

## the arts



Film still from Carl Theodor Dreyer's "The Passion of Joan of Arc" (1928). Joan of Arc (center) is flanked by her accusers.

# BRINGING JOAN OF ARC TO LIFE

**Simona Minns** and **Luis Fraire** create a film score for a classic silent film

"How do you tell a shattered story?  
By slowly becoming everybody. No,  
by slowly becoming everything."

Arundhati Roy,  
The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

## MARY TEUSCHER

The *Passion of Joan of Arc* is the latest creation by Lithuanian musician Simona Minns. She is producer, composer, vocalist, and conductor of the work which was performed September 16 at The Sprinkler Factory in Worcester, Massachusetts. Minns and her colleague Luis Antonio Fraire created a live score for the 1928 silent film of the same title by Carl Theodor Dreyer. Fraire contributed original electronic music for the evening. The string quartet included Tudor Dornescu – first violin, Aija Reke – second violin, Josh Wareham – viola, and Alan Toda-Ambaras – cello. There was a breadth of imagery, moods, and ideas which were conjured up throughout the evening.

The film is based on records of the trial of Joan of Arc. Concentrating upon the last 24 hours of Joan's life and the final moments of her trial leading to her execution, Dreyer aimed to create a psychologically realistic depiction of her agony and her accusers' scorn. Despite Dreyer's attention to history, the negative portrayal of most of the churchmen was controversial in 1928, and the initial version of the film produced in France was banned. Pressure from the Archbishop of Paris and government censors was



Simona Minns (far left) on the Lithuanian kanklės with the string quartet.

Photo: Becke Drake

a significant factor. In an ironic twist of fate, in December 1928, a fire at the studios in Berlin destroyed the film's original negative.

It was only in 1981 that an intact original version of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* became available to the public. Nearly sixty years after its first release, a copy of Dreyer's intended final cut was discovered in a mental institution in Oslo, Norway, and re-released.

Dreyer's use of the biblical myth as social criticism is compelling; it is no wonder authorities in France of the 1920s felt affronted. Now, in our time, Minns' string quartet melodies, vocal improvisation and zither playing beside Fraire's driving electronics guided the audience along the other-worldly journey of the trial. As the audience sat in the sizeable revitalized mill space and art gallery of the Sprinkler Factory, it became spellbound by the film and the music. I looked

around at one point to see a full theater on the edge of their seats. It was a superbly evocative performance!

The interplay between Minns' film score and Dreyer's cinematography resulted in a breathtaking performance. Minns' musical composition connected the audience to Dreyer's actors and transcended linguistic, cultural and temporal barriers. Through the sweeping musical compositions, the audience could identify with the psychological struggles of Joan portrayed by actress Renee Jeanne Falconetti. The terror, frustration, desperation, and sorrow reflected on her face were conveyed through the musicians' sounds into our present world. As for Joan's tormentors, they appear familiar: Who are these villains and how is it that we know them so well?

And what a time this is indeed to think about women and justice! Minns's decision to compose alongside, re-examine and highlight this seminal film could not be more relevant to the present historical moment. Annihilation was a central theme of the night, the anticipation of which we felt deeply through Minns's compositions and Fraire's pulsing keyboard. The film ended in ashes and the solo vocalist (Minns) whaling and then almost whispering a hypnotic serenade for the journey that brought us there.

Minns's composition for *The Passion of Joan of Arc* enables us to synthesize the dismal landscape of news headlines, or more broadly, any experience embodying an injustice. And isn't this what good art does? It helps us to understand better the world in



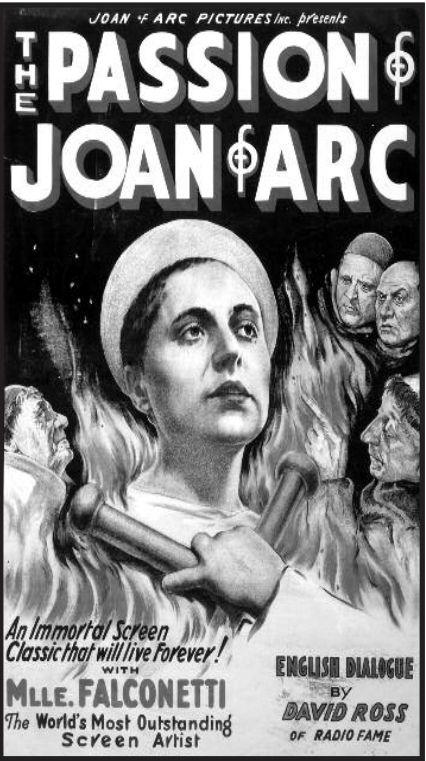
Simona Minns conducts her film score for "The Passion of Joan of Arc."

Photo: Gintaras Sekmokas



which we live. The collage of actors, musicians, and singers that Minns marshaled made me ask: What does it mean to speak truth to power? And, what, if any, is the validity of the state as a truth-seeking enterprise? I am in awe at the transmission of emotions and ideas made possible through the performing arts. Minns, Fraire and their musicians reminded me of the power of this art form, especially in times of turmoil.

The evening was a wonderland decorated by the many textures of Minns’s voice: velvety, bright, mournful, strong and sensuous. The most compelling parts were moments when she demonstrated her considerable skill as a vocal improviser. Often wild and unpredictable, her vocals retained the solemnity of the subject matter. While a score for such a film could easily be melodramatic, the musicians gracefully walked a fine line of intensity and subtlety. The soundscape they devised was fresh and elegiac yet appropriately neutral, giving the work a feel that is sophisticatedly postmodern



yet deeply human.

Sitting amongst Minns’s multilingual, multigenerational, multicultural audience I realized what made the evening so fantastic was not only its relevance in a sociopolitical sense but also in its argument for human interconnectedness. Minns’s music connects listeners to the Joan of Arc story in a way that reminds us of all the experiences we share as people. Her work is empathetic: crystal clear in its insistence on shared humanity. The broad palette of zither melodies, found sound, electronic sound, string quartet arrangements, original songs and lyrics, breath work and vocal improvisation bind us on a gut level to the images laid out in Dreyer’s narrative. The audience can reflect and ruminate both inwardly and outwardly. Whatever kind of misfortune you may have experienced, Minns provides a place for you here.

The Passion of Joan of Arc film score by Minns and Fraire, although a meditation on pain, exhibits a redemptive power. The mosaic of composition and cinematography is itself a shattered story. As a composer, Minns is holding it up to the light for us all to see. She has carefully collected the broken parts and pieces and sewn them back together with sound to create something new, something beautiful. Her soulful voice beckons us once again to journey, through and across the darkness. But this time, she assures us — we are not alone. □

books

Blood, Sweat, Tears, and FAITH!

ROMUALDAS KRIAUCIUNAS, PhD

Unstoppable – It’s a Choice by Inga Lizdenytė  
Westbow Press, Bloomington, IN, 2018  
Hard-cover, 501 pages

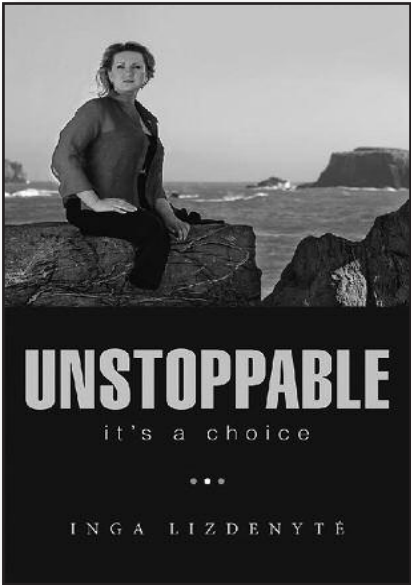
The expression “blood, sweat and tears” was coined by British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, in the course of his historic speech in which he declared, “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.” At that time, in 1940, he was rallying his countrymen to brace themselves for the inevitable hardships of the next world war. Author Inga Lizdenytė expanded the expression by adding a fourth component “FAITH” in capital letters, no less. This expanded phrase pretty much summarizes the essence of her new book *Unstoppable – It’s a Choice*.

I first took notice of this book when I read Karilė Vaitkutė’s interview with the author in the July/August 2018 issue of *Bridges*. Procuring the book proved difficult, but I eventually prevailed. A promo on the Internet stated that it is an autobiography/coaching book, based on a true story of how a young woman transformed her life after a tragic car accident in Vilnius. I was ready to believe every word she wrote until I read the fine-print disclaimer: This book is a work of non-fiction. Unless otherwise noted, the author and the publisher make no explicit guarantees as to the accuracy of the information contained in this book, and in some cases, names of people and places have been altered to protect their privacy. Thus I was on my own, as gullible as I might be.

The book begins with three “endorsements” and a Foreword, all highly praising the book. Noteworthy is an observation by Alexander Shevchenko, Senior Pastor of the House of Bread Church, “The book consists of real letters, which Inga wrote to her brother, a skeptic of faith, who had asked her for help at a critical moment of his life. This is an extremely transparent story, written with extreme care, the results of which was God changing a man’s life.”

Adam Brown, Executive Director of Disability Services and Legal Center, the author’s employer, states, “If you’re a fan of faith-based inspirational literature, *Unstoppable* is right up your alley. If you’re like me, however, an agnostically oriented cynic who finds little inspiration in anything, *Unstoppable* may be an odd choice of literature, but an incredibly rewarding one nonetheless.” He further notes that Ms. Lizdenytė’s work offers an intense, often raw, insight into the human condition.

In the book, we find almost 400 pages of letters from Inga to her brother Valdas; however, there is virtually no response from him. If the book had not provided us with a photo of the two siblings together, I would have suspected that the “letters to brother” component was merely a literary device for her own self-expression.



The dust jacket describes the book as an inspirational autobiography, grounded in the author’s Christian faith. The book recounts Inga’s life after a tragic car accident. Initially being incapable of speaking, moving, and living independently, and then moving from Lithuania to the United States, the book develops as a testimonial to the power of God.

We are told that Inga chose to reclaim her life. Yet the lesson learned was that even when matters seem on the way to redemption, the worst can occur. With only a step away from achieving the impossible, everything for Inga has been destroyed all over again. The fruits of her hard work and her continuous efforts were ruined.

Realizing that it’s not events or the choices of others that can break her, with Lord’s intervention, Inga picked up herself up and continued her journey in spite of the odds.

The book reveals many intertwining paths: her injuries from the car accident, “sermonettes” to her brother, and dealing with marital infidelity. When faced with challenges, she turns to God, in the person of Jesus. She delivers some “pop psych” advice not only to her brother but the reader as well. As a psychologist, I can say that her “pop psych” points were well presented and had a firm footing in the current clinical practice. If she had more closely followed her own advice, she could have avoided or at least reduced the fallout of a love affair with a married man. Of course, it is easier to preach than to practice what you preach.

In the last few pages of the book, she challenges her readers: *When you have unshakable faith and a mindset that empowers you, you will always have the courage to accept any situation in life and the strength to move on, no matter what happens along the way. And if you protect and guard your faith, and make it the rock on which you stand, no life’s storm will be able to break you down. So, cherish and protect that which is within you. Be like a ship that hoists its sails and moves forward despite any storms. Be strong. Be determined and Relentless. Be Unstoppable.*

It took seven years for Ms. Lizdenytė to complete the book. She acknowledges that many people that encouraged her. She notes two dedicated editors that “made the manuscript shine.” I suspect that perhaps they were more supportive than critical of the author’s efforts. The book tends to be redundant. Trimming it down to 200-300 pages would have been a step in the right direction. There are some 50 photos in the book; unfortunately, they are dark and lack detail. Perhaps they could have been enhanced utilizing currently available computer technology.

Westbow Press, the publisher, is described as one promoting “Christian self-publishing, allowing authors to self-publish their books with Christian morals, inspirational themes, and family values.” I don’t know for sure, but I’m guessing that the author and her supporters were left alone to fend for themselves. □

Who is Inga Lizdenytė

Inga Lizdenyte was born and raised in Vilnius, Lithuania. At the age of nineteen, she joined the staff at Vilnius International Airport. While working as a manager at the airport’s Business Lounge, Inga enjoyed a dynamic lifestyle until a tragic car accident changed her life. Inga found herself in a world she never knew could exist: severe injuries throughout her body made her hardly able to speak or move.

Faced with the crossroads of her destiny, she decided to fight for her life. She firmly believed that with God’s help she could reclaim her independence and was ready to work relentlessly to achieve her vision.

After losing both of her legs and the use of her left arm in a car accident, Inga was able to transform her life from not being able to speak, move or do anything independently, to traveling from Europe to the United States by herself and successfully building a fulfilling life all over

again.

Three years from the accident, Inga traveled to the United States. Since 2005 she has been living independently in California. Inga’s life has been completely transformed. Today she feels happier than she was before the car accident.

Inga currently works as the Public Relations & Volunteer Coordinator at Disability Services & Legal Center (DSLCL). On June 2, 2017, the Board of Directors of California Human Development (CHD) bestowed on Inga a Champion Award for serving as a role model to people with disabilities.

In addition to her job, Inga is a Public Speaker and a certified Life Coach. Inga’s passion is to help others overcome their difficulties and change their lives, sharing her testimony of God’s power to restore the broken, and turn the impossible into the possible.

From *Unstoppable – It’s a Choice* (Westbow Press, Bloomington, IN, 2018)