

# AGO BOSTON 2014 COMMISSIONS

## COMPOSERS HILARY TANN AND EDWARD THOMPSON

Heinrich Christensen and Edward Thompson

This article is the ninth in a series to illuminate new music commissioned for the 2014 AGO National Convention. Commissioned composer Hilary Tann ([hilarytann.com](http://hilarytann.com)) responds to questions from Heinrich Christensen, who will be premiering her four-movement cycle *Embertides* at the convention.

### What initially brought you from Wales to the United States?

An invitation to be a visiting fellow at Princeton University in the early '70s. These were heady times. Serialists and nonserialists (of which I was one) butted heads, and conversations often lasted late into the night in the Route 1 diners.

### How does your Welsh heritage inform the music you write?

Many of my titles are drawn from a poet's synthesized view of nature—for example, "In the First, Spinning Place" (alto saxophone concerto, title from "Fern Cliff" by Welsh poet Dylan Thomas), where, in the last movement, the "spinning" idea gives rise to all sorts of trilling figures and wobbles. Or this passage from "Spring" by Gerard Manley Hopkins, which has actually given me three titles (my italics): "Nothing is so beautiful as Spring/ When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;/ Thrush's eggs *look little low heavens*, and thrush/ *Through the echoing timber* does so rinse and wring/ The ear, it strikes *like lightnings* to hear him sing." The compositions are for solo trumpet, full orchestra, and solo oboe, respectively.

### What are your thoughts about writing for the organ specifically?

The organ keeps surprising me. I tend to think of it as an orchestra *manqué*, and then I hear fine organ-playing and I'm in awe again. For this piece, after I'd finished it, I went to see my friend Alfred V. Fedak so that I could hear him play my suggested registrations and refine them. I very much appreciate his professional assistance.

### What was your process for putting together *Embertides*?

Well, the title itself is so evocative! Since school days, I've been called upon to accompany church services, and my hymnbook refers to "Ember Days." Apparently, these refer to the *quatuor tempora*—four times of fasting roughly equidistant throughout the year—and other sources date them back to earlier Celtic divisions. The Fish Eaters website ([fisheaters.com](http://fisheaters.com)) has a wealth of quotations and images associated with each season: Advent (winter), Lenten (spring), Whit (summer), and Michaelmas (autumn). To unify the cycle, I decided to use the Golden Sequence *Veni Sancte Spiritus*. Different verses of this lovely eleventh-century plainsong appear in each of the movements. In addition, I wanted to pay homage to our glorious treasury of old hymns. The movements do not quote them directly, but I think enough of the sense of these



Hilary Tann

## Embertides

### 1. ADVENT (Winter)

Hilary Tann

Andante  $\text{♩} = 69$

Organ

Sw. *p*

Ob. 8'

Fl. 4'

Meno mosso  $\text{♩} = 60$

*a piacere*

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hymns is present to give the seasons their spiritual resonance. For example, the falling minor third of “Rejoice, rejoice” from “Veni Emmanuel” in “Advent.” In performance, I’d like the organist and his/her audience to be surprised and pleased by these references. As for the seasons themselves? Well, I’m used to thinking of direct seasonal references from my “other” life as a sometime haiku poet. Many of these poems are built around *kigo* (season words), and so, as in earlier secular traditions, winter is associated with “seeding,” spring with “awakening” (hence the staccato rising figure), summer with “harvesting” (the opening wide chord is marked “hazy”), and autumn with “vintage” (a dance-like movement). My hope is that these short season-specific movements will stand alone as preludes or postludes during the church year, and that the entire four-movement cycle will also be attractive for recitals.

**Do you feel that your day job in academia has changed the way you compose? Is there a pedagogical element in any of your music?**

I hope not! In fact, too often I find myself talking about “what is” in the classroom; whereas, as a composer, my concern is always with “what might be.”

**I understand that one of the movements will be included in the *Boston Organ Book*, which will be given to all conventioners with their registration package.**

The movement chosen for BOB is the opening one, “Advent (Winter).” Here are a few sample measures [see previous page]. You can see how the pedal notes are “hidden” inside the lines on the manuals—much as snow covers parts of a landscape. The four-movement cycle is available through Oxford University Press, but the movement in BOB will give a good idea of the practical nature of the writing as well as my enjoyment of natural imagery and love of old hymns.

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**Heinrich Christensen** holds diplomas from conservatories in Denmark, France, and the United States. He is the music director of historic King’s Chapel in Boston.

## EDWARD THOMPSON

*Prayers of Hildegard* is a three-part work based on the writings of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179). It is scored for mixed choir and marimba, and explores the tonal possibilities of this unusual combination. Hildegard’s basic premise or perspective was that earthly experience was not to be shunned, but rather embraced because divinity is omnipresent. And, although the words of Hildegard were written about 900 years ago, they are completely relevant for us today.

Hildegard of Bingen was a nun, a writer, a composer, a philosopher, a theologian, a visionary, and an abbess. She wrote texts on theology, botany, and medicine; she also composed 70–80 musical works and painted illuminations. Her encyclopedic knowledge made her a leader and an authority in several areas. Because of her visionary-intuitive abilities, she was consulted by popes, bishops, and important political figures. Given the Medieval stance on women and women’s rights, what she accomplished was astonishing. The fact that she was well in advance of her time would be an understatement.

Why the marimba? The choice of the marimba with choral sound was both musical and symbolic. The marimba offers a unique color, and one that we do not associate with choral sound. With this combination, the voices frequently carry the linear aspect of the music while the percussion provides more of a rhythmic impetus. To be sure, the unique quality is in no way meant to imitate something that we might think of as a Medieval sound ideal. It is meant to offer another way to hear the words of Hildegard that is simple and direct. Sometimes the marimba plays a single line that has a lute-like quality. At other times, it plays four-part chords. Sometimes it functions as a soloist and sometimes as an accompanist. There is ample opportunity for the marimba player to be heard as soloist.

Movement 1: Hildegard says that there is the music of heaven in all things. This thought mirrors the important position that Hildegard gave to music. As a Benedictine nun, she sang the Divine Office several times each day and knew experientially the power of music to balance, renew, inspire, and uplift. She used music in her heal-



Edward Thompson

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ing practice in much the same way. Hildegard also used “music” in a symbolic way to suggest that our experience of inner harmony is like a heavenly music.

In this movement, one can hear homophonic and polyphonic textures in the choir; the lilting marimba part is both supporting the choir and in dialogue with the choir. The marimba part has the unique rhythm of 2+3+3+2+2+4 16th notes while the choir is in a simpler 4+4+4+4 16ths. For the words “we have forgotten,” the marimba has a pattern of 5+5+6 eighth notes (repeated) pitted against a repeated ostinato pattern in the alto/tenor/bass part while the soprano has a distinct superimposed melody. The layered technique offers harmonic tension that eventually leads to the resolution “until we sing,” in which there



Illumination from the *Liber Scivias* showing Hildegard receiving a vision and dictating to her scribe and secretary

is a canon between the tenor and bass parts while the alto and soprano parts have an ostinato pattern in a different key center. This is all by way of saying that the tension and resolution of the music mirrors the forgetting and remembering to which Hildegard refers.

Movement 2: "It Is the Heart" begins with a chant-like texture that is an actual musical quotation from the works of Hildegard: "Caritas abundat in omnia" ["Charity or love abounds in all things"]. This quotation is enchanting because it is from the pen of Hildegard, and the chant lends another texture to the work. After the quotation, the music changes character and we hear other words (of the same theme) by Hildegard about the importance of the heart and its ability to "see" the eternal in all creatures. Hildegard's ability to get at the essence of things is admirable. The highpoint of this movement is reached by means of rhythmic intensification:

the marimba plays a sextuplet figure, while the tenors and basses have quarter-note motion. There is also a superimposed canon between the sopranos and altos.

Movement 3: "O Holy Spirit" is a joyous piece that affirms, in the words of Hildegard, the workings of the Spirit: to renew, to heal, and to awaken us from "sleep." The use of a perpetuum mobile figure in the marimba helps to energize and propel this song of praise.

Brava to Hildegard! May her work continue to inspire us all.

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**Edward Thompson** has composed many commissioned choral works for youth choir, mixed choir, women's choir, and men's choir. He has completed four commissioned song cycles and various works for orchestra and chamber ensembles. He is minister of music at the Unitarian Church in Westport, Conn.

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