
The Sorrell Affekt Jeannette Sorrell '90,
the founder of the Baroque orchestra
Apollo's Fire, keeps the flame of period music
burning brightly. By Justin Glanville

I

T WAS 1991, AND JEANNETTE SORRELL '90 WAS driving from Oberlin to Cleveland, feeling more than a little nervous about where she was headed: a job interview for a position as assistant conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra.

Roger Wright, the orchestra's artistic administrator, had called her for the interview after she'd appeared on an international list of

15 up-and-coming conductors.

For a young musician, the job was a plum one—a chance to make her name in the classical music world while working among some of the world's top musicians. But prestige aside, Sorrell needed the job. As a recent graduate of the Oberlin Conservatory's Artist Diploma program, she was “absolutely impoverished,” in her words—living off fast-dwindling prize money from a harpsichord competition she'd won.

To raise the stakes even higher, the interview was with none other than the orchestra's then-music director himself: Christoph von Dohnanyi.

Arriving at Dohnanyi's Shaker Heights home, she sat with Dohnanyi and Wright outside near the pool. Sorrell and Dohnanyi chatted about music for 10 minutes or so. Things seemed to be going well.

Then Dohnanyi uttered words that have remained seared in Sorrell's memory ever since. “He said, ‘Well, my dear, there's really no point in your auditioning, because audiences in Cleveland would never accept a woman conductor,’” Sorrell recalls.

Thudding silence followed. Then Sorrell came back with an equally pointed—and completely spontaneous—reply.

“That's fine, sir,” she told him. “I didn't ask for this job, and I want to work with period instruments anyway.”

Telling the story today, Sorrell pauses and gives a rueful laugh. “At that point, it was kind of like, ‘OK, that's the end of this interview.’”

Wright, as stunned by Dohnanyi's words as Sorrell was herself, pulled her aside on her way out. He apologized, then told her he'd always wanted to see a Baroque orchestra in Cleveland. If she were interested, he said, he'd help her start one.

On the drive back to Oberlin, Sorrell considered her options.

“I was aware that I could have sued,” she says, “because Dohnanyi was basically telling me directly that he wouldn't give me the job because I was a woman. But I wasn't interested in spending my time and energy suing people.”

ROGER MASTROIANNI





She was also aware that as a woman she faced considerable resistance in landing a conducting job with a major symphony orchestra. In a foreshadowing of the Dohnanyi episode, the Houston Symphony Orchestra had told her she “didn’t fit the board’s vision” for an assistant conductorship there for which she’d applied. Male instructors had long railed against her for standing too much like a ballet dancer on the podium, or for being too expressive with her hands and face. One had even thrown his shoe at her to get her to stand more firmly.

It all added up to one message: Be someone else—specifically, someone more conventionally masculine. And Sorrell couldn’t—and didn’t want to—do that.

So she took Wright up on his offer. Within a year she had founded Apollo’s Fire, the Baroque orchestra she’s been conducting and leading ever since. The orchestra celebrates its 25th anniversary this year and, while still based in Cleveland, maintains an increasingly busy touring schedule across the U.S. and abroad.

“Looking back, it turned out to be a valuable lesson in being true to myself,” she says. “It was partly because of those early experiences of rejection that this other path emerged, one that was much closer to who I am.”

AS EXCITING AND AS RIGHT AS IT FELT, ESTABLISHING APOLLO’S FIRE was far from easy. Sorrell, then 26, had grown up in San Francisco and Denver and knew hardly anyone in Cleveland. She was living in Oberlin, 40 miles and worlds apart from the established, monied patrons and foundations who supported Cleveland’s arts organizations.

An early meeting with a mentor from Case Western Reserve University was typical of the initial response she received.

“She said, ‘I think what you’re trying to do is hopeless and impossible,’” Sorrell remembers. “And I said, ‘Well, I’m going to try it anyway. Would you help me?’ And she said, ‘OK.’”

That, Sorrell says, was the key to her progress in those early days: to meet other people’s doubts with her own resolve. It turned out to be a winning formula. She received seed funding from the Cleveland Foundation, and six months later, Apollo’s Fire—its name referencing the Greek god of fire and music—made its debut in a pair of sold-out concerts featuring Mozart’s Requiem.

“She’s so single-minded,” says Oberlin Conservatory Professor Emerita Lisa Crawford, who was Sorrell’s harpsichord instructor and now counts her as a friend. “She sets herself to something, and she’s very sure about her ideas—as a leader and with music, too. It’s what makes her such a convincing performer.”

For her part, Sorrell attributes the group’s immediate success to a combination of good press and people’s natural curiosity about period instruments. Apollo’s Fire musicians play instruments contemporary to the time the pieces were written. Some—lutes, cornettos (curved woodwinds), and sackbuts (relatives of the trombone)—are no longer familiar to contemporary audiences. Others, such as violins and cellos, are strung not with contemporary steel strings but with animal gut strings, which by many accounts produce a rawer, warmer tone.

Most important of all, she says, is the emotionally vivid performance style that has become the group’s trademark. That style is based on the 18th-century concept of *affekt*—the notion that art, through expressive performance, should uplift the emotional states of audiences.

“When you read music writers from the time, *affekt* was a hugely important concept, and I felt other early music groups weren’t focusing on that at all,” Sorrell says. “They were more academic or drier in their style.”



Sorrell and Apollo’s Fire, which has long included a number of other Oberlin alumni since its founding a quarter century ago.

To achieve that emotional uplift, Sorrell seeks out musicians—including a steady stream of Oberlin alumni—who are as expressive as they are technically proficient. She also works with scores for weeks before performances, annotating them with descriptive words and sometimes even emoji-style faces to help musicians find the heart of the music.

“We want to find the rhetorical purpose of every phrase,” she says. “Is it building tension, or is it bringing us down into a contemplative mood? Should this rest be stretched out like a question mark, or is it more of a restful breath?”

The group remains based in Cleveland but also maintains an international touring schedule that has included stops in Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, England, and Portugal. Reviews of its performances and its 25 recorded albums have been almost uniformly laudatory. The *New Yorker* declared that the group “put Cleveland firmly on the period-performance map.” The *London Daily Telegraph* praised a 2014 London appearance as “superlative music-making” and one of the top five classical concerts of the year. The *New York Times* dubbed the group’s presentation last year of Bach’s *St. John Passion* at St. Paul’s Chapel in New York “a resplendent performance” and said the unique staging “proved an effective enhancement of the drama, and a particularly brave one,” since the production was to be repeated in seven very different locations in New York and Cleveland.



Who knew the cutting edge would be found playing compositions and instruments from two-and-a-half centuries ago?

Former instructors now view her as an inspiration. Robert Spano, professor of conducting at the Oberlin Conservatory and music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, worked with Sorrell during her Oberlin days. Reached via email while on tour in the Middle East, he called Sorrell both “virtuosic” and “sensitive.”

“I hope I was able to help Jeannette in her studies at Oberlin, but the real joy is to be able to be inspired and informed by her work today,” he wrote.

ON A SUNNY SPRING DAY IN APRIL, SORRELL RETURNED HOME TO Cleveland Heights after several weeks touring with Apollo’s Fire and serving as guest conductor for the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra in Minnesota.

“Sorry about the dust,” she says, with a smile of greeting. “The last few months I’ve been away about 80 percent of the time.”

The short walk from the front door to the back porch is a compact tour of things she holds most dear. A Bernie Sanders campaign sign perches among thick ivy in her front yard—one of the few still standing even in this ultra-liberal corner of town and a memento of the 15 hours a week she devoted to volunteering for his campaign.

The house’s two front rooms are dominated by period instruments: the

harpichord she bought as a student more than 20 years ago; a sleek, Beethoven-era fortepiano donated by a patron; and shelves of Celtic and Sephardic percussion instruments (Apollo’s Fire has lately been programming early folk music to help connect audiences to their immigrant heritage).

She was preparing, as always, for an upcoming series of concerts, this time a 25th-anniversary festival celebrating the music of Beethoven and Schubert that took place on her home turf in Cleveland in April.

As is so often the case with Apollo’s Fire concerts, several Oberlin graduates joined her on stage. Violinist Edwin Huizinga ’06, who worked with Sorrell when she directed the Oberlin Baroque Ensemble, has played with Apollo’s Fire for several years, commuting to performances from his home in Toronto.

“These pieces have been played a lot, but they’re not being played in this style,” he says. “All the instruments sound completely different. You close your eyes and say, ‘Wow, that was the sound Beethoven heard in his time.’ I think that’s a pretty exciting thing for an audience.”

One of Sorrell’s own professors at Oberlin, Thomas Forrest Kelly, now a professor of music at Harvard, gave several talks as part of the festival. He’ll return to Cleveland and Apollo’s Fire next year, after he retires, as a guest performer in Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo*, one of the first pieces he and Sorrell played together at Oberlin as part of the opera theater program.

“It’s going to be great fun,” Kelly says, speaking by phone from Harvard. “I’ve played in a few shows of hers before. She’s very imaginative but also makes clear exactly what she wants through her gestures.”

Despite all her success as a musician, Sorrell sees herself as a human being first.

“I don’t ever want to be one of those people who can only sit around and talk about music all day,” she says, sitting on a purple-cushioned chair and sipping water with a slice of orange. “What I spend most of my time doing is trying to help people tap into what is universal inside us.”

At present, that’s primarily through music, but Sorrell says she can also envision herself someday serving the same purpose in other ways: becoming an investigative journalist and helping to “take down Monsanto,” for example, or teaching English abroad.

“I still hope I can do some of those things,” she says. “There are so many things apart from music I want to talk about, because that’s how I learn.”

For now, though, she’s quite content helping audiences connect with their humanity through music—and proving, with each sold-out concert, that audiences in Cleveland and beyond have not only accepted, but embraced, a woman conductor. In May it was announced that Sorrell had won the prestigious mid-career artist award from the Cleveland Arts Prize.

With a growing list of conducting credits with large symphony orchestras that might once have deemed her style as too feminine—including the Utah Symphony, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, and the New World Symphony in Miami—she’s become something of a role model for young women conductors who still face an uphill battle in securing leadership positions with orchestras.

“Women who are studying conducting sometimes come up to me after concerts and tell me it’s helpful to see me up there,” she says. “And what I always tell them is just to be themselves, because that’s what I did. Instead of trying to act more like a man and less of a ballet dancer on the podium, I said, ‘The heck with this. I’m just going to start my own group and be myself.’” ■

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