

Through the Flames Artistic Statement

Through the Flames was born from a desire to give musical voice to the extraordinary men, women, and even children whose unwavering convictions transformed suffering into enduring witness. Though the cycle focuses on six saints—Joan of Arc, Maximilian Kolbe, Little Li, Perpetua, Blessed Miguel Pro, and Maria Goretti—they represent a remarkable diversity of cultures, eras, and life experiences. Despite their many differences, they were united by an unwavering love of Christ and the conviction that no earthly suffering could separate them from Him.

These martyrs span continents, cultures, and nearly two millennia of Christian history. Their stories are as varied as the ages in which they lived, yet each bears witness to the same hope: that suffering, even unto death, is not the end, but the gateway to the fullness of life promised by Christ. Their witness finds its fullest expression in the vision of the Book of Revelation: *“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”* This vision forms the spiritual heart of the cycle, illuminating each individual story within a hope that transcends history itself.

The title *Through the Flames* is drawn from the opening movement portraying the martyrdom of Saint Joan of Arc, whose earthly witness ended in literal flames. Yet the title speaks more broadly to the Christian understanding that faith is refined through trial. Scripture compares faith to gold tested in fire; for many of the saints, that image became a lived reality. The flames that sought to destroy instead became the passage through which they entered eternal glory.

The decision to compose the work for soprano and organ arose naturally from the collaboration between composer Samuel Backman, an organist, and poet and soprano Elena Zolnick, whose operatic artistry helped shape the dramatic vision of the cycle. Together, we sought to create a work embracing the full emotional spectrum of these extraordinary lives. Moments of quiet contemplation give way to scenes of poignant intensity; mystical reflection stands alongside childlike innocence, exuberant joy, and, at times, stark realism. These are not distant figures preserved behind stained glass, but living men and women whose courage, fear, hope, and triumph continue to speak across the centuries.

Within the rich tradition of the song cycle, works written specifically for soprano and organ remain remarkably uncommon. *Through the Flames* embraces the expressive possibilities of this distinctive pairing. The organ serves not merely as accompaniment but as an equal dramatic partner. Too often confined to stereotypes as a purely ecclesiastical instrument, it reveals itself here as a one-person orchestra, capable of extraordinary breadth of color and expression—from whispered intimacy to overwhelming grandeur. Joined with the expressive range of the soprano voice, it becomes an exceptionally versatile medium through which these stories unfold.

The choice of All Saints' Day for the world premiere is no coincidence. On this feast, the Church celebrates not only the memory of the saints, but their continuing life within the communion of heaven. The cycle therefore traces a journey from earthly witness to heavenly triumph, inviting listeners to contemplate not only the cost of conviction but also the profound joy and abiding hope that made such sacrifice possible.