



NORTH AMERICAN FOCUS

Fire starters

Cleveland's early music ensemble Apollo's Fire – led by harpsichord player Jeannette Sorrell – is poised to set Europe alight, as *Andrew Stewart* discovers

Even the most credulous listener instinctively knows when truth and integrity are measured and served short by musicians. Jeannette Sorrell and Apollo's Fire could never be accused of diluting either. Their work is distinguished not simply by its historical awareness or even because they favour performing on period instruments. The partnership's seductive vision of musical authenticity is guided by a shared commitment to honest emotional expression, rooted in period style yet never its slave. Among the notably small club of North American period instrument bands, Apollo's Fire has forged a vibrant, life-affirming approach to the re-making of early music.

European ears, steeped in the ways of historically informed performance practice, have begun to appreciate the blend of intellect and artistry concocted by harpsichordist Sorrell and her colleagues. The group's international reach and reputation are set to grow thanks to a new record distribution deal with Avie Records and the advent of its first European tour. The present demands of operating in a tough home market, where box-office income and audience fidelity can make or break arts businesses, are also working in favour of Apollo's Fire.

The story of how Apollo's Fire came to be reads like a tale from a bygone age, one in which period instrument players were dismissed as screwballs and endemic misogyny blighted the cause of women musicians. Those prejudices were still alive, if not entirely well, in 1991 when Sorrell returned to her native Ohio from a postgraduate year's study with Baroque specialist Gustav Leonhardt in the Netherlands. The young performer's attitudes to communicating early music's expressive richness, forever influenced by the eloquent Dutchman, had been complemented by summer lessons in the Tanglewood conducting



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classes of Kurt Sanderling, Roger Norrington and Leonard Bernstein.

Sorrell's name surfaced on a list of 15 outstanding young US conductors and caught the interest of Roger Wright, then artistic administrator of the Cleveland Orchestra, now controller of BBC Radio 3 and director of the BBC Proms. He was on a mission to find an assistant conductor to work with the Cleveland Orchestra's music director, Christoph von Dohnányi. When the German maestro rejected a clutch of podium prospects, Wright called Sorrell and invited her to interview for the job. 'I think the idea was that if Dohnányi liked me, the orchestra would find time for my audition,' she recalls when we meet in London this summer.

'Everyone who had auditioned before me was male. In essence, Dohnányi told me the audience in Cleveland would

never accept a woman as his assistant. I replied that this was fine: I never applied for the job and wanted to work with period instruments. That was the end of the interview!' The proto-history of Apollo's Fire, however, continued to unfold thanks to Wright. He appreciated her cultured musicianship, sensing innate leadership qualities and supplied her with introductions to the Cleveland Foundation, all-important benefactors for community projects in Ohio city and its surroundings.

Wright, eager to add a Baroque band to Cleveland's cultural landscape, clearly backed the right woman to convert his wish into reality. 'Roger didn't know me at all but genuinely wanted to help,' says Jeannette Sorrell. 'He knew my real love was working with period instruments and not with a modern orchestra.' Wright's enthusiastic support, she adds, brought Apollo's Fire to life. That it survived his return to Europe and start-up tests to reach maturity as a world-class outfit is down to the ensemble's quality team of period performance specialists and Sorrell's tireless devotion to their cause. Interest in



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EARLY RISERS: Apollo's Fire (above) and founder Jeannette Sorrell (below)

Apollo's Fire soon spread among a regional audience receptive to early music. Their collective interest has been fuelled by Sorrell's imaginative programming and sustained by a sense of civic pride in what the group has achieved since its start in June 1992.

'We made our debut outside Cleveland in the country, in a wealthy area well stocked by aristocratic English immigrants,' says Sorrell. 'We continued playing to capacity audiences in churches and gained wonderful support from the local press. I'm sure that there are other cities in America where Apollo's Fire would have gone unnoticed and died off. But Cleveland, thanks to George Szell's long tenure as the orchestra's music director, has been well groomed to support classical music at a very high level.'

The rarity of US period instrument ensembles, highlighted in September with the demise of the New York Collegium, underscores Sorrell's analysis of Cleveland's boon to Apollo's Fire. The group set firm artistic and financial foundations during the 1990s, supporting a model of work that yields multiple performances of five programmes and a national tour each season. Private donations, income from co-promotions and buoyant subscription ticket sales have so far provided Apollo's Fire with shelter from the worst economic storms to strike Ohio since the Great Depression. 'Since the US economy crashed in 2008, our foundation funding has almost disappeared,' says Sorrell. 'But we've been able to pass the point where our earned income exceeds our revenue from contributed income, which is pretty unusual for an arts organisation. I've found the economic crisis to be a positive challenge. We have to earn our way in the world – and why not?'

Sorrell cites the case of Monteverdi's *Vespers*, performed 11 times by Apollo's Fire in October at home and on tour nationwide. The ambitious project, conceived to mark the work's 400th anniversary, took to the road with a big professional chorus, large ensemble and weighty budget. 'Universities, cathedrals and churches from Toledo to Santa Fe worked hard to find the money for it, which shows how much this music matters to them and their audiences,' she says. 'It wasn't easy, but these presenters each managed to raise \$20,000 and we made a small profit from the tour. If the economic climate is such that there's no guaranteed income, it means your work has to be good. I think that reality has been important for us: our concerts have to be damned



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good if we want audiences to return and presenters to book us.'

Sorrell notes that Apollo's Fire, in artistic terms, was fit to make its European debut by its 10th birthday. But it took another eight years to raise sufficient funds to underwrite the ensemble's inaugural transatlantic trip, a worthwhile wait given the international tour's scope and profile. The enterprise rolls out on 21 November with a date in New York City's 'Music Before 1800' series, shifts to Spain and the Netherlands for four more performances, and concludes on 30 November with a concert at London's Wigmore Hall. Her repertoire choices, Handel's solo cantata *Armida abbandonata* and extrovert instrumental works by Rameau, Tartini and Vivaldi among them, have been guided by the overarching themes of 'Fire and Folly'. 'Growing up in the

US,' she says, 'I became aware that the early music field here often follows the academic idea that a programme should contain works from one particular province of one particular country all written within the span of five years. I was never convinced that this was the best way to present Baroque music to a mainstream audience.'

Advanced ticket sales for the Fire and Folly tour suggest that Sorrell and Apollo's Fire are poised to raise their

international stock. The ensemble's discography, practically unknown outside the US, likewise stands to attract fresh ears thanks to a repackaging and distribution deal with UK-based Avie Records. The arrangement has seen the global release of three albums devoted to Mozart's Symphony No. 40 coupled with ballet music from *Idomeneo*, Bach's

Brandenburgs and other concertos, and Monteverdi's *Vespers* of 1610. The issue of *Vivaldi and Friends*, complete with Sorrell's arrangement for harpsichord and strings of 'Summer' from *The Four Seasons*, has been timed to coincide with the European arrival of Apollo's Fire.

Despite present economic challenges and gloomy financial forecasts, Sorrell believes that Apollo's Fire has a bright future. She speaks with persuasive optimism about the excellence of her ensemble's players and the rise of accomplished early music performers in the US. 'The talent pool has deepened hugely since the early 1990s. I work closely with students coming out of Oberlin [Conservatory of Music] and we now have an apprentice programme to encourage the best among them. Many young players started on Baroque instruments at 16, so they're comfortable with them by the time they leave college six years later. Most of my generation only began playing Baroque instruments at 22!'

Asked to compare Apollo's Fire with other US period instrument bands, Sorrell pauses before saying that her ensemble's sound and spirit are unlike those of bands such as Boston Baroque and Philharmonia Baroque. The nearest equivalent, she says, rests in Europe with the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra. 'It will be interesting to discover what European audiences think of us. We have been ready for this trip for years and can't wait to bring our performance style across the Atlantic. Apollo's Fire is a collection of artists who believe passionately that our job is to communicate – to take the listeners with us on an emotional journey. If, after two hours, the audience is moved to tears, or joy, or laughter, or prayer, then we know we've done a good night's work.' ■