Hildegard of Bingen at 900

The eye of a woman

To celebrate the anniversary of the influential composer and mystic Hildegard of Bingen, JUNE BOYCE-TILLMAN assesses her work from a sharply contemporary angle

From women's eyes this doctrine I derive.
They sparkle still the right Promethean fire.
They are the books, the arts, the academes
That show, contain, and nourish, all the world.[1]

IN THE LATE-20TH CENTURY, the music of the 12th-century abbess Hildegard of Bingen seems of significance for many types of people. The substance of this article is that within her, our age reclaims its lost feminine. This is achieved partly through a return to pre-Enlightenment conceptual frameworks, and partly because of Hildegard's own special position within these. Although there are those, scholars included, who would dispute the legitimacy of applying a feminist approach to an age that knew nothing of feminist theorists such as Carol Gilligan, there are others who see considerable parallels.[2]

This article is argued from an unashamedly essentialist position, one based on the work of the feminist psychologist Mary Field Belenky in her book *Women's ways of knowing*.[3] Her project, conducted in the 1970s, was based on a notion of Carol Gilligan's[4] 'that women have been missing even as research subjects at the formative stages of psychological theories'.[5] One-hundred-and-thirty-five women were interviewed, some from formal academic settings and some from family agencies, and the resulting data analysed using schemes from a similar project by William G. Perry that involved mostly male students.[6] A number of different stages in women's ways of knowing which have similarities with but also significant differences from their male colleagues were identified. The stages were identified: silence, received knowledge (listening to the voices of others), subjective knowledge (the inner voice), subjective knowledge (the quest for self), procedural knowledge (the voice of reason), procedural knowledge (separate and connected knowing) and constructed knowledge (integrating the voices). These were not related to musical knowing in the book. In my own work, however, drawing on the writings of feminist musicologists such as Diane Peacock Jezic[7] and my own experience of women undergraduates, I have identified how these characteristics might be related to music.[8] In doing so, I have employed to a considerable extent the notions of connected knowing and constructed knowledge.

To summarise Belenky, connected knowers believe that the most trustworthy knowledge comes from personal experience rather than the pronouncements of authorities. They develop procedures for gaining access to other people's knowledge, at the heart of which is empathy, favouring what Bruner called 'narrative' rather than 'paradigmatic' thinking.[9] Other characteristics shown by connected knowers are a desire to converse using empathy, the use of story, a prizing of mutuality and shared insight, a refusal to judge, collaboration in groups of connected knowers, and the use of personal knowledge as a source of truth. In constructed knowledge, the woman attempts to move outside the given boundaries of the group in which she has been tutored. It is marked by an effort to reclaim the self by integrating knowledge that she feels to be personally important with knowledge that she has learnt from others. The position often includes 'passionate knowing': 'the elaborated form connected knowing takes after women learn to use self as an instrument of understanding'.[10] Question-posing is central to this mode of thought, and this is at the heart of its orientation towards responsibility, which resolves conflicts not by a logical hierarchy of abstract principles, but in the context of each person's perspective, needs and goals.[11] My argument is structured around these principles, intertwined with ideas from the feminist musicologists Susan McClary[12] and Rose Rosengard Subotnik.[13]

THE first concept, that of interrelatedness, draws on strands found in Belenky's notion of connected knowing. This may be perceived both in the internal relationships within Hildegard's music and the way in which music is perceived in relation to individuals and society. The backdrop to this notion for Hildegard was her fundamental view

1. William Shakespeare: Biron in *Love's labour's lost*, act 4 scene 3, ll.326–29.

2. Richard Woods: *Medieval and modern women mystics: the evidential character of religious experience*, Second Series Occasional Paper 10 (Oxford; The Religious Experience Research Centre, 1997), p.2.

3. Mary Field Belenky, Clinchy McVicker, Rule Blythe, Nancy Goldberg & Jill Mattuck Tarule: *Women's ways of knowing: the development of self, voice and mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

4. Carol Gilligan: 'Woman's place in man's life cycle', in *Harvard Educational Review*, 49 (1979), pp.231–446.

5. Belenky: *op. cit.*, p.6.

6. William G. Perry: *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years* (New York: Rinehart & Winston, 1970).

7. Diane Peacock Jezic: *Women composers: the lost tradition found* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1988).

8. June Boyce-Tillman: 'Women's ways of knowing, in *British Journal of Music Education* vol.10 no.3

(November, 1993), pp.153–161; Boyce-Tillman: 'The role of women in the passing on of tradition and its implications for the school music curriculum', in *Musical connections – tradition and change* (Proceedings of the 21st world conference of the International Society for Music Education) (Tampa, Florida, 1994), pp.283–91.

9. J. Bruner: 'Narrative and paradigmatic modes of thought in learning and teaching the ways of knowing', in *Eighty-fourth Book of the National Society for the Study of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp.97–115.

10. Belenky: *op.cit.*, p.141.

11. Belenky: *op.cit.*, p.149.

12. Susan McClary: *Feminine endings: music, gender, sexuality* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

13. Rose Rosengard Subotnik: *Deconstructive variations: music and reason in western society* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

14. From *Vitae Hildegardis*, quoted in Sabina Flanagan: 'Hildegard and the global possibilities of music', in *Sonus* vol.11 no.1 (Fall, 1990), pp.20–22.

15. Pozzi Escot: 'Hildegard of Bingen: universal proportion', in *Sonus* vol.11 no.1, (Fall, 1990), pp.33–40.

16. Subotnik: *op. cit.*, pp.xxiv–xxv.

17. Subotnik: *op. cit.*, p.175

of the cosmos, which is most clearly reflected in the paintings of her visions. In these, circular and oval shapes are common, and circles of earth, fire and water hold all together, with the winds blowing in at four points. Music is seen as an essential part of this unity. Inside the pieces, the texts of her songs are characterised by the use of many conjunctions, a character reflected in the free flowing nature of many of the musical settings.

Sometimes attributed to lack of education, these features may equally well be seen as reflecting the free-flowing interconnectedness of her thinking, which in turn reflects the pattern of the universe. Indeed, for Hildegard, the notion of sin was related to a break in this relationship. Music has a crucial part to play in the restoration of right relationship, and for this she gave each of the psalm tones a theological significance.[14]

For Hildegard, the theory of music was inextricably bound up with the cosmic order. The American Hildegard scholar Pozzi Escot points out that there are examples of mathematical patterns in her work; but the origins of these are not in the theories of the autonomous nature of musical structures as found in the theories of contemporary musicologists, but a reflection of something beyond the music – the order and pattern of the universe which reflects that of the Divine.[15] Hildegard thus places herself among the non-autonomous theoreticians of music.

CONTEMPORARY feminist theorists locate themselves similarly. It is no accident that Rose Rosengard Subotnik draws on the work of the 'psychological' theorist Leonard Meyer, stressing the relationship of music to human processes. She writes:

> I would argue that the best writing about music, in the last century and in this one, moved away from technical descriptions and analyses towards images and analogies and ideas. But until recently, even the most figurative of those writings worked on the basis that they were 'about music.' A course on European music criticism since 1800 must certainly consider decades of debates over whether or not music is autonomous... . To my mind there can be little doubt that the disappearance of 'music itself' as a conceptual paradigm grew out of a massive process of Western self-criticism... . More recent critical movements such as the Frankfurt School, poststructuralism, and feminism have offered musicologists a way to reconfigure 'reason' so that their field could no longer justify rejecting as 'irrational' viewpoints, interests, and traditions that differed from the academic norm. Many who have been excluded from musicology on this basis had strong ties to nonautonomous conceptions of music.[16]

This relates well to the problems that connected knowers experienced in the survey of Mary Field Belenky. Rose Rosengard Subotnik continues, addressing the effect of such theorising on ways of listening:

> Only some music strives for autonomy. All music has sound and a style. Only some people listen structurally. Everyone has cultural and emotional responses to music. These characteristics and responses are not uniform or immutable but as diverse, unstable, and open-ended as the multitude of contexts in which music defines itself.[17]

This attitude to listening also acknowledges the importance of contextualisation, which is part of Belenky's connected knowing.[18] There is a strong tradition of women's songs associated with activities such as spinning, weaving and rocking the baby to sleep. These songs are customised and reworked every time for a particular circumstance. As we listen to Hildegard today, it is impossible for us to ascribe to her music the meanings that would have been ascribed to it in the convent. Shifts of context mean shifts of meaning. For Hildegard the liturgical context would have been inseparable from the music's meaning. Her compositions arose directly from the rhythm of the monastic community, using forms used in the regular worship which characterised it: responsories, antiphons, sequences and hymns.[19] Contemporary culture is filled with the essentially decontextualised phenomena of the CD and the concert, and it is difficult to enter again the liturgical context of Hildegard, except perhaps for those still engaged in the regular provision of music for worship.

Closely allied with the notion of contextualisation is that of ephemerality. For many women working, for example, as schoolteachers or church musicians, pieces are produced for particular occasions and then not preserved. The notion of producing material appropriate only for a particular purpose is analogous to the amount of women's art to be found in children's clothes and quilts for beds and not on the walls of art galleries. Women's artwork is often both useful and beautiful and, as such, it wears out. The collection of songs entitled *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* was almost certainly not written down by Hildegard. It is possible that towards the end of her life an unknown patron paid the considerable sum necessary to employ the services of a musical scribe. Some material may have been lost, as were later women's songs like those of the beguine Mechtild of Hackeborn, the so-called Flemish nightingale. The character of the pieces suggests they were created for particular festivals with no grand scheme in mind, following the themes that Hildegard loved and considered under-represented in terms of the music of the Church. The addition of the psalm tones in the margins of one of the manuscripts

implies that some of the songs may have had an independent life before being linked (somewhat uneasily) with the psalm tones. It is likely that the *Symphonia* was an ordering by Hildegard (in the case of the Dendermonde manuscript) of diverse material created in different occasions. It is possible that the music drama *Ordo virtutum* may have been written for the dedication of the Rupertsberg. The score is, therefore, in a different relationship to its sound from that of later periods. Rose Rosengard Subotnik develops this further:

> If the Western dialectic of structure and medium is still with us, should we not be trying in the classroom to develop intellectually rigorous ways of analysing sound and style as well as structure? Is it not possible that encouraging less dependence on the score as we listen, and of perceiving what the score suggests, might help us to develop new and richer ways of speaking about music? And might not such an expanded language enhance even our conception of how structure operates, and what it signifies, in music?
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> Designed to protect music as a preserve of individual integrity within society, and thereby ultimately to contribute to the betterment of the individual's position within society, this concept [of structural listening] in Schoenberg's and Adorno's version begs off its social responsibilities no less than the stylish snobbishness of Stravinsky's formalism does... .[20]

Some may have problems with the application to pre-Enlightenment music of principles of deconstruction proposed by post-Enlightenment theorists. And yet there is something to be said here about Hildegard and individualism. There is no doubt that whatever she touched she made her own, whether in the use of exuberant leaps and modal changes in her music, the colours of her paintings, or the huge feminine figures of her visions. Yet her underlying motivation for this is profoundly different. She stresses always her belonging to a Divine tradition; her striving is for authenticity within a tradition not for innovation moving away from the preceding generation. Her fundamental desire is not the individualism of modernism but to belong.

Many European myths, including the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, illustrate the importance of women's roles in the preservation of traditions. The women were left at home while the men embarked on their heroic quest; their role was the maintenance of a culture. Hildegard was steeped in the tradition of the Bible and Benedictine spirituality. Therein lay her strength and her weakness. How could she express her own unique spirituality and music, which she believed came directly from God in the context of the Christianity in which lay her roots? She delved deeply into the Old Testament, drawing on the Wisdom writings wherein the figure of Wisdom is traditionally feminine. Her rediscovery of the feminine aspects of the Divine was crucial to her search for an authentic voice. The symbolic figures of her visions are not women in name alone, but are explicitly female, endowed with breasts and wombs, performing particularly female functions such as cradling offspring or giving birth.[21] For some theorists[22] the loss of the feminine dimension of the Divine can be seen as important in the loss of an authentic female musical voice.

Hildegard also draws on the surrounding nature traditions of her times, for example, in the faces of the green person that can be seen on the pillars of the monastery of Disibodenberg where she spent much of her youth. This is very clear in *O viridissima virga*, in which she likens the Virgin Mary to a greening branch in which the birds build their nests. She tried to contain these ideas within orthodox theology. She was a traditionalist, but one who looked for an authentic female voice not outside it but within it. Some of her writing recalls that of Luther some centuries later; but never is there a hint of separation from the dominant tradition. In this context, the obscurity of some of her writing may be due not so much to an inadequate grasp of Latin as to a desire to belong. In common with many oppressed individuals and groups existing within an established order, she invented a system of 'double speak' that could be interpreted a variety of ways.[23]

18. Belenky: *op. cit.*, pp.112–30

19. Sabina Flanagan: *Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179): a visionary life* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.107.

20. Subotnik: *op. cit.*, pp.174–75.

21. Beer: *op. cit.*, p.7

22. Sophie Drinker: *Music and women: the story of women in their relation to music* (1948, repr. ed. Elizabeth Wood, New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1995), pp.131 & 135.

23. For further discussion of this see June Tillman: *32 Galliard spirituals* (London: Stainer & Bell, 1982).

24. Nel Noddings, *Caring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p.30.

Her sense of the mystical is related to the quality of empathy, central to Belenky's mode of connected knowing.[24] This receptivity goes beyond the reading of purely verbal cues. It includes a valuing of the non-verbal. Allied with Belenky's notion of passionate knowing, it leads to a desire to use a variety of media to express feelings and ideas. There were few art forms that Hildegard did not explore. Her nuns wore crowns and beautiful robes, which she considered justified because of their high calling as the brides of Christ.[25] She brings all the arts together in her music drama *Ordo virtutum*. In this, the Virtues or Powers, who are all female, attempt to guide the Soul on a heavenly path and steer her away from the charms of the Devil. He is the only man with a significant part in the piece. (A chorus of Patriarchs and Prophets sings an opening chorus, but do not appear again.) He does not sing, a symbolic representation of his lack of connection to the Divine. The alliance of the women with notions of the highest good in a large-scale music drama turns on its head later operatic traditions.

Her use of music as part of healing rituals shows clearly how she favoured the expressive elements of music. This was a clear feature both of Belenky's connected and constructed knowing. There is a subtle expressive interrelationship between text and music in all of Hildegard's songs. In her antiphon *O virtus sapientiae* (ex.1) the melody rises upwards in one of her characteristic ecstatic openings at the announcement of the power of Wisdom. In line 2, with its concern with circling, it spirals around B. As she sings of embracing the earth in a way that brings life into being, the line sweeps down form the top E to root the life into the earth. As the first of the three wings reaches highest heaven, the line sweeps up to its highest note, while for the wing sweating in earth it goes down nearly to its lowest note. The third, flying everywhere, uses the whole octave. The doxology leans downwards in a gesture of reverence.[26] In this welding of text to tune, and in creating both simultaneously, she is in the tradition of the woman singer and song-writer that includes 20th-century figures such as Joan Baez and Joni Mitchell, for whom the song represents an intensification of their own feelings and beliefs.

THE song-texts glitter with vivid images. Her work, compared with that of her male contemporaries, has often been viewed as lacking craftsmanship. But the dazzling accretion of images that characterises her writing results in cavalcade of excitement that Jung (had he known it) would have found a rich source for women's use of symbol. Contemporary performances of her work sometimes do not reflect such expressive writing in the chosen singing style, although recordings such as those of Vox Animae are remarkable for their dramatic quality.[28] Barbara Newman states that: 'Given her visionary conception of the music it is hard to believe the rhapsodic quality of her lyrics did not call forth a similarly rapt uninhibited performance style. She praises the sweet clear, ringing tone (dulcissima, clara, sonans).'[29] This vibrant vocal style is allied to her concept of 'viriditas'. Although this is usually translated as greening power, it includes the vibrancy and energy of all creation.

Belenky stresses the importance of process to women, claiming that as long as teaching concentrates on the presentation of 'polished products', women will be disempowered.[30] Hildegard's music is in itself a revelation of her process because she received it as part of the visionary experience, which started in her fourth year. Having received her visions directly from God in this way, she resisted revising them. As a result, the music is improvisatory in character.[31] Her pieces elaborate a number of very small motifs, which give coherence to her work. In this respect, Hildegard might be compared with later women composers, Clara Schumann for example, whose use of form has been seen to contrast with that of her husband. Hildegard's music unfolds rhapsodically in a way that blurs the outlines of its formal structures. This is not the practice of her male contemporaries. It may well be the choice of women, however, and not simply the result of a lack of musical education, as some writers suggest. Susan McClary writes: 'I believe it may be possible to demonstrate that various women composers in history (Hildegard von Bingen, Barbara Strozzi, Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn) likewise wrote in ways that made a difference within the music itself.'[32]

In this improvisatory style Hildegard introduces changes of mode – out of keeping with the usage of her day.[33] She also exploits the forbidden augmented fourth in portraying the cosmic cataclysm of *O cruor sanguinis*. She also ends *O ignis Spiritus* in a different mode from the one in which she began. McClary writes:

> Closure is a far more absolute condition in classical music than in most other arts ... in most tonal music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries nothing less will suffice for the purpose of concluding pieces than complete resolution on the triad. Equivocal endings are few and far between. Yet the fact that most listeners do not know how to account for this overwhelming push for closure they experience in this music means that it often seems like a force of nature rather than a human ideological construct.[34]

McClary is writing of post-Enlightenment traditions, but the notion of closure was even more

25. Nancy Fierro: *Hildegard of Bingen and her vision of the feminine* (audiocassette produced by Sounds True Studio, Boulder, Colorado, 1995).

26. Boyce-Tillman: *op. cit.* (1993).

27. Newman: *op. cit.* (1988), p.45.

28. Michael Fields, Michael & Evelyn Tubb (musical directors): *The soul's journey: Ordo Virtutum by Hildegard of Bingen* (Etcetera Record Company, KTC 1203 (1996)); also available from the same company on videotape.

29. Newman: *op. cit.* (1988), p.30.

30. Belenky: *op. cit.*, p.215.

31. For more details see Franz Wellner, ed.: *Adam von Sankt Viktor: Sämtliche Sequenzen* (Munich, 1955).

32. McClary: *op. cit.*, p.33

33. Some scholars see this as merely a shifting of hexachords rather than a changing of the mode.

34. McClary: *op. cit.*, p.61

35. Boyce-Tillman: *Anointing the wounds*, piano solo based on 'O cruor sanguinis', London: Hildegard Press, 1996. Boyce-Tillman: *The call of the ancestors* for brass quintet, chorus and improvising groups (London: Hildegard Press, 1997).

36. Belenky: *op. cit.*, p.152.

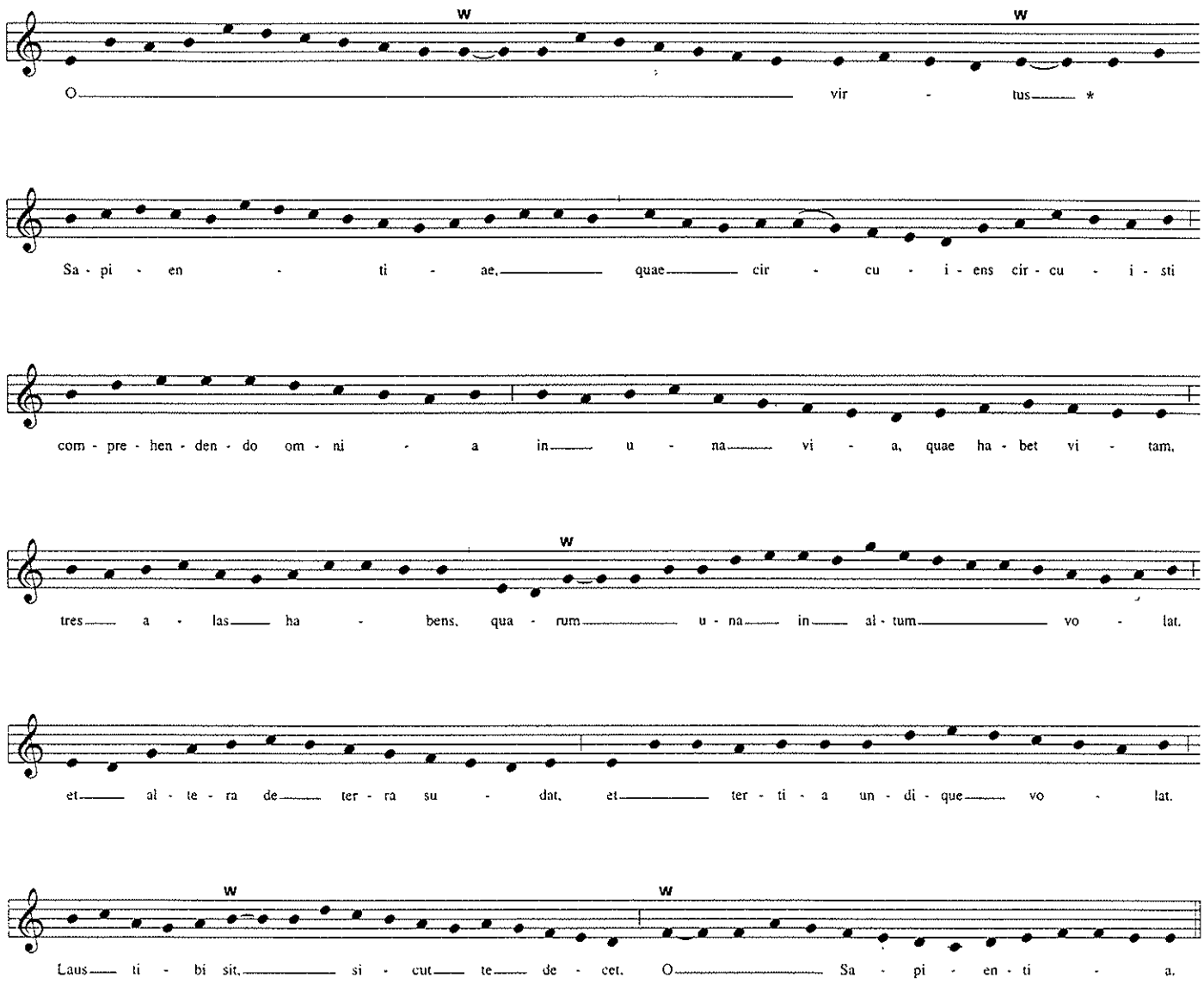
37. Bowie & Davies: *op. cit.*, p.29.

38. Norma Gentile: 'Into the desert', in *Continuo* (6 October), pp.5–7.

39. Belenky: *op. cit.*, p.152.

O virtus sapientiae

Hildegard of Bingen



Ex.1: Hildegard of Bingen: O virtus sapientiae. The w sign indicates the presence of a quilisma.

true of the church modal traditions, which never left their chosen mode. Hildegard, in introducing a change of mode at the end of *O ignis Spiritus*, challenges this notion. She is thus setting up a different model more akin to the helix (a feminine symbol), where the same point is never returned to exactly. It is a model I have followed in my own pieces.[35]

In Belenky's study, women constructivists did not wish to create compartments but sought to develop all aspects of life simultaneously out of an adherence to a belief that they are all interrelated.[36] This means that they will take a more holistic approach to life, one that stresses the relationship of music to healing. In founding the Hildegard Network, bringing together people interested in exploring the links between spirituality, the arts and healing, I wanted to explore such notions. For Hildegard wrote freely of many aspects of life. She saw laughing, crying, singing and dancing as being linked with the health of the body, particularly in relation to the immune system, which she saw as central to health. As such she sounds almost contemporary. It is the integrative aspect of Hildegard's music that explains its popularity in modern society.[37] Today's healers are using her music to effect the order in these elements that Hildegard desired.[38]

40. Bowie & Davies: *op. cit.*, pp.35–36.

41. Newman (1988): *op. cit.*, p.25.

42. Subotnik: *op. cit.*, p.210.

43. Michael Polanyi, Michael: *Personal knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p.viii.

Belenky identifies the desire of connected and constructivist knowers for collaborative ways of working and a sense of community.[39] Central to the Benedictine Rule by which Hildegard would have lived was the notion of communality. In her creative work, she laboured in collaboration with both Richardis of Stade and Volmar. This is shown clearly in an illumination in the Lucca manuscript where they stand on either side of her. Her drawing of herself as a visionary is also contained within a monastical building showing how she saw belonging to such a community as an important part of her experience.[40]

Musically Hildegard favoured inclusivity, a non-judgmental notion the Belenky sees as part of connected knowing. Barbara Newman writes: 'Thus music for Hildegard was not the province of a gifted elite but a thing quintessentially human; mankind was never meant to live without it.'[41] Rose Rosengard Subotnik also attacks elitism: 'Any principle, even the principle of reason, when honoured so rigidly as to exclude all others, sooner or later becomes the basis of a rationality that can be used to justify immorality in the real world.'[42] Such writing reflects Belenky's idea of passionate and committed knowing, which she illustrates from Michael Polanyi: 'Personal knowledge ... is the passionate participation of the knower in the act of knowing.'[43] Rosengard Subotnik launches a strong attack on the supremacy given to reason since the Enlightenment:

> This is the concept of the theoretical or cognitive reason, as analysed most cogently by Immanuel Kant in his Critique of Pure Reason. Kant's achievement was to demonstrate that a condition of abstract universal validity can be established reliably through intersubjective structures of cognitive reason. In this way he protected a reliable epistemological basis for resolving scientific and logical problems.
>
> But many human acts ... fall into a domain that is clearly moral rather than cognitive in character. Determining 'rightness' of these actions requires more than the cognitive processes of scientific and even logical verification; it requires moral judgement. Can the two be joined? However justified we may be in demanding that all notions of reason be moral, and that all notions of morality be reasonable, it is far from self-evident that the archetype of theoretical reason on which we come to rely in modern Western thought has any bearing on moral questions.[44]

Such writing has clear echoes of Hildegard, who writes in *The book of divine works* of human reason and the interrelated powers of 'expiratio, scientia et sensus' – spirit, knowledge and feeling.[45] In her committed knowing, Hildegard learnt to speak with authority based on the vision of the blinding light which, when it struck her at the age of 43, gave her the sense that the authority she desired had been given to her.[46] Other creative women have similarly found strength in mid-life; Virginia Woolf is but one example. It is the rediscovery of the power of the older woman who is marginalised and ridiculed by our society – the redeeming of the crone.[47] However, her image of herself as a feather on the breath of God reflects Belenky's notion of constructivist knowers having a sense of humility about their knowledge.[48]

WHEN Hildegard was 80, her powerful voice was silenced for eight months for failing to obey the bishop's instructions and for pursuing her own view of God's justice. It is a fine metaphor for what patriarchal cultures have attempted to do to women throughout history: 'the active silencing of history, the regulation, the circumscription, the prohibition of women's musical practices'.[49] But thanks to a letter warning the Bishop that those who silence the music of God on earth will have no part in the songs of the angels in Heaven, Hildegard did sing again for eight months before she died – the connected, related, contextual, communal, visionary, collaborative, improvisatory, integrative, committed, authoritative song of the mature woman. Her song represents a value system that the dominant culture is ignoring. To hear it would help men as well as women. Yet it is a song that our age still has problems hearing.

44. Subotnik: *op. cit.*, pp.181–82.

45. Boyce-Tillman: *Hildegard of Bingen: a musical hagiography*, Hildegard Monograph Issues Two (Winchester: The Hildegard Network, 1996), p.11.

46. Monica Furlong: *Visions and longings: medieval women mystics* (London: Mowbray, 1996), p.88.

47. Fierro: *op. cit.*

48. Belenky: *op. cit.*, p.139

49. Lucy Green: *Music, gender, education* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), p.2.

June Boyce-Tillman is Reader in Community and Performing Arts at King Alfred's University College, Winchester.