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Audio Review

Hildegard of Bingen: *Lifeline*. Angels Share Records, 2022.

Performers: Ann Moss, soprano; Sidney Chen, Shruti box; Eric Fraser, Banduri flute; Trace Johnson, cello; Justin Ouellet, viola; Carrie Smith, guitar; Jessie Nucho, flute; Colm Ó Riain, violin; Matt Berkeley, Fender Rhodes piano and synthesizers; BZ Lewis, guitar and synthesizers

The COVID-19 pandemic sent full-time performers into isolation that threatened their livelihoods and psyches. Operatic sopranos are often some of the most socially-oriented people, thriving on their ability to thrill an audience with their hard-won technical prowess and musicality. Suddenly, without access to even a live accompanist, they were isolated and alone. But the most powerful artistic statements often arose from this forced imprisonment. In her 2022 recording *Lifeline*, soprano Ann Moss took inspiration by analogy, exploring the highly personal and unique music of the Gothic polymath and mystic, Hildegard of Bingen. She also used modern recording technologies to collaborate with other musicians, who created accompaniments ranging from atmospheric and ambient textures to more elaborate, independent accompaniments. The result is a deeply personal and highly collaborative statement of communal ritual, both artistic and spiritual.

The admixture of the ancient and contemporary is as old as our earliest musical memory; even in the medieval period, creation of new ideas was never *ex nihilo*, but a reforming and re-arranging of preexistent shapes and gestures into a new, self-contained statement, which then became fodder for the next in line to potentially hear and pluck their own blooms for a new bouquet. Many new directions in art, literature, and music have arisen from plumbing the past for what is missing in the present. Debussy, for one, found Gregorian chant to have the plasticity of line and time that he found lacking in the music of his world. The dizzying variety of what we can access as our current and past musical culture post-iPod allows an even greater cross-fertilization of styles than ever before. Moss's recording demonstrates this, while keeping a sharp focus clearly on Hildegard's melodic gift and her own dynamic vocalism.

We know virtually nothing of the sound of the voice in Hildegard's time, other than that her technique was not related to either contemporary or eighteenth-century *bel canto* tradition as far as anyone can convincingly prove. Moss's vocalism is thoroughly modern and

The recording is available online at sites including Bandcamp, Apple Music, Amazon, Spotify, Pandora, and Tidal. For more information on the recording, see <https://www.annmossosoprano.com/lifeline-2022>.

stunning. Her sound is incredibly consistent, true, and flexible, a pyramid of color from bottom to top. What is interesting about Hildegard is the uncompromising challenges she presents to the singer; self-taught, or so she claimed, these melodies often display a wider tessitura than any before the advent of Baroque opera, and Moss delivers them with aplomb. She sings in a historically-informed manner, closing vowels to nasal syllables at times as indicated in some of the neumes, and producing quivering ornaments for others. Her highest notes shine forth like light in the dark of the abbey, often straighter but even more luminescent. And her tuning is likewise more just than equal, with wide half steps that have more emotional pull, especially in modes 3 and 4 (Phrygian and Hypophrygian).

In this recording, there are definitely aspects that may challenge purists of early music seeking another recording of Hildegard—this isn't yet another clone of the splendid *Sequentia* recordings. Sometimes, the choices of her accompanists work against the modal language willfully or playfully, as in the ending of “O frondens virga,” where the cello and violin drone ends in the Dorian, a step lower, or in the final track, “O vos angeli,” where BZ Lewis and Justin Ouellet create a prog-rock environment that follows the chant more closely in a 1980s way that is reminiscent of the soundtrack to *Stranger Things*, with its synth loops and distorted power chords. But often, the most willful choices are exactly what makes the collaboration soar. Witness how Jesse Nucho's incredibly tight, multi-tracked flute choir in “O virtus sapientiae” resembles at times a medieval portative organ; elsewhere, a high pulsation recalls a similar punctuation in Mahler's Nietzschean Lied from his Third Symphony. The choice of flute comes directly from the text, which speaks of the three winds of Wisdom, and the opening, with chthonic speaking through what sounds like a bass flute, lends a quasi-threatening sense of hidden knowledge. Yet other choices demonstrate the long reach of the late Thomas Binkley's exploration into traditional, contemporary world music influences on modern early music performance, such as Eric Fraser's running, Bansuri flute commentary in “Caritas abundant.” In “Quia Ergo Femina,” Carrie Smith's subtle, oud-like guitar playing adds just a hint of the Phrygian's association with Spain in the later nineteenth century's flamenco-drenched modality, aided by Trace Johnson and Justin Ouellet's sul ponticello nasality that approaches the sound of a kemenche as much as the world of Kaija Saariaho's spectral string works, with their swooning glissandi and microtonal trills. In some ways, these sounds resemble sci-fi film scores such as *Dune* (2021).

Of course, we should be careful not to worry overmuch about anything as outdated as authenticity. All of these choices make musical sense on their own and read wonderfully to the microphones, providing much for her collaborators to work with. Moreover, the technological dimension shouldn't be overlooked, as it is central to the conception of this work. The recording and production of this disc is ethereal and clear. We always hear the vocal element's tiniest details even when the surface threatens to overstep the “drone” status. And technology is used on the voice subtly as well: one of the things that was impossible was group singing, and the overlaying of voices is done splendidly in “Quia Ergo Femina”—surely representing Moss's longing for the communion of a vocal ensemble.

Overdubbing in this track is sometimes natural, at others more produced and modern, a wonderful juxtaposition of nature and artifice. The most natural of all is the a cappella statement beginning “O quam mirabilis.” Finally shorn of its shell, we hear Moss in full freedom, and her sudden clarity is thrilling when encountered in the context of the program, an “authentic,” twelfth-century texture that never returns, but is precious and memorable.

We must not forget that Hildegard had powerful visions that she recorded for posterity. Some of the tracks on this disc clearly refer to altered states of perception. Most notable is “O lucidissima apostolorum turba,” where Matt Berkeley’s undulating, synth-heavy background shimmers with its own metric timescale, a hint of a broader, universal pulse just beyond our perceptual grasp. Its tonal world is likewise somewhat remote from Hildegard’s, with short, ascending chromatic lines and detuned sonorities. At one point, Moss’s limpid tone emerges imperceptibly out of a synth pad on the word “lux”—a subtle merging of human and machine. In this chant, Moss departs from the typical medieval application of *musica ficta* by singing naked tritones, an aural representation of the Devil’s prison (i.e., the physical world) that the apostles are urged to transcend in their search for Mary’s purification. The modernity of a pure Lydian modality here stands out among the Phrygian and Dorian modes of the surrounding tracks, adding to the otherworldliness of this composition.

Finally, one of the most delightful tracks that brings us into a completely new world is the aforementioned “O quam mirabilis est.” Colm Ó Riain’s fiddling vigorously accompanies a repeated verse in a way that brings traditional Celtic and Bluegrass playing to the proceedings, and Moss gamely rhythmicizes the repeated chant into something between *coloratura* and a reel, the only time on this disc that Hildegard is forced into a metric world. It’s thrilling and highly contemporary, notwithstanding the unnatural twisting of the original to suit the new.

Lifeline is a beautiful window into two similar women, both bound by circumstance to their anchoritic cells, and both producing otherworldly visions. It is also an admirable social statement about isolation and togetherness that should resonate with all listeners with an open mind. I found it cathartic, challenging, and delightful.

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