (…) I divided them into groups corresponding to the way she had divided up the cosmos Heavenly, terrestrial, Earthly, etc. Areas which had special interest for me—the natural world, the feminine world—seemed to have had special interest for her, for she took particular care in her tone settings of words of these genres. I discovered there was a place within this cosmos for every idea, and that every modal gesture contributed to this gigantic matrix of meaning and tone. One merely had to do is locate where one’s self at any given moment. If a rhetorical avant is set in the Heavenly, Earthly, or Infernal, one must be aware of its manner and usage, if a mode is being used in conjunction with or in conflict with its own nature, this knowledge will affect one’s thinking and performance” (Thornton, as cited by Duffy, 2008, p. 246).
References


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Artículo de análisis o reflexión producto de investigación recibido en agosto de 2017 y aceptado en septiembre de 2017.