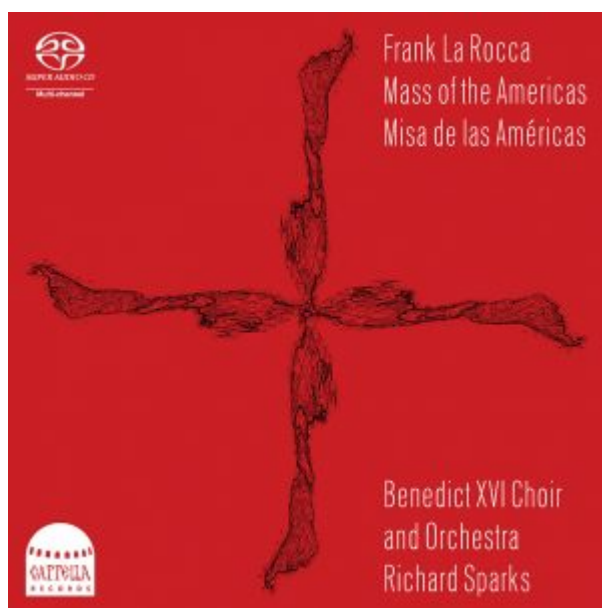


Frank La Rocca – Mass of the Americas

Reviewed by Tobin Sparfeld, USA

The Benedict Sixteen Choir has recently released a recording featuring the world premiere recording of Frank La Rocca's *Mass of the Americas*. Recorded in January 2022, the work was commissioned in 2018 by the Benedict XVI Institute for Sacred Music and Divine Worship to be a Mass incorporating traditional Mexican melodies, in the manner of Renaissance paraphrase Masses, especially the Mexican folk song *La Guadalupana*. This solemn mass is an interesting piece both as a liturgical work as well as in secular performance settings.



American composer Frank La Rocca (b. 1951) set the Mass for choir, organ, percussion, guitar, and string ensemble. While most of the settings are in Latin, there are also portions in Spanish as well as Nahuatl, a native language of central Mexico.

The Benedict Sixteen Choir is a sixteen-voice SATB ensemble in the greater San Francisco Bay area and was founded in recent years by conductor Richard Sparks. Sparks has an impressive career in both professional and academic worlds. He founded Seattle Pro Musica in 1973 and has guest conducted numerous professional ensembles, including the Swedish Radio Choir, Santa Fe Desert Chorale, and the Vocal Arts Ensemble of Cincinnati. His doctoral dissertation won ACDA's Julius Herford Award, and he served as Director of Choral Activities at Pacific Lutheran University and is Professor Emeritus at

the University of North Texas.

The Mass for the Americas brings together popular Hispanic carols and pious songs with high classical musical styles. Preceding the Mass ordinary is *El Cantico del Alba*, a traditional Mexican folk melody simply arranged by La Rocca in the style of a processional. Accompanied first by a single-tone chime, the unison melody branches out into two parts sung by soprano and alto voices. Tenor and bass voices enter in two parts and are accompanied by strings and organ.

La Rocca's composition largely relies on a traditional harmonic language. While there are passages that contain more modern dissonances, they never intrude upon the underlying consonant foundation. The instrumental texture is led by organ and strings, with percussion instruments providing timbral color as opposed to metric reinforcement.

One of the most notable movements of the Mass is the offertory *Ave Maria*. La Rocca sets the text at two different points in the Mass, one in Latin and the other in Nahuatl. The first Latin setting begins gently, but more expressive dissonances build as the text reaches "fructus ventris tui" and later "Jesus." The end features a captivatingly elegant solo by soprano Estelí Gomez.

During the Benedictus, one can hear another Mexican folk melody, *La Guadalupana*, sung over repeated string triplets and a soft marimba tremolo. Snippets of this melody can also be heard in portions of the *Gloria* and *Salve regina*. The *Ave verum corpus* is reminiscent of many other famous choral settings of that text, including William Byrd's famous setting.

At the end of this Mass, there are four Marian antiphons, each belonging to a season of the year. In the *Salve regina*, the chant melody is sung sometimes in unison, sometimes imitated with instrumental accompaniment. At the end, the *La Guadalupana* melody can be found interweaved with the vocal

chant texture.

The Benedict Sixteen Choir should be commended for a strong world premiere recording of an important choral work. The artistry of the professional singers is omnipresent, and the recording allows the choir's diction and melodic phrasing to be clearly heard over the organ, string, and percussion instruments. The exceptionally detailed album notes by William P. Mahrt should also be mentioned. The Benedict XVI Institute's stated mission is to "open the door of Beauty to God;" this recording represents the fruit of their labor.



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