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## The World Beloved: A Bluegrass Mass

5 out of 5 stars

Modernist, intelligent and profoundly moving, May 1, 2008

By Richard Threadgall (University of Tennessee, Knoxville)

Although the sentiments of the text are markedly politically and socially liberal--exponentially Vatican-II, even to the point that one could imagine this being played in a unitarian universalist meeting--the mass itself has so much to speak for it that I am rather intimidated by the task.

The bluegrass idiom is not a domineering force in the music: It has been wholly internalized and classicized, much the same way Moeran and Williams internalized and classicized the idiom of British folk music in their pastoral work. What could have so easily manifested as a gimmick is instead unflaggingly surprising and incisively intelligent: Barnett's score is utterly modernist in its handling of expectation and satisfaction, administering the familiar movements of American folk music in ways that underscore both the intellectuality of post-Romantic tonal composition as well as delivering a deeply affective textual and musical package. The first time I listened to this album in the privacy of my home I was brought almost to tears upwards of four times--freakish, considering my disposition.

The form and content of the mass, though modernized and treated with great liberty, is completely faithful to both the formal outline of the classical mass as well as the theological ideas it carries except in the case of the Credo, which has been replaced by an inappropriate (but beautiful) meditation on labor and paradise. Undercutting the affirmation of faith in an indivisible trinity reduces the very real emotional impact of the ballad which divides the mass into its canonical sections--a theological point which I raise as a non-religious person, and which I doubt will be of concern to most listeners. Other than the Credo, the faithful inventiveness of the text is a source of delight.

The high point of the Mass is, I think, without doubt the Kyrie, a show-stopping and sophisticated handling of folk idiom in a modernist context. The Sanctus is another real pleasure, although Barnett's score is far less complicated; what it temporarily lacks in sophistication (the folk idiom is not commented on or exploited by her setting, but feels taken for granted) it makes up in joyful energy: It is the most exuberant, sincere and personally moving piece of sacred music I have heard.

Purchase the album for the Mass--the choral pieces tacked onto the end are handsomely executed but nothing to compare with the feature event.

I simply cannot praise this album highly enough.