



Monroe Crossing

Soprano, Tenor, Alto ... Banjo!

When two different musical worlds collide, you can expect friction ... and perhaps, creative energy that impacts everyone involved in the project: the composer, the poet, the performers, and most of all, the audience. That's exactly the kind of experience the Minnesota-based chorus **VocalEssence** provided in the world premiere of "The World Beloved: A Bluegrass Mass" by **Carol Barnett**.

By *Katryn Conlin*

This collaboration with the bluegrass band **Monroe Crossing** attracted an audience that wouldn't ordinarily turn out for a choral world premiere. And the classical music audience was thrilled by the intense drive of the band's vocal and instrument playing, roaring its approval in tones not often heard in the concert hall. There were two performances, January 19, 2007, at Trinity Lutheran Church in Stillwater, Minnesota, and January 20 at Ted Mann Concert Hall in Minneapolis.

Having frequently appeared on *A Prairie Home Companion*, conductor **Philip Brunelle** and the VocalEssence Ensemble Singers were already familiar with bluegrass, folk and country music, but this was a completely new concept: a major classical music work composed specifically for chorus with bluegrass ensemble.

As far as VocalEssence Artistic Director Brunelle knows, this collaboration marked a first. "Certainly, bluegrass groups and choruses have worked together on many occasions, but what we are putting together reaches far beyond the comfort zones of both the classical and the bluegrass musicians involved," he said.

The project was first conceived about six years ago when **Mike McCarthy**, a bluegrass bass player and a choral music aficionado himself, ran into composer Carol Barnett after a concert at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis. He asked her if she'd be interested in writing something for bluegrass band and chorus.

"We kept talking about the idea with Philip Brunelle, and finally we came up with a concept—a bluegrass Mass," said Carol. For a choral music piece she naturally required a text and brought playwright/author **Marisha Chamberlain** on board to write the libretto. Marisha crafted poetic interpretations of the parts of the Mass—the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei, tied together by a lovely ballad text—and gave the work the title "The World Beloved."

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As Marisha worked on the libretto, Carol started learning about bluegrass, admitting, "I really hadn't had much exposure to it before, but I knew that I liked the banjo." She attended several Monroe Crossing concerts and delved deep into a collection of CDs supplied by McCarthy — mostly Seldom Scene, Bill Monroe and Earl Scruggs.

With Marisha's completed libretto in hand, Carol set to work composing the music. Of course, she drafted the music in standard musical notation, which proved quite challenging for the bluegrass band as they began rehearsals.

"We frequently play bluegrass at church services, in fact, that's pretty much what we expected when we agreed to work with VocalEssence; a bunch of nice Gospel songs in the bluegrass tradition," explained Monroe Crossing bass player **Mark Anderson**. "Instead, what we received was a true Mass in the traditional classical sense. There were constant time shifts between 2/2, 3/4, and 5/4 and the tempo and key shifted frequently."

Guitarist **Art Blackburn** pointed out, "One thing people should know is that it's not a bluegrass Mass sung by a chorus. It's more like classical music played on bluegrass instruments."

Mark said that fiddler/vocalist **Lisa Fuglie** was the only member of the band with the classical music background needed to read the music. "The rest of the band used the sheet music to facilitate learning the piece by ear. We had the copyist make midi files for us and we listened to them, and we tabbed out our parts. We never really expected to find ourselves in front of a conductor, playing with music stands!"

Lisa was confident that the combination of classical and bluegrass would work. "It's just gorgeous. Some parts are more classical and some of it definitely has more of an Appalachian feel; it reminds me of Copland's *Appalachian Spring* or *Rodeo*, where he adapted folk and fiddle tunes for orchestra," she said. "Carol has listened to a lot of bluegrass music and it's really influenced her. You can hear how some of her melodies are derived from bluegrass scales. In places you'll find the crooked timing and extra beats just like you might find in bluegrass music."

The world premiere performances of "The World Beloved" in January were received extremely well as the audience leaped to its feet and gave the work a heartfelt standing ovation. The critics were also impressed. Minneapolis *Star Tribune* critic William Randall Beard wrote, "The impulse behind bluegrass is improvisation. It is virtually unheard of for bluegrass musicians

to play from scores, yet Barnett's music was idiomatic enough and the musicians flexible enough that it sounded perfectly natural 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."

In the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, Rob Hubbard commented, "Somewhat surprisingly, the Mass was most successful when at its simplest: when fiddler Lisa Fuglie sang soft ballads that bridged the traditional parts of the Mass. While the 'Gloria' was aptly celebratory (and was probably the best blend of choir and band), this Mass was most engrossing when stripped down to its contemplative core, memorably when Fuglie reprised its opening in an *a cappella* finale."

Often the mark of whether a new work is successful is whether it will be performed again. Conductor **Dale Warland** attended the world premiere and immediately booked Monroe Crossing to perform "The World Beloved" in Cincinnati in May of 2007. VocalEssence and Monroe Crossing will reprise the concert in Appleton, Wisconsin, on tour during their 2007-2008 season.



Marisha Chamberlain (left) and Carol Barnett

— **Katryn Conlin** does marketing and communications work for VocalEssence by day and performs with several bluegrass bands in her free time ♦

For more information on future VocalEssence concerts and events, visit: www.vocalescence.org