

From LE SORELLE DI MOZART by BEATRICE VENEZI

I dedicate this book to my parents Daniela and Gabriele, who taught me the importance of critical thinking and free will, of the courage of supporting one's own ideas without conforming to others' expectations, of believing in the one's unlimited potential. It's thanks to them if I'm today the woman I am.

I dedicate this book also to all women -whatever sisters, wives, mothers, daughters they are, to all of them: do not let anyone to tell us that we don't fit, or we are not enough, that some chances aren't for us or we don't have the right to demand something more, something better, our place in this world.

They are wrong: we can be whatever we want to be.

"There are no composer women, they never had and never will!"

Sir Thomas Beecham, founder of London Philharmonic Orchestra, 1920

Introduction

This is the story of some unique women.

Brilliant musicians. Original composers. Divine performers. Unique women capable of emerging in a world that would have gladly got rid of them. A world that considers them unsuitable, unashamed, outrageous, unfit. A world that each time turned to the common moral or to an alleged biological superiority granting the talent to make good music only to men.

This is, then, the story of some unique women, in a world of men. The story of how, regardless of prejudices, regardless of restrictions, a group of rebellious women decided to defy the social conventions for the love of art and music. A rebellion that very often ended to be left out from official historiography.

It all begins in High Middle Ages. Bingen is the place, a small German town, prospering in the valley where the Rhine meets the Nahe. From here the story begins, in a cloister of nuns leaded by the bright and revolutionary intuition of Hildegard: the first musician woman the story can recall.

Hildegard devoted to Saint Ursula, who was regal and beautiful according to legend and leaded eleven thousand virgins on a pilgrimage across Europe. Saint Ursula martyr, champion of the sisterhood. Of union, of support and help among women.

Hildegard, also a woman on the move strongly believing in the idea of bearing together, like a choir, the word of God. Hildegard, who had visions and for that was considered mad. Hildegard who only took orders from God himself, and for that the Church forbid her to sing. To let her harmonies fluctuate in churches.

But music, music doesn't fly. The music arrived to us until today could do it only thanks to who had the courage to do it.

It would be a very normal action today. But so revolutionary, for women of yore.

Who couldn't tell if they did such a thing!

It was not appropriate for a woman to compose. A female could at least perform for amusement, entertainment, or to cheat the little of free time that life, among chores, allowed her.

And the music indeed disappeared.

And indeed, that old music, when composed by a woman, didn't reach us.

Until Baroque, that bursts into these pages, powerful, loud and striking. Because it actually seemed that from then on, all could be different. Europe fills with female musicians, immortalized by painters with their instruments, some of them even signed their compositions and even got a wage equal to men's...

But History, as we know, sometimes turns back, in reverse, instead of going forward. Men turn up their noses, their leading place in arts, achieved without competition, is at stake. The morality hides the insecurities of a society that want women relegated to the home.

In a letter to the Duke Francesco I d'Este from Modena, Fulvio Testi the poet writes in 1633:

A woman practising the trade of musician seriously jeopardizes her reputation. If your Highness requires a perfect honesty in the performers, do not turn to this sky. Here female performers take some pleasant liberty, and many of the other women, not able to sing, become performers here.

Men are superior; they only can aim to artistic creation, to instil emotions with arts. It is again morality, reputation, the weapon used to deprive women of their instruments. The background of Testi's words hides something else: some women, even when they don't know how to perform –he says- become performers. He doesn't explain further, the reason

is left pending. But today, with tired ears after listening so many times these voices insinuating, judging, defaming, we can understand the underlying meaning: a woman reaching a top position, doesn't get there for her talent, but thanks to another gift, hidden, given to the powerful person of the day in return for exposure.

This is only the beginning.

In 1686 a decree is issued forbidding to all women "spinners, married ones or widows" to study music, to go to conservatories, to perform before an audience.

Going on studying is only for personal pleasure, like pursuing an amiable skill to add to the dowry for the husband. They play as long as they are child but then they are forced to tend the house.

Romanticism, in spite of its innovative drive, will end up being one of the darker ages. Women can't be defined without men. They are sisters of, wives of, daughters of. Like they couldn't have existed without a man. That is what happens, so far: if women are brilliant musicians, but they are tied to a talented man by blood or love, they must sacrifice themselves. Leave the field to them. It is customary in a society that, since the noun of Bingen times, usually doesn't see nor listen to them, and recognise them only as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers. Almost always with this order, as their lives go.

The system starts to falter in 1900s. Women begin to bewitch from the stages, and even if some man still give them condescending smiles, it is already obvious that the history of music can't do without the female part. Not everyone agrees: many musicians still object, and early in the century Church forbids women to sing in a choir, but the way seems open at this point.

Few women are forgiven for their talent, still today; even less, for their success. There's always behind some gossiping, some "how she did it" and "it won't last".

And sometimes it's hard, very hard, because all these women are pages of an extraordinary history that keeps playing, and replaying.

They are all revolutionaries, without knowing it. From Hildegard, her again, who explained the period to nouns, to Björk, tiny and mysterious, who takes away the music boundaries, experimenting and dressing up. Pop? Rock? Classic? Electronic? Woman? Man? Which face? Which form? It doesn't matter. Truly, it doesn't matter. Only music matters, if it's good or not.

Each woman that lives in this book is a woman that I would have liked to be, or maybe I'm or I'll never be. Each of them, from a distance of ages and centuries, has something to do with complexity and courage that takes to compose the word music. This is the story then of some unique women in a world of men. Brilliant musicians. Original composers. Divine performers. A story made of prejudices and impositions, often sad, made of defeat and rebellion, of talent and passion: the story of some women unique, brilliant, innovative, rebel, without whom I maybe could not get on a podium today.

Hildegard of Bingen

The woman who lent her voice to God

Jesus is female, without a doubt. And if you're thinking about some 70s poster, you'll be disappointed. You have to go back of at least ten years. No: twenty, thirty, forty. Let's say fifty, one hundred, two hundred. Actually, nine hundred and that's it.

Hildegard is born in 1098, in fact. In a completely male world, full of dogmas. It is not yet the illuminist time of questions; it is the time of faith and obedience. A time when history converges under the big arcades of cathedrals and the Church's allows inquisitions, persecutions and starts wars.

Hildegard is a child, only a child when, she starts to see strange things: visions bursting in darkness and silence. Neither saints nor virgins. Hildegard sees a powerful light that shakes her, tightens her stomach and terrifies her. What is the difference between who says to see things that others can't and who actually sees them? None. For the rest of the world, it's madness. And the most cautious thing to do, back then and for the most of our times too, was to isolate those people.

That is why the story we are about to tell begins in the abbey of Disibodenberg, in Odernheim, where an only eight years old girl lives. She is lock there because of her sickly health but also because maybe the fault is in the visions, delirium, making her so different: from her brothers, from her peers, from the rest of the world.

“Make sure you don’t talk with anyone! Migraines, these are only migraines!” and Hildegard obeys. She won’t talk about that, for the next thirty years or more.

Hildegard of Bingen: that’s how we know her. In that land, on the Rhine, she left a huge footprint of her existence. A religious existence, and yet rebellious. A devoted life and yet nonconformist.

Born from aristocratic parents, the last of ten children. If she were a colour, she would be green.

Indeed, because *viridis* means freshness, strength. And for a very frail girl, grown up among nuns, is not a small thing becoming the bearer of *viriditas*: the strength of the green. Green as plants, as trees’ foliage. Green as hope that the herbs she’s studying, looking for, mixing, can actually heal. Green as the spring, which heals her and awakes her from the deep emotional ice she sinks in, from time to time.

She takes her vows at fifteen, in 1112. And then she starts her love affair, so modern and tormented, with God. So far from the idea of woman that accepts and keeps quiet, she fights. All that already exists, she makes it exiting anew, bringing it into question, always under the attentive eye of God.

The body, for a start. It has not to be punished with fasting or flagellation, as the faith seems to require, but on the contrary, it has to be respected, fed and even adorned. Because that body is, above all, a uterus and uterus, for Hildegard, is the equivalent of the world.

Jesus, then, the divine spirit’s expression on Earth, can only be female indeed. The human and passionate side of God. No, it’s not the 70s, as we said, but the beginning of XII century. And woman is mother. But if you’re thinking to how old is this idea, well forget it.

Hildegard is the gynaecologist of her sisters. Back in an age that sees menstrual blood as a shame, she talks about it as the essential mechanism of a perfect machine. That can give birth, thanks to that blood. And that is always mother, even if she doesn’t bear children. Maternity is about all the existing things, says Hildegard, not only about who you give birth to. That is why woman is a universal being, divine, and superior. Strong. Strong, indeed, as Hildegard, who has no children but becomes mother of endless doctrines, such as homeopathy, natural science (today called physics), philosophy,

poetry, music. Of the music *inaudita* that she composes and leaves to posterity. But how can a *paupercula forma* (a “poor, small figure”, that’s how she calls herself) know Latin, medicine and art?

She didn’t go to school, because of God. And so God has been her tutor. He taught her everything, without she knew. Hildegard is a feather, entrusted to His will.

And yet all her work shows a huge culture: she doesn’t know only the liberal arts, but also the philosophy and the theology that the great minds of Middle Ages were developing, far from her. A mind able to include distant disciplines, different ideas, with a brightness and shrewdness equal, maybe, only to those that, after centuries, Leonardo da Vinci will show.

Well read Hildegard, humble Hildegard. Hildegard in the wind of God, that lifts her up to Him.

That is exactly what the music of the saint, but she is not a saint yet, does: it expands, as she does. She goes beyond: beyond the idea of woman that she knew, beyond the idea of nun, beyond the idea of intellectual. Beyond and higher. So high that who sings that music hard do sing, must make the voice fly higher than two octaves and a half. Quite above that only octave (customary for Gregorian chant) that suddenly seemed a prison. With Hildegard, even the notes feel free to go, to be whatever they want to be. And she composes, even if she doesn’t know how. She respects some rules, that time canons, but she reinvents the style. She, for instance, favours the semitone, a chromatic way to lead the melody, and makes sensual, feminine, even the music that should be liturgical, and also immediate even if complex: severely monodic, by the way, because for one God one voice. With Hildegard that voice, always a male one, becomes female.

Jesus, in the end, is female. That’s why also women should have the honour to be performers, and directly talk to God with the musical language. And yet, it’s not just music and sounds. It’s about to sing the order of the world itself, to transfer into notes and air the Cosmic Symphony that God established, to recreate a “echoes of the Heaven harmony”.

Mahler once said to his colleague Sibelius that a symphony should be like the world, including everything. Hildegard already understood it already. There’s no break between her and God, as well as between her and the cosmos. Therefore, music

emphasizes words and vice versa, to foster meditation and comprehension. So, her music is well balanced, not different in form from the one sang by her confreres, and yet bold, generated and instructed by the strange visions she grew up with, and it will become a habit and a godly message for other monasteries and cloisters. Because soul is of anyone, writes Hildegard, is symphonic and that singing she promotes goes beyond the walls of her cloister: "Every symphony of voices and instruments on the Earth, aimed to the sky, it's a way to restore oneself, to give a new life to the lost condition of Heaven. *Symphonia* is material and immaterial because voices are human and instruments made and played by terrestrial men, not only by angels. Terrestrial music comes from the Earth, and yet it is not tied to the Earth, that why the performer and the listener will survive."

It takes courage, teaches the young nun in love with green.

The woman daughter, the woman mother, the woman wife, the woman chaste, the woman silent. It's been ages without any other options. The woman doesn't speak in public, cannot challenge men!

And yet the story of Hildegard lights up with Bernard of Clairvaux. Who is not only a man and a monk, but also the friend and counsellor of Pope Eugene III. Hildegard, do write! Says Bernard. All that you see, and listen, and sing, write it down! And Hildegard, who became abbess, starts writing and write, and write. Volmar the monk helps her, and also the young lady Richardis, of whom Hildegard takes care as a daughter in the cloister. Hildegard is not silent anymore. She talks about her visions. She collects 26 of them and combine words with illustrations. The work is called *Scivias*, and when Pope Eugene evaluated it, even if still uncompleted, something starts to shine one day in 1148, in the cathedral of Trier. It's Hildegard celebrity, the Sybil of the Rhine, as everybody will call her. From now on, she will only tell and be a link between terrestrial things and heavenly ones, which find voice in her. "The Trumpet of God", that is what became the sickly Benedictine nun. And the great men and women search her, call her and consult her. Her words are oracles. Her hands are medications. And she travels, for mission, for work, for passion.

As a modern age woman. And yet it is not today, the time of Hildegard. It is not today the time when she met big approvals and gets such a celebrity to become counsellor of

Frederick Barbarossa and, speaking her mind very clearly, even calls him stupid, telling him that his anticlerical policy is wrong and will harm him. A woman daring to speak to the emperor, even admonishing him! A woman even daring to talk in public. Among the firsts allowed to.

Hildegard is, for her cloister, a tiny and endless source of gold. All the nuns want to live where she lives, the woman who lent her voice to God. A fearless, faithful, illuminated woman. But Hildegard is above all free, that is why she brings her sisters with her and founds a female monastery, all hers, in Bingen. But no: it is not only a monastery, the one she founds, she refounds a way of life. Sinful, for some people, too frivolous, for others. Hildegard commands her sisters one specific order: make yourselves beautiful. Beautiful?! Is it another joke of that German mystic nun that plays with herbs believing in their healing powers, and then one minute later speaks an unknown language claiming she heard it from angels and codified? What of the mortification of the body, then? And what of the annihilation of the vanity? Is not the soul the only way to chase the Heaven and run away from hell? No, shouts Hildegard, Jesus is female, we said, with flesh and bones. He saw with his eyes, he ate, spoke and sang with his mouth. Make yourselves beautiful, then. They are all talking about the nuns of Bingen wearing green, jewels to go to the mass. Doing their hair for God, and for themselves too. For that body that is a temple and must be therefore venerated.

Hildegard. The first feminist (a nun!) in the history.

Is October 7th 2012 when Pope Benedict XVI, a strong conservative that yet recognised and sanctified the exceptionality of a revolutionary devotee, proclaims her Doctor of the Church: for her extraordinary modern message, for her charisma and speculative skill incentivizing the theological research; for her thoughts of the mystery of the Christ, contemplated in his beauty; for the dialogue of Church and theology with culture, science and contemporary art. For her music, also.

Precisely because God “talks”, man is called upon to listen. This idea gives Hildegard the chance to present her doctrine about the chant, particularly the liturgical one. The

sound of the word of God creates life and appears to creatures. [...] But, of course, man is the creature that can answer, with his voice, to the voice of the Creator. And he can do such thing in two main ways: *in voce oris*, that is the liturgical celebration, and *in voce cordis*, that is a virtuous and holy life. The entire human life, therefore, can be seen as a harmony and symphony.

With these words, Benedict XVI proclaims her Doctor of the Church. The present stitches on her chest, almost one thousand years after her birth, a title rarely given, in history. And even more rarely given to women.

Her celebrity shined over the centuries. Maybe also Dante looked up on a codex with her *Liber divinatorum operum* (in my city, Lucca, where it still is). Some believe that, and who knows if it's true, her effective and deep visions took root in him, and then found space in The Divine Comedy: ideas such the one of the a united universe, with the man at his centre, or the one of God as a unreachable splendour, "living light".

Her spirituality doesn't stop to inspire even today.

To Hildegard: wise, mystic, experimenter, bursting with music.

She dies at the age of eighty-one, the abbess of Bingen. The 17th September 1179. Blessed by an extraordinary long life, thanks also to the cloister diet, to the inflexible rigor, to the heed to the body.

Shortly before, she disobeys.

She gave Christian burial to an excommunicate knight, repented just before his death, and therefore, according to the woman that will be saint and Doctor of the Church almost one thousand years later, deserving the God's hug. The Church orders to exhume the dead, immediately. But Hildegard is the woman grown up listening to the Lord. And only he can give her orders. So, she refuses.

As punishment, she receives the interdict. Her nuns are forced to silence. In that precious place, pulsating of light and music and knowledge, singing will be forbidden.

In one of the last letters, she says: " Be careful, you, taking the music from churches, because you let in the devil."

Six months before her death, then, music is given back to her.

Her music, music again: that must remain and must reach, without impediments, God's ear.

To us now, the duty of preserving the story of this incredible woman. Of this woman who seems being born today but instead no. You have to go back of at least ten years. No: twenty, thirty, forty. Let's say fifty, one hundred, two hundred. Actually, nine hundred and that's it.

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