

ON À SIBYL – MÖNĒ

In 2017 German cellist Christina Meißner made contact with me for a commission for a cello piece in the context of a project alternating between new cello music and cello transcriptions of the music of Hildegard of Bingen. Since my interest in mystic experiences and sound had already pre-occupied my work it quite intuitively resonated with me. After been given examples of the quality of Meißner's cello skills it was decided to collaborate for a new piece with the ambition of a CD- project in which both the new pieces, Hildegard's music as well as an existent work of Sofia Gubaidulina (reflecting on Hildegard) was to be included. A record which will be released in 2020.

For various reason my work on the piece did not notably start until early 2019 and was more or less finished in June the same year with some revisions taking place continuously up until the moment of its recording for said CD on 17th of September 2019 at Løgumkloster church in Denmark.

As such, it is a piece which in many aspects was conceived with the *method of sound* as a point of reference. Although some attempt will be made to align its different phases with the chronology of the method it will also be important to point out some of its more apparent compositional concerns. Even if the *method of sound* was in a phase of becoming, this becoming is intrinsic to the practice explored in each, individual, composition.

PRE-STUDY

On a weekly basis I spend a few hours in the small city of Lerum (more precisely the area of *Stenkullen*) just outside of Gothenburg. When the weather permit, I walk along the local brook, *Säveån*, which runs through Lerum toward Gothenburg. The promenade is part of a beautiful nature reserve. The first part of the walk is almost always downstream, following the stream on the left side of the water. It has become increasingly important, since by pausing along the trails, gazing across the water, the sound of the brook flows gently and occasionally deafeningly to my left.

Regardless of its perhaps Thoreau-esque undertones it has been an important meditative spot contemplating sound and the score. It could seem a simple truth, working on sound, listening to

sound, there is not a strict direction of its evolution in space. There is not even an *objective* experience of time. The sound flows, as the rushing water, in the direction which gravity directs it. The suspense of sound and the interaction of shorter events does not work in themselves as rhythmical identical cells. They express likeness, they act in our mind as part of our conception of their acoustical properties, but truthfully, they exist independent from us.

This walk and especially this position (see image) have then for the past year been a place of *composing*. It is a bench to which I brought the imagined cello.



The first stage of *the method* is the space. For *à Sibyl – mÖne* I worked with what could be considered two different spaces. One, which more reassembles, the imagined space in the *method* – a space that has limits; walls, ceilings and that is essentially empty and silent until I place myself and sounds in its midst. The other one is the actual space along the trail in *Stenkullen*. Similarly, as in *Songs for Antonin*, the open, unlimited space have an importance (for me). And I would say it belongs to the *imagined space*. If not else, it underlines the sense of breathing that I perceive in space. Of how, even the remotest sound, in the open space by the *turning* of the ear is accessible and despite its remoteness (or as with the opposite; a sounding, or just a “dead” object directly in front of me) can harmonize or completely negate all other sounds. Listening to water gushing, tree branches creaking, far-away cries of civilization and the hallucinatory sensation of the rays of the sun, the movement of clouds as sounding properties is a *reality*. It speaks to me. Imagining the cello as the source of all this richness and depth – and perhaps especially, this suspension of time, lends itself not as a challenge, but as a further degree of this kaleidoscopic experience. I don’t conceive of it as a technical act, it is not an exercise in which the cello is asked to perform the sound of water, the feeling of horizon or light – such an approach would only give focus to

¹ Säveån, Stenkullen, Västra Götaland, Sweden. Photo, Esaias Järnegard

sound as a mechanical reality. A reality which by no means occupy the center of my interest in the multiplicity of the emergence of a (possible) piece of music.

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Another companion on this initial stage was the work of Hildegard of Bingen. A woman of considerable depth. Her music displays a richness which deserve and are part of many dedicated analyses. One of its most prominent features is that of its relation to the word, and in a wider sense, language.

“In a word there is sound, meaning (uirtus), and breath. It has sound for it to be heard, meaning for it to be understood, and breath for it to be uttered. In the sound, then, recognize the Father.”³

Uncharacteristic for the time, her music displays a rhetoric unprecedented. The gestures, and especially, then, but not restricted to, the melodies are used to elevate or single out a force that sees sound and word work together. From a monastic point of view, it aligns with the tradition which already had been liturgically refined, for instance the *lectio divina*, which in the context of a musical culture without a traditional score and more in touch with the reciting traditions of the Tora’h comes across as more or less natural. However, a quick glance on the prevailing types of Gregorian chants at the time, it seems clear that the musical gestures and *dynamical* writing of Hildegard of Bingen occupies a particular place in the history of western music. We can compare, for instance, the 12th century chants of Jerusalem monasteries and the Mozarabe music from Spain with the contemporary *Symphonia* of Hildegard of Bingen.

All of these examples are written in neume notation, whereas the Jerusalem school display a more clearly polyphonic orientation and while the Mozarabe seem to imply a more intricate, ornamental character, the music of Hildegard lends focus to words, to their shape and meaning. Below an excerpt of Bingen’s original score transferred to modern notation and its sounding result, gives a typical example of Bingen’s musical world.

The image displays two versions of the 'Ave Maria' by Hildegard of Bingen. On the left is the original manuscript, featuring neume notation on red four-line staves with a large red initial 'A'. On the right is a modern musical transcription in G major, 4/4 time, with lyrics: 'A - - - ve Ma - ri - - a O - - - auc - - - trix vi - - - te'. The transcription includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature (C). The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span multiple notes. The transcription is numbered 4 and 5 at the bottom.

² Field recording, Säveån, Stenkullen, Västra götaland, Sweden.

³ Sarah L. Higley, *Hildegard of Bingen's Unknown Language*, 32.

⁴ Hildegard of Bingen *O dulcis electe*, excerpt

⁵ Transcription of the same part



Another peculiar aspect of Hildegard's music is the occasional inclusion of her own invented words. Most famously the *O orzechis Ecclesia*. Though not particularly researched, her *lingua ignota*, which besides a unique 23- letter alphabet also include a glossary of more than 1000 words in her preserved work. Not much is known of how the language is used, but its conception and use are occasionally mentioned in the preserved letters to and of Hildegard, for instance:

“Where then, will the voice of your unheard music [be], and the voice of your unheard language?”⁷

Her music did in all probability sound inside the walls of the monastery, and possible also at some public occasions, such as the *Ordo Virtutum*, the first large work, more or less a kind of staging of the passion, of a single composer with the intent of *one* work. Of her language, however, few mentions are made in the sources of her life. Scholarly, it is not until the 20th century that the uniqueness of her *unknown language* has come under scrutiny.

À Sibyl – *mōnē* – program note

The piece is strung around two poles: the sybil of the Rhine, Hildegard of Bingen, and the 16th century *Carmelite* nun and mystic, Teresa of Àvila. Hidden in the sound and textures, if you are equipped with a microscope you find traces of melodies, words (the secret *lingua ignota* of Hildegard) and possible even the voice of the extasis of Hildegard. In form, the *mansions* (*mōnē* in classic Greek) of Àvila's book *The Interior Castle* looms as different movements of contemplation. In essence the piece comprises of 8 shorter movements strung together as one. Each with a different subtitle of “homage” encapsulating a wide range of my mystic and musical forebears.

Teresa of Àvila, in her book *the interior castle*, writes of the prayer and the monastic life, as not an activity, but as a state-of-being. For me, sound, is exactly this. It is not something I do for a few hours every day, but it is mode of existence; never possible to discern from life.

The opening sound of the tail-piece to the final moment of an unstable harmonic is an exploration of sound in an imaginary space where past and present resonates through the hands and cello body of the performer. Taking the sound from its explicit point of origin to – hopefully – a more mythical, primordial dimension.

On the following pages the first pages of the score is included.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMzOCQsJrH8&feature=youtu.be>

⁷ Sarah L. Higley, *Hildegard of Bingen's Unknown Language*, 21.

General remark:
- Each movement (marked with I, II etc.) should be considered (always) as one, long line (regardless if pauses, fermatas appear)

Oscillating, ominous, luminous - an echo of (a mythic) Sibyl
Leggiero e inquieto

Esaias Järnegård 2019

I. À Eckhart

3''

♩ = ca 52

General remark
Melodic/ gestural sections - a wide range of expressions and dynamics; the cello should be considered as an extended vocal body - sing! Stable (soft or loud), slow lines of sound - let the sound be "colourless", "stone-faced", with a sense of clear, linear direction.

Voice

Cello - strings

Bow position

Tail-piece
pitch*

circular bowing

fast bow

Don't leave fermata until low, buzzing sound is fully established.

Bow on the rim of the cello body (bout)

noise

General remark
- Never use diminuendo in end-phrases, unless called for.
- Remain with intensity and presence on fermatas - don't relax the sound.

Two tailpiece position pitches:
Upper line - low humming pitch
Lower line - higher, penetrating, pitch (ca Bb)

Vlc. str

rallentando
(Crini)
III./IV.

(legno)
L
(III./IV.)

AT

accel.

XP

5

Bow on the bridge (IV.)

Even lighter than harmonic pressure.

mp

f

AT

XP

Bow position:
Upper line: Alto tastiera
Lower line: Extreme sul ponticello

Vlc. str

♩ = ca 84-96

Ord.

Take time-rubato

III.

III.

pizz. ca 6"-8"

Lunga

III. (P)

II.

Ord.

gliss. on III.

pp

mf

pp

poco

f

f

pppp

pp

Vlc. str

13

P

II.

3

T

XP

Ord.

P

(P)

(gliss. on III.)

Loco

pp

mf

pp

mf > pp

V

V

V

V

(always consider vocal actions 8vb,
voice should never be too uncomfortable)

♩ = ca 96 *stringendo* → ♩ = ca 120 *rall.*

Voc. *fp* *mf*

Vlc. str *pppp* *mf* *pp* *mp* *pp* *poco*

III. XP IV. 5 I. Ki XP P

♩ = ca 66-78 *accel.* → ♩ = ca 96

Voc. *pp* *mf* *pp* *pppp* *p*

Vlc. str *mf* *pp* *f* *p* *pppp* *XP* *Ord.*

20 e-e-e-e

Voc. *fp* *fp* *p* *f*

Vlc. str *ff* *pp* *mf* *molto* *pppp*

23 e-e-e i au ispaiz (is-par-iz) au!

P create a stable, intense multiphonic sound through bow speed and pressure

XP fast bow

Ord.

Lunga III./IV. *P*

I-IV. II-I-II-III-IV.

III. Hildegard, à Sofia - in croce

♩ = ca 84 *accel.* → ♩ = ca 96 *Lunga* (6"-8")

Voc. *f*

Vlc. str *p* *mp* *f* *pp* *poco* *f* *pp* *mp* *p* *f*

AT *Ord.* I. T i au

II. III. IV. I./II. *damped string* III. *L.V.*

crushed sound (noise)

*

Instead of glissando along the string, perform the glissande more as a glissande with the bow from I/II to IV- string, using the change of left-hand pressure and bow pressure to create a distorted sound of progression from pitch to noise

IV. La Pesanteur, Simone $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 60$ libera ca 16"-20"

Bow

29 Bow on the rim of the cello body (bout)

Bow on the rim of the cello body (bout)

Knuckle on cello's upper bout

Lunga

pp *mf* *molto pp* *mp*

"Dead stroke" (remain with the knuckle on the body of the cello)

V. à Giacinto $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 58-66$

Voc.

Vlc. str

pppp *mf* *p* *mf* *pppp*

P *f* *pp* *mf* *pp*

(m) Ord. Ke - i au (m)

I. I. (I./ II.)

6 3

Voc.

Vlc. str

cresc. *f*

e-e-e- (m) *e-e-e-e*

Meno $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 52$

sim. *Ord.* *Bow on the bridge*

cresc. *tremolo between I/II* *f* *pppp*

III./ IV.

VI. ISPARIZ, Hildegard II

Vlc. str

P *II.* *Bow on the bridge* $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 40-48$ *T* *III.* *P*

p *pppp* *pppp* *p* *mf*

III. IV.

Voc.

Vlc. str

pppp *pp* *mf* *pp*

Ord. *pp* *p* *II.* *(m)* *T* *mp* *P*

III. *pp* *p* *mf* *pp*

pp *p* *mp* *f pp*

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