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Arts & Entertainment:

Moving Pictures: Chorus Performs Dramatic Oratorio for Classic Film

By Justin DeFreitas
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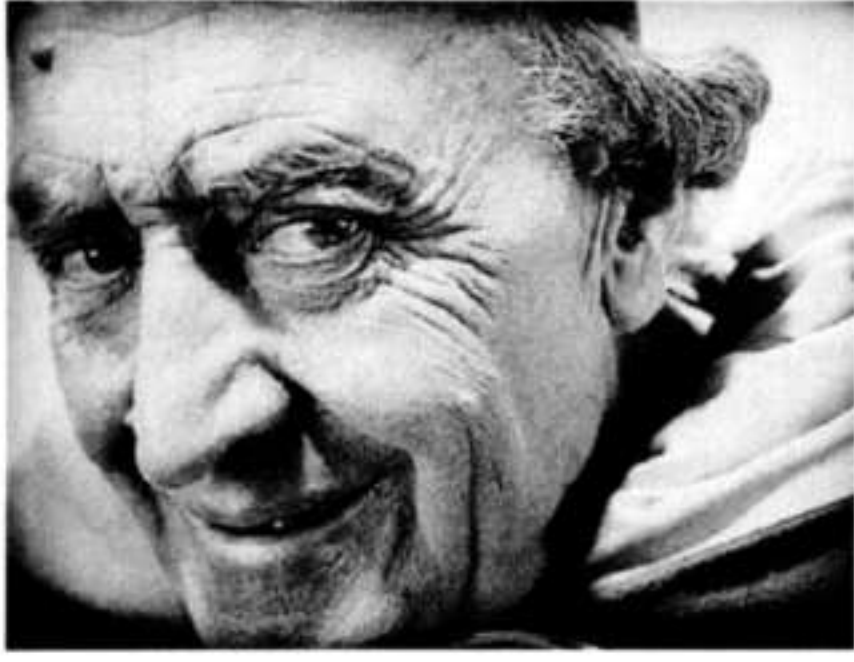


Carl Dreyer's *Passion of Joan Arc* uses dramatic close-ups and sparse backgrounds to dramatize the confrontations of her trial, juxtaposing her youth and sincerity against the corruption and hostility of her persecutors.

A rare event is coming to the Bay Area this next week. One of cinema's greatest works of art will screen twice—once at San Francisco's Castro Theater and once at UC Berkeley's Hertz Hall—accompanied by 200 singers and a 24-piece orchestra. UC Berkeley's Alumni Chorus will present *Voices of Light*, an oratorio, as accompaniment for Carl Dreyer's 1928 landmark film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.

Composer Richard Einhorn was kicking around New York's Museum of Modern Art one day in 1988 when he came across a still from a movie, an arresting shot of a woman's face from a silent film about Joan of Arc. Though Einhorn was a film buff and fairly knowledgeable about the medium's history, he had never heard of this movie. He immediately requested a screening.

"Some 81 minutes later," Einhorn later wrote, "I walked out of the screening room shattered, having unexpectedly seen one of



the most extraordinary works of art that I know."

He had long considered writing a piece about the 19-year-old martyr, and now inspiration had finally struck. The result, *Voices of Light*, is, as Einhorn describes it, "neither opera nor oratorio, but a mixture of both." The libretto, containing Latin, Old and Middle French

and Italian, is a pastiche of writings by female mystics of the Middle Ages, including Joan herself, the voices of the choir echoing the voices that spurred Joan on in her quest to unite France.

Soldier, insurgent, terrorist, transvestite, schizophrenic, mystic, witch, saint, seer, martyr, feminist; the modern world could apply many words to this fascinating life, all of them containing a bit of truth but none of them wholly accurate. It is an extraordinary story, one that might have devolved into myth but for the plentiful documentation of her trial: a pious, illiterate farm girl, prodded by voices, rises up to lead an army and to consult with kings, and when captured stands her ground against her captors until breaking under threat of torture, then rises again to retract her confession before bravely facing death at the stake.

"The piece explores the patchwork of emotions and thoughts that are stitched together into the notion of a female hero," writes Einhorn. "Such a hero invariably transgresses the conventions and restrictions her society imposes."

Einhorn debuted the piece to critical praise in 1994, and though *Voices of Light* was not written as a score for the film, Einhorn often presented it that way.

When Criterion released the film on DVD, the disc came with two options: The film could be watched with *Voices of Light* or in complete silence. *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is one of the few films from the silent era that its director preferred to screen truly silent, without any musical accompaniment at all, but considering the options available at the time, Dreyer's wish is understandable. While the larger theaters of the era could afford to use an orchestra, most theaters would have presented the film with improvised accompaniment on Wurlitzer organ or piano, and Dreyer probably felt that neither instrument could do justice to his film. He could not have imagined that his avant-garde masterpiece would one day get so lavish and respectful a treatment as Einhorn has provided. The opportunity to see the film on the big screen is rare enough; to see it presented with a full choir is an opportunity that may not come again.

Mark Sumner, director of UC Choral Ensembles, will conduct *Voices of Light* along with *The Passion of Joan of Arc* twice: at 7:30 p.m. Monday at San Francisco's Castro Theater, and at 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 23 at Hertz Hall on the UC Berkeley campus. A 24-piece orchestra will provide the music, while the Alumni Chorus will combine with the UC Men's and Women's Chorales and Perfect Fifth for a total of 200 singers.

It will make for an unusual arrangement at the Castro. Sumner will conduct the orchestra in front of the stage, while the chorus will fill the seats off to the sides in the first few rows, behind the conductor. "It will be a challenge," says Alumni Chorus Manager Karen Moore. According to Moore, Sumner may have to wear white gloves so that his hands can be seen by the choir behind him, and the singers have had to memorize as much of the multi-lingual libretto as possible in order to reduce their scripts to one page, so that the audience isn't distracted by the sound of 200 pages flipping every few minutes.

There will be differences between the two performances. At the Castro the film will be shown full screen in 35mm, and the choir will be joined by San Francisco's Unitarian Church choir. For the Hertz Hall performance, the film will be shown on a smaller screen with the use of DVD projection, and the Unitarian choir will not participate.

The Passion of Joan of Arc has a history nearly as turbulent as the life of its heroine. When the French learned that a Danish director, a non-Catholic, was coming to their country to make a movie about their recently sainted heroine (Joan was excommunicated from the church before her execution and was not reinstated and elevated to sainthood until centuries later, in 1920), they were outraged. They were further scandalized by the news that the lead role would be taken by an Italian (though not quite as scandalized as they had been over rumors that Joan would be played by American actress Lillian Gish). French authorities were unable to stop the production but were successful in demanding a few changes. Meanwhile, the producers went ahead with what they may have expected to be a commercial film, a sort of epic biopic; elaborate sets were constructed and a generous budget was approved.

However, Carl Dreyer was not one to put commercial considerations before artistic concerns, and when he saw what he had in Renée Falconetti it was clear that there was little need for sets and high production values. This would be the only film performance for the successful stage actress, and Dreyer ensured that it would be an immortal one, recognizing that he had a great actress with a face that could carry the film all on its own. Dreyer contrasts the purity and beauty of that face with the harsh, corrupt and scheming faces of Joan's interrogators in a film that largely consists of close-ups, alternating between the pious sincerity of the girl soldier and the fleshy, self-important visages of her persecutors. For Dreyer, form must follow function, and so he used the actual transcripts of the trial

(condensed from several months into a single day) to stage a series of dramatic, face-to-face confrontations. He allowed his actors no makeup, and the walls behind them are almost uniformly white, accented here and there with windows, crucifixes and low-angle shots for a mise-en-scene as stark, as spare and as simple as Joan's religious conviction.

It is an avant-garde film, and its impact has hardly lessened over the years. Dreyer's imagery is relentless, and his editing ranges from staid to rapid-fire, at times juxtaposing shots from multiple angles and culminating in a forceful and dynamic final sequence that rivals Sergei Eisenstein's fabled Odessa Steps scene from Battleship Potemkin.

However, the public never really got a chance to see this film. Upon release *The Passion of Joan of Arc* was shown just once in its original state. Soon after, it was edited by censors, and in fact was edited differently in every country it which it was shown, trimmed, rewritten and re-edited to fit each culture's prevailing political winds. Consequently, the film Dreyer made was rarely seen at all, and, to compound the matter, at some point the original negative was lost to fire. Dreyer, devastated by the loss, was able to cobble together a reconstituted version using alternate takes, creating a shot-by-shot replica, but this version too was later lost to fire. Thus for decades afterward, the film existed only in bastardized forms: sound versions that imposed a narrator's voice on Dreyer's dramatic silent imagery; rewritten versions that softened Joan's interrogators and even Joan herself; poorly paced re-edited versions that inaccurately gauged the projection speed, reducing the film to a dull, plodding pace. Thus critics over the years were hard pressed to claim that the film measured up to its legend.

But once again, a resurrection. In 1981 a print of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* was discovered by a worker in, of all places, a storage closet in a Norwegian mental institution. Canisters were turned over to the Norwegian Film Institute, where they sat unopened for three years. When the film was finally reviewed, it was found to be a complete and nearly pristine print of the original version, unseen for nearly six decades. The mental institution's director had an interest in French history and had apparently acquired the print for his personal use, his staff and patients perhaps among the privileged few to see Dreyer's masterpiece in its original form.

Voices of Light / *The Passion of Joan of Arc*

7:30 p.m. Monday, Nov. 17 at the Castro Theater, San Francisco; 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 23 at Hertz Hall on the UC Berkeley campus. Tickets available at the door: general admission \$15; seniors \$12. For more information, call (510) 643-9645 or see www.ucac.net. Co-sponsored by Pacific Film Archive.