



'Joan of Arc' burns down Holmberg Hall

By Doug Hill

For The Transcript

On Sunday, the University of Oklahoma's venerable Holmberg Hall beheld what may have been one of the most spectacular multimedia performances the state has ever seen.

A screening of director Carl Dreyer's 1928 silent motion picture "The Passion of Joan of Arc" was accompanied by musical oratorio from the Norman Philharmonic and OU's School of Music's combined student choirs. Richard Zielinski and David Howard directed these groups performing the oratorio by Richard Einhorn. The composer was present and addressed the audience before the performance of his best-known work.

He also has composed scores for many Hollywood horror and thriller flicks.

The experience of hearing a university chorale, women's chorus and men's glee club ensemble of nearly 150 voices singing with a 26-piece orchestra was magnificently overwhelming. Coupled with moving images that Einhorn characterized as "one of the most extraordinary works of art I know" made it a singular event.

The film centers on 15th century French patriot and later saint Joan de Arc in the final time before her martyrdom. She was an illiterate teenage Hundred Years War heroine who miraculously inspired her fellow citizens in their struggle to rid the hated English from their homeland. She was captured by her enemies and was put on trial for being a tool of Satan. Much of Joan's torment by the English revolved around the fact that she wore "men's clothes," refusing to dress as her judges decreed.

Solo vocalists included soprano Dohee Kim, alto Emma Sharp, tenor Hunter Birkhead and bass Sangwook Park. A quartet of "Spirit" singers were Tara Traxler, Sarah Spurlin, Hannah Tullius and Emma Bruce.

Park's canyon-deep voice was an extraordinary instrument to hear.

REVIEW

The vocals were paired against moving images typical in 1920s-era silent film.

The camera lingered over the actors' faces, allowing their expressions to convey emotion. Although Joan was little more than a child, she managed to outfox a crew of judges with some of the ugliest

mugs imaginable. The orchestral and vocal volume soared at times and others reduced to a whisper as the quasi-judicial but mostly religious bigotry outrages mounted against the girl. Countless shots were of Joan's (actor Renée Falconetti) face clouded by bewilderment and anguish as the men shouted down her defiance.

Solo vocal performances intertwined with Joan's interrogation, abuse by her jailers, torture, illness, a humiliating haircut, final walk and then burning at the stake. In the fever scene, an artery is opened in Joan's arm to bleed the illness from her.

Some of the most horrid moments were little disgraces perpetrated against Joan by her jailers. Those are then compounded by the judges, who supposedly represent wisdom but use base deceit to build their case against the girl.

The lyrics sung are a tapestry of French and Latin. Spare subtitles on the film in original French, with English added later, conveyed the story. The music intensified the story's unmistakable passion. Joan doesn't stand a chance because she refuses to knuckle under to the men insisting on her submission to their wills. They demanded the child warrior confess her sins, but Joan persisted in her insubordination.

The film builds to its inevitable conclusion when she is taken from her stone dungeon to be executed.

French townspeople observe the abomination about to take place and start a riotous melee.

English soldiers beat back the unarmed peasants.

The orchestra roared and every voice in the combined choirs swelled as the flames around Joan grew higher.

Afterward, those in the university and broader community audience were stunned by what we had just witnessed. A standing ovation was small tribute for a masterpiece performance.

OU choirs join the Norman Philharmonic in a performance of Richard Einhorn oratorio with 1928 silent film "The Passion of Joan of Arc" at Holmberg Hall in April.

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