

Last update: January 20, 2007 – 6:15 PM

Review: 'Bluegrass Mass' amazing

William Randall Beard

Carol Barnett's amazing "The World Beloved: A Bluegrass Mass" was given its world premiere by the VocalEssence Ensemble Singers in collaboration with the bluegrass band Monroe Crossing at Trinity Lutheran Church in Stillwater on Friday night.

This was not an easy partnership. The impulse behind bluegrass is improvisation. It is virtually unheard of for bluegrass musicians to play from scores. Yet Barnett's music was fully notated. But her music was idiomatic enough and the musicians flexible enough that it sounded perfectly natural.

Much of the credit for the success of the piece has to go to librettist Marisha Chamberlain who took the Catholic liturgy and transformed it into a text in the bluegrass tradition. The mass movements were separated by verses of a ballad that told the story of Adam and Eve, but Chamberlain replaced the notion of original sin with that of original blessing and created a work of life-affirming celebration.

Barnett traversed the two idioms quite ingeniously, bringing out the best in both ensembles. The contrasts between the sophisticated classical choral sound and the jubilant bluegrass harmonies were effectively used to make the text come alive. Occasionally, as in the Kyrie, the instrumentalists felt straight jacketed by the complex liturgical forms. But the triumphant Gloria that followed was an exuberant success. Likewise, the Credo, Chamberlain's explication of the traditional text, became a powerful Gospel number. This mass was compelling statement of faith that ended on a note of sublime grace and peace.

In the first half, Monroe Crossing cut loose with a set of their own. Their performances of traditional bluegrass and gospel as well as several original numbers had the audience cheering.

The concert opened with another world premiere, "Psalm Dances" by Daniel S. Godfrey, a serious and thoughtful work for chorus and chamber ensemble. Godfrey has an individual, even quirky voice that uses elements from jazz to atonality to encompass the Psalms' diverse emotions from joy and lament. He made particularly effective use of the percussion. But this was music that engaged the mind more than the heart.

The Ensemble Singers handled Godfrey's complex score effectively, if not with ease. They seemed to be working very hard. In the mass, they sang as if they

had been to the manner born. Director Philip Brunelle was in his element conducting these two works of profound spirituality.

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