

A Latin Latin Mass Missa Latina "Pro Pace"

by Roberto Sierra;

The Canticum Novum Singers conducted by Harold Rosenbaum,

May 15, 1916, Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College

By Barry O'Neal

One of the striking features of the New York Concert Scene is the large number of fine amateur and professional choruses that enrich our musical life. From long established groups like the Oratorio Society of New York, the New York Choral Artists, the St. Cecilia Chorus and the Canterbury Choral Society, which tend to tackle the large-scaled classics of the chorus and orchestra repertory, to more select and adventurous groups such as the New Amsterdam Singers and Amor Artists, there is a breadth of options for lovers of the choral art. In addition there are many superb church choirs such as the St. Thomas Choir of Men and Boys and the Trinity Church Choir that often venture beyond traditional church music. The Trinity Church Choir in particular, under its director Julian Wachner, has presented concert series' devoted to Britten, 15 | NEW MUSIC CONNOISSEUR Stravinsky and Ginastera, and last year participated in a monumental concert devoted to the Ives' Symphony No. 4 and Ginastera's rarely heard Tubae ad Passionem Gregorianam. One of the best of the professional groups is The Virtuoso Singers. Under its director, Harold Rosenbaum, it has specialized in fine performances of new and especially American choral music. Members of that group combined forces with The Canticum Novum Singers, Mr. Rosenbaum's amateur chorus, soloists Sharla Nafziger, soprano and Daniel Teadt, baritone, pianists Blair McMillen and Steven Beck, and five of New York's top percussionists to present the premiere of a new version for chorus, soloists, two pianos, timpani and percussion of Roberto Sierra's Missa Latina "Pro Pacem" on May 15, at the Kaye Playhouse. Originally commissioned by the National Symphony of Washington, DC and first performed by them in 2006 as a work for soloists, chorus and orchestra, the pun of the title is borne out by the mostly Latin text in which the mass is sung and the persistent use of Latin American rhythms and instrumental sounds, particularly from marimba, maracas, claves and drums.

Missa Latina, which lasts nearly an hour and twenty minutes, uses the standard liturgical mass texts (the Ordinary consisting of Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei), but bookends them with two additional prayers from the Liber Usualis, the Introit ("Da Pacem") and a verse added to the Agnus Dei ("Pacem relinquo vobis") which uses celebrated words adapted from St. John's gospel (in English, "My peace I leave with you: my peace I give you."). Along with an added Offertorium ("Rogate quae ad pacem..."), inserted after the Credo, these additions are designed to make clear the purpose of this mass as a plea for peace.

Roberto Sierra may have bitten off more than he could chew in this sprawling, intermittently engaging work. But there is still much to admire in the choral, solo and instrumental writing. Unfortunately, the composer's cause was not altogether well served by this performance, with the chorus (33 voices), much too small for the scale of the work. Twice or even three times as many voices would have made a better balance with the two pianos and the large percussion array, stationed in front of the chorus.

The piece began with a gentle setting of the "Da Pacem" text for solo soprano, a radiant, high flying Ms. Nafziger, with subdued chorus and lovely, florid piano writing that had an almost middle eastern flavor: Villa Lobos with a Levantine accent. The "Amen" was especially striking, with the soloist rising from her lowest register to her gleaming top, followed by a full outburst from the chorus gradually dying away.

The Kyrie was also quite effective, with the two soloists joining the somewhat stern chorus with the lively sounds of marimba, claves and maracas adding a pronounced Latin flavor. Little distinction was made between the “Kyrie” and “Christe” lines of text, however.

The problems began to surface with the two longest parts of the ordinary, the Gloria and Credo. In both of these sections there is admittedly a surfeit of text. The standard approach (c.f.: Beethoven, *Missa Solemnis*, Bach, *Mass in B Minor*, or any Mozart or Haydn mass), is to break down the text into manageable sections and alternate intimate solo and/or duet writing with grand or solemn sections for the full choral ensemble.

Sierra paid lip service to this tradition in his notes, but often blurred the distinction between solo and choral sections by having subdued choral writing accompanying the soloists or inserting solo outbursts into choruses, and by failing to use tempo changes to delineate the changes in the text. His approach worked best in the Gloria where, for example, the two soloists in the slower “*Qui tollis peccata mundi...*” were accompanied by a florid piano part. This made for a fine contrast with the lively, swinging choral and percussion entry at “*Quoniam Tu solus Sanctus.*” Unfortunately however, this section seemed to go on for too long, and once the soloists joined in at “*Gloria Dei Patris*”, the musical material became less interesting.

The problem persisted and was amplified in the Credo, despite an original approach to the opening lines (“*Credo in unum Deum...*”), with loud pianos and percussion and stentorian soloists answered by a soft, mystical choral response. The sections usually highlighted (“*Et incarnatus est...*” and “*Crucifixus*”) were given some prominence, the former mostly for baritone, with too much piano noodling, but the stormy “*Crucifixus*” would work better if the musical ideas had more distinction. For the most part the rest of the Credo was through composed and just muddled along. The most effective touch came at the end where the lively “*Et vitam venturi*” (c.f.: Beethoven’s mad fugue with its scarily high notes for the sopranos) led to a quiet ending with melismatic solos and quiet, simple piano accompaniment.

The *Offertorium* began with a powerful, clamorous instrumental section. When the baritone entered in a reflective mood, the piano accompaniment was again quite florid and full of Latin American harmonic touches and syncopations. But once again overextension marred the ending “*Alleluia*,” with its baritone solo lead and spirited piano and percussion riffs.

The final two movements of the mass, *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*, by being inherently less discursive lend themselves to the colorful, individual treatment Mr. Sierra offered. The *Agnus Dei* began with a high-spirited chorus in full flight. The Latin-flavored treatment of the “*Pleni sunt caeli et terra Gloria tua*” was infectious and a ravishing solo soprano setting of the “*Benedictus*” was impressed upon our hearts by Ms. Nafziger. The repeat of the “*Hosanna in excelsis*” had the same nice lilt as the original statement of the text and segued into the opening of the “*Agnus Dei.*” Unfortunately the baritone solo’s florid style seemed inappropriate to this prayerful text and the choral writing was marred by unnecessarily melodramatic touches. All went well at the end of the movement with a beautiful soprano solo with gentle choral underlay for the interpolated text (“*Pacem relinquo vobis...*”), striking, thoughtful and soft, and a pulsating non-traditional “*Alleluia*” with both soloists, full chorus and ensemble in a merengue groove, which made for a bright, invigorating wrap-up.

On the whole, I found the continual sound of the pianos and percussion somewhat wearing even if this version placed the Latin American character of the piece in bolder relief than the original with full orchestra would have.

As indicated earlier, the performance would have benefited from a larger chorus, and the group sounded a bit tentative at times. Apart from an occasional lack of co-ordination between the fine pianists, Mr. Rosenbaum handled his forces extremely well and kept things moving along and the percussionists (Barry Centanni, timpani, Thomas Mulvaney, Eric Borghi, Taylor Goodson and Minhye Ju on the other various percussion instruments) were outstanding, as were the two vocal soloists and the pianists.

This was only my second encounter with Roberto Sierra's music in live performance so far as I can recall (I heard Leon Botstein present the world premiere a year ago of the 25 minute *Cantares*, a tighter, more engaging work for chorus and orchestra with his American Symphony Orchestra). While I found his vocal writing impressive, nothing in *Missa Latina* really moved me. However, despite its longueurs, there was enough in the work to make me curious to hear the original version and some of Mr. Sierra's music in other genres and formats.