

A woman in traditional Chinese opera costume, featuring a large, ornate headdress with red and gold elements and a red and gold patterned robe. She is looking upwards with an expressive face.

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Light in Darkness

Joan of Arc's heroism shines forth

BY SHUEH-LI ONG

Former drummer in a rock 'n' roll band turns to writing only serious music?! I wanted to unmask the real person behind Richard Einhorn, composer of *Voices Of Light*, an oratorio for orchestra, chorus and soloists celebrating the life of Joan of Arc, and featuring *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, the legendary silent movie by Danish filmmaker Carl Dreyer.

During my phone tête-à-tête with Einhorn, a composer who was very much inspired by Jimmy Hendrix and Igor Stravinsky, we traded thoughts on music appreciation and compositional techniques, with revelations about *Voices Of Light* and the silent film that moved him to write this oratorio.

Shueh-li Ong: So, you were a drummer in a rock band during your teens?

Richard Einhorn: (Chuckles) I had a rather different music education from people in classical music. Drumming got me interested in modern experimental music. 20th-century music got me excited about composing. I then educated myself going backwards in music history! 20th century music was my first love. Now I guess, 21st-century music is!

SO: Many people end their musical education feeling jaded, delineating music into what's dreary: classical music and what's cool: pop music.

RE: I got into classical music because

it spoke to my gut and emotions. I love rock and many kinds of popular music, but I don't make a distinction. When I think of the 19th century, which is what's normally thought of as classical music, it is actually the music I am least attracted to! 20th century and medieval music is in a lot of ways closer (a certain rhythmic thing) to what we think of as pop music. Maybe kids just need to listen more to Stravinsky instead of Beethoven!

SO: The way to appreciating music should be to approach them as styles in a musical pool.

RE: Every single time you sit down to a new piece, even if by a great name like Mozart, you have to decide if it's an engaging experience.

SO: So it's important people leave behind all preconceptions and treat *Voices* as an Einhorn experience?

RE: Exactly. The thing about the piece is that it sounds like medieval music – but it isn't. It sounds like 20th- or 21st-century music, but it doesn't quite do what that music does either. It is very direct, which I thought was perfect for Joan who herself was very direct in the way she worked.

SO: The human voice has so much power in it and people respond to it immediately. Do you feel that this was what was needed to generate the energy to speak directly to the audience?

RE: Yes. The human voice is almost

the most personal instrument... it speaks in a very emotional way. Composing for *Voices* was difficult and rewarding at the same time. There is the vocal style that is very similar to a standard opera style, and then there is Anonymous4, an early-music vocal ensemble from the United States of world repute, with very little vibrato and very pure tone, very simple intervals and motion – almost like Gregorian chant. The contrast between those two and the way that both styles affect you emotionally was the thing about the piece that was most interesting for me.

SO: How do you work? Talk about the technology.

RE: What I generally have is a lot of samplers and synthesizers which form an electronic orchestra as a template in my sequencer – as if I were composing with an orchestra in front of me. I am glad I can talk about the sampler because most of the people I have spoken to about the project know nothing about technology. A recording of the bell from the church in the village of Domremy, Joan's birthplace, will be played

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RICHARD EINHORN





you least expect them to be heard.

SO: What in rock music do you use as an ingredient in your compositions?

RE: Syncopation. You are constantly

thrown out from the standard rhythmical thing – extending those ideas and creating something you think you've heard before, but you haven't.

SO: Tell us about the film?

RE: The *Passion of Joan of Arc* was made in 1928 but looks very modern and the performance of Joan is considered one of the greatest of all time.

SO: And its history?

RE: A few months after its premiere, its negative and all known prints were destroyed in a warehouse fire. Dreyer reconstructed the film from out-takes which were destroyed in a second fire. In 1981, a copy of the original was discovered in a janitor's closet in a mental

institution in Oslo, Norway, and it's this version that you will see. The film takes place at the trial of Joan. It's all done in close ups of her face and the faces of her judges.

SO: When I write my dramatico works, I think of the music as a piece forming part

of a puzzle, yet able to stand on its own. Does the music in *Voices* do this?

RE: That's a good question. Yes it does. I felt the film was totally complete in itself (it tells the trial of Joan). I was musically inspired to focus on her mission, which was to save France and to

drive the English out of France. It's really a counterpoint. It seems to work very well with the film except I wasn't looking at the movie when I was composing it!

SO: I noticed that Dreyer picked a silent film to tell the story of Joan, a woman who was very much influenced by the aural medium. Do you think that there might be a message in this?

RE: I don't think anyone's mentioned that before but you are 100 per cent right. I think one of the things that attracted Dreyer to Joan's story was the idea that it was all about sound – hearing voices – yet he had to work in a silent medium so he had to find some way of communicating that. Dreyer was also a bit of a mischief-maker. Asked by a French company to do a film, he chose to do Joan of Arc, the most important and the most 'French' of subjects!

SO: You have taken as lyrics, certain writings by women mystics. Are lyrics important to you?

RE: The sounds words make is much more important to me than their meaning... and often that is why I work with languages I can't speak. That's a modern idea, not 19th, 20th or 21st century!

SO: The Singapore production of *Voices Of Light* will see the involvement of the Anonymous4 (as the voice of Joan) and four soloists from Europe, with Singapore's Philharmonic Chamber Choir and Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra, under the baton of Lim Yau. What final thought would you like to leave our readers?

RE: Go see it because you will never forget that film – considered by critics as one of the 10 greatest films ever made in history – and the experience! **a**

Voices Of Light – The Passion of Joan of Arc is on 12 Aug at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Concert Hall.

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Scenes from Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*

by a sampler during the performance.

SO: Do you have a favourite instrument?

RE: I love string and percussion; left to my own devices, I would write string quartets for the rest of my life! I love that sound (strings) and I also love the interplay that you get.

SO: Does any of that 'drummer in a rock band' experience pervade your compositions?

RE: Oh yeah! I think often in terms of rhythm... drumbeats that have become transposed into string patterns or... where