

A musical homage

Sine Nomine concerts will honor St. Hildegard

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She was a composer. An author. An herbalist. A lexicographer. Something of a community organizer. A mystic, and a visionary. And now she's a saint.

Hildegard von Bingen lived a thousand years ago, but thanks to dozens of recordings from groups like Kronos Quartet, Sequentia and Anonymous 4, coupled with multiple new-age interpretations of her simple but provocative vocal lines, this Renaissance woman — who actually lived about eight centuries before the Renaissance — is a musical superstar. And with the October decree from Pope Benedict XVI making it official, she is now a saint.

The Fall River-based choral group Sine Nomine, led by Paul Cienniwa, will celebrate Hildegard's sainthood in the most appropriate fashion next weekend with a program that includes her own compositions, music throughout the years that was inspired by her music, and contemporary compositions and improvisations.

"I knew right away I didn't want to do just Hildegard's music," says Cienniwa, talking about preparing the concert celebration. "It's extremely hard to perform by a soloist or small ensemble, since the music is monophonic (a single vocal line sung in unison) and without accompaniment.

"So we came up with the idea of using some of her music, but also some of the music from around her, and music inspired by her."

Besides Saint Hildegard's compositions, the program includes alto sax improvisations in her style by Marcus Monteiro, a new work, "O virtus Sapientiae," by Sine Nomine choir member Jennifer Charleson (as well as Charleson's arrangement of a work with the same name by Hildegard, sung by soprano Eva Toma), and medieval works by Willaert and Gabrieli.

"Hildegard was a medieval person but a Renaissance woman," Cienniwa says. "She started her own monastery. She wrote several mystical books, invented her own alphabet, and created a kind of herbology as well. More importantly to us, she was a female composer who was recognized as a composer. Even much later on, you had Clara Schumann, who was a concert pianist and great composer, but she had to publish her music under her husband's name. Hildegard was able to create her music freely because of the love of education in that female monastic community."

Hildegard's "resurrection" as a composer of note after a thousand years had mainly to do with two things: the advent of feminist scholarship, and the burgeoning popularity of chant and medieval music in general.

"Her music was copied down and carried on, so it wasn't lost," Cienniwa says. "Because of female led musicology, more and more topics have been reached out to and studied. But it's not just about musicology; her music has a general mystical and very spiritual aura to it, and you can get lost in it. And even though she wrote in the chant style, polyphony was developing, and that's why I included some later works that were influenced by her.

"And the notion of sainthood — well, the labyrinthine ways of the Vatican are impossible to figure out," he says. "It appears that there were four other times in history when they tried to make her a saint, and to make it even more confusing she was actually called a saint back in the 16th century. Now it's official. We don't care that much about that, especially for someone who was so important in the musical world. But now we can pay homage to Saint Hildegard."

