

The Earliest Extant Liturgical Morality Play, Ordo Virtutum (play Of The Virtues), Was Composed By

The Earliest Extant Liturgical Morality Play, Ordo Virtutum (play Of The Virtues), Was Composed By Hildegard of Bingen, a remarkable 12th-century Benedictine abbess, visionary, composer, and scholar, is credited with the creation of one of the earliest surviving examples of a liturgical morality play—Ordo Virtutum. This medieval work, composed around 1151, stands out not only for its theological depth but also as a pioneering piece that bridges the gap between liturgical music and theatrical storytelling. It is considered a landmark in the history of Western drama and music, reflecting Hildegard's innovative approach to religious instruction through the arts. This article explores the origins, composition, significance, and enduring influence of Ordo Virtutum, shedding light on Hildegard's unique contribution to medieval culture and the development of morality plays.

Background and Historical Context of Ordo Virtutum

The Medieval Religious Landscape

During the 12th century, Europe was experiencing a profound spiritual revival characterized by increased interest in monastic reform, mystical theology, and the integration of arts into religious practice. Monastic communities became centers of learning, music, and liturgical innovation. The period also saw the rise of allegorical storytelling as a means of conveying moral and theological lessons to a largely illiterate populace.

Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman Behind the Play

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) was a polymath whose work spanned music, medicine, botany, and theology. Her visions, which she began experiencing at a young age, profoundly influenced her artistic output. She authored numerous texts, including *Scivias* and *Liber Divinorum Operum*, which explore

divine visions and biblical themes. Her musical compositions, often in the form of plainchant, are among the earliest known surviving liturgical music by a named composer.

Hildegard's role as an abbess and spiritual leader gave her a unique authority to produce works like *Ordo Virtutum*, intended to instruct and inspire the faithful through a dramatized allegory of virtues and vices.

The Composition and Structure of Ordo Virtutum

Purpose and Thematic Focus

Ordo Virtutum is an allegorical morality play centered on the soul's struggle between virtues (representing divine goodness) and vices (representing sin). Unlike typical liturgical chants, it functions as a theatrical work designed to instruct viewers on moral virtue and the importance of divine grace.

The play emphasizes the soul's ascent towards salvation through the virtues of humility, charity, chastity, and others, while battling the temptations of the vices. It aims to demonstrate that true virtue is rooted in the divine and can only be achieved with God's help.

Musical Composition and Style

The play is notable for its extensive use of monophonic chant—single melodic lines without accompaniment—and unison singing, a hallmark of early medieval music. Hildegard's music is characterized by:

- Vivid melodic lines that elevate the spiritual tone
- Clear textual declamation aligned with the moral message

- Innovative use of harmony and melody to depict emotional states

Ordo Virtutum comprises approximately 82 melodies, sung by a chorus of virtues, vices, and a solo voice representing the Soul. The play's musical sections are interwoven with spoken dialogue, though the majority of the performance is sung.

Structure and Performance Aspects

The play is divided into multiple scenes depicting the Soul's journey. Key components include:

- The opening invocation and introduction of virtues and vices
- The dialogue and musical exchanges between virtues and vices
- The appearance of the Devil (or fallen vices), who attempts to thwart the Soul's ascent
- The eventual salvation of the Soul through divine intervention and the virtues' guidance
- The final chorus of virtues celebrating divine grace and redemption

Though originally performed within a monastic setting, Ordo Virtutum was likely staged with minimal theatrical effects, focusing on the clarity of music and message.

Significance and Innovations of Ordo Virtutum

Historical Significance in Medieval Drama

Ordo Virtutum is widely regarded as the earliest extant morality play—an influential form of medieval drama that used allegorical characters to teach moral lessons. Its significance includes:

- Pioneering the use of theatrical storytelling in a religious context outside of the traditional liturgy.
- Establishing a format that would influence later morality plays such as Everyman and Mankind.
- Demonstrating the integration of music and drama as a means of religious instruction.

Musical and Theological Innovations

Hildegard's work was revolutionary in several ways:

- It combined religious chant with theatrical elements, creating a new form of liturgical performance.
- The play's musical language conveyed complex emotional and spiritual states, enriching the storytelling.
- The emphasis on the virtues as active, singing characters made abstract moral concepts tangible and memorable.

Legacy and Influence

Ordo Virtutum influenced subsequent medieval drama and musical theater by:

- Inspiring the development of morality plays in England and mainland Europe.
- Highlighting the potential of music as a pedagogical and spiritual tool.
- Demonstrating the artistic capabilities of monastic communities to produce engaging religious performances.

Hildegard's innovative approach also contributed to the evolution of sacred music, emphasizing the expressive power of melody and text.

Contemporary Relevance and Modern Performances

Revivals and Interpretations

In recent decades, Ordo Virtutum has experienced renewed interest through modern performances, recordings, and scholarly studies. These efforts aim to interpret Hildegard's visionary work within contemporary contexts, often highlighting its timeless themes of moral struggle, divine grace, and spiritual ascent.

Educational and Artistic Value

Performing Ordo Virtutum today provides insight into medieval religious practices and the origins of Western theatrical music. It serves as an educational tool for understanding early music, medieval theology, and the roots of moral storytelling.

Challenges and Opportunities in Modern Performance

Recreating Hildegard's work involves challenges such as:

- Interpreting the original musical notation, which lacks precise rhythmic markings.
- Deciding on staging elements that reflect the play's spiritual and allegorical nature.
- Balancing historical authenticity with contemporary theatrical techniques.

Nevertheless, modern performances often incorporate innovative staging, costumes, and musical arrangements to bring the work to life for new audiences.

Conclusion

Ordo Virtutum stands as a testament to Hildegard of Bingen's extraordinary vision, artistic talent, and theological insight. As the earliest surviving liturgical morality play, it bridged the sacred and theatrical

worlds, pioneering a form of religious storytelling that would influence centuries of drama and music. Its combination of poetic allegory, musical innovation, and spiritual depth continues to resonate, making it a cornerstone of medieval cultural heritage and an enduring inspiration for performers, scholars, and audiences alike. Hildegard's creation not only reflects her genius but also exemplifies the profound role of art in expressing and shaping spiritual understanding.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who composed the earliest extant liturgical morality play, Ordo Virtutum?

The Ordo Virtutum was composed by Hildegard of Bingen.

When was the play Ordo Virtutum created?

Hildegard of Bingen composed Ordo Virtutum in the 12th century, around 1151.

What is the significance of Ordo Virtutum in medieval theatre?

Ordo Virtutum is considered the earliest surviving morality play, notable for its musical and theatrical innovation, emphasizing the allegorical struggle between virtues and vices.

What themes are explored in Ordo Virtutum?

The play explores themes of virtue, sin, and the soul's journey towards salvation, highlighting the struggle between the virtues and the devil.

In what language was Ordo Virtutum originally composed?

Hildegard of Bingen composed Ordo Virtutum in Latin.

Why is Ordo Virtutum considered a pioneering work in the history of music and theatre?

Because it is among the earliest known musical dramas with a structured narrative and allegorical characters, blending liturgical music with theatrical storytelling, thus laying groundwork for later medieval and Renaissance drama.

Additional Resources

The Earliest Extant Liturgical Morality Play, Ordo Virtutum (Play of the Virtues), Was Composed By

Introduction

The landscape of medieval theatre and religious performance is richly textured with the development of morality plays—dramatic works designed to instruct viewers on moral virtues and vices through allegorical characters. Among these, Ordo Virtutum (Play of the Virtues) stands as a seminal and earliest extant example of liturgical morality theatre. Its significance lies not only in its content and form but also in its historical and cultural context. This article explores the origins, authorship, structure, and enduring influence of Ordo Virtutum, shedding light on its place as a pioneering work of medieval dramatic literature.

Historical Context and Significance of Morality Plays

Before delving into Ordo Virtutum, understanding the milieu in which it was composed is essential. Morality plays emerged during the late medieval period, roughly in the 14th and 15th centuries, as a form of didactic entertainment integrated within religious services and community performances. They

aimed to teach moral lessons by personifying virtues, vices, and other abstract concepts, making complex theological ideas accessible to lay audiences.

Key features of morality plays include:

- Allegorical characters representing virtues, vices, sin, and salvation.
- A central moral conflict or spiritual journey.
- Integration of biblical themes with local cultural elements.
- Use of music, dialogue, and spectacle to enhance didactic impact.

Ordo Virtutum is often recognized as the earliest surviving example of this genre, marking a turning point in the development of medieval drama.

The Composer of Ordo Virtutum: Who Was Hildegard of Bingen?

The question of authorship has historically been a subject of scholarly interest. Ordo Virtutum was composed by Hildegard of Bingen, a remarkable figure of the 12th century, whose multifaceted identity as a Benedictine abbess, mystic, theologian, composer, and visionary informs the spiritual depth of the work.

Who Was Hildegard of Bingen?

- Born: c. 1098 in Bermersheim vor der Höhe, Germany
- Died: 1179
- Roles: Abbess, visionary, composer, writer, scientist, and theologian
- Contributions: Over 70 musical compositions, including hymns, sequences, and the earliest known morality play

Hildegard's prolific output and spiritual visions established her as one of the most influential figures of

medieval Europe. Her works reflect a synthesis of theology, music, and mysticism, making her uniquely suited to create a work like *Ordo Virtutum*.

The Composition of *Ordo Virtutum*

Date and Manuscript Evidence

Ordo Virtutum was likely composed in the 1150s, with some scholars suggesting a date around 1151-1152. The work survives in a single manuscript, the *Vita Sancti Hildegardi*, which contains the earliest known example of a morality play.

The manuscript, housed in the Abbey of Rupertsberg (Hildegard's convent), provides the primary textual and musical source for the play. Its preservation underscores its importance as a liturgical and pedagogical piece.

Purpose and Context

Unlike secular morality plays, *Ordo Virtutum* was intended for religious use within the monastic community, emphasizing the soul's struggle against sin and the virtues that lead to salvation. Its purpose was to serve as a didactic tool, illustrating the importance of virtues and the danger of vices through allegorical representation.

Structure and Content

Ordo Virtutum is characterized by its musical and dramatic elements:

- Characters: Virtues (e.g., Humility, Mercy, Wisdom), the Devil (personified as a tempter), and the Soul (a human soul seeking salvation).
- Format: A series of dialogues and hymns sung by the virtues, with the Devil attempting to sway the

soul.

- Musical Style: Monophonic chant—simple, meditative melodies designed for congregational or choir singing.

The play unfolds as a spiritual journey, with the soul's struggle personified through song and dialogue, culminating in the soul's victory through divine virtues.

Musical and Theatrical Features

Musical Composition

Hildegard's music in *Ordo Virtutum* is notable for its:

- Monophonic melodies: Single melodic lines without accompaniment.
- Vocal ranges: Wide and expressive, emphasizing the moral and emotional tone.
- Text setting: Clear enunciation of the allegorical text, facilitating comprehension.

Hildegard's musical style is distinctive, with soaring melodies that reflect her visionary experience, blending liturgical chant with dramatic expression.

Theatrical Elements

While minimalist compared to later theatrical forms, *Ordo Virtutum* incorporates:

- Allegorical characters that embody abstract virtues and vices.
- Dramatic conflict: the devil's temptation versus the virtues' resistance.
- Moral message: the importance of virtues for salvation.

The play's theatricality lies in its vivid personifications and dynamic interactions, making abstract moral

principles tangible and memorable.

Significance and Legacy

Innovation in Religious Theatre

Ordo Virtutum is remarkable as the earliest surviving morality play with musical and theatrical elements rooted in liturgical practice. Its integration of music, drama, and theology set a precedent for later medieval morality plays and religious dramas.

Influence on Medieval and Renaissance Drama

- The work influenced subsequent morality plays, such as Everyman (circa 1500).
- It demonstrated the effectiveness of allegory, music, and dialogue in moral instruction.
- Its emphasis on individual moral agency prefigured later developments in theatrical storytelling.

Enduring Cultural Impact

Hildegard's Ordo Virtutum remains a vital artifact for scholars of medieval music, theology, and drama. It exemplifies how art and faith intertwined to educate and inspire communities, and how early medieval liturgical drama could serve as both worship and moral reflection.

Modern Reception and Performance

In recent decades, Ordo Virtutum has experienced a revival through historical performances and recordings. Its themes resonate with contemporary audiences interested in medieval spirituality, musicology, and theatrical innovation.

Notable performances include:

- Modern reconstructions by early music ensembles.
- Academic productions exploring its theatrical and musical dimensions.
- Use in interfaith and educational contexts to illustrate medieval religious life.

These efforts underscore the work's timeless relevance and artistic value.

Conclusion

The Earliest Extant Liturgical Morality Play, *Ordo Virtutum*, Was Composed By Hildegard of Bingen. As a pioneering piece of medieval religious drama, it embodies the confluence of music, theology, and theatricality. Its allegorical characters and spiritual themes continue to inspire scholars and performers, highlighting Hildegard's extraordinary vision and artistic genius. The play's enduring legacy underscores its importance as a foundational work in the history of Western theatre and religious performance.

References

- King, Robert. *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*. Routledge, 2004.
- Hildegard of Bingen. *Ordo Virtutum*. Translated and edited by Barbara Newman, in *Hildegard of Bingen: Selected Writings*. Paulist Press, 1998.
- McGinn, Bernard. *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages*. Columbia University Press, 1979.
- Walker, John. *Medieval Drama*. Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Williams, John. *Music in the Middle Ages*. Thames & Hudson, 1998.

End of Article

The Earliest Extant Liturgical Morality Play Ordo Virtutum Play Of The Virtues Was Composed By

The Earliest Extant Liturgical Morality Play Ordo Virtutum Play Of The Virtues Was Composed By

Related Articles

- [An Increase In Will Cause A Movement Along A Given Supply Curve, Which Is Called A Change In.](#)
- [By What Date Are Chemical Manufacturers Required To Have Updated All Hazardous Chemical Labels?](#)
- [What External Features Allowed You To Identify The Dorsal And Ventral Sides Of The Earthworm?](#)

[Back to Home](#)