CD REVIEW: SUGARLOAF MOUNTAIN: AN APPALACHIAN GATHERING

Jeannette Sorrell (hpd, cond); Amanda Powell (s); Ross Hauck (t); Tina Bergmann (hammered dulcimer); Susanna Perry Gilmore (vn); Kathie Stewart (wooden fl); Brian Kay (lt, gtr, banjo, long-necked dulcimer); René Schiffer (vc); Apollo's Fire Baroque O • AVIE 2329 (69:06 Text and Translation)

TRAD. SCOTTISH The Mountains of Rhùm. TRAD. IRISH/APPALACHIAN Farewell to Ireland/Highlander’s Farewell. TRAD. BRITISH/CANADIAN We’ll Rant and We’ll Roar. TRAD. BRITISH/APPALACHIAN The Cruel Sister (Child Ballad No. 10). Nottamun Town. The Fox Went Out on a Chilly Night. Once I Had a Sweetheart. TRAD. IRISH Se Fath Mo Buart Ha/The Butterfly/Barney Brallaghan. TRAD. SCOTS/APPALACHIAN Black is the Color of My True Love’s Hair. NILES/TRAD. APPALACHIAN/TRAD. SCOTTISH I Wonder As I Wander/The Gravel Walk/Over the Isles to America. FOSTER/TRAD. IRISH Oh Susanna!/Pretty Peg/Far From Home. TRAD. APPALACHIAN Pretty Betty Martin/Katy Did/Red Rockin’ Chair. ROOT/SPIRITUAL Just Before the Battle, Mother/Go March Along. KENTUCKY FIDDLE TUNE Glory in the Meeting House. SPIRITUAL Oh Mary, Don’t You Weep. J. SORRELL Sugarloaf Mountain

Back in 35:2 I had the distinct pleasure of reviewing the predecessor to this release, Come to the River, and so I jumped with alacrity upon the opportunity to audition its successor and conduct the associated interview. As with the earlier release, the contents of this disc are a mixture of vocal/instrumental and purely instrumental works, intelligently organized into textually thematic groups, here depicting Celtic emigration to North America and facets of the new lives established there. “Prologue” and “Crossing to the New World” features laments of farewell to the ancestral homeland, and “Dark Mountain Home” a set of ballads—some cheerily nonsensical, others horrifically grim, in content—that the migrants brought with them. “Cornshuck Party” (with a wonderfully fresh rendition of the old chestnut Oh Susanna!), “Love & Loss,” and “Glory on the Mountain” explore various facets of community life in the Appalachians—festal gatherings, romance and death, and religious revivalism. Finally, Sorrell’s simple but touching eponymous lyric for this disc under the heading of “Appalachian Home” brings the cycle full circle, as an immigrant invites her family and sweetheart likewise to make the ocean voyage and find a new home with her in a fair land. The musical forms are equally varied, featuring Medieval folk tunes, jigs and reels, sea shanties, minstrel songs, and shape-note and black gospel hymns. If the variety of instruments employed this time—fiddle, cello, banjo, long-necked and hammered dulcimers, and harpsichord—to support the voices is somewhat less wide-ranging than in the previous release, there is no lack of color.

In previously describing the performances in Come to the River as “wonderfully exuberant,” I noted as an observation (not a criticism) that they were “occasionally just a tad more formally stylized than one would encounter from non-classically trained folk musicians.” With a few more years’ immersion in this repertoire, even that trace of formality has gone by the board. The members of Apollo’s Fire are now truly to the manner born, exuding utter authenticity, contagious kinetic energy, and a totally free-wheeling spirit to the nth degree while shedding not a whit of their phenomenal technical polish, exemplifying the kind of art that conceals art. And, as before, I am again reminded of the essential vitality of folk music as the foundational basis for all classical music worthy of the name, as opposed to the abstract manipulations of the constituent elements of music (pitch, timbre, rhythm, etc.) pursued in some quarters, artificial exercises that time and again have proven to be sterile dead ends.

As before, all texts are provided in the accompanying booklet, and the recorded sound is up close and vivid. Come to the River was a surprise best seller, topping the classical category in Billboard for two weeks. If there is any justice, this equally worthy release will find the same success. A must-have item; highest recommendation.

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