

BLACK SUN CD review

This Hildegard piece was initially intended, and finished, for an earlier issue of Soundscapes. But at exactly the time that the editor was finalising content for that issue, a press release turned up announcing the imminent arrival of a significant new player in the Hildegard market. volume one of the complete hildegard von bingen by sinfonye on the celestial harmonies label (this label is right-on, and doesn't go in for capital letters) has now arrived; it looks and sounds very good, and approaches the repertoire in sufficiently different ways to provide rich and worthy competition to Sequentia's series.

Stevie Wishart divides her time, enviably between Sydney and Oxford. Shortly after I spoke to her she was off to the UK for six months or so, initially to give an innovative, audio-visual Hildegard performance in London similar to the one Sinfonye gave in the 1994 Adelaide Festival. She's understandably excited about this release, her first for the Arizona-based, eclectic, slightly new-agey label celestial harmonies. Picking up a contract for a complete Hildegard project must be truly a gift from on high? "Yes, I'm obviously very pleased about it. It's a great contract, and gives us a lot of flexibility and control."

Wishart is very hands-on with her recordings. She produces them, and has strong views on design and textual content. Her present approach is minimalist, and so in this Hildegard release, there are full texts and translations, but no lengthy erudite notes—just a quote from Hildegard and a short note from Wishart indicating the group's performance aesthetic. Revealingly, the Hildegard quote contains the following: "I also brought forth songs with their melody...I sang them too, even though I had never learned either musical notation or any kind of singing." Wishart aims to recapture the same spontaneous feeling in Sinfonye's performances: "working as much as possible within aural processes of learning by rote, I hope for a communal sense of metrical direction while leaving space for the spontaneity of vocal ornamentation and improvised organum."

In addition to the core trio of Sinfonye—Wishart, Jocelyn West and Vivien Ellis—this Hildegard release features Welsh folk-singer Julie Murphy and five members of the Oxford Girls' Choir. In this sense, using young women and working less from the printed page and more aurally, it's arguable that this is a pretty authentic Hildegard—what you'd have got in the Bingen nunnery. Other interpretative aims, Wishart tells me, are that "there's a sense of urgency, a moving through the phrase", that "we're not looking for a completely click-tight ensemble", and that there's "a lot of personality". She consequently likes to concentrate on chest voice production rather than head—in order particularly to transmit text more clearly—and this is certainly evident in the low-placed, dark and alluring contributions from Murphy and Ellis.

But how about Hildegard's stratospheric writing? "Well, you just have to work really hard on the texts, and let the head voice do

its work." I'm certainly very impressed with this higher singing, carried mostly by the Oxford girls and Jocelyn West. It's in tune, better blended than the other richer, beefier Sequentia ensemble, and has just that small element of fright and tension which makes high notes worth listening to. Track 4, O vos angeli, with a range of two and a half octaves is their biggest challenge, and it comes off very well. There are many other fine moments, and my favourite track is the last, a Song to Ecclesia, where Vivien Ellis's warm, detailed, committed, really attractive solo rounds the album off in an interesting and affirmative way.

Meurig Bowen