



EXTASIA - THE MUSIC OF JEAN CATOIRE & HILDEGARD VON BINGEN

1999

EMD/VIRGIN CLASSICS

HARVEY BROUGH: CONDUCTOR

EDITORIAL REVIEW - MATTHEW WESTPHAL

The cover looks like it's aiming for the art-rock/New Age crossover market; the contents list makes it look like a "concept" record. Well, this is a concept record, but you needn't be suspicious: the concept is innovative and brave--and it works. Producer Malcolm Bruno sees some aesthetic continuities between the music of 12th-century abbess Hildegard von Bingen and French composer Jean Catoire (b. 1923), a sort of precursor to the "Holy Minimalist" composers of the 1990s such as Arvo Pärt and John Tavener. Bruno has assembled six of Hildegard's works (each sung by a single unaccompanied voice) with Catoire's Requiem and Requiem Antiphons to make a "Requiem Sequence." To evoke the sound world of Hildegard's convent, Bruno has arranged the Catoire works for female voices in various combinations (choir, small consort, solo voices), with an occasional gong or bell. The straightforward, almost simple writing and plangent harmonies of the Requiem are not unlike Benjamin Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols*, yet the irregular flow and chromaticism of the melodies evoke Frank Martin's *Mass for Double Choir*. The Requiem Antiphons, scored here for solo voice and bells, are extremely austere, with a slow-moving melody that's haunting and somewhat disorienting. In this company, Hildegard's soaring melodies sound almost luxuriant--as Bruno intended. The Harrogate Ladies' College Chapel Choir and soloists Helena Ek, Emily van Evera, and Catherine King sing with purity and conviction; conductor Harvey Brough (a sometime Tallis Scholar) paces the whole program well (no easy task).