

Iconic Joan of Arc Photoplay Gets Krasinski Treatment

by [BMINT STAFF](#)



The Seraphim Singers, under the direction of Jennifer Lester, collaborates with organist Peter Krasinski to present *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. With improvised organ accompaniment and through-composed choral elaboration, Krasinski and the chamber choir will provide a theatrical presentation of Carl Theodore Dreyer's 1928 masterpiece. March 29th at First Lutheran Church (Boston), and April 5th at the Church of St. Ignatius of Loyola (Chestnut Hill).

Through the use of intense and un-forgiving close-ups and distorting camera angles *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* compresses the many sessions of Joan's infamous interrogations into a relentlessly moving 83 minutes. Renée Falconetti's Joan is probably the finest performance ever recorded on film, but the lesser roles are no less distinctive. One especial treat for some is seeing the author of "The Theatre of Cruelty," Antonin Artaud as the only sympathetic inquisitor. As one of the greatest silent films rarely to be performed with its original score, the *Passion*, has suffered from all sorts of treatments since its debut, including being shown without any music, and worse, with a 1950's baroque potpourri by Joseph-Marie Lo Duca. The best of the later scores, and a standard for presentations where budgets for small orchestras and royalties are available, is Richard Einhorn's perhaps overly hypnotic oratorio *Voices of Light*.

In addition to the overall voice of the film, the organ improvisation, The Seraphim/Krasinski treatment will feature the five choral works, including specially-commissioned music by Elliott Gyger:

Maurice Duruflé: Notre Père (The Lord's Prayer)

Alberto Ginastera: Lamentaciones de Jeremias Propheta

[Elliott Gyger](#): (b. 1968) Eleven Questions; Three Temptations; Libera ma (World premieres) Daniel Pinkham: "In monte Oliveti" from *Passion Music*

Works of Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179)

BMInt spoke with organist Peter Krasinski about his work in the silent movie field.

You refer to your art as improvisation, yet that improvisation is in a defined context. You watch films and take notes of exact cues and timings well before you perform for them. Please explain how the planning and improvisation unfold in performances.



Peter Krasinski (file photo)

Any good improvisation depends on a good grasp of music theory, respect for the theme, and understanding of existing music. Koussevitzky loved the idea of “The Central Line” in a piece of music and passed that important concept on to, among others, Leonard Bernstein. I search for that Central Line in the film to be played for, and engage far more than just music theory and form to help me to empathize with the story there... it’s an organic holistic approach that strives to totally respect the world that the movie is presenting. That musical reflection of feeling, story telling, drawn from my own experience, is then utilized to support the visual story as it unfolds, hopefully resulting in a dynamic, breathing and living accompaniment, which always puts the master of the images first, and flows effortlessly to create an organic whole for the audience.

Like any fine musical performance, preparation is key so that the performance becomes a logical journey. The art of improvisation is often a mis-understood one, particularly as taught in some circles. For me it’s always been a natural thing... to just “make music”. In a way music making as a child was on the creative side as opposed to the interpretive side, preferring the act of “playing by ear” to “reading the score”. This perspective, undoubtedly formed by a certain neurological construct, leaves room for chance, spontaneity and discovery during a true improvisation.

So, in this case specifically, I’ve seen the film on a number of different levels at different times... as observer, interpreter, narrator, music maker, historian. From this I hope to have discovered the central line of this piece, which in broad terms is “a journey of truth spoken to power with the resultant consequences”.

Jenn and I met a number of times to see the film and discuss what choral music might be appropriate to highlight scenes, “phrase gestures”, the visual rhythm, and story segments. We then decided that we should not limit ourselves to only one style of period of music (This in some way might answer your question about “updating a film”... some of this music was written far before the film’s creation, some written during it, and some after, and yet more composed specifically for it). These choral sections will be woven into the larger improvised texture provided by the organ improvisation and the organ will sometimes accompany, sometimes be silent, sometimes be in dialog and even in disagreement with the chorus pieces.

The process included viewing the film with chorus members and entering into dialogue about feelings and thoughts about the film. After learning the repertory chosen, rehearsals included moments with starting a few seconds before the choral cues with an improvisation, preparing the chorus for the scene they sing for, singing the segment, and then exiting the scene. During this rehearsal process many discoveries were made about tempo, dynamics and even key relationships and the relationship of the sound to the image became a passion for all involved.

During the performance the organist and conductor will be using the timing of the film as well as the images themselves to cue the chorus. A true multi-media event, but one whose sole purpose is to narrate the story presented by the film: it is not

for us to judge the content of the film, only to present in sound what that content says.

In the case of *The Passion of Jeanne D'Arc*, you will also be working with The Seraphim Singers for whom you will be playing the accompaniments in pieces listed above.

No, not necessarily—in some moments I may be supporting those pieces, in others section I may be sonically fighting those pieces, in others improvising accompaniments, in still others playing completely different music in juxtaposition – and, so far in rehearsal, these have always been different every time due to both internal and external influences.



Renée Falconetti

Do you and the chorus have any freedom to improvise within those fully composed works?

Yes... except for the commissioned works by Gyger the pieces were not written for the film so, of course, they will serve that theme and might have to be altered in tempo, key, rhythm, dynamics, mode and length, to mention just a few variables. The Gyger pieces will be untouched however, they are perfectly timed and created and when they occur I will be supporting that voice.

What other music will you be drawing from in your performance? I note that your rehearsal notes refer to wandering chords—that sounds completely improvisational, but from what I've heard of your other performances, you do incorporate recognizable tunes from the period of the films you are scoring.

Indeed, some films demand that previously composed music be utilized—the drinking and marching songs in *The Big Parade*, Gounod's *Faust* music in *Phantom*, the angelus and chants in *Hunchback*, etc. Those musical quotes should not draw attention to themselves, of course. Years ago I once heard “Raindrops keep falling on my head” played in the sewer scene in *Phantom*... sort of funny, but pretty terrible and extremely distracting from the film. Even some of the more respected accompanists from the gilded age of the Wurlitzer and orchestral scores might not always get it right by playing, for instance, the “Kol Nidre” because it sounds “Jewish” during a scene in *The Ten Commandments* when the cast is portraying a completely different moment from the Exodus experience, or the “La Marseillaise” in a German expressionist film when the scene has nothing to do with France. Composer Victor Herbert objected to the use of pre-existing music in film score because he believed it would be distracting to an audience that was familiar with the music. For the most part, silent film composers Riensenfeld, Wilson, Zamecnik, Rapee and others went this route.

In this case, the music improvised with be not so much “drawn from” as “worked from” and created. When the music from Gyger arrived I instantly recognized the use of fourths along with other compositional language which I will be using. Along with this, the choral pieces also have their own language, which will be used in the improvisations. Finally, for me, and this I can't explain, I've had a “sound “ in my mind the moment I saw this film for the first time— that will be there also. Finally, yes, there are sections the chorus will improvise as well—in fact; they got very comfortable with that as the rehearsal process continued. Film is a fixed [in time] art form; the improvised music and even the choral repertoire are fluid art forms. Trust and imagination on the part of all the participants will be key to this project, holding these two aspects in creative tension and balance.

Some of the great silent films had original musical accompaniment written for them at the time of their premieres, although I gather no such score exists for *Joan*, though Richard Einhorn has written a much-performed cantata for use either with the film or as a stand-alone. [A comment from Dennis James induces a retraction. There was an original score. See first comment below, and click [here](#) for excerpts of the original Victor Alix & Leo Pouget version (first six selections)]

According to Casper Tybjerg the director of *Joan*, Carl Theodor Dreyer, was known to have banished on set music that traditionally was used during filming to get the actors into the right mood – “it’s something artificial that...does not give them a true emotion...In the depth of silence there is always oneself.” He told the same interviewer that ‘He was in favor of showing films with out any musical accompaniment.’ However, Dreyer was also ‘crucially concerned that actors should draw from their own emotional depths, that they should merge with their characters.’ Interestingly, this is always what I strive for when I accompany a film and it’s also what the singers have been learning to do. This is no surprise because this group often does achieve this in performances of composed music. With the opportunity provided by the Seraphim Singers to partner and collaborate with them, I felt another musical take on the film was in order: one that would more closely reflect the visual rhythm, over all form, and emotional content of the film.

Do you ever use those original-to-the-film scores for your performances?

The most recent pre-composed score I’ve used for a film was my own realization for organ of Prokofiev’s music for *Alexander Nevsky*. This was in a performance for the Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts with chorus, soloist and percussion. After reading a great deal about the process of that original film score, the problems and obstacles presented to the composer during editing and recording, the political realities of the time, I created as much as possible a score as close to what the composer intended, except of course for the fact that it was not played by an orchestra, but by a 1921 E. M. Skinner organ.

In my younger years I heard live accompaniments played live by Lee Irwin, Gaylord Carter, and others. I also enjoyed recordings of Jesse Crawford and others. There is always something to be gleaned from hearing these performances and indeed, they inspired me. The fact is, when I started playing silent film regularly there were few score available and I had to create them myself.



Antonin Artaud as Massieu

Do you look at the original cue sheets and suggestions that often were included with films that were not fully scored?

I’ve seen these and am always interested in any approaches to film accompaniment from both the silent and sound track time periods. They most often depend heavily on originally composed music that was never intended to accompany the scene in question. If, when reviewing a film, I am reminded of a piece previously written, I can imagine that music as a model of mood, form, and structure (basically, what does the piece say) and from that create something similar but different. There are two reasons for this: To slavishly quote an actual piece at an inappropriate time will draw attention to itself and away from the film. (This was what Victor Herbert had expressed years ago). Also, a piece composed in real

time, using the film as the source material: this will, of course, work better. All that said, sometimes a real musical quote is the only way to go... scenes of *Faust* in *Phantom* for instance to "Take me out to the ball game." in a Harold Lloyd feature for instance.

Do you think silent films need musical updating for modern audiences?

What do you mean by updating? The music (read ANY) should fit the rhythm, pace, story, arc, characters, sets, emotion of the film. Having a Jazz trio accompany *Salome* might not work very well, although during the "Dance of the seven veils" it might be just the ticket (if they're really good and sensitive). Hearing a Wurlitzer's pipe organ with the tremolos pumping away all night can be exhausting, particularly if there are scenes of quite introspection in the film, It's a complex question worthy of discussion for sure. It's all about serving the theme, which in this case, is the film.

What do you think of the work of the film scorers Erno Rappee, Hugo Riesenfeld and J.S. Zamecnik?

Of those that I've experienced, ground breaking, of course. Hearing that music performed live with full orchestra must be riveting, but that is something rare indeed. The performance aspect of these presentations cannot be easily described – it must be experienced to be fully understood. Gosh, it isn't watching a DVD at home, that's for sure. That doesn't come close, ever.

Do you have a collection of period photoplay music?

No, but finding this material is not that difficult and over time many people have sent me examples of cue sheets and such. In the late 1970's the rented 16mm came just as advertised: silent. At Hammond Castle I would review the film and take notes, eat dinner and come back and play the film. It was a very enjoyable process and I discovered that it seemed the most natural music making I did. (Hammond Castle was the location where I played three *Phantom* performances in one evening) The Rappee cue book was available, but seemed somewhat limited to me... "love scene" – "train wreck" – "sailing" all with corresponding classical cues. I'd been playing dramatic accompaniments for fun since childhood. Of course, we can always learn something! The wonderful work of Gillian Anderson and Dennis James in reconstructing music from the silent ear must be appreciated and applauded.

In Joan will your score highlight action and be tightly cued?

Of course, but hopefully without drawing attention to itself.

Will you assign motivic elements that will recur?

Given the nature of this film, probably not... this story: among many things, it's a progression.

Do you agree that some silent film scores, like Riesenfeld's for *Sunrise* are perfect and that it is hubris to try to create a new one?

Well, there is a lot of ill advised accompaniment going on and has been for some time... it's hard to know exactly what to say about that. Now I'm no fan of the Giorgio Moroder score for *Metropolis*, however it undoubtedly helped to create a new and young audience for silent film...

What to say about rock bands accompanying silent films that seem to have not even seen the film? We'll it's really about them, isn't it, and I suppose their fans enjoy it. As long as they know it's not about the film. I'm impressed with much of the work of Berklee students as presented at the Coolidge Corner Theater, but some of that composing seems more about itself than the film also. On a slightly different tack, many directors were unhappy with the scores created for their films and just as many films have been saved by a great score.

For your upcoming performances you will be playing on two very different organs. At First Lutheran Church we will hear you on a Baroque tracker, while at BC you will play an American classic Casavant. How will the performances differ?

Great question! Exactly how the performances will be different will be an unfolding experience. That said, there are some obvious influence of audience, instrument, building, style, aesthetic and faith that will play into these performances

First Lutheran Church, Boston:

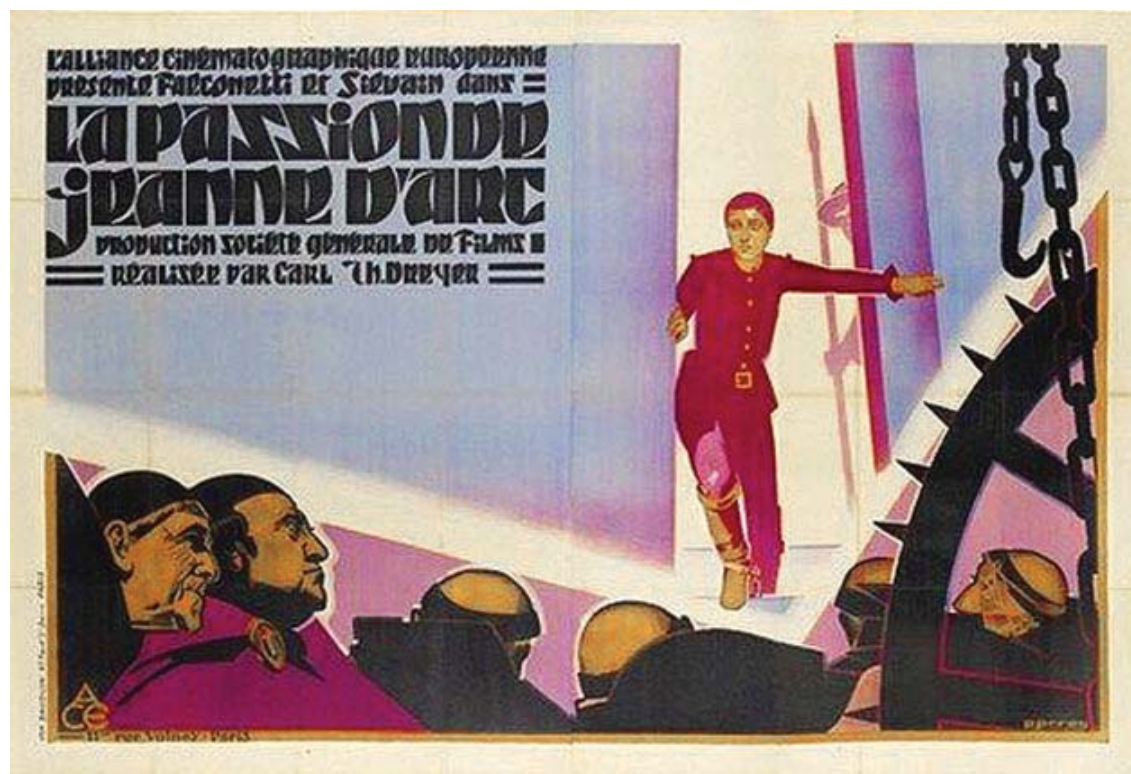
The organ is a North German/Dutch influenced mechanical action (direct contact from fingers to pallet) instrument lovingly built by Richards, Fowkes and Co. Its tuning is distinctive (not equal temperament) and has a very different color depending on the key played in. Its voice is bold, singing, and speaks right into the room from the back gallery where the chorus will be, except for some special moments. To me it somehow seems a sort of sound pointing toward the people of Joan's time. Some stops call out to be voices for those portrayed in the film, particularly in the closing reels of the film. The building, a 1956 Pietro Belluschi design, has fantastic live acoustics and a modern feel. I feel that the film will be a perfect fulcrum, balanced between this structure and the music in it. The audience will hopefully be diverse and drawn from the general public, but the church is well known to academics and the intellectually and theologically minded musicians in the city as well. Its members are an active congregation, very much connected to their faith.

Church of St. Ignatius of Loyola:

The organ, an American classic with a French accent, Casavant Opus number 1691, was rebuilt and expanded recently. This sound might be more related to the "sound temperature" familiar to those that made this film in the 1920s. This organ can get very soft because of swell boxes and is located in both the Rear Gallery and the South Transept creating a 'surround sound' effect if desired. More orchestral in nature than the "pure organ design" of FLC, this instrument will point more forward to 20th century symphonic than back toward the medieval esthetic that FLC will provide. The building is stylized 20th century Gothic, is traditionally "churchy" looking and had a congregation drawn for the Boston College Community. The audience will reflect that as well.

Each of these places will bring its own weight to the performance. One might be so bold to say that the Lutheran traditions and Catholic traditions come to the story of Joan from two very different perspectives. It will indeed be interesting to see if the very souls of these two sacred spaces will in some way shape these two performances in ways unexpected, unfolding and meaningful. For performing musicians, the composer and the composition are the primary focus. For improvisers, the theme is the primary focus. In this endeavor, it is *the film that is the theme*, and it is from this that all our sonic assistance will spring. We will aim to create a production that is meaningful, serious, dynamic, fluid, and above all, relevant to our present time. The politics of power that we experience every day are nothing new – and Joan was unique in her way of speaking truth to power.

Ed. Note: This article was clarified in response to a comment. See related review [here](#).



Passionate Poster *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) Directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer

Performed with live and improvised accompaniment by: