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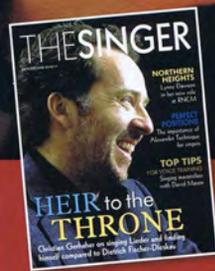
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fortnightly

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

FIRE

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 Eclترا 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 Duchiffre'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 generate 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



Roger Mastroianni

STORM

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 abbandonata*, 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

"Mozart needed those ticket sales!"

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 adrenalin 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



Lighting the blue touch paper: Apollo's Fire

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, preface a new chapter in Sorrell's career. Roger Wright set the scene with a personal introduction to the Cleveland 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 debut performance in June 1992.

'I was very young at the time, and didn't know anyone in Cleveland,' recalls Sorrell. 'Roger knew my real love was for working 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 fledgling board of directors. 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 communicate 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-



Passion:
Jeanette Sorrell

"I've found the economic crisis to be a positive challenge"

grants,' she recounts. The unhurried process, helped by the experience of recording for Eclectra 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 Cleveland 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 boon to Apollo's Fire. The group set firm artistic and financial 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 foundation 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 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 quatercentenary, 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 Endowment 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 actually 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 audiences to return and presenters to book us.'

Apollo's Fire presently comprises specialist players from North America and Europe, outstanding youngsters fresh from Cleveland'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 instrument ensembles, Apollo's Fire is arguably the most distinctive in sound and memorable in style. 'I don't think we sound anything 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.'

GLW