



The impressive growth in the schedule of Cleveland's Apollo's Fire has come from taking the group on the road

Apollo's

By Heidi Waleson

THIS FALL, the Baroque chamber orchestra Apollo's Fire will embark on a seven-stop North American tour, performing Bach's Brandenburg Concertos with 17 players at several big university series, among other venues. At Cal Performances, where they first played in 2011, Apollo's Fire will be one of seven early music attractions this season, including the Montreal-based Les Violons du Roy, with soloist Stephanie Blythe, harpsichordist Davitt Moroney, the Venice Baroque Orchestra with soloist Philippe Jaroussky, Hespèrion XXI, Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, and the Philharmonia Baroque, San Francisco's home Baroque orchestra, performing Handel's *Messiah*. On some

of the series, such as Penn State's Center for the Performing Arts, where they will be making their third appearance in six years, they will be the only early music group this season.

George Trudeau, director of the program at Penn State, calls himself "a big fan" of Apollo's Fire. "I'm particularly proud that we presented them for first time in November 2007; they were not doing much touring in the U.S. at the time," he says. "It's great to see the interest in what they are doing increase, and their reputation grow."

The \$1.4 million, Cleveland-based ensemble, founded and directed by harpsichordist Jeannette Sorrell, has toured since its inception in 1992, but

has been working on increasing its touring presence in the last several years. Recent seasons have featured an autumn U.S. tour and a smaller one in the spring. In 2010, the group made its first European circuit, with four stops in England, the Netherlands, and Spain; the following year, they went to France, Portugal and Spain. A third visit, including some new venues, is scheduled for spring 2014, and an invitation to make their debut on the London Proms in September 2015 will be the centerpiece of yet another European tour. This summer, Apollo's Fire signed with Columbia Artists Management in New York for representation in North and South America, and they anticipate that

touring will increase still further.

Touring is a key strategy to increasing Apollo's Fire's activity. The group does eight weeks of performances in their home market annually. A recording project can add a few days, and touring has represented three to six more weeks in recent years. Like most early music ensembles, Apollo's Fire is made up of itinerant musicians. The majority of the players live in places other than Cleve-

ances at Berkeley, a powerhouse of early music programming, first brought the group in 2011. "They were working with the countertenor Philippe Jaroussky that year," he recalls. "We had been looking to present him, and many colleagues had spoken warmly of Apollo's Fire, so we invited them together. It was a beautiful program, and a stunning performance. There's a distinctiveness to their sound and a lot of energy on stage. It's visceral,

Tours On Fire

land — the concertmaster, Olivier Brault, lives in Montreal, for example, and one of the violinists is the concertmaster of the Bozeman Symphony in Montana—and have multiple jobs. Touring," says Sorrell, "is making Apollo's Fire a larger source of income for our musicians. Our principal violist, who has been with us for 10 years, just moved from Boston to Cleveland because we are her biggest source of income. That was a landmark moment for us."

Over the years, Apollo's Fire has worked with different managements for touring. Most recently, Intermusica in London has been doing their European work, a small California-based agency books one of their U.S. tours, and they handle the rest of the domestic touring themselves. The move to CAMI will change things. "We get so many calls to perform, and the demand was too great to handle on our own," says Kristen Linfante, the group's acting general manager and one of its violinists. "We felt we needed to move to a larger management. We are now talking about several tours per year." Apollo's Fire and the Toronto-based ensemble Tafelmusik are currently the North American early music orchestras with the most regular U.S. touring activity, Trudeau notes. The Montreal group Les Violons du Roy, which plays early music on modern instruments, also tours the U.S. each year.

For presenters, the appeal of Apollo's Fire is a combination of their onstage charisma and their programming. Matias Tarnapolosky, who heads Cal Perform-

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“Touring is hard work, and we have to be in top shape, physically and artistically, to pull it off the way we want to,” Sorrell says. “But it also feels like a great privilege—something we never take for granted. It is a chance to create something magical for people.”



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expressive qualities,” Sorrell says. “We’re focused on communicating the affect of the music to the listeners, making it a shared experience with them. I always encourage the individuality of the players onstage. They have to play blended, but people want to get to know these players as individual artists, not an anonymous group.”

Sorrell usually programs thematically, which, she says, has been important to building the audience in Cleveland. “We play music in a context where mainstream, non-academic listeners can find something to latch onto, to find a window into the music. There might be a theatrical element, or dance, or speaking from stage—something that will help debunk the myth of stuffy, academic music-making that has been associated with early music.” Tour programs are drawn from the Cleveland concerts.

Collaborative projects

At Penn State, Trudeau works to integrate his series’ concerts with the academic programs of the university. Apollo’s Fire’s debut in 2007 was the result of a year-long collaborative initiative with the university’s Arts and Humanities Institute, called Moments of Change, which focused on 1600-1625. The director of the institute that year was a musicologist who was familiar with the group, and the year was the 400th anniversary of Monteverdi’s first opera, *Orfeo*. “They put together a wonderful program of major excerpts from *Orfeo* and other Monteverdi pieces for us,” Trudeau says. “Jeannette Sorrell is always looking for ways to add dramatic flair, and she brought a Baroque dancer.”

Along with the concert, Apollo’s Fire always does some kind of residency activities at Penn State. For the first visit, Sorrell participated in a lecture about how *Orfeo* was a change agent for music, with the director of the Institute of Arts and Humanities, and she and members of the ensemble and gave masterclasses. Each time the ensemble returns, with the Monteverdi *Vespers* in 2010, and the *Brandenburgs* this November, additional residency events are scheduled. “We look for interesting projects that can tie into other aspects of the academy,” Trudeau says. Penn State’s School of

Music has a Baroque ensemble, so “that aesthetic is built into the school,” Trudeau says. “The faculty are keen to have their students coached by great Baroque instrumentalists, and have them bring their expertise to the classroom, to masterclasses. Jeannette has coached the Baroque ensemble.”

Apollo’s Fire expands according to repertoire; its touring size ranges from 12 musicians to 30 for a big work like the Monteverdi *Vespers* or the *St. John Passion*. “Touring 30 people means a higher fee, and this always worried us, but it never seems to be an issue,” says Linfante. “It speaks to the fact that if it’s a program people really want—say, a blockbuster like the *Vespers*—they are willing to pay.” The big university series have larger budgets than the smaller, dedicated early music series which, Sorrell notes, “tend to bring smaller ensembles than us.” University series like Penn State also have resources for collaborative funding—like the Arts & Humanities Institute, or currently, a Mellon grant that is dedicated to having the concerts reach a broader cross-section of the university community through residencies.

Touring fees are structured to cover the expenses of moving everyone around, as well as the management percentage. For the first European trip, however, the Apollo’s Fire board stepped in to make up the difference when one of the group’s two scheduled concerts in Spain was cancelled due to the rickety economy. It was a good investment: the reviews were good, paving the way for future visits. European presenters do not balk at the additional costs required to bring the ensemble over. In general, Sorrell notes, “We get higher fees in Europe than in the U.S.; it’s due to the level of funding and appreciation for arts in Europe.

“We have been somewhat immune to the downturn,” notes Linfante. “We have developed a following. We do a lot of re-engagements. We also have so many different types of programs.” In contrast to the bigger, more recognizable programs like the *Brandenburgs* or the *Vespers*, there are offerings like “Mediterranean Nights,” music from 17th century Italy and Spain, most of it arranged by

Sorrell, and built around soprano Nell Snaidas, an expert singing actress. Sorrell says, “There’s not a composer on the program that would be a household name to a mainstream concertgoer, but it has been really popular. We’ve done more than one tour of it. At the Pittsburgh Renaissance and Baroque Society, they chose us as one of the best concerts of year. With eight or nine people, it’s also more affordable.” Apollo’s Fire has also done well with its crossover programs, like “Come to the River, An Early American Gathering” and “Sacrum Mysterium, a Celtic Christmas Vespers,” both of which have been recorded.

Coordinating tours with recording releases is valuable for the ensemble—several tour performances in conjunction with the release of the “Celtic Christmas” recording last year increased its sales considerably, Linfante says. But the fact that an ensemble has recordings is not necessarily a factor in whether people will buy tickets to the concert. “People can do their research, and having recordings adds credibility for people encountering a group for the first time,” Trudeau says. “However, with the change in the recording industry and how people access music, touring now drives the interest in the recording as opposed to the other way around. People come to performances now not as familiar with artist, and then they want to buy a CD that night. We can provide that opportunity with Apollo’s Fire and Tafelmusik, and that helps to grow their audiences. It keeps them engaged, as they continue listening.”

It all adds up

Apollo’s Fire has seen its Cleveland-based audience grow exponentially over the last several years, and was able to increase the number of Baroque series programs from five to seven in the 2012-13 season. The group plays each program four times, in three different venues (mostly churches of 400-600 seats) in east and west Cleveland, and in Akron, drawing about 1,400 people per program. Some bigger events during their 20th-anniversary season (2011-12) were performed in larger venues, bringing in more ticket buyers, but the group does not have grand local expansion



plans. “We’re limited in our capacity to sell tickets because our regular venues are small,” Linfante says. Though, she adds, “It is nice to play to full houses.” Sorrell says, “I don’t see us ever approaching the kind of season that Tafelmusik has. Cleveland is fairly small, and we don’t have level of government funding that Canada does. It’s not a full time job for the players, but it is interesting that it is becoming the biggest piece of employment for principal players. If budgets increase, I would love to do more classical programming with larger ensembles.”

Any expansion will thus probably come through the increased touring, which has its ups—more work, more income, more fans—and its downs. Sorrell recalls the group’s first trip to Europe as a time of “high excitement and stress.” Several of the players, including Sorrell, had studied in The Netherlands, so they felt comfortable and welcome there. The concert at Wigmore Hall in London, which was almost sold out in advance, was more of a nail-biter. “It snowed, which is so rare,” Sorrell recalls. “Everyone was saying that people wouldn’t be able to get out of their driveways; it will be half empty. But it was totally packed. Sold out. Four critics were there,

Apollo’s Fire has also done well on tour with its crossover programs, like “Come to the River, An Early American Gathering.” From left, Rachel Jones, violin, Paul Shipper, banjo, and Ross Hauck, tenor.

and it was being recorded by the BBC for broadcast. The stage is tiny for a group of our size. It was not the most relaxed night. Going back the second time, in 2011, the group had settled in and matured, and we knew we would be well received.”

“Touring is hard work, and we have to be in top shape, physically and artistically, to pull it off the way we want to,” Sorrell says. “But it also feels like a great privilege—something we never take for granted. Getting to play on some of the great stages of the world—as an ensemble of 13 or 15, not as anonymous member of a large symphony orchestra—is a rare and special honor. It is a chance to create something magical for people. We won’t see these people again for at least a couple of years, or maybe ever. So that makes us want to give everything we have. I think that’s why we tend to pull out all the stops. You have to live for the moment.”

Heidi Waleson, the opera critic for *The Wall Street Journal*, writes frequently for *EMAg*.