

Joan of Arc Is Fried in Winter Park



Voices of Light and The Passion of Joan of Arc

By Jay Boyar

In the twilight of the 1920s — just as talking pictures were taking off — a late-arriving silent surprise shimmered into view.

Called *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, it's a stubborn sort of film: The world sometimes seems to want to forget all about this singular masterpiece, but its transcendent emotional force has always kept it near the top of many lists of the world's finest films.

On Nov. 18 and 19, at 7:30 p.m., this very special movie will be shown in a very special way. Presented by the Bach Festival Society of Winter Park, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* will be screened at Rollins College's Knowles Memorial Chapel.

The black-and-white, 1928 production will be accompanied by an approximately 30-piece orchestra and 100-voice



PATRICK BROWN

choir, conducted by John V. Sinclair, the Bach Festival Society's artistic director. They will perform an oratorio, *Voices of Light*, inspired by the film and written by New York composer Richard Einhorn.

"This has been a collaborative aspiration," says Randy Robertson, founder of GladdeningLight, a locally based organization devoted to art and spirituality that is working in partnership with the society to present the film, the oratorio and related Joan of Arc events.

"She's just such an attractive prototype of feminine heroism," he adds.

A Powerful Archetype

You don't have to be French, Catholic or even particularly spiritual to find yourself caught up in the towering emotions of this film about the 15th-century Gallic teenager who would come to be

called St. Joan. Carl Theodor Dreyer, who directed the movie, was a Danish Lutheran.

Joan of Arc tells the tale of Joan's inquisition and fiery demise. As we encounter her in the film, her battlefield exploits, as well as her preference for male attire, are in her past. This is a movie about how "the maid of Orléans," who famously heard "voices," is made to pay dearly for her transgressive spirit.

Dreyer, who had worked as a court reporter, chose to tell this story largely through the use of actual transcripts from Joan's trial. Much of the power of the film resides in its heavy reliance on closeups. As the director once observed, the face "is a landscape one never tires of exploring." In addition, he employs oblique, Expressionistic camera angles, which are both disorienting and dramatic.

"I've seen at least 100 movies about Joan of Arc," notes Southern Methodist University Professor Bonnie Wheeler, founder and director of the International Joan of Arc Society. "I've never seen anything else that maintains this sense of both historical accuracy and emotional power."

That power also arises from the passionate performance, as Joan, of Renée Falconetti, a French stage actress who was known mainly for comedy. The critic Pauline Kael wrote that Falconetti's portrayal "may be the finest performance ever recorded on film."

"It's a very intense, very intimate drama of Joan of Arc and her accusers," offers Enzian's president, Henry Maldonado, who has been working

to support the showings of the film at Knowles. "It's a movie of ideas and a movie of conversations."

"If you have a list of 10 favorite movies," composer Einhorn predicts, "after you see *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, you'll have a list of 11 favorite movies."

An Ethereal Marriage

Sixty-five years after Dreyer directed this film, Einhorn wrote his oratorio. For Sinclair, the two works are more like one.

"Einhorn did such a good job of marrying the two that I can't separate them," reflects the conductor. "Success for me will be not only a beautiful sound, but also [a sound that] perfectly lines up with the film so it matches the action."

This approach is not precisely what Einhorn intended: "Dreyer had his vision of Joan," he says simply, "and I have my own." Nevertheless, he's fine with those who think of the works as a single statement instead of, as he does, "parallel works of art."

Einhorn almost didn't write *Voices of Light*. When someone suggested that he compose a piece about Joan of Arc, he was at first unenthusiastic.

"I thought that was a terrible idea because I knew nothing about Joan at all," he recalls. "Then I saw the movie and I thought: Oh, my God! That's absolutely perfect. It's one of the most remarkable stories in Western history."

He estimates that his oratorio has been publicly performed about 250 times throughout the world, sometimes with the film, sometimes not. The music, he adds, sounds a little medieval and a little modern, but not quite either.

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— Bach Festival Society Artistic
Director John V. Sinclair



"The music sort of floats outside of time," he explains, "the way the story and the film do."

More Than Film & Music

In addition to the movie and the oratorio, there will be a lecture by SMU's Wheeler about Joan of Arc at 2 p.m., Nov. 19. At 4 p.m., Robertson will moderate a forum about all things Joan with a panel including Wheeler, Einhorn, Sinclair and Maldonado. Both events are free and will be held at Rollins' Bush Auditorium.

With female empowerment and gender identity very much on our minds these days, this may be an especially appropriate moment for such a lecture and panel, and to watch a film that tells Joan's story.

"Talk about timely!" exclaims Sinclair. "It has more poignancy today than in many other times in history."

If current sociopolitical trends may be part of the reason that *The Passion of Joan*



COURTESY BACH FESTIVAL SOCIETY OF WINTER PARK

The Bach Festival Society orchestra and choir at home in Knowles Chapel

of Arc will be shown at Knowles Chapel, so are the efforts of GladdeningLight's Robertson, who saw the film, with Einhorn's oratorio, performed in Washington, D.C., in February 2014. Ever since, he has been working to bring it to Central Florida.

"When it was over, people didn't even know how to react, it was that astounding a production," reflects Robertson, clearly still in awe. "People just sat there for a while and then jumped to their

feet. And roared."

For tickets and further information, contact the Bach Festival Society of Winter Park at bachfestivalflorida.org/tickets or 407.646.2182. **oam**

Jay Boyar's columns, reviews and articles have appeared in such publications as the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, the Chicago Tribune, the New York Daily News and the Orlando Sentinel, where he served as the movie critic.



VOICES of Light

Classic Cinema & Live Music

Presented by the
Bach Festival Society of Winter Park
under the direction of John V. Sinclair
in partnership with GladdeningLight

NOVEMBER 18 & 19, 2016
KNOWLES CHAPEL AT ROLLINS COLLEGE

In 1928, celebrated silent film director **Carl Theodor Dreyer** completed his masterwork, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. It has since made many film critics ten-best lists of all time.

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