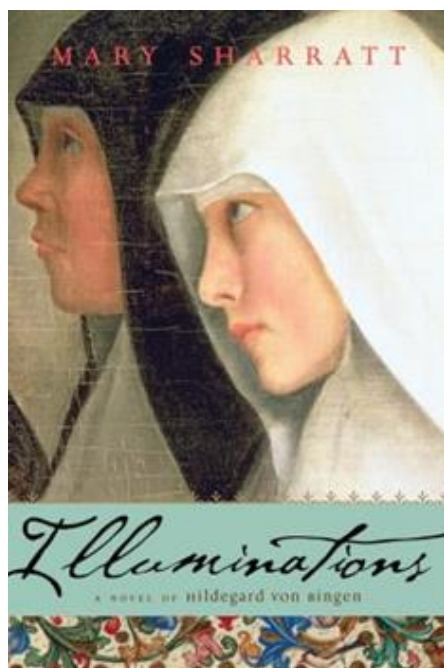


## WE READ

by Barbara Nicoletti

*A column dedicated to enriching our lives as flutists through the review of literature with a musical focus.*

12<sup>th</sup> century vocal, sacred compositions by an extraordinary female composer have relevance to modern day flutists!? To find out more, read on!



### The Book

This newsletter's selection is [Illuminations: A Novel of Hildegard von Bingen](#), by Mary Sharratt, 2012. Briefly, this is historical fiction that draws fairly strictly from historical record. Reading this book for GPFS originally came from a deep, personal interest in learning more about an extraordinary woman of the Middle Ages/12<sup>th</sup> century – an historically long overlooked composer, artist, healer, philosopher and overall polymath – who we first met in last month's GPFS book review [Year of Wonder: Classical Music to Enjoy Day by Day](#), 2018.

The book spans St. Hildegard's lifetime (1098 – 1179, canonized in 2012, and one of only four women to date designated "Doctor of the Church," in part because of her compositions). In the novel and historical record, she was "offered to the church at eight years old and entombed with the expectation that she live out the rest of her life in silent submission (Sharratt)." However, due to her sacred visions, tenacity, will, and passionate intellectual and creative capacity that could not be contained, she ultimately lived a *very* different life.

Along with many other historically noteworthy accomplishments, she composed 77+ songs yet was left out of the history books until about 1979, an astounding fact since she is now considered one of the most prolific composers of the time and our earliest known female composer. Further astounding, the Middle Ages were a time when most women did not read, write, speak their mind, serve as spiritual leaders or travel to the extent she did.

## Take-Aways

- **Context of Compositions:** This story gives deep context to what inspired her musical and artistic compositions, the birth of this substantial body of work from the Middle Ages that has endured to this day.
- **Power of Our Creative Energy:** The book also inspires the reader to think about our own creative force, obligation, inspiration and journey. As musicians, how would we answer – *“What is our relationship to the creative world?”* Our own musical practice is a personal vow to be creative.
- **Creativity as Moral Practice:** A visionary intellectual, her life practice focused on the importance of an individual’s capacity to tap into our own imagination and creativity, regarding it as a moral practice that can heal ourselves and others, bring radiance to the world and movement of other creative forces – a “greening power,” her phrase. She believed Creation was still going on through human creativity and that, for humanity, creativity is an essential, divine path especially rich when done with others.
- **Creative Conscience:** She was a strong example of creating what you love, to be observant and discerning, while nurturing and honoring your own creative conscience.
- **12<sup>th</sup> Century Music Literature:** Last, but not least, this reader had the additional surprising benefit of receiving a refresh on music of this time period, which was largely either sacred chants or minstrel songs. The musical staff of the five horizontal lines we know was not invented until around 1200. There is no flute literature for this time period so, therefore, we can easily overlook it. **Yet, there is value to the flutist.**
- **Music for the Flutist to Play:** Many of St. Hildegard’s works have been published to modern standards to be performed by vocalists in unison choir or as solo works. These can be found at Hildegard Publishing Company. This flutist studied five of her pieces and found them very meditative, inspiring, and challenging to play.
- **Musically Challenging:** Fine vocalists describe these works as “not for the faint of heart” and requiring significant commitment because the phrases are long, have many notes, use nuanced ornamentation, and span two+ octaves. It also provides an opportunity to exercise a very different type of musical phrasing and tone shaping based on the poetry/words (lots of vowels). The music challenges the player to have a strong, but warm and gentle tone. It also provides an opportunity to exercise a very different type of musical phrasing and tone shaping based on the poetry/words (lots of vowels). Her music has either one pitch per syllable (syllabic), two to three (neumatic), or many pitches per syllable - up to 50 at times (melismatic). One publication noted she often uses all three in one short piece. Imagine the challenge of carrying the written word and musical idea! This reviewer is outwardly hoping my favorite flutist, Laurel Zucker, happens upon this review and decides to make a recording of some of Hildegard’s pieces.
- **Improvisation Opportunity:** Another interesting experience is to use one’s ear to improvise along with the recordings by adding simple, meditative, slow harmony and/or repeating elements of the melodic line.

## Insightful Resources

- **Online Biographical:** A brief summary of her life and works can be found on the Hildegard Publishing Company website as well in the Classical FM guides on discovering great composers.
- **Recordings:** “Canticles of Ecstasy” by Sequentia and “11,000 Virgins, Chants for the Feast of St. Ursula” by Anonymous 4. Streaming music services iTunes and Spotify have several albums and playlists featuring her compositions. Enjoy the playlist I put together in iTunes called “Hildegard von Bingen: GPFS Book Review of “Illuminations.”
- **Hildegard Publishing Company:** Hildegard.com, whose mission is “to seek out and publish compositions by women composers which display the highest level of excellence and merit.”

*“We cannot live in a world that is not our own, in a world that is interpreted by others. An interpreted world is not a home. Part of the terror is to take back our own listening, to use our own voices, to see our own light.”*

*“My song must float like a feather on the breath of God.”*

*“All of creation is a symphony of joy and jubilation.” (St. Hildegard von Bingen)*

