



JoAnn Falletta, music director for the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, will conduct "Francis: An Oratorio in Nine Scenes" Oct. 10 and 11. The oratorio brings together music composed by Richard Danielpour and a Franciscan-inspired libretto by Franciscan Sr. Margaret Carney. (Steve J. Sherman)



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As global observances of the Jubilee Year of St. Francis declared by Pope Leo XIV continue, the 800th anniversary of the death of St. Francis of Assisi will be celebrated in a very special way this month: with an original Franciscan oratorio.

When "Francis: An Oratorio in Nine Scenes" is performed Oct. 10 and 11 by the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and a 120-voice chorus, it will bring together classically styled music and the words of St. Francis to share a message of hope that speaks to the challenges of the 21st century.

The commission for the oratorio was funded by multiple Franciscan congregations and provinces, generous donors and the Swan Foundation of Buffalo, New York.

"This is a wonderful way to promote St. Francis' message through music," Sr. Judith Marie Kubicki, provincial minister of the Felician Sisters of North America, told the National Catholic Reporter. Herself a musician, Kubicki was pleased by the enthusiasm among her community for supporting the oratorio.

Kubicki saw joining with numerous other communities to bring the oratorio to the stage a "good investment of our resources," and a way to share the Franciscan message with a broader audience through a unique work of art.

Differing from an opera, an oratorio is a presentation of sacred texts set to music. The performance typically features soloists and chorus on stage in formal dress, without acting, costumes or full staging. "Francis," however, will be performed with special lighting, minimalistic costumes and a narrating angel who will connect aspects of the saint's story for the audience.

Richard Danielpour composed the 75-minute oratorio, bringing his love of music and its creation to this singular subject.

"The music chooses you," he said of what he clearly sees as his calling. "It is so overwhelming an art form."



Inspired by a 2021 trip to Assisi, Richard Danielpour composed "Francis: An Oratorio in Nine Scenes" to reflect both the struggles and joys of the saint. (Courtesy of Richard Danielpour)

Danielpour is a distinguished professor of the Herb Alpert School of Music at UCLA, and a Grammy-award winning composer, whose previous works include the opera "Margaret Garner," created in conjunction with Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, and "The Passion of Yeshua," written in Hebrew and English as a dramatic meditation of Jesus' last day. His pieces have been commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, Vienna Chamber Orchestra and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

Much of the sound of the oratorio was inspired by Danielpour's 2021 visit to Assisi, Italy, where Francis, the founder of the Franciscans was born. Danielpour recalls finding the hillside city "unbelievably strong in its gentleness," which helped him create a musical score that reflects both the struggles and joys of a saint who was profoundly human.

Danielpour asked Franciscan Sr. Margaret Carney to write the libretto for the oratorio.

Carney's reaction included a healthy dose of humor. She saw development of the project as a "very accidental coming together of events," originating in conversations with Danielpour about Pope Francis, to whom the oratorio is dedicated.

Carney is a member of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities and lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The first woman to receive a doctoral degree from the Franciscan University in Rome, she has taught in the Philippines, Canada, Italy, England, Ireland and Japan. Carney served as president of St. Bonaventure University's Franciscan Institute from 2004-2016, previously serving as professor and dean there. She has written several books, including [Light of Assisi: The Story of St. Clare](#).

"Richard was very insistent that I had the knowledge base to do it," Carney said about the project.



Franciscan Sr. Margaret Carney wrote the libretto for the new oratorio, "Francis: An Oratorio in Nine Scenes." (Courtesy of Sisters of St. Francis)

She relied upon the advice of a mutual friend, JoAnn Falletta, music director for the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, who will serve as conductor for the October

performances.

"Richard realized that the only person who could write the libretto was Margaret," Falletta said. "We were not going to allow this [anniversary] to happen and pass by without making something that people can look to as an example."

Falletta continued, "Francis is someone who emerges as a figure of hope. He is someone who eschewed the riches of the world and empowered women. He loved animals. He loved the earth. He was a pacifist."

In the same way Danielpour saw Carney as the only person to write the libretto, he sees Falletta as the right person to present the oratorio on stage. "She's such a pure artist," he said. "I'm just very happy that she's going to be bringing this to life."

Themes that dominate the oratorio are Francis' commitment to peace, solidarity with the poor, and protection of our planet and all creation, according to Carney.

Three soloists will convey these themes, portraying St. Francis, St. Clare and the angel-narrator, which is a speaking role. Actress Claudia Christian will link the scenes together, grateful she isn't required to sing, though coordinating her timing with the music remains a huge part of the performance.

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"This is a project that's filled with deep, deep love," Christian said. When she listened to a workshop performance of the oratorio in early June, she noted, "I was gobsmacked with how beautiful it was." Hearing Danielpour's music come to life, and seeing Carney's reaction, increased her enthusiasm.

"There's a lot of Franciscan genetics going into this libretto," Christian said of the deep knowledge Carney brought to the oratorio. "This is a way to honor her gift to society and the Franciscan world."

Carney, for her part, is grateful for the support the oratorio has received. That it was created by an American composer is huge, she said, and "to have Franciscans of the U.S. collaborating on it, and it being funded by individual gifts from many, many Franciscan communities and provinces is a tribute to the universal gift this will be."

The performances will be recorded for release on the Naxos label, another aspect of the project that Carney finds important. "I'll need to listen to it many times after the live performance to fully take in the message and the music," she said.

Carney said the recording will make the oratorio more widely available for those who cannot be present for the Buffalo performances, and for those who seek to deepen their understanding of the message of both St. Francis and Pope Francis.

Danielpour concurred, adding, "The fact that the oratorio is based on something spiritual and very deep makes it all the more incumbent on me to make sure it really works."

"We're hoping that the music is a kind of a joy for people to see that it is possible for people to be good in the world," Falletta said.

Danielpour, Carney and Falletta all hope that future performances of the oratorio will be scheduled at other venues, and in other countries.

In conjunction with the performances of "Francis (An Oratorio in Nine Scenes)," the [Franciscan Federation](#) is planning a day of reflection and celebration at the Buffalo Academy of the Sacred Heart on Oct. 10.