

A rare birthday present for St. Joan of Arc

Pope Benedict XVI minces no words when he describes the medieval judges who interrogated and sentenced St. Joan of Arc to death 580 years ago. The French clergymen were aligned with St. Joan's political opponents, the pope said in a Jan. 26 general audience, and they "lacked charity and the humility to see God's action in this young woman."

"Joan's judges were radically incapable of understanding her or of perceiving the beauty of her soul," Pope Benedict XVI said. "They did not know that they were condemning a saint."

As the world prepares to celebrate the 600th anniversary of St. Joan's birth early next year, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra will showcase a rarely performed oratorio that captures the drama of the French saint's trial and execution.

"Jeanne d'Arc au Bucher" - "Joan of Arc at the Stake," a groundbreaking work by Swiss composer Arthur Honegger, will be performed Nov 17-18 at the Meyerhoff Symphony Hall in Baltimore before hitting the bright lights of New York's Carnegie Hall.

In an e-mail interview, BSO Music Director Marin Alsop told me the work defies categorization.

"It's a dramatic oratorio with narrative creating a unique story and sound world," the maestra said. "Joan is portrayed as a living, breathing human being who did not comprehend how she found herself in such an unbelievable predicament."

Honegger's work features folk tunes, plainchant, classical music and contemporary jazz. It includes many of the instruments of a modern orchestra, along with saxophones, pianos and the ondes martenot - a rarely used instrument best known for producing the eerie, glissando "woooooo" sounds of old-time science fiction and horror movies.

"Joan of Arc at the Stake" is as much a work of theater as it is of music. Performed in French with English subtitles, it will feature vocalists from Concert Artists of Baltimore, the Peabody Hopkins Chorus, Morgan State University Choir and the Peabody Children's Chorus. Canadian actress Caroline Dhavernas has the title role.

French poet-dramatist Paul Claudel wrote the libretto for "Joan of Arc at the Stake" in 1934 after having a vision of two hands tied together, raised and making the Sign of the Cross. Honegger completed the score on Christmas Eve, 1935 and the work premiered in Switzerland on May 12, 1938.

Claudel tells St. Joan's story through flashbacks that follow the course of her life in reverse order. The climax occurs when the work returns to the present for St. Joan's martyrdom.

Just as Honegger's work defies easy description, so does the woman on which it is based.

"She has been adopted by people on the right and left of the political aisle," Alsop said, "and as a model for both religious and non-religious belief systems. I am intrigued by her ability to transcend categorization."

St. Joan is the patroness of France who heard voices from saints commanding her to drive the English and Burgundians from her homeland. The illiterate peasant girl led the French to victory in several military campaigns before being captured by the Burgundians and sold to the English. She was condemned as a witch and burned at the stake at age 19. Pope Callistus III reopened her trial in 1456 and she was found innocent of all charges. She was canonized in 1920.

"I admire Joan's total commitment to her beliefs and willingness to stand up for what she believed," said Alsop, noting that St. Joan continues to serve as a model for people from all walks of society.

"Joan is portrayed as a devout individual adamantly true to herself and completely devoted to God," Alsop said. "She is free of guile, but not above being human with faults and strengths."

St. Joan's inquisitors may have been "incapable of understanding her or perceiving

the beauty of her soul,” but the musicians who recounted her fate surely weren’t.

For more information about the concert, visit the BSO site.