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Sturm und twang

VocalEssence and Monroe Crossing will merge their distinct styles in a bluegrass mass premiering next weekend.

By Pam Miller, Star Tribune

Bluegrass is mountain music. Its lilting, primitive melodies carry ballads that are sometimes dark and brutal, sometimes sweet and giddy.

The liturgy of the Roman Catholic mass is solemn church music that tells stories of repentance and redemption, of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Can such disparate forms of music meet in a way that doesn't clash and discomfit?

Absolutely, say the folks behind the concert "Bluegrass Harmonies."

Philip Brunelle's VocalEssence Ensemble Singers and the bluegrass-gospel group Monroe Crossing will perform "The World Beloved," a bluegrass mass by two Minnesotans, composer Carol Barnett and librettist Marisha Chamberlain.

The singers and eight instrumentalists also will perform "Psalm Dances" by New Yorker Daniel Godfrey, which sets to music the Psalms as translated by artists from John Milton to Stephen Mitchell.

The bluegrass mass was the brainchild of VocalEssence board member Mike McCarthy, Brunelle said. McCarthy, Brunelle, Barnett and Chamberlain spent months slashing through a thicket of ideas and concerns: How to make the two forms of music sound natural together? How to write a mass that would appeal to a broad audience and be respectful of the past but relevant for these times?

"Carol rose to the challenge and found a way to set choral harmonies in a bluegrass format," said Brunelle. "It's a surprisingly natural blend." Bluegrass and the sacred mass embrace some of the same themes -- sin and redemption, dirge and praise, he said. The mass cries out, "Lord have mercy"; the ballad, "Oh, mercy me."

Barnett said she knew little about bluegrass "except that I liked the banjo." But crossing musical boundaries proved easier than she had expected, she said.

"It is the usual movements of a mass, and interspersed among them are ballads with verses and refrains," she said. "It's very listenable."

Chamberlain was familiar with both bluegrass and the Latin mass, which she grew up with. Her libretto includes stories both ancient and modern -- those of Adam and Eve and the devastation wrought by 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Sorrow and lament are strong in the Kyrie and the interspersed ballads, while joy and praise ring out in other movements -- the Gloria, the Credo and the Benediction.

"I'm interested in the notion of original blessing as opposed to original sin," she said. "Yet, a new liturgy that speaks for us as a people addressing God has to take into account what terrible trouble we are in. I want this to be so compelling that people will sit forward on their chairs. So in the movements, things need to get worse before they get better."

Chamberlain said the elements of bluegrass -- basic melodies and stark stories -- allow "something as complex as our country at war to be brought into a simple story.

"You think of [author] Charles Frazier's soldier [in "Cold Mountain"], of the sacred-harp [shape-note] music it used as the soundtrack for Civil War battle," she said. "Bloodshed is common in ballads, and when you think about it, it is in the story at the center of Christianity -- Christ's passion -- too." "As I wrote, I'd think of the kinds of things that have caused human beings to raise their voices to God," she said. "Frankly, Carol and I both found some ease in writing this. There is something in the daring of it that brought out an adventuresome spirit in us."

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