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## Sonic Characterization of Joan of Arc

by **Sudeep Agarwala**

Saturday evening saw the second presentation of Carl Dreyer's *Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* by the Seraphim Singers and "sonic artist" Peter Krasinski, this time in Boston College's Parish of St. Ignatius.

Dreyer's 1928 silent film, sourced from original fifteenth-century clerical court transcripts, follows the imprisonment, trial, and eventual immolation of Joan of Arc. The film has achieved landmark status for its unusual camera work, which uses closeup and medium shots almost entirely; camera angles are frequently tortured, placing particular emphasis on narration through facial expression of the characters. Most notable are the iconic performances of Renée Falconetti as Joan, and poet/philosopher Antonin Artaud as Jean Massieu, one of her advocates.

There is a long history of recasting Dreyer's film with different scores. The original 1928 version of the film was lost early on, along with the accompanying music by Victor Alix and Leo Pouget. This, along with controversial evidence that Dreyer never selected a definitive score to accompany the film, has spawned a variety of accompanying music, even after rediscovery of both original film and music in 1981. Many early scores have incorporated works by Bach, Albinoni, or Vivaldi to accompany the film. Others have completely recast the score in contemporary musical language. Perhaps the most famous of these is Richard Einhorn's 1994 minimalist oratorio, *Voices of Light*, written for chorus and orchestra. More recent settings have sampled extensively from electronica or indie rock genres.

Much can be said about the effectiveness about these different approaches to scoring Dreyer's film, and much has already been said about Saturday's presentation by Peter Krasinski and the Seraphim Singers, led by Jennifer Lester (for *BMInt*'s discussion on the topic and interview with Peter Krasinski, see [here](#)). Saturday's performance placed Krasinski at the organ as the sonic narrator for most of the film, while dramatic moments in the work were punctuated by choral music, featuring commissioned scores from Elliott Gyger in addition to more standard pieces—Gregorian chants, sequentiae of Hildegard von Bingen, the *Notre Père* of Maurice Duruflé and selections from Alberto Ginastera's Op. 14 setting of the Lamentations of Jeremiah.

I was impressed at the beginning of the film—Hildegard von Bingen's *O aeterne Deus*, performed by *Chant Schola* under the leadership of Teri Kowiak, set the mood for the drama, introducing us to the interrogation of Joan. Other moments in the film were also equally effective. Ginastera's *O vos omnes*, paired well with the scenes depicting torture devices; Krasinski's German dance-trio movement during bureaucratic proclamations were gleefully illustrative. And the evening's performance culminated in a particularly poignant immolation scene featuring Gyger's *Libera me* underscored by an almost violent organ.

Despite these fine moments, however, I found much of Saturday's performance somewhat wooden. Technically, Krasinski's performance on the immersive pipe organ was a feat—to provide music almost continually for a ninety-minute film requires a remarkable amount of energy. Yet, rather than compelling the film forward to enhance the pathos on screen, too often the organ seemed to play the role of placeholder, staving off silence. I found it hard to identify any narrative component in this accompaniment—there were not any *leitmotifs* that would characterize individuals or allow the audience another medium in which to experience the work. Although somewhat emotive, Krasinski's approach often felt too personal, too internalized, too reigned-in, and unable to underline the events occurring on screen effectively. As a result, the accompaniment frequently had the effect of detracting from the film as a whole, and almost made it boring.

None of this, however, reflects on the performance by the members of Seraphim Singers on Saturday evening. Technically, the ensemble was in fine form, performing incredibly challenging choral repertoire with a high degree of finesse. Chants were performed with more staid colors and exquisite blend, faring well in the expansive space of St. Ignatius. Gyger's works, too, succeeded well with the chorus. Saturday saw three commissions from Gyger: *Eleven Questions*, *Three Temptations*, and the concluding *Libera me*. Tonally, the pieces are spare, almost atonal, with a great emphasis on sharp rhythmic motives. Although blend sometimes suffered in the face of these challenges, the ensemble is to be commended on their complete commitment to Gyger's austere compositions. Although the Duruflé *Notre Père* was sometimes a bit uneven, the choir provided memorable performances of a terrifying *O vos omnes* and a sombre, staid *Ego vir videns* from the Ginastera *Lamentations*.

Saturday's performance was presented by a grant from the Institute for the Liberal Arts at Boston College. The concert marks the final performance for the ensemble in the 2013-14 season.

**Sudeep Agarwala performs with various singing groups in Boston and Cambridge.**