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POPE JOAN (DIE PÄPSTIN)

[MARCEL BARSOTTI](#)

Rating: ★★★★★ (maximum 5 stars)

Original Review by [Jonathan Broxton](#)

Despite all its successes in other creative arts, German cinema has never made much of a splash on the international scene. Likewise, German film music never reaches much beyond its boundaries to the world stage, despite the efforts of composers like Niki Reiser, Klaus Doldinger, Stefan Zacharias, or its two most famous exports, Hans Zimmer and Klaus Badelt. I haven't reviewed the score for a German film since *Der Untergang* in 2004, but I'm very pleased to add *Pope Joan* by Marcel Barsotti to the (sadly) short list of German soundtracks covered here.

The film, called *Die Päpstin* in its native language, is a historical drama directed by Sönke Wortmann which tells the possibly fictitious story (it has never been proven either way) of a young woman called Joanna of Ingelheim who, while disguised as a man and calling herself Johannus Anglicus, fooled the Catholic church and rose to become Pope. The film stars Johanna Wokalek as Joanna, and features an eclectic multi-national supporting cast that includes David Wenham, Iain Glen, and John Goodman as Pope Sergius. The score for *Pope Joan* is by 46-year old Swiss composer Marcel Barsotti, who has been working in the German film industry since the mid-1990s, and has scored popular projects such as *Das Wunder von Bern* (2003), *Kebab Connection* (2004), *Deutschland: Ein Sommermärchen* (2006) and *Wo ist Fred?* (2006), but had never really made any kind of impression in the wider industry. I had one Barsotti score in my archive, from the 1999 film *Grüne Wüste*, as well as a compilation of various suites and themes which I'm not sure how I acquired, but none of that prepared me for how excellent *Pope Joan* turned out to be.

Despite its ancient setting, *Pope Joan* is not an 'old' sounding score. It's warm and romantic, written for a conventional orchestra with emphasis on strings, piano, woodwinds and choir, and with a modern classical sound which is exceptionally appealing. The main theme, first heard in the opening "Pope Joan", is a lilting piece for elegant strings and soft flutes, which rises to rich orchestral heights during its statement in the cue's second half. Later cues, such as the pretty "Dorstadt", the slightly ostentatious "Pope Sergius", and the longing "I'll Wait for You Here Every Evening at Sunset" restate the main theme to excellent effect, while the recapitulation of the theme with a gorgeous acoustic guitar in "Like a Mustard Seed in the Garden" is especially wonderful.

The score's secondary theme, "Joanna's Theme", is a more carefree, optimistic piece for rolling pianos, tender string chords and a gorgeous cello element which seems to express Joanna's groundbreaking worldview, her convention-challenging destiny, and her sense of freedom within the crushing constraints of the world at the time. There is, naturally, a prominent liturgical element to the score too, most often expressed through choral work. "Anno Domini 887" and "Johannus Anglicus" contain sublime pieces of religious adoration featuring a male voice choir incanting traditional plainsong, while later cues such as "Count Gerold's Pain" and "Sacred Gates" are less formally Catholic, but more generally spiritual, notably through their use of expressive ethnic woodwinds, longing solo violins and angelic vocal work.

There is also a great deal of pure, simple, orchestral beauty, which Barsotti creates through tender piano lines, lush string harmonies, choral crescendos and striking instrumental textures. Cues such as "Letters in the Forest", the lovely "Fulda", the glorious "Ingelheim", the pastoral "I Wanted You As My Wife", and the moody "Silent Wedding" are wonderful, and the way Barsotti highlights certain instrumental textures – cello, recorder, solo violin – at different times in different cues is superb. Possible the score's single highlight cue is the stunning "Pilgrimage to Rome", which begins with a sorrowful-sounding solo violin, but eventually swells into one of those spine-tingling orchestral crescendos, complete with cymbal rings and a beatific chorus, which never fail to give goose-bumps.

Elsewhere, the "Carnival" cue adds a dash of life and effervescence to the score with Renaissance-style dances, ancient woodwinds and peppy, upbeat rhythms that capture the attention. Occasionally, the music takes a sinister turn, most notably during the brooding "The Envoy" the malicious-sounding "Emperor Lothar", and the intimidating "Easter Ceremony", all of which increase the brass presence, add a thrusting percussive element, and even make occasional use of wailing Middle Eastern vocals, bringing a satisfying darkness to the music. The closest the score comes to action music is during the stirring pair "Norman Assault" and "The Battle of Fontenoy", which throb to martial rhythms and bold, bright brass fanfares.

The final five cues – from the powerful "Ink for Shame" through to the glorious "Liber Pontificalis" – never let the standards drop, presenting even more sublime vocal and orchestral writing, a magnificent restatement of the main theme in "Papa Populi", and one utterly glorious celebration of deification in "Coronation" which rises to astonishing dramatic and spiritual heights of choral and orchestral power, before reprising the score's thematic elements in the conclusive "Pope Joan Suite".

I love it when scores for films I don't know, by composers with whose work I am unfamiliar, surprise me by being as good as this. If Pope Joan is an example of the general quality of Marcel Barsotti's work, I have clearly been missing out on a lot of good music. Anyone whose tastes fall within the realm of dramatic/romantic orchestral writing, with strong themes, impressive choral performances and lovely harmonies, will undoubtedly find Pope Joan to be an appealing work. The directness of the writing, the unambiguous emotions, and the clarity and attractiveness of the music in general makes it an approachable score that's easy to appreciate and never outstays its welcome. It certainly appeals to me greatly, and is easily one of the most impressive dramatic scores of 2009.