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CD REVIEWS

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CLASSICAL

Carol Barnett, "The World Beloved: A Bluegrass Mass," VocalEssence Ensemble Singers and Monroe Crossing, directed by Philip Brunelle (Clarion)

Barnett manages to honor both the classical choral tradition and the improvisatory impulse of bluegrass music in her contemporary rendition of the mass. Poet Marisha Chamberlain creates lyrics giving each of the sections of the Catholic liturgy (Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, etc.) a contemporary interpretation. She also intersperses verses of a bluegrass ballad elucidating a joyful spirituality. In the performances of the VocalEssence Ensemble Singers and the bluegrass band Monroe Crossing, both traditions are in good hands, with formality and jubilation well balanced in this life-affirming celebration.

The second half of the CD features the Ensemble Singers in more familiar repertoire: 10 selections by composers acknowledged by the National Endowment for the Arts in its choral initiative. Works by Ned Rorem and William Bolcom rub elbows with such local luminaries as Libby Larsen, Stephen Paulus, Aaron Jay Kernis and Randall Thompson. It's hard to imagine a more idiomatic performance of this survey of contemporary choral masters. 5313

WILLIAM RANDALL BEARD