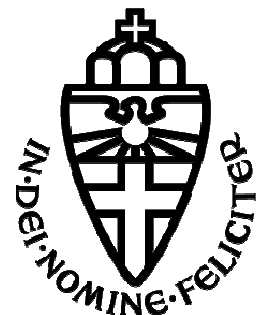


Where Body Meets Soul, Hildegard of Bingen's Musical Notions Analysed Through the Lens of Embodied Cognition

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Bachelor thesis

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Handed in on: 15 March 2022
Word Count: 9181



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Introduction

O beautiful, O sweet!
How deep is that delight that God received in you,
when 'round you he enwrapped his warm embrace,
so that his Son was suckled at your breast.

Your womb rejoiced
as from you sounded forth the whole heavenly symphony.
For as a virgin you have borne the Son of God—
in God your chastity shone bright.

Your flesh rejoiced
just as a blade of grass on which the dew has fall'n,
viridity within it to infuse—just so it happened unto you,
O mother of all joy!

So now in joy gleams all the Church like dawn,
resounds in symphony
because of you, the Virgin sweet
and worthy of all praise, Maria,
God's mother. Amen.¹

These are the final lines to '*Ave Generosa*', a praise to the virgin Mary. It describes how her womb and flesh rejoiced and how she sounded out the 'heavenly symphony' as she birthed Christ. This is only one song in a large repertoire of chant music written by Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century nun at the monastery of Disibodenberg and abbess at the monastery of Rupertsberg. She was born in 1098 into a wealthy family and was taken into Disibodenberg at age 8 where she would spend her first years as a recluse. She was educated by her mentor Jutta of Sponheim in a selection of theological subjects typical for female monastics. This included chant singing.

From a very young age (there are no records of exactly what age) she had begun receiving what she believed to be visions from heaven. It wouldn't be until she was in her 40's that she began writing these visions down, not only in the form of books but also to music. She continued writing until her death in 1179 and a great body of her work has survived to this day. Her books and letters can still be read and

¹ "Ave generosa", International Society of Hildegard von Bingen Studies. September 16, 2014, Accessed 9 March 2022, <http://www.hildegard-society.org/2014/09/ave-generosa-hymn.html>.

her music has been recorded multiple times.² In her books and letters she discusses (among many other topics) her thoughts on music. Music to her was a very important medium through which one could connect to God and heaven. As we will see, these descriptions of music often come in very bodily terms. She speaks for instance of music emanating from the body because God is 'within it' or of the body trembling with joy at the sound of the heavenly symphony.

It is from these writings that this paper's claim is derived: Hildegard of Bingen's notions about music were directly influenced by her understanding of the embodied experience of music. She believed that earthly music could and should reflect the immense bodily joy produced by the music of angels. She furthermore believed that a person could only reflect heavenly music if God was 'in their body'. In short, this paper aims to prove what the lyrics '*Ave Generosa*', with their references to the rejoicing of the flesh and the womb, hint towards: Hildegard of Bingen understood that music and the human body were connected.

This paper will examine two of Hildegard's writings: her first visionary book: *Scivias*, and a selection of letters she has written during her life.³ These sources were chosen over other writings (such as her other books: *Liber Vitae Meritorum* and *Liber Divinorum Operum* or the lyrics to her music) because they offer the most direct and clear descriptions of Hildegard's thoughts on music. These writings have been analysed with a focus on what Hildegard says in them about the body and music. The findings from this analysis have then been examined through the lens of a concept called 'embodied cognition', which in short explains how people derive meaning from music primarily through the bodily experience music gives them. This concept has gained traction since the 1990s and has since been applied, amongst many other topics, to the topic of music. The most prominent names in this field are music theorist Arnie Cox and psychologist Leonid Perlovsky. Both have developed similar theories that give a clear method through which to examine how Hildegard's

² For a recording of '*Ave Generosa*' see for instance: Hildegard of Bingen, *Ave Generosa*, directed by Ola Gjeilo, performed by the Choir of Royal Holloway (2017, London: Decca Classics).

³ For *Scivias* the following translation has been used: Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias. Trans*, Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (Mahwah: Johnist Press, 1990).; For Hildegard's letters the following translation has been used: Joseph L. Baird, *The personal correspondence of Hildegard of Bingen* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2006).

understanding of embodied experience shaped her thoughts on music.⁴ In short (this will be more thoroughly explained when discussing Cox and Perlovsky's theories) they state that people give meaning to music through three steps: first a person has prior knowledge, then they experience the music with their body, finally the brain combines this prior knowledge and the embodied experience to attach a meaning to the music. An oversimplified example might be a person having prior experience with a certain sound making them sad, hearing this sound in music then gives them a 'lump in their throat' which causes them to attach the meaning: 'This song is sad'.

By viewing *Scivias* and Hildegard's letters through the lens of this concept the conclusion will be drawn that she was very much aware of the bodily experience of music and that this awareness shaped her thoughts on what music was and should be.

Previous historical research

Many insightful conclusions have already been drawn regarding Hildegard's notions about music. The body-specific focus that is purposed in this thesis has however mostly been underlit. These conclusions do still form a strong foundation on which this research can expand.

Many scholars, most notably medievalist Barbara Newman and medieval literature expert Peter Dronke agree that to understand Hildegard's thoughts, we have to understand her specific worldview: Her world was monastic. She was taken into Disibodenberg as a child, she was educated according to monastic custom and by the time she started composing she has risen to the position of abbess. It is not surprising then that the music she composed was meant primarily for her monastery.⁵

⁴ Arnie Cox, "The mimetic hypothesis and embodied musical meaning." *Musicae scientiae* 5:2 (2001): 195-212.; Leonid Perlovsky, "Origin of music and embodied cognition." *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (2015) Accessed 9 March 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00538>.

⁵ Barbara Newman, "Sibyl of the Rhine, Hildegard's life and times", in: *Voice of the living light: Hildegard of Bingen and her world*, ed. Barbara Newman (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998) 1-29.; Peter Dronke and Ernst Peter Michael Dronke, *Women writers of the Middle Ages: A critical study of texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984).; see also: Leigh-Choate, Tova, William T. Flynn, and Margot E. Fassler, "Hearing the Heavenly Symphony: An Overview of Hildegard's Musical Oeuvre with Case Studies.", in: *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*. eds, Debra Stoudt, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Kienzle (Leiden, Brill, 2013): 163-192.

Barbara Newman in fact stated that Hildegard was one of the very few (if not only) medieval women to not only compose her own liturgical chants but also create accompanying artwork and theological explanations of their meaning.⁶ She is not alone in this statement. Peter Dronke, through examining the lyrics of Hildegard's *Symphosia*, expanded on Newman's statement. He added that the music Hildegard did compose specifically for the mass, she would also use to convey messages she herself thought important for her monastery.⁷ This last point brings us one step closer to understanding Hildegard's notions about music: she believed that music could convey messages, that it could teach. The didactic nature of song was central to Hildegard's thinking on music.

Hildegard's focus on didactic value might not have been exclusive to music. Historians Raymond Powell and Geri Henderson argue that Hildegard believed sound in general, not only music, was of great value to her monastery. Powell and Henderson state that this was no uncommon notion amongst twelfth-century religious monastics. For this they point to how the New Testament laid much emphasis on sound. In the book of John, Christ is often referred to as 'the word' and in Psalms 33:2 Christians are urged to praise God through 'trumpet and ten-stringed harp'.⁸ Powell and Henderson state that this was understood as that Christ was the sound that helped people understand the will of God and that God was to be praised through sound. From this, Powell and Henderson conclude that Hildegard saw sound as a key to understanding God's messages. While that was a common way of thinking, Medievalist William Flynn states that Hildegard's specific relation to sound went one step further: she believed she actually *heard* messages from God. In explaining how her visions came to her she was quite clear: not in a dream and not in a trance, she was awake. A voice of heaven would have spoken to her directly to teach her about God's will.⁹ Therefore, as Powell and Henderson would argue, sound

⁶ Margot Fassler, "Composer and Dramatist.", in: *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, ed. Barbara Newman (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998) 149-175.

⁷ Peter Dronke, "The Composition of Hildegard of Bingen's Symphonia.", *Sacris Erudiri* 19 (1969): 381-393.

⁸ John 1:1 (ESV); Psalms 33.2 (ESV).

⁹ For this conclusion Flynn points to a letter Hildegard has written to Guibert of Gembloux in which she explains how she experiences her visions. In it she states that during a vision she 'sees, hears and knows all at once'. See: William T. Flynn, "Singing with the Angels: Hildegard of Bingen's

was what taught her to understand God, and sound was what she would use to give this understanding to her monastic followers.¹⁰

Several scholars, most notably Peter Dronke and John Stevens, expand on this by arguing that this makes Hildegard's music inseparable from her visions. They state that her visions were her primary inspiration. They were what taught her the ways of God, which she in turn sought to convey through her music.¹¹ Visions were her inspiration to such an extent in fact that she herself stated that she was largely untrained in any musical skills and relied completely on the divine inspiration that her vision granted her.¹² This leaves the question: what exactly did she hear, what did her visions teach her?

The contents of her visions covered far more than only music (topics included medicine, marriage, death or gender roles to name only a few). One thing she heard was however central to her understanding of music: the symphony of heaven. In several of her visions she claims to have heard angels sing heavenly music, which she describes as very joyful. She further believed that God had, at their creation, given humankind the capability to create this heavenly music. This capability would then have been lost upon humans when Adam betrayed God.¹³ What several authors, most prominently William Flynn and medievalist Rius Gatell, have pointed out is that Hildegard believed that God had given people the possibility to reconnect with the heavenly symphony. Through earthly music people would be able to express a fraction of the essence of the heavenly symphony.¹⁴ Flynn and Gatell have slightly differing views on this. Flynn states that Hildegard did not see her earthly music as a

Representations of Celestial Music.", in: *Conversations with Angels*. ed, Joad Raymond (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 204.

¹⁰ Raymond Powell and Geri Henderson, "The Power of Words: Speech, Sound, Song, Silence, and Audition in the Writings of Five Medieval Women.", *Mystics Quarterly* 35:1/2 (2009): 29-56.

¹¹ Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*.; J. Stevens, "The Musical Individuality of Hildegard's Songs: A Liturgical Shadowland", in: *Hildegard of Bingen. The Context of her Thought and Art*, eds, Charles Burnett and Peter Dronke (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995) 163-188.

¹² See for instance Hildegard's letter to the abbot Bernard of Clairvaux in which she states that she is: 'untaught and untrained in exterior material, but [...] only taught inwardly, in my spirit.'; Baird, *The personal correspondence*. 18.

¹³ Several scholars that have pointed to this notion being central for Hildegard's belief system include Peter Dronke, Rius Gatell and William Flynn.

¹⁴ Flynn, "Singing with the Angels"; Rius Gatell. "Armonías y disonancias en el cosmos de Hildegarda de Bingen", *Revista d'Estudis Feministes* (1999) 35-52, in: Rabassó, Georgina. "Rediscovering the Secrets of Voice: Hildegard of Bingen." *Medievalia. Textos e estudos* 32 (2016): 53-70.

direct imitation of heavenly music but instead as something that would allow humankind to remember its connection to God from before the fall of Adam. According to Flynn Hildegard did not believe that humans could truly regain it.¹⁵ Gatell instead argues that Hildegard believed humans could restore their pre-fall connection to God through music. Gatell describes this through a ladder model. The highest rung is heaven, the lowest are regular humans and in between stand priests, saints and angels. Through creating the correct music (music that reflected the heavenly symphony) humans could climb this ladder and end up 'closer' to God.¹⁶ Both however agree that through music humans could, to a certain degree, come closer to the connection to God that Adam had possessed before his betrayal.

The following conclusions can then be drawn regarding Hildegard's notions about music: Hildegard saw music as integral to monastic life because of its didactic value. Besides that, her music should always be seen in relation to her vision as she believed those to be her primary inspiration. Finally, she believed that music could reflect the heavenly symphonies that people would have lost their connection to. This would happen either by enabling people to remember it or by re-establishing this lost connection.

Embodied cognition

Does this resolve this paper's aim? Do we now know how Hildegard understood music? Partly but not entirely, one important link is missing: her body. While one could explain how Hildegard believed what she believed purely through mental experience (thinking, reading, learning) this does not tell the whole story. In recent years the notion of embodied cognition has gained traction. Scholars have theorized that people understand and make sense of the world around them largely through what they feel in their bodies instead of purely through mental efforts.

The theory of embodied cognition stresses the importance of bodily feelings for how people gain understanding. For example: sadness is most often perceived as a mental thing: an emotion. Such an emotion however is felt largely in the body. One might feel a 'knot in the stomach' or a 'lump in the throat'. It is precisely these feelings that give signals to the mind. The mind converts such a signal into meaning: 'I am

¹⁵ Flynn, "Singing with the Angels".

¹⁶ Gatell, "Armonias y disonancias en el cosmos de Hildegarde de Bingen".

sad'. In this example, it was the embodied experience of sadness that led to meaning-giving (cognition).

The scholars credited with laying the groundwork for this concept are philosophers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. In 1999 they wrote their book: 'philosophy in the flesh', which became highly influential in the field of cognition research.¹⁷ In short, the authors stated that humans give meaning to the world around them largely through metaphors and that these metaphors stem from bodily experience. The knot in one's stomach or lump in one's throat are striking examples of what Lakoff and Johnson mean. These metaphors refer to bodily experiences of emotions. Through this, the authors concluded that the mind is shaped very much by what the body experiences. This laid the foundations for the concept of embodied cognition, which has been applied to many topics. One of these topics is music.

As stated before, two names in the field of musical embodied cognition stand out: Cox and Perlovsky. Both have written on the implications of the embodied experience of music and both came to a similar conclusion: music is first experienced in the body and then cognized in the brain. Furthermore, both authors stress that the way in which music is felt in the body (and therefore ultimately cognized in the mind) relies heavily on a person's prior knowledge. To understand this better we should look at exactly how both scholars theorized the process of embodied cognition of music.

To Cox, the starting point is this: musical sounds are ultimately created by the body, they are either sung or a person uses their body to play an instrument. Therefore, he states that a listener will subconsciously link musical sounds to the bodily functions that they relate to the creation of that sound. According to Cox people do this through a process called 'mimicking'. What he means by this is that because humans recognize musical sounds as bodily, the body will automatically react to them by subtly or explicitly mirroring the action through which the sound was made. This can happen on three levels: intramodal (for instance tapping along to the rhythm), intermodal (for instance imitating sounds) and amodal (an 'abdominal exertion', or a 'gut feeling').¹⁸ It is through this bodily experiencing of musical sound

¹⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought* (New York, Basic Books, 1999).

¹⁸ Note how the use of metaphors like 'gut feeling' is in line with Lakoff and Johnson's theory of embodied metaphors.

that a person gives meaning to music: 'my body reacts in this way, so it means this'. The musical sounds have been cognized by the mind through the body. This happens unconsciously and almost instantaneously. Exactly how the body will 'mimic' the sounds however depends largely on a person's prior knowledge. Perhaps the clearest example Cox gives is that a violinist listening to violin music can associate the music to a known bodily experience: playing the violin. A person who has never played the violin does not have the prior knowledge of what playing one feels like, they can therefore impossibly link the music to this experience and will link it to some other experience. This is a clear example of why Cox states that the way in which music is felt and subsequently understood is dictated by a person's prior knowledge.¹⁹

Perlovsky reaches much the same conclusion, although via a slightly different route. Instead of mimicry, he attests the embodiment of music to what he calls 'knowledge instincts'. He argues that people are embedded with certain instincts, a well-known example of this would be to pull one's hand away when touching a hot pan. An external input (heat) triggers a bodily reaction (pulling the hand away). Perlovsky would call such an instinct a regular instinct. Knowledge instincts work similarly but through different triggers, such as music. When a person hears musical sounds their body reacts instinctively, certain sounds might trigger for instance happy or sad bodily feelings (think of what one might describe as 'a heavy heart' or the 'lump' in one's throat).²⁰ These instincts are called 'knowledge instincts' because (much in line with Cox) Perlovsky states that they are dictated by prior knowledge. A person unconsciously knows a certain musical sound to be related to a certain instinctive bodily reaction. Perhaps they have previously experienced a similar reaction or have a pre-existing belief about music that they then relate to a particular sound. This causes this specific sound to trigger a specific bodily reaction. This instinctive bodily reaction to the music is then interpreted by the mind, which attaches meaning to it ('this song is happy', 'this song reminds me of a certain emotional event', etc.). Musical sounds have again been embodied and then cognized. Prior knowledge, again, played a key part in this process.²¹

¹⁹ Cox, "The mimetic hypothesis".

²⁰ Note how the use of such metaphors is in line with Lakoff and Johnson's theory.

²¹ Perlovsky, "Origin of music and embodied cognition".

Both Cox and Perlovsky thus come to the same conclusion: musical sounds are first felt by the body (either through mimicry or knowledge instincts) and it's these feelings that the brain decodes to derive meaning from the music. Both authors also agree that prior knowledge is the driving force behind exactly how the music will be felt and therefore how it will be cognized. This insight tells us that in order to understand Hildegard's notions about music we need to know three factors: what was her prior knowledge? What did she experience bodily? What meaning did she attach to music? The first and last questions have been answered before. In short, Hildegard's prior knowledge was that there was music in heaven, that this music was joyful and that it had been lost to humans due to Adam's betrayal but could be restored to some degree. The meaning she attached to music then was that, when it successfully reflected heavenly music, it was of great importance for her monastery as it could bring people closer to God. That makes the second step, her embodied experience, the missing link. This is precisely the aim of this paper: to research Hildegard's notions about music through the lens of embodied experience.

So far, little has been written on this subject, one author however has already undertaken similar research: Medievalist Bruce Holsinger. Holsinger's research deals with medieval notions about the body in relation to music. His main conclusion is that medieval chant music can never be seen as separate from the body. He states that it is the body that creates, hears and subsequently feels the music and that ultimately it is through this bodily experience that meaning is attached to the music.²² Furthermore, Holsinger states that these bodily aspects were understood through religious motives. What one felt while creating or listening to music was interpreted as a feeling given by God. The greatest example to Holsinger was the heavenly symphony, which was understood to be extremely joyful if imitated correctly. The heavenly symphony of course was Hildegard's main musical focus. She believed to have heard it in her vision and that it could bring her people closer to God. It is no wonder then that Holsinger concludes that to Hildegard the embodied effects of music would have been very welcome. Hildegard wanted to feel the great bodily joy of the music of heaven. Holsinger expands on this by pointing to how Hildegard was somewhat unique in this outlook as several contemporaries would criticize her for her

²² Bruce W. Holsinger, *Music, body, and desire in medieval culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer*. (Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 2001).; For his point on embodied experience Holsinger leans heavily on Lakoff and Johnson's theories and Cox's research.

focus on bodily expression. He especially places Hildegard in contrast to contemporaries that were aligned with the Cistercian monastic order. Cistercians believed that the visible embodied effect of music (facial expressions, tensed muscles, etc.) were signs of the devil and should be prohibited in monastic orders. Holsinger points to this opposition to show how Hildegard's notion of the body and music was somewhat unique and based on her personal beliefs. To her, earthly music should reflect the heavenly symphony and all its aspects. This included the joy one felt in one's body.²³

Two main conclusions can then be drawn from Holsinger's research. First of all, it can be said that medieval monastics knew of the embodied effects of music and that they had to think about their own theological stance towards this. Secondly, Holsinger shows how Hildegard welcomed the embodied effects of music because she saw them as given by God.

Hildegard's writings

As stated before, this research will be based on *Scivias* and a selection of Hildegard's letters. Both require some technical remarks before they can be analysed. First of all let us examine the specifics of *Scivias*. This book was likely completed between 1151 and 1152. In it, Hildegard described 26 of her visions. She always does so first by explaining what she saw and then analysing its meaning. Her first vision for instance begins with the line: "I saw a great mountain the color of iron". Her analysis is this: "The great mountain the color of iron symbolizes the strength and stability of the eternal Kingdom of God".²⁴ The entire book follows this pattern of a description followed by Hildegard's explanation of its meaning.

This makes this work a great source for Hildegard's thoughts and beliefs as she constantly explains her view on the visions. It is however important to note a few complications regarding the nature of the book. First of all this work does not reflect Hildegard's thoughts directly. That is to say, what we read today is not the writing of Hildegard herself. The version used for this research is an English translation of the

²³ Bruce W. Holsinger, "The Flesh of the Voice: Embodiment and the Homoerotics of Devotion in the Music of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179).", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19:1 (1993): 92-125.

²⁴ Columba Hart, "Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*", 67.

original Latin. Besides that Hildegard's assistant and fellow monastic Volmar always took to correcting her grammar. Therefore, the version used for this research is a first corrected, then translated version of Hildegard's original writing. While it can be expected that both Volmar and modern translators have no reason to make impactful changes to her original words we need to be cautious. For the purpose of this paper it is best not to go into extreme detail regarding single words (as they might not be Hildegard's original word choice) but instead focus on larger ideas.

A second complication is that if we were to ask Hildegard herself what we were reading she wouldn't say it were her thoughts. She believed that what she was putting to writing was the words of the voices of heaven. This raises the question: if she did not believe these were her thoughts, is it possible to examine her thoughts through this source? It stands to reason however that, even if she thought these words did not come from her mind, she did find them important enough to write them down and she did defend them. Therefore, it can very much be said that she believed them to be true.²⁵

This is not the only source for Hildegard's thoughts on music that will be analysed. The abbess also wrote a large body of letters. These letters are often more straightforward than *Scivias* in that they directly reflect Hildegard's thoughts and opinions. However, these writings were also corrected by Volmar (or some other helpful associate after Volmar died in 1173). Besides that, for this research an English translation of the original Latin was used. In this regard, the same cautions stand as with *Scivias*.

Hildegard's bodies

Having taken into account the specifics of the selected sources, we can analyse what they tell us regarding Hildegard's notions about the body and music. Hildegard's writings are filled with references to the human body. A good starting point is this advice written to a priest who asked her to resolve nightmares he was having: "May the Holy Spirit make you a tabernacle of sanctification so that in the joys of supreme

²⁵ In line with Peter Dronke and John Stevens' conclusions in respectively: Dronke, *Woman Writers of the Middle Ages*.; Stevens, "The Musical Individuality of Hildegard's songs". it could even be said that her visions were very much the starting point for her thoughts.

bliss you may live always with God.”²⁶ The tabernacle of course is the biblical tent in which God lived during the 40 years that the Israelites wandered the desert. She indicates here that a human body can also be a tabernacle (a vessel in which God can live). This shows how to Hildegard God was quite literally present in the body. This was however no guarantee, not every body would house God. This is exemplified for instance in the following section of *Scivias* about the incarnated Christ (who she refers to as ‘the word’ in line with the previously mentioned book of John):

After He assumed flesh, the Word also remained inseparably in the Father; for as a person does not exist without the vital movements within his viscera, so the only Word of the Father could in no way be separated from Him.²⁷

Here Hildegard stresses the fact that Christ did not lose his connection to God when he took on his human body. She seems to sideways refer to the fact that regular humans very much could lose their connection to God. This is not the only time she refers to the very special position of Christ’s human body. In a letter responding to a monk inquiring about a dream he had she also spoke about the body of Christ.²⁸ She wrote that Christ became true flesh not through impregnation but because God descended power into Mary’s womb.²⁹ Christ’s flesh then was never truly human in the same way regular flesh was. It was an incarnation of God’s power and would therefore have never been at risk of not being inherently connected to God. What is interesting for this research then is not what the body of Christ *is*, but what in comparison to it a regular body *isn’t*: ensured of a connection to God.

That this connection to God stemmed very much from the body is further exemplified in the following section from *Scivias*. In it we see how she relates the notion of Godly connection to the biblical tale of Adam and Eve’s betrayal:

Eve -- whose soul was innocent, for she had been raised out of innocent Adam, bearing in her body the whole multitude of the human race, shining with God's preordination -- was invaded by the Devil through the seduction of the serpent for her own downfall. [...] that ancient seducer cast out Eve

²⁶ Baird, *The personal correspondence*, 63.

²⁷ Columba Hart, “Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*”, 90.

²⁸ the monk’s letter is sadly lost.

²⁹ Baird, *The personal correspondence*, 65.

and Adam by his deception from the seat of blessedness and thrust them into the darkness of destruction.³⁰

This shows how she felt that humankind, who had been represented by the bodies of Adam and Eve, was cast away from God and into darkness. From there on out people were no longer guaranteed to have the spirit of God within themselves.

Another aspect of her thinking on this is portrayed later in *Scivias* when Hildegard speaks of the death of Christ:

He poured out His beautiful blood and knew in His body the darkness of death. And thus conquering the Devil, he delivered from Hell his elect, who were held prostrate there, and by His redeeming touch brought them back to the inheritance they had lost in Adam.³¹

Here it was the death of the pure body of Christ that redeemed a selection of condemned souls. What this shows us is that she apparently believed that the devil was capable of corrupting a person's connection to God but that this connection could be redeemed.³² Note specifically that this redemption came through bodily means: Jesus poured out the blood from his pure body. This 'brought them back to the inheritance they had lost in Adam': their connection to God.

The notion of an unguaranteed and corruptible Godly presence in the body is further exemplified in several of Hildegard's letters. In a letter to fellow abbess Tengswich of Abernach she explains her thoughts on pious life as a female:

Let a woman remain within her chamber so that she may preserve her modesty, for the serpent breathed the fiery danger of horrible lust into her. Why should she do this? Because the beauty of woman radiated and blazed forth in the primordial root, and in her was formed that chamber in which every creature lies hidden³³

Here she seems to indicate that the serpent, through deceiving Adam and Eve, infused all females with the sin of lust. Hildegard states that it is therefore best for

³⁰ Columba Hart, "Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*", 74.

³¹ Columba Hart, "Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*", 93.

³² This is much in line with Rius Gatell's conclusion in: Gatell, "Armonías y disonancias en el cosmos de Hildegarda de Bingen". Which states that Hildegard believed that a person could fully restore their connection to God.

³³ Baird, *The personal correspondence*, 26.

women to stay within their chamber, so as not to be lured into this sin and thereby not to corrupt the beauty that God would have given to her at the creation of humankind (the primordial root). What this tells us is that while Hildegard believed sin to be ever-present in the human body, she also believed that making the right choices in life can prevent one from being lured into said sins.

That one might lose the beauty given to her by God could be seen in the light of Hildegard's notion of Godly connection. The 'beauty' Hildegard speaks of seems to refer to a woman's capability to give birth: "in her is formed the chamber in which every creature lies hidden" refers to the womb. The 'beauty' that God has given woman is therefore very bodily. Although Hildegard does not say so directly it could follow that she believed this 'beauty' could be misused through the sin of lust. One would then drive God out of the body as the womb is not used in accordance with God's will. By living righteously, one could prevent themselves from being lured into sin. Through this one could maintain their connection to God.

This concludes what Hildegard's writings tell us about her notion of the body. Much in line with what Holsinger already concluded it can be said that Hildegard saw the body as a possible vessel for God. She believed that through devotions and righteousness, one could welcome God into their body. A person would then reinstate to some degree the unwavering connection to God that humanity had possessed before the fall of Adam.³⁴

Hildegard's senses

If we take Cox and Perlovsky into account, the aforementioned conclusions on Hildegard's notions about the body do not yet answer every question about Hildegard's relation to the body. In accordance with the notion that meaning-giving stems from bodily feeling it should stand that if Hildegard believed a righteous body housed God, she must have 'felt' God in her body to some degree. Some bodily feeling must have told her that God was indeed present within her body. To come closer to this answer we can examine the medium through which Hildegard believed God could enter the body: the senses.

³⁴ This can be connected to Flynn and Gatell's statements on how Hildegard believed music to be a key to remembering or reviving a person's connection to God. Flynn, "Singing with the Angels"; Gatell, "Armonías y disonancias en el cosmos de Hildegarda de Bingen".

The body receives its input through the senses, to Hildegard this played a significant role in acquiring a connection to God. She felt that the senses were the key to understanding God. *Scivias* itself is in fact a great example of this. This was a book filled with what she believed to have heard and seen in her visions. She believed that it was through the senses that she had learned the knowledge she was trying to pass on.³⁵ This is not the only hint to how she attested great importance to the senses. She has written, both in *Scivias* and her letters, about this subject. She discusses anything from feeling (pain, pleasure, etc.) to scent. These writings can tell us how Hildegard felt bodily senses influenced people's understanding of, and connection to God. One great example of this comes from *Scivias*. When explaining a vision in which she saw a blazing fire she wrote:

The blazing fire [...] offered to the human a white flower, which hung in that flame as dew hangs on the grass. Its scent came to the human's nostrils, but he did not taste it with his mouth or touch it with his hands, and thus he turned away and fell into the thickest darkness, out of which he could not pull himself.³⁶

First, she explains that the blazing fire is 'the Omnipotent and Living God'. The fire (God) offers the human a white flower. She explains that this flower is the order of obedience that God had originally given to Adam. What happens next is telling, she states that the human (possibly Adam or possibly a representation of mankind as a whole) could smell the flower but did not taste it or touch it. As a result of this negligence to further sense the flower the human 'falls into the thickest darkness'. This darkness, Hildegard explains, was the devil who could get a hold of him because he had failed to fully understand God.

It is interesting that apparently only the smell of the flower coming to the nostrils wasn't enough. It did not keep the human from falling into the darkness. Hildegard seems to indicate that this was because the human did not actively go to smell the flower, the smell of the flower simply came to his nostrils. It was up to the human to further sense it by actively putting it in his mouth or touching it, which he

³⁵ This is in line with authors like Peter Dronke and John Stevens who stress that Hildegard's beliefs were heavily influenced by her visions. Dronke, *Woman Writers of the Middle Ages*; Stevens, "The Musical Individuality of Hildegard's songs".

³⁶ Columba Hart, "Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*", 91.

did not do. In essence, the human did not choose any of the sensual experiences the flower gave him, they merely happened to him. As a result of his not actively choosing to sense the flower he fell into darkness. What this might tell us is that Hildegard seemed to have believed that the senses were very much a key to understanding God but that one had to actively choose to use them as such. This could be in line with Hildegard's previously mentioned notion that a person must actively choose not to behave in a way that would lure them into sin. A person's active commitment to God seems to have been very important to her thinking. Not only with regard to sin, but also with regard to understanding God through the senses.

In the previous example, she refers only to smell and touch. As Powell and Henderson have already pointed out however, sound was very central to her thinking. This is strongly indicated by how she chose to often refer to Christ as 'the word'. In the next passage she describes why she prefers this particular description of Christ:

And why is He called the Word? Because, just as a word of command uttered by an instructor among local and transitory human dust is understood by people who know and foresee the reason he gave it, so also the power of the Father is known among the creatures of the world, who perceive and understand in Him the source of their creation, through the Word Who is independent of place and imperishable in His inextinguishable eternal life; and as the power and honor of a human being are known by his official words, so the holiness and goodness of the Father shines through the Supreme Word.³⁷

Hildegard links the reference to Jesus as 'the word' to regular human senses. She does this by comparing 'the Word' to a word uttered by a human instructor. To her they are the same: a sound that gives information that is to be understood by its listeners. Successfully hearing and understanding 'the Word' leads to the shining of fatherly holiness and goodness.³⁸

This is yet another example of how Hildegard appears to have viewed the human senses as at least one way of understanding the will of God. In this case, she

³⁷ Columba Hart, "Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias", 90.

³⁸ This is in line with Powell and Henderson's point that the didactic nature of sound was very important to Hildegard's thinking. Powell and Henderson, "The Power of Words: Speech, Sound, Song, Silence, and Audition".

specifically refers to hearing: the hearing of a word. At first glance it might seem logical, almost a truism even, that hearing a word would lead to understanding. That does not however mean that it is unimportant for this research. The mere fact that Hildegard thought this was important enough to be mentioned directly shows how she saw the human senses as greatly important for acquiring an understanding of the will of God. In other words: Because senses are how the body picks up external inputs, it can be said that Hildegard saw the will of God as at least partially understood through the body. This makes the body not only the place in which God resides but also the thing with which God can be understood.

Hildegard's music

If it is true that Hildegard felt that sound was a key to understanding God, that must mean that music had a very special position for Hildegard. After all, music presents a listener with something to hear that goes beyond simply a word. Luckily Hildegard has, both in *Scivias* and her letters, written about music directly. As we have already seen in the literature, Hildegard believed earthly music to be a reflection of heavenly music. Given that she saw the body as a 'tabernacle for God' we will see that she also saw correct music as springing from the Godly Spirit within the body. In a way music to her was a meeting ground between the body and God. It was the effect of a righteous, God-housing body expressing itself.

There are a few mentions of heavenly music in *Scivias*. In these mentions Hildegard often stresses the joyful nature of the heavenly symphony. When writing about earthly music she often expresses her opinion that if it is to reflect heavenly music, it should also be joyful. When describing for instance the incarnation of Christ she wrote:

While the Son of God was being born in the world from a mother, He was still in Heaven in the Father; and at this the angels suddenly trembled and sang the sweetest praises of rejoicing.³⁹

In this passage, she describes how she heard angels singing in rejoice as Christ was born. Note especially that before singing these joyful praises the angels had a bodily reaction: they trembled. The joy was very physical. This is a clear instance of

³⁹ Columba Hart, "Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*", 93.

Hildegard referring to how she believed to have heard the heavenly symphony. This is the 'truth' she had learned from her visions: there is a heavenly music, and it is extremely joyful. That would explain why she seems to have sought joyfulness in music over any other emotion. Further along in the same passage she again refers to heavenly music as being joyful:

The son of God [...] rose again to serene immortality, which no one can explain by thought or word. And the Father showed Him with His open wounds to the celestial choirs, saying, "This is My beloved Son, Whom I sent to die for the people." And so joy unmeasurable by the human mind arose in them.⁴⁰

Here she mentions celestial choirs feeling great joy. This joy 'arose in them' which indicates that the joy was felt from within their bodies. Again, a bodily reaction. It must be noted of course that it is not described that the choirs actually made music at the time. Still, where she describes something heavenly and musical (celestial choirs), she describes joy.⁴¹

The following passage is Hildegard's first reference to earthly music in *Scivias*. It is also the first example of her conviction that earthly music should reflect heavenly joyfulness:

*a harp is lying with its strings across his body; which signifies the joyful songs of those who will suffer dire torments in the persecution that the son of iniquity will inflict upon the chosen, torturing their bodies so much that they are released from them and pass over into rest.*⁴²

What Hildegard describes here is how the 'chosen', those who at the end of time worship the real Christ and not the antichrist, sing out in joy besides being tormented. They sing in joy because they know they will be going to heaven. This relates to earthly music because the 'chosen' are not heavenly creatures, they are still on earth. The knowledge that they will go to heaven makes them sing out in joy. Again,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ This section might refer to 'choir' not as a musical group but simply as a crowd. There is no real indication of what Hildegard meant. If it would be so that she referred to a group of people instead of a group of singers this section would not give insight directly into her notions about music. It still shows however her focus on joyful bodily feelings.

⁴² Columba Hart, "Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*", 121.

Hildegard describes heaven-related music as joyful, but this time it is earthly music. The chosen held on to their faith in Christ, therefore they have maintained a connection with God. It can then be said that, according to Hildegard, music created by those with a connection to God reflect the joyfulness of the heavenly symphony. As we have seen before, Hildegard believes a person with a strong connection to God to be a 'tabernacle'. The joyful music then emanates from a body that houses God. This notion is very evident in a series of letters Hildegard wrote to the prelates of the archbishop Christian I of Mainz. These letters are Hildegard's most direct and thorough description of her thoughts on music yet.

Before examining these letters some context is required. They were written after Hildegard got into the greatest controversy of her life. In 1178 she had allowed for a nobleman (whose name is unknown) to be buried on her grounds. This nobleman however had, at some point in his life, been excommunicated. Because of this, the prelates of Christian I (who was away to Rome at the time) demanded that Hildegard would remove the body from the holy ground. She refused to do so as she believed that the nobleman had been absolved of his excommunication prior to his death. To enforce their demand the prelates placed Rupertsberg under interdict, essentially banning Hildegard's community from performing liturgical rites (and thus from ritualistic singing). Instead of giving in and removing the body, Hildegard took to defending her cause by arguing that the burial was righteous as the nobleman had been resolved of his excommunication prior to his burial. Besides this she stressed the unfair nature of the punishment. A few letters through which she defended her cause have survived to this day. In these letters, she explains the importance of music for her monastery. This she does in very bodily terms, for instance in this section where she points to the danger of the devil corrupting earthly music:

But when the devil, man's great deceiver, learned that man had begun to sing through God's inspiration and, therefore, was being transformed to bring back the sweetness of the songs of heaven, [...] he devotes himself continually to thinking up and working out all kinds of wicked contrivances. Thus he never ceases from confounding confession and the sweet beauty of both divine praise and spiritual hymns, eradicating them through wicked suggestions, impure thoughts, or various distractions from the heart of man and even from the mouth of the Church itself, wherever he can, through dissension, scandal, or unjust oppression.⁴³

⁴³ Baird, *The personal correspondence*, 160.

Most important in this segment is how Hildegard describes the devil's methods of corruption. She states that he seeks to corrupt earthly music by instilling impure thoughts into people or by distracting the heart of man and the mouth of the church. Note how the latter two descriptions of the devil's tricks are bodily metaphors.⁴⁴ To Hildegard, the way for the devil to corrupt earthly music was largely through the human body. It seems here that she believed that the devil sought to drive out the spirit of God from the body.

In another letter to the prelates, she states even more clearly that correct earthly music can only be created by a body that houses God. Here she explains to the prelates that she chose to respect the interdict not because she felt it was a just punishment but because she felt it would be unjust to be disobedient to her superiors. To strengthen her point that the punishment is unfair, however, she claims to have heard it from even greater superiors: the voices of heaven themselves. She writes:

I heard these words in a vision: "It is improper for you to obey human words ordering you to abandon the sacraments of the Garment of the Word of God. [...] For ever since Adam was driven from the bright region of paradise into the exile of this world on account of his disobedience, the conception of all people is justly tainted by that first transgression. Therefore, in accordance with God's inscrutable plan, it was necessary for a man free from all pollution to be born in human flesh, through whom all who are predestined to life might be cleansed from corruption and might be sanctified by the communion of his body so that he might remain in them and they in him for their fortification."⁴⁵

Through this vision Hildegard stresses the importance of the 'sacraments of the Garment of the Word of God'. This refers to the seven sacraments of the catholic church (baptism, confirmation, communion, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders and matrimony). She especially mentions the communion, which traditionally goes paired with music. She states again that through such rituals (which Hildegard's monastery would no longer be allowed to perform 'correctly' as they are not allowed

⁴⁴ This can be seen in the light of Lakoff and Johnson's theory of embodied metaphors. It shows how Hildegard also explained the world around her through bodily metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*.

⁴⁵ Baird, *The personal correspondence*. 158.

to sing) a person allows for God to live within them. Note how she explicitly calls it “communion of His body”. ‘His’ refers to Christ, who, as we have seen earlier, had a pure and incorruptibly God-connected body. It is through the communion with Christ’s body that God may remain in ‘them’ (humans). She continues, relating this directly to music:

Further, I saw in my vision also that by obeying you we have been celebrating the divine office incorrectly, for [...] we have ceased to sing the divine office, merely reading it instead. And I heard a voice coming from the Living Light concerning the various kinds of praises, about which David speaks in the psalm: “Praise Him with sound of trumpet: praise Him with psaltery and harp.”. These words use outward, visible things to teach us about inward things. Thus the material composition and the quality of these instruments instruct us how we ought to give form to the praise of the Creator and turn all the convictions of our inner being to the same. When we consider these things carefully, we recall that man needed the voice of the living Spirit, but Adam lost this divine voice through disobedience. For while he was still innocent, before his transgression, his voice blended fully with the voices of the angels in their praise of God.⁴⁶

Here she stresses again how Adam, and with him all of humanity, had lost their direct connection to God at Adam’s transgression. What is interesting is how she names specifically music as the way to regain this connection.⁴⁷ This means that Hildegard believed that not only the musical accompaniment of the communion, but music at large was what allows God to ‘remain in them’. To strengthen her argument she expands on the importance of ritualistic music for her monastery:

And so the holy prophets, inspired by the Spirit which they had received, were called for this purpose: not only to compose psalms and canticles (by which the hearts of listeners would be inflamed) but also to construct various kinds of musical instruments to enhance these songs of praise with melodic strains. [...] Men of zeal and wisdom have imitated the holy prophets and have themselves, with human skill, invented several kinds of musical instruments, so that they might be able to sing for the delight of their souls, and they accompanied their singing with instruments played with the flexing of the fingers, recalling, in this way, Adam, who was formed by God’s finger, which is the Holy Spirit. For before he sinned, his

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ This would be in line with Rius Gatell’s conclusion that Hildegard believed people were capable of reviving their connection to God. Gatell, “Armonías y disonancias en el cosmos de Hildegarda de Bingen”.

voice had the sweetness of all musical harmony. Indeed, if he had remained in original state, the weakness of mortal man would not have been able to endure the power and the resonance of his voice.⁴⁸

She starts by drawing attention to the effect that music has on its listeners: their hearts would be 'inflamed' by it. Note how this is again a very bodily metaphor. This seems to relate to Hildegard's notion that correct religious music creates a feeling of great joy. She then states that 'men of zeal and wisdom' have taken to imitating the prophets in constructing instruments to accompany the hymns. The playing of these instruments she relates, in very bodily terms, to Adam. She states that playing these instruments with their fingers relates to how Adam was created by the finger of God.

After this, she goes on to once again draw a line between heavenly and earthly music. She does so by stating that if people were capable of singing the heavenly symphonies (as Adam was) they would not be able to endure the sheer power of it. This indicates the superiority of heavenly music over its earthly imitator and reinforces the notion that humans can only imitate the heavenly symphony.⁴⁹

Having stressed the general religious importance of music she goes into explaining the importance of music to the individual. Here she gives the most detailed description of music in relation to the earthly body yet. She starts by stating that:

The celestial harmony is rooted in the Church through the Holy Spirit. The body is the vestment of the spirit, which has a living voice, and so it is proper for the body, in harmony with the soul, to use its voice to sing praises to God.⁵⁰

She clearly states, as we have seen her do before, that the body is a vessel for the Holy Spirit. Here however she expands on that by stating that this Spirit has a voice which needs to sing Praises to God. Religious music therefore is much more than just singing, it is a harmony between the body and the soul which produces heavenly-inspired music. She continues:

⁴⁸ Baird, *The personal correspondence*. 159.

⁴⁹ This would be in line with William Flynn's conclusion that Hildegard believed people could only remember their connection to God from before Adam's transgression instead of truly regaining it. Flynn, "Singing with the Angels".

⁵⁰ Baird, *The personal correspondence*, 160.

And because sometimes a person sighs and groans at the sound of singing, remembering, as it were, the nature of celestial harmony, the prophet [...] urges us in the psalm to confess to the Lord with the harp and to sing a psalm to Him with the ten-stringed psaltery. His meaning is that the harp, which is plucked from below, relates to the discipline of the body; the psaltery, which is plucked from above, pertains to the exertion of the spirit; the ten chords, to the fulfilment of the law.⁵¹

There are two references to the embodiment of music here. The first one is indirect: Hildegard states that a person may sigh and groan at the sound of music. This is a bodily reaction to the joy that heaven-imitating music brings. Upon hearing it a person may physically express joy. Her second remark on the body is more direct: she quotes the biblical psalms 33:2 which states that one should confess with the harp.⁵² This harp, Hildegard writes, is 'plucked from below' and 'relates to the discipline of the body'. This can be related to a notion we have seen Hildegard express earlier in her letter discussing women and the sin of lust.⁵³ There she stated that through 'staying in their chamber' women would not be tempted into sin. Through refraining from sin the person would be able to allow God into their body. 'Staying in one's chamber' seems to be an example of the 'bodily discipline' she discusses here. In this section then Hildegard connects the idea of practicing bodily discipline to refrain from sin directly to music because the harp (which she believes to represent bodily discipline) is, according to psalms 32:2, the musical instrument with which to praise God. This bodily discipline is what refrains a person from losing their 'tabernacle' status. Therefore, it can be said that Hildegard believed that only through creating correct music a person could keep God within their body.

Conclusion

This analysis of Hildegard's writings gives us several answers to the question: how were Hildegard's notions about music shaped by her understanding of embodied experiences. A few clear conclusions can be drawn regarding her. First of all, Hildegard believed the heavenly symphony to be predominantly joyful music. Because of this, she believed joyfulness to also be the characteristic of 'correct'

⁵¹ Ibid., 161.

⁵² psalms 33:2 (ESV).

⁵³ Baird, *The personal correspondence*, 26.

earthly heaven-imitating music. Secondly, she believed that earthly music was only capable of imitating heavenly music if it was produced by a body that housed God. Furthermore, a person's body would only house God if this person lived according to God's will. Once the body had become a 'tabernacle' for God it could emanate music akin to the heavenly symphony.

Hildegard very much stressed the fact that the making of music was biblically obligated to all Christians. To praise God without music was to praise God incorrectly, which would chase the Spirit of God out of one's body. This creates something of an interplay: a person could only create heaven-imitating music if his body housed God, but his body could only house God if he understood and practiced heaven-imitating music. These were Hildegard's beliefs regarding the body's relation to music.

If we look at these beliefs through the lens of Cox and Perlovsky's theories we can deduce how Hildegard's awareness of embodied experience influenced her thoughts on music. The main conclusion is that she was very aware of the bodily effects of music. So much so in fact that they were central to her thinking on music. As we have seen in both *Scivias* and her letters, she saw music as detrimental for her monastery. This was because she believed music could allow a person to be the 'tabernacle' of God; it could allow God to live within a person. To Hildegard, if music gave people the wonderfully joyful feeling of 'God being within them', it meant that the music was right and that it reflected the heavenly symphony. In an interplay with that, she believed that the heavenly symphony could only be produced by those who had God within their body.

Both Cox and Perlovsky theorized that people give meaning to music via three steps: prior knowledge, embodied experience (be it through mimicry or knowledge instincts) and finally cognition. Hildegard's prior knowledge came from the bible and from her visions.⁵⁴ It is especially important that she believed that her visions had let her hear the heavenly symphony at first hand. This, combined with biblical references to music such as psalms 33:2 and 150:3, convinced Hildegard that the main characteristic of the heavenly symphony was joyfulness. This was her prior knowledge. The meaning she gave to music was that it was of great value for the

⁵⁴ This is in line with Peter Dronke and John Stevens' statements that Hildegard's thinking cannot be seen as separate from her visionary experiences. Dronke, *Woman Writers of the Middle Ages*; Stevens, "The Musical Individuality of Hildegard's songs".

living soul because correctly imitating the heavenly symphony could restore, or help people to recall, the connection to God that people had possessed prior to the fall of Adam.⁵⁵

We know then her prior knowledge and the meaning she deduced from music, all that remains is her understanding of embodied experience. Here again, joyfulness seems to be the answer. It seems that this one bodily feeling, which she understood to be a characteristic of heavenly music, signified to Hildegard that she was making or hearing the music of God. When discussing the importance of music she always seems to go back to this one feeling. She claims to have heard the immense joy of the heavenly symphony and talks about the great joy of correct earthly music. Music can make one 'sight and groan', the chosen sing out joyfully as they are being tormented by the antichrist and the hearts of listeners are 'inflamed' by the psalms and canticles. This was how she saw the ideal embodied experience of music. It is from this bodily experience that she derived the meaning she did (Cox and Perlovsky's final step): When music made the body feel great joy it meant to Hildegard that it reflected the heavenly symphony and thereby allowed the spirit of God into the body.

Worthwhile further research might be done into Hildegard's own, individual bodily experience of music. In the selected sources she speaks on the embodied experience of music, but not on her own, personal experience. Perhaps there are sources, such as hagiographies or Hildegard's *Liber Vitae Meritorum* and *Liber Divinorum Operum*, that would prove useful for examining this. Another possible expansion on this research could be an analysis of her lyrics through the lens of embodied cognition. While they offer a less direct description of Hildegard's thoughts, they could still prove to be another fruitful source for Hildegard's musical ideas. For this current paper however it stands to conclude: Hildegard of Bingen understood music and the body to be intrinsically connected.

⁵⁵ This conclusion is in line with William Flynn and Rius Gatell's statements about Hildegard's perceived effect of earthly music (to remember or revive the Godly connection that Adam had still possessed). Flynn, "Singing with the Angels"; Gatell, "Armonías y disonancias en el cosmos de Hildegarda de Bingen".

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