

Nine Saints in One Act

By Olivia Giovetti



Victoria and Robert Sirota (Brian Hatton)

Pairings and trios are all well and good, but when you've been commissioned to write a 40-minute piece of music about nine saints all featured in the stained glass windows of a church -- namely the Chapel of St. Bede's in Greenwich, CT -- you face an interesting challenge.

"Nine of anything is a very difficult number in the arts," laughs composer and Manhattan School of Music president Robert Sirota. "You have to get it down to twos and threes in order to make any sense of it."

Along with his wife, librettist (and vicar of the congregation of St. John the Divine) Victoria, Sirota happily took on the challenge, which resulted in *Holy Women Lives of the Women Saints in the Stained Glass Windows of St. Bede's Chapel*. The piece will be heard for the first time in New York on Wednesday at Corpus Christi Church on W. 121 Street. "We

were able to make a sort of a drama in which each one of these remarkable women in her own way tells her story," says Sirota, who bases the work in such traditions as Britten's *Noah's Flood*, *The Play of Daniel* or Hildegard of Bingen's *Ordo Virtutum* and divides the nine saints into three categories: Mystics, Martyrs and Mothers.

We spoke with Sirota about the shape of his modern-day passion play. Check out the disambiguation below for more information on the main players and their musical representations.

The Mystics: Saint Walburga

For Walburga (or Walpurga), sainthood was a family business: The niece of Saint Boniface and sister to Saints Willibald and Winibald, she evangelized pagan Germans and chronicled her brothers' lives and travels, making her arguably the first female author in England and Germany. She succeeded Willibald as abbess of his monastery near Eichstätt. The eve of her feast day (May Day) is known as Walpurgisnacht, a witches' Sabbath immortalized in Gounod's *Faust*.

The Mystics: Saint Catherine of Siena

After her older sister Bonaventura died in childbirth, Catherine Benincasa was, at 16, asked to marry her widowed brother-in-law. Problem was that Catherine made a vow of chastity at 7, just a couple of years after her first vision of Christ, so she responded to her imposed engagement with a fast. Her parents caved and she became a nun, experiencing what she called a "mystic marriage" with Jesus and advocated for peace between Italy's then-divided city states.

The Mystics: Saint Theresa

Described by Sirota as “the mistress of ceremonies, if you will,” Theresa of Ávila is the most mystical of the three saints, detailing among her writings the four stages of the soul’s ascent, from mental prayer to prayer of quiet to devotion of union to the devotion of ecstasy or rapture. Saint Theresa is often depicted in her own ecstasy, most notably in Rome’s Santa Maria della Vittoria with Bernini’s sculpture *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*.

The Martyrs: Saint Ursula

Michael Haydn memorialized her joining a Benedictine abbey with his *Missa in honorem Sanctae Ursulae*. Likewise, the Martyrs section of *Holy Women* is more extensive in its material. “This is the closest thing I get to a sort of show tune in the whole thing, because it has the entire story in it—its really kind of a little opera within the cantata,” Sirota explains. “Ursula was asked by her father, who was a king, to marry outside of Christianity. And she said I’ll agree to do that, but first I need to travel the world and she loaded up a flotilla full of women—this is the legend anyway—a flotilla full of women sailors and she sailed all over the world for several years. And she was set upon by Attila the Hun and they were all raped and killed. So this is a huge piece of Christian martyrdom.”

The Martyrs: Saint Barbara

If you follow Barbara’s biography, teenage rebellion in the Third Century involved converting to Christianity and changing the architecture of your family bathhouse to include three windows as a symbol of the Holy Trinity and the baptism. “You can’t make this stuff up,” says Sirota, who gives Barbara a coloratura mad scene to correlate with her transgressions—and ultimate murder at her father’s hands.

The Martyrs: Saint Agnes

“I think the saddest one of all is Agnes, who would rather die than marry a heathen,” muses Sirota. Martyred at age 12 or 13, Agnes was a Roman noblewoman who was condemned to death after refusing to marry the Prefect Sempronius’s son. Problem was, as a virgin it was illegal to execute her, so to circumvent that issue, Sempronius dragged her naked through the Roman streets where they wound up at a brothel. There are enough legends surrounding this part of Agnes’s legend to constitute their own cantata. “This is a very small and very sad song that she sings with just oboe and bassoon accompaniment.”

The Mothers: Saint Anne and Saint Elizabeth

As Anne and Elizabeth have a duet in *Holy Women*, it makes sense to speak of them as a duo here. The mother of the Virgin Mary (and, consequentially, Jesus’s grandmother), Saint Anne has several incarnations in multiple religions, including Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam and Christianity. Elizabeth, likewise, is Mary’s cousin and the mother of St. John the Baptist.

The Mothers: The Blessed Virgin Mary

The climax of *Holy Women* is, understandably enough, the Virgin Mary. However, while Sirota notes that the Holy Mother’s portrayal often errs toward “a virgin or an earth mother,” he gives her here “a magnificent where she is a firebrand... It’s not quiet and delicate: Mary is the soldier of Christ, if you will.”

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