

FORBES CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS  
**JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY**  
**School of Music**  
*presents*

***Dialogues of the Carmelites***

Music and Libretto by Francis Poulenc

*featuring the JMU Opera Theatre*

By arrangement with Hendon Music, Inc.,  
a Boosey & Hawkes Company

Special orchestral reduction created by Nicholas Greer

Originally commissioned by Wolf Trap Opera Company

Friday-Saturday, February 6-7, 2026 @ 7:30 pm  
Sunday, February 8, 2026 @ 2 pm  
Mainstage Theatre

*Sung in English with English surtitles.*

Three-hour running time, including one  
15-minute intermission

## Director's Note

*Dialogues of the Carmelites* is an opera unlike any other. In fact, it's difficult to call it an opera at all. With no arias or "hit tunes," *Dialogues of the Carmelites* slowly works on its audience, creating an almost meditative experience that transcends normal "entertainment." I say this not to scare you, but to invite you into a different headspace. This is an opera that uses its music and drama to pose the greatest questions we can ask—questions that we often don't take time to consider.

This ritual—almost religious experience—is the main reason that this opera is so important to so many people. In fact, in the world of opera, *Dialogues of the Carmelites* is one of the most beloved pieces we perform.

Written in the 1950s, French composer Francis Poulenc composed this piece as a response to the atrocities of WWII. When it premiered, audiences were surprised that an opera about a group of nuns during the French Revolution was Poulenc's memorial to the horrific events of the 1940s. However, when you dig a little deeper, I think we start to realize why this was the story Poulenc chose to tell...

In this work, we meet a community whose world is crumbling around them. These peaceful, kind women become swept up in wider political and societal change, leading to their unjust execution and the end of the world as they know it. This story is not only specific to the events of the French Revolution, but Europe in the 1940s... and our world today.

So, I invite you to lean forward, and engage with these "dialogues" by asking yourself, "What questions are being explored? Who am I in this scene?" And by the end, I hope you will be profoundly changed as we bravely ask how we live, how we die, how we fall apart, how we come together, and why we must keep singing to the very end.

-Prof. Joshua Borths

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# Synopsis

## Act I

Paris, April 1789. The first signs of the French Revolution are beginning to shake the country. The Marquis de la Force and his son, the Chevalier, are worried about Blanche, the Chevalier's fearful, nervous sister, whose carriage has been held up by a mob on her way home. When Blanche arrives she makes light of the incident, but her anxiety is revealed when a servant's shadow frightens her as she leaves the room. Shaken, she returns to tell her father that she has made up her mind to become a nun.

Weeks later at the Carmelite convent in Compiègne, Blanche is interviewed by Madame de Croissy, the aged and ailing prioress, who makes it clear to Blanche that the convent is a house of prayer, not a refuge. The prioress is touched by Blanche's resolve to embrace her new life.

Blanche and young Sister Constance discuss their fear of death, which Constance claims to have overcome. Blanche admits her envy of her companion's straightforward and easygoing nature. Constance shocks Blanche by telling her that she knows they will both die young and on the same day.

Madame de Croissy is lying on her deathbed, struggling to appear calm. She blesses Blanche and consigns her, as the youngest member of the order, to the care of the loyal Mère Marie. The prioress confesses her fear in the hour of death, then she falls back lifeless.

## Act II

That night in the chapel, Constance and Blanche keep vigil by the prioress's bier. Blanche is overcome by fear and about to run off, when Mère Marie appears. Realizing that Blanche is genuinely afraid she tries to calm her.

Constance hopes that Mère Marie will be the new prioress. She tells Blanche that she wonders why a god-fearing person like Madame de Croissy had to die such an agonizing death. Perhaps, she says, people don't die for themselves but for others. Someone else will be surprised one day to find death easy.

Madame Lidoine has been appointed the new prioress. In the chapter room, she addresses the convent, counseling patience and humility.

## Synopsis (cont'd)

### Intermission

At the convent, a visitor is announced—it is the Chevalier, Blanche's brother, who is about to flee the country. He urges Blanche to leave the convent and return to their father. Blanche replies that her duty is to her sisters.

In the sacristy, the chaplain, forbidden to perform his duties, celebrates his last mass. The nuns discuss the fear that has grabbed the country and Mère Marie wonders if self-sacrifice will be their destiny. Madame Lidoine reminds them that martyrs are not chosen by their own will, only by God's. Knocking is heard and the sounds of an angry crowd. Two Commissioners enter and tell the sisters that they have been expelled from the convent. One of them, speaking quietly to Mère Marie, adds he will do what he can to help them get away safely. One of the sisters gives Blanche a figurine of the Christ Child. When revolutionary cries are heard from outside, Blanche nervously drops the figure, breaking it. She is horrified by this omen.

### Act III

In the devastated chapel, Mère Marie suggests in Madame Lidoine's absence that they all take a vow of martyrdom by unanimous decision. Noting Blanche's reaction, the others suspect she will vote against it. When the secret ballot reveals one dissenter, Constance claims it was she and asks to reverse her vote so the vow can proceed. Blanche, afraid to live or to die, runs away. The sisters are led from the convent.

Blanche is forced to work as a servant in the ransacked mansion of her father, who has been sent to the guillotine. Mère Marie finds her there to take her back to the sisters. On the streets, Blanche learns that the nuns have been arrested.

At the Conciergerie prison, Madame Lidoine joins the sisters in their vow of martyrdom. Constance says that she has dreamed of Blanche's return. A jailer enters and reads the death sentence. Madame Lidoine blesses the sisters. When Mère Marie learns from the chaplain that the nuns will die, she wants to join them, but the chaplain reminds her that it is for God to decide whether or not she will be a martyr.

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## Synopsis (cont'd)

A crowd has gathered on the Place de la Révolution. The Carmelites walk towards the guillotine, led by Madame Lidoine and singing the Salve Regina. With each stroke of the blade, their voices are cut off one by one, finally leaving only Constance. On her way to the scaffold, she sees Blanche step up from the crowd, take up the chant, and follow her to her death.

--Courtesy of The Metropolitan Opera

## Historical Context

The French Revolution was a period of major social upheaval in France that lasted from 1787 to 1799. Though it started with the promotion of noble ideals such as freedom and equality, it quickly derailed into a fight for control of the government. In September 1792, the National Convention, established as a new form of Republican government, abolished the constitutional monarchy that ruled France. King Louis XVI was tried for treason and executed by guillotine in January 1793. Nine months later, Queen Marie Antoinette was tried and executed as well.

These executions marked the beginning of the Reign of Terror. The Committee of Public Safety, set up by the National Convention, gained near total control of France. Their aim was to protect the new French Republic against any enemies that would threaten it. The definition of who was an enemy to the French Republic included anyone who spoke ill of the government, and the Committee of Public Safety believed that strict laws, harsh punishments, and terror were necessary to maintain liberty. These harsh punishments included the liberal use of the guillotine. During the Reign of Terror, at least 300,000 people were arrested as enemies of the Republic; around 10,000 of these people died in prison without a trial, and around 17,000 people were executed.

The Martyrs of Compiègne were among those executed by guillotine. These 16 women were Catholic nuns of the Order of Carmel, known for their seclusion from the wider world to focus on prayer. Their religious activities were deemed suspicious by the Committee of Public Safety, who had outlawed all religious life in 1790, citing the need to dechristianize France to provide a new moral framework for the nascent Republic. The Committee demanded that the Sisters abandon their convent and join public life, but the Sisters refused. They were put on trial with no legal counsel and were deemed enemies of the state. On July 17, 1793, the Carmelites were taken to the guillotine. They sang hymns of praise as they were driven by cart through the streets of Paris and reportedly renewed their religious vows and

## Historical Context (cont'd)

forgave their captors before singing the *Laudate Dominum* as they mounted the scaffold one by one to be executed. The Reign of Terror would end just 10 days after their deaths.

The Carmelites of Compiègne were canonized as saints by Pope Francis on December 18, 2024. Today, these 16 women are recognized for their courage to stand by their beliefs and their devotion to their faith. Today, we remember these women, their bravery, and their sisterhood as we tell their story through Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*.

— Marlow Lewis, Production Dramaturg

## Cast

*In order of vocal appearance*

|   |       |   |
|---|-------|---|
| <b>The Marquis de la Force/2nd Commissioner</b> | ..... | Ian Amos  |
| <b>The Chevalier de la Force/Chaplain</b>       | ..... | Ye Lynn Han   |
| <b>Blanche de la Force</b>                      | ..... | Sydney Murrell  |
| <b>Theirry/M. Jovelinot/Officer</b>             | ..... | Habib Jaafar  |
| <b>Madame de Croissy (Old Prioress)</b>         | ..... | Ziqi Guo  |
| <b>Sister Constance*</b>                        | ..... | Augusta Nafziger<br>Cover: Katy Lange   |
| <b>Mother Marie</b>                             | ..... | Olive Poole   |
| <b>Madame Lidoine (New Prioress)</b>            | ..... | Tanya Corcuer<br>Cover: Uche Agulor   |
| <b>Sister Mathilde</b>                          | ..... | Madeleine Parr  |
| <b>1st Commissioner</b>                         | ..... | Miles Morley-Massado  |
| <b>Mother Jeanne</b>                            | ..... | Ciara Theisz  |
| <b>The Jailer</b>                               | ..... | Ivan Godoy  |
| <b>Sister Anne of the Cross</b>                 | ..... | Emma Jones  |
| <b>Mother Gerald</b>                            | ..... | Emma Corrao   |
| <b>Sister Antoine</b>                           | ..... | Uche Agulor   |
| <b>Sister Felicity</b>                          | ..... | Helen Albiston  |
| <b>Sister Gertrude</b>                          | ..... | Katy Lange  |
| <b>Sister Valentine</b>                         | ..... | Bella Baptiste  |
| <b>Sister Martha</b>                            | ..... | Annea Phillips  |
| <b>Sister St. Charles</b>                       | ..... | Katie Blackwell   |
| <b>Sister Alice</b>                             | ..... | Sydney Ashworth   |
| <b>Revolutionary Chorus</b>                     | ..... | Emma Leudesdorff,<br>Yasmine Acoum, Sarah Damon, Marin March,<br>Abigail Smith, Nina Chen |

## Music Staff

|                                     |                     |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Director of Orchestras</b> ..... | Dr. Kira Omelchenko |
| <b>Conductor</b> .....              | Noelle Singleton    |
| <b>Pianist/Musical Coach</b> .....  | Steven Brancaleone  |

## Production Staff

|   |                           |
|---|---------------------------|
| <b>Stage Director</b> .....             | Prof. Joshua Borths       |
| <b>Stage Manager</b> .....              | Ainsley Jones             |
| <b>Production Coordinator</b> .....     | Michael Giovinco          |
| <b>Lighting Designer</b> .....          | Dr. Emily Becher-McKeever |
| <b>Scenic Designer</b> .....            | Grant Preisser            |
| <b>Costume Designer</b> .....           | Catherine Mason           |
| <b>Wig &amp; Make-Up Designer</b> ..... | Karman Boisset            |
| <b>Production Assistant</b> .....       | Lindsey Hart              |
| <b>Dramaturg/Surtitles</b> .....        | Marlow Lewis              |

## Orchestra

### Flute

Joshua Brancaleone\*  
Vanessa Britto

### Oboe

Darcie Roberge  
(alumni)

### Clarinet

Ian Graff\*  
Jeanette Gilson

### Bassoon

David Kang\*  
Hannah Gerick

### Horn (2)

Gray Smiley\*  
Jake Hix

### Trumpet (2)

Taylor Lowry\*  
Micah Wingfield

### Trombone (1)

Blake Downs\*

### Percussion

Zane Johnson\*  
Rowan Lane

### Keyboard

Steven Brancaleone

### Violin 1

Zike Qi\*  
Felicity Banner

### Violin 2

Johnny Park\*  
Alexandra Goodell

### Viola

Elliot Drew\*  
Sawyer Degregori  
Julia Johnson

### Cello

Danny Postlethwait\*  
Will Hayes

### Bass

Gabriella Bieberich\*  
Jack Choi

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