

And now, a Bluegrass mass!

by Stephen Black for Vocal Area Network

Posted December 7, 2009



There are several choral works called masses that have become popular in the last fifty years or so that are non-traditional in their approach to setting the Catholic mass. There is the *Missa Criolla* by Ariel Ramirez, which keeps the integrity of the complete Latin texts but utilizes indigenous Argentinian rhythms and instruments. Another example is the *Missa Luba* arranged by Father Guido Haazen, which incorporates traditional Congolese songs and prayers into the composition as well as the Latin texts. A more recent setting of the Latin *Missa Brevis* is Bob Chilcott's *Jazz Mass*, a work written for the New Orleans Children's Chorus with varied jazz rhythms and styles. And now a new work joins this eclectic repertory, *The World Beloved -- A Bluegrass Mass*, by the Minneapolis-based composer Carol Barnett.

The World Beloved -- A Bluegrass Mass was premiered in 2008 by the professional ensemble VocalEssence, conducted by Philip Brunelle and in collaboration with the bluegrass band Monroe Crossing. There are several interesting aspects of the work, not the least of which is the scoring! The accompaniment to the SATB chorus is a traditional five-piece bluegrass band consisting of fiddle, banjo, mandolin, guitar and bass. In the score Barnett indicates sections where the band musicians can also sing with the chorus as they play. This is surely a nod to bluegrass tradition, as nearly all bluegrass musicians are relied on to both sing and play when performing. The treatment of the text is also highly individual. Marisha Chamberlain, a contemporary novelist, poet, playwright and librettist, incorporated the complete *Kyrie*, *Sanctus* and *Agnus dei* texts into the libretto of the work, as well as references to well-known Biblical stories and allusions to country hymns. Musically, the work varies in the degree of bluegrass influence throughout its course. All of the solo ballads have a strong bluegrass character, as do several of the choral movements. The *Sanctus* in particular allows the instrumentalists to display their bluegrass virtuosity in an up-tempo manner, while the chorus sings along with exuberant rhythm. (It should be noted that in some places in the score the instrumental parts are specifically notated, and in other parts the instrumentalists are allowed to improvise in an idiomatic style.) There are movements that are more classical in nature, such as the a cappella *Agnus dei*. Here, and in other sections of the work, Carol Barnett displays a craft cultivated by study with Dominick Argento and Paul Fetler at the University of Minnesota and honed over the years with numerous commissions from leading classical ensembles and soloists around the country. The over-arching character of *The World Beloved* is a skillful blending of classical and bluegrass style, rather than an alternation or juxtaposition of the two idioms.

In the composer's own words, "To bring the solemnity of the classical-based Mass together with the down-home sparkle of bluegrass -- now there's an assignment. My highest hope is that listeners coming from one tradition -- and perhaps dubious about the other, might discover something new and wonderful in the combination, as I have. Composing music for *The World Beloved* has given me the chance to write cheery sacred music -- all too rare in a medium rife with staid and even lugubrious settings. It's brought me back to memories of music heard while visiting my grandparents: country music with a church flavor that told stories and came out of a scratchy old

record player. Grandma would not have allowed dancing, but under the table I tapped my toes."

Central City Chorus, conducted by Stephen Black, presents the New York City premiere of *The World Beloved -- A Bluegrass Mass* on Saturday, December 12, at 8:00 PM. Carol Barnett, the composer, will be the honored guest for the concert, at St. Joseph's Church Yorkville, 404 East 87th Street (between First and York Avenues), Manhattan. Also on the concert is *A Ceremony of Carols* by Benjamin Britten, and *Wedding Chorus* by Ralph Vaughn Williams. For more information please see our concert listing here on this website.

To listen to an excerpt from *The World Beloved -- A Bluegrass Mass*, click [here](#).

Stephen Black directs the Central City Chorus.

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