



De Caelis
Direction Laurence Brisset

PRIMA VOX
ENSEMBLE DE CAELIS



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Five Female Voices and Organetto

Medieval Music: Excerpts from *Symphoniae Harmoniae Celestium Revelationum*, Riesen Codex, by Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), excerpts from the Codex IX of Las Huelgas, anonymous pieces compiled in the early 14th century

This program carries the echo of feminine voices, singing and praying within two renowned monasteries: Disibodenberg in Germany in the 12th century and Las Huelgas in Spain in the 13th and 14th centuries. Here, through five female voices, shifting between Hildegard's monody and the polyphonies of the Las Huelgas manuscript, we encounter themes of sacredness and feminine devotion. These works aim to resonate with our deepest selves, reaching towards an initial voice, *prima vox per quam omnes creati sumus* — the first voice by which we were created, like a cry reaching heavenward towards this voice of beginnings. It reconnects with the most ancient of human qualities, liberating those who sing or listen, opening up vast inner spaces.

Many assume that singing was forbidden to women in religious settings, yet it appears that it was, if not encouraged, at least tolerated in convents. This is evidenced by musical manuscripts from Riesen, Fontevraud, and Las Huelgas, some of the most well-known examples from female-founded institutions. In fact, the existence of repeated prohibitions against women singing only serves to confirm that this practice was indeed present; otherwise, why prohibit it? Hildegard knew the story of Genesis by heart: man was created in the breath, by the breath; God breathed into man to bring him to life. And for her, as a spiritual musician, breath is song, breath is sound. Each melody she created and performed became a response to this creative

voice, establishing a dialogue between the earth and “the One who spoke first.”

We paired Hildegard’s chants with those from another great female foundation, the Cistercian abbey of Las Huelgas. Drawn from one of the largest medieval polyphonic collections, these chants—still held in the monastery and sung by women—seem to resonate with those of the saint.



Medieval music is not expressed in the first person; it speaks neither of the self nor of personal feelings. It is the creature addressing its creator, from whom all beauty flows, or so it was thought at the time. To sound true—that is, to sound authentic—one must approach it with modesty, attempting to shed the ego, the desire to appear or to shine. There is no virtuosity to hide behind; the necessary technique is simple but unforgiving, demanding transparency to let the soul, the light, emerge. For these are not mere songs; they are prayers.

LAS HUELGAS

The monastery of Las Huelgas, though somewhat removed from the purely contemplative ideal of early Cîteaux, is a Cistercian foundation near Burgos, Spain, founded in 1187 by Alfonso VIII of Castile and his wife Eleanor. Strongly connected to the Castilian royal family and frequented by high Castilian nobility, the monastery became powerful and richly endowed. Its abbesses reported directly to the Pope. In the 13th century, it housed a choir of a hundred women and thirteen cantoras or cantrix, skilled singers and musicians. In the early 14th century, the abbey acquired a manuscript containing 186 liturgical and paraliturgical chants, likely commissioned by Abbess María González d’Agüero. Some pieces were unique to the monastery, others were common to Spanish sources, but the majority came from the Notre-Dame School of Paris. This manuscript, still held in the monastery, appears modest and well-worn, attesting to its frequent use and the importance placed on musical practice there.

The monastery provided the ideal environment for musical nuns, with a scriptorium and experienced copyists, qualified performers, and ample liturgical occasions for singing. Saint Augustine believed that music helps the soul contemplate invisible realities, adding that singing is the act of one who loves and is like praying twice. Saint Bernard, in contrast, valued the Word above all else, describing the Cistercian church as a place of worship and labor “where man, listening to heaven, works on the Divine Word as one would knead bread.”

HILDEGARD VON BINGEN

To Hildegard, music was the supreme instrument in God's service, able to bring humanity into harmony and orient it toward the spiritual path. The voice, an inseparable mix of body and soul, praises God on earth. This is why she saw singing, unlike many of her contemporaries, as the highest of human activities—a terrestrial reflection of celestial harmony and angelic choirs. The music she composed was theological in nature, connected to cosmology, and expressed the mystery of life's depths. It cannot be separated from the rest of her work, and it is within this context that its beauty can be fully appreciated.

In a letter, Hildegard gave music a fundamental role in recalling a lost original state and the power to kindle devotion through emotion. Singing, therefore, had nothing to do with the devil; it did not disrupt the senses but instead elevated the soul and transported it toward God.

Hildegard, as a female composer and singer, represented a significant transgression. At that time, aside from a few rare female troubadours, no woman was known as a composer or performer of music. The only comparable body of work in abundance was that of Peter Abelard some twenty years earlier.

As a young nun attempting to practice theology in a male-dominated world, Hildegard sought to be a woman at the heart of the spiritual and intellectual life of her time. The challenge was enormous. But Mary, who led the way for others, showed that salvation would not exist without her. Humbly yet determinedly, these women claimed the Word through monastic chant, letting it resonate with their unique accents, voices, and breaths. They allow us to enter into time that is pure present, at the very point where heaven and earth meet.



BIOGRAPHIES

ENSEMBLE DE CAELIS, Directed by Laurence Brisset

Founded in 1998 under the direction of Laurence Brisset, De Caelis is an ensemble of a cappella female voices specialized in interpreting medieval repertoire. Driven by a passion for this lesser-known repertoire, they undertake an interpretative approach based on deep knowledge of sources, notations, and the context of the works. Serving as a field for experimentation and research, they enjoy fostering unexpected encounters between masters of the past and those of today, thereby creating resonances between two innovative and creative epochs. They also explore other traditions, such as Arabic chant. In 2016, they were awarded the Liliane Bettencourt Prize in choral singing.



Laurence Brisset

After studying harpsichord, she dedicated herself to singing and obtained a First Prize unanimously at the CNR de Versailles before being admitted to the CNSM de Paris in the Lyric Art curriculum. Concurrently, she studied ancient musical notations and participated in numerous concerts and recordings. In 1998, she founded the De Caelis ensemble of which she is the artistic director. Holding a vocal technique teaching certificate, she divides her activities between concerts and teaching singing.

PRESS REVIEW



« It is full of flesh, warmth, and femininity.» Télérama



« Real moments of grace. » Diapason



« Magistral » Le Pèlerin Magazine



« It's beautiful, it's sublime to hear. » France Culture



« The singers create an unreal radiance» Le Monde de la Musique



« An almost mystical dimension. » Ouest France



« Heartfelt admiration » Le Figaro



« The sound of the French ensemble is sumptuous. » Goldberg Magazine



« Passionate and captivating singers » Cadences



« Poignant, even reaching ecstasy » Répertoire



CONTACT



ENSEMBLE DE CAELIS
www.decaelis.fr

Artistic director
Laurence Brisset

Booking
Céline Landais
production@decaelis.fr
+33 (0)6 63 62 30 74

Administration
Aurélie Gorce-Marion
direction@decaelis.fr
+33 (0)6 03 08 50 37

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