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Apollo’s Fire
THE USA’S HOTTEST BAROQUE BAND IS HEADING OUR WAY

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A GARLAND FOR AMELIA
Composers pay tribute to Britain’s first lady of new music

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Almost 20 years ago, when Roger Wright ran the Cleveland Orchestra, he put in a call to a young conductor. It was the start of story that led to one of the brightest lights of period instrument playing in the United States. Now Apollo's Fire is heading our way. Andrew Stewart talks to director Jeanette Sorrel.

A German maestro's dismissive comment and the energy of a young British arts administrator, linked by good fortune, lit the touch-paper that launched one of North America's finest period instrument ensembles. The saga of how Apollo's Fire entered the world is worth telling, if only to record a strikingly dim chapter in the annals of musical misogyny. But it's the group's subsequent story that counts above all, wherein lies the guiding influence of its music director, Jeanette Sorrell, and the collective spirit of her admirable colleagues.

Their pursuit of musical excellence and adventure has drawn audiences to Apollo's Fire performances in numbers rarely sustained by other early music operations native to the United States. It has also delivered a substantial discography and a stock of radiant reviews that reflect the ensemble's progress since its birth in 1992. European ears have the chance to measure the strength of Apollo's Fire this month when the group makes its first transatlantic tour from 23 to 30 November, a five-date sojourn long in the planning and rich in opportunities to project Sorrell's band at its best. The Cleveland-based ensemble's international reputation likewise stands to grow thanks to a new distribution deal with Avie Records, initially fed by titles made for Canada's Eclectra label and more recently for Koch. Fine recordings of Mozart's Symphony No 40, Bach's Brandenburgs and Monteverdi's Vespers of 1610 have already appeared under the Avie imprint; Vivaldi and Friends, complete with Sorrell's transcription of Summer from The Four Seasons for harpsichord and strings and René Duchifflée's tango-inspired concerto for two violas da gamba, has just been issued to coincide with the ensemble's trip to Europe.

Avie director Melanne Mueller welcomes the extensive international media interest and positive reviews generated by the opening round of Apollo's Fire releases.

'Three individuals, quite independently, contacted me from the States to recommend that we take a look at Apollo's Fire,' recalls Mueller. 'We began to talk and discovered how vibrant they were, both artistically and as an organisation. Their plans to tour internationally appealed to us and we...
could see where we could help put them on the world musical map.

Apollo's Fire, born during the last global recession, has proved a dogged survivor in the latest economic slump. A quick survey of the group's concert archives reveals solid reasons for its appeal to audiences and individual donors, the imaginative nature of Sorrell's programming, her readiness to perform works by big name composers and feeling for creating a sense of event around Apollo's Fire concerts chief among them. The deal, clearly expressed in the ensemble's Fire and Folly tour programme, has always addressed box-office realities without suppressing its desire to explore or readiness to provoke.

Fire and Folly opens with Handel's Italian cantata, Armida abandonata, with British soprano Sophie Daneman as soloist, continues with works by Rameau and Tartini, and includes Sorrell's concerto grosso arrangement of 'La folia' from Vivaldi's Sonata XII.

In short, Jeanette Sorrell's approach to repertoire, popular rather than populist, offers an attractive alternative to weighty early music concept programmes that demand audience indulgence of drab works by obscure mediocrities.

'We could not survive if we offered anything that was less appealing,' Sorrell observes when we meet in London. 'I feel it's healthy because this is how it was in the 18th century: Mozart needed those ticket sales! Occasionally you wish you could put on the Biber Requiem and not need to worry about it. In fact, we've reached the position in Cleveland now where we could put on the Biber Requiem and feel confident that our audience will follow.'

Sorrell says that Apollo's Fire presents around 35 local concerts each season and a further ten-to-15 concerts on annual national tours. She adds that the structure offers much more than marketing focus. 'It's important artistically for the group.

We know our pace of working this way, so there's a shift from the adrenaline of the early performances of any given programme to the relaxed style of the last, with each phase having a particular energy.'

The ensemble's prehistory is bound up with Jeanette Sorrell's postgraduate studies with Gustav Leonhardt in the Netherlands and her experiences as a conducting fellow at the Aspen Festival and of Tanglewood conducting classes with Kurt Sanderling, Roger Norrington and Leonard Bernstein. In 1991 Sorrell's name appeared on a list of North America's finest young conducting talents, which in turn led to a phone call from the Cleveland Orchestra's artistic administrator, Roger Wright, in search of an assistant conductor, invited the 26-year-old musician to interview for the post.

'I thought it was strange that Roger wanted me to interview rather than audition for the job,' she recalls. The unconventional process, it transpired, reflected incumbent music director Christoph von Dohnányi's dissatisfaction with the handful of men who had already consumed the available audition slots. Wright hoped the maestro...
would warm to Sorrell and recommend that
the orchestra find time for her to audition.
"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 really wanted
to work with period instruments. That was
the end of the interview."

The veteran conductor's inglorious
remark, however, prefaced a new chap­
ter in Sorrell's career. Roger Wright set
the scene with a personal introduc­
tion to the Cleve­
land Foundation,
one of America's
largest community
benefactors. Their
start-up funding
enabled Sorrell and
two string playing
colleagues to convene Apollo's Fire for its
"I was very young at the time, and didn't
know anyone in Cleveland," recalls Sor­
rell. "Roger knew my real love was for work­
ing with period instruments. He told me
how he wanted to see a baroque orchestra in
Cleveland and thought I was the person to
do it. He was very generous with his time,
helping me get a Cleveland Foundation
grant and to put together a flotilla of
director. It would never have happened
without him."

Wright, who left his Cleveland job to join
Deutsche Grammophon in Hamburg before
Apollo's Fire gave its first concert and has
since progressed to head Radio 3 and the
BBC Proms, has yet to hear the ensemble
he helped create perform live. "We're really
looking forward to seeing him when we
come to Wigmore Hall," comments Sorrell.

While the ensemble's music director
admits that she had no idea what arts
marketing meant 18 years ago, Apollo's Fire
presented her with a rapid learning experience.
"I was so green in that respect," she notes. "People told me marketing was about
getting people to fill seats, which wasn't all
that helpful!" Sorrell's desire to communi­
cate through music and programming nous
blended neatly with the musicianship of her
Apollo's Fire colleagues to create a potent
selling proposition, one recognised early in
the piece by Cleveland's classical music
audience and signally praised over the years
by influential critic Donald Rosenberg.

Jeanette Sorrell says that her band was
able to evolve naturally in small out-of-town
venues and city churches. "We made our
debut in the country, in a very wealthy area
well stocked by aristocratic English immi-

grants," she recounts. The unhurried proc­
ess, helped by the experience of recording
for Electra in the late 1990s, allowed
Apollo's Fire to develop its trademark
qualities of expressive subtlety, exuberance
and passion, conditions not easy to balance
yet equally rooted in baroque performance
practices. "We continued playing to capacity
audiences in churches and gained wonderful
support from the local press. I'm sure there
are other cities in America where Apollo's
Fire would have gone unnoticed and died
off. But Cleveland, thanks particularly to
George Szell's long tenure with the Cleve­
land Orchestra, has been well groomed to
support classical music at a very high level."

The abiding rarity of North American
period instrument ensembles, highlighted in
September with the official demise of the
New York Collegium, underscores Sorrell's
analysis of Cleveland's boost to Apollo's
Fire. The group set firm artistic and finan­
cial foundations during the 1990s. 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 founda­
tion funding has almost disappeared. But we've been able to pass the point where our
earned income exceeds our revenue from
contributed income, which is pretty unusual
for any 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?"

Jeanette Sorrell cites the case of Mon­
teveddi'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 quatercen­
tenary, took to the road with a substantial
professional chorus, large ensemble and
weighty matching budget. A grant of
$15,000 (£9,400) from the National En­
dowment for the Arts helped prime the
pumps. Individual promoters proved ready
and able to cover core costs, apparently
convinced that their faith in Apollo's Fire
would be repaid at the box office.

"Universities, cathedrals and churches
from Toledo to Santa Fe have worked hard to find
the money for it, which shows just
how much this music
matters to them and
their audiences. It
wasn't easy, but
these presenters
each managed to raise $20,000 and we actu­
ally 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 damn good. I think that reality has
been very important for us: our concerts
have to be damned good if we want audi­
ences to return and presenters to book us."

Apollo's Fire presently comprises spe­
cialist players from North America and Europe,
outstanding youngsters fresh from Cleve­
land's Oberlin Conservatory among them.
Their collective work has been informed
by Sorrell's artistic vision, above all by the
lasting legacy of her studies with Leonhardt.
"Every lesson with him contained perfect
pearls of wisdom," she recalls. "I just drank
up what he had to say. I'm an extrovert
in the way I play and I think he would be
shocked by that. But I believe everything I
understand about music came from my year
with him."

Among North American period instru­
ment ensembles, Apollo's Fire is arguably
the most distinctive in sound and memo­
nable in style. "I don't think we sound any­
thing like Boston Baroque, for example, nor
very much like Nicholas McGegan's
Philharmonia Baroque either, which has
what I would call a 'British' style of playing," Sorrell observes. "We have far more in
common with Freiburg Baroque or some of
the Dutch groups. It will be interesting to
hear what people think of us when we
come to Europe. The musicians and I have
been ready for this for many years and
can't wait to bring our performance style
across the Atlantic."