

Apollo's Fire, Birmingham Town Hall, review: 'agile grace and unforced energy'

This Cleveland-based period ensemble of a dozen string players delivered an evening of superlative music-making, says Ivan Hewett

★★★★★



String ensemble Apollo's Fire

By Ivan Hewett

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Groups that specialise in “period performance” often drape themselves in a sonorously historical or mythological name. One such is “Apollo’s Fire,” a Cleveland-based ensemble of a dozen string players flavoured with flute, lute and harpsichord, which is giving two UK concerts, the first of them at Birmingham Town Hall. The name suggests something recherché and possibly difficult, which may be why so many of Birmingham’s music-lovers stayed away.

This was a shame, as it was a terrific concert. The group’s director, harpsichordist Jeannette

Sorrell, had put together a ingenious programme which showed off the ensembles's range of colour, mood and style. The basic contrast was between fiery concertos by Vivaldi, racing along with motoric energy, and spaciouly grand or pathetic arias by Handel, where the orchestra was joined by French soprano Sandrine Piau.

Italian groups have made a speciality of Vivaldi, naturally enough, and they tend to emphasise the furious, sun-baked intensity of the music. This group was more playful and flexible. The onrush of Vivaldi's A minor Concerto for two violins was softened by tiny fluctuations towards the end of phrases, like an intake of breath. Despite the orchestra's restricted palette, each piece found its own special colour. The rushing final movement of Vivaldi's G minor Concerto for two Cellos (stylishly played, like the other concerto, by the orchestra's own principal players) was like a Dance of the Possessed Spirits from a ballet.

Another engaging thing about this group is that it combines European stylishness with "can-do" American entrepreneurism. They seize on unlikely things like American folk music and recreate it with foot-stomping brio – as their first encore showed. There's a famous sonata by Vivaldi called La Folia (so called because it gets wilder and wilder), which Sorrell thought would transfer well to the orchestra. So she simply arranged it for the full band, and the results were thrilling. You could imagine it was conceived that way.

The players' agile grace and unforced lyrical energy made them ideal partners for Sandrine Piau, who has the same qualities. She caught the virtuoso fire of Handel's *Il primo ardor*, without once losing the lovely soft tone which suffused the slow arias, such as the heavenly *Viens Hymen* from Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes*. Most entrancing of all was her rendition of Vivaldi's *Sonno*, *se pur sei sonno* from the opera *Tito Manlio*, which wrapped us in a delicate evocation of sleep.

Apollo's Fire and Sandrine Piau appear tonight (8 May) at St John's Smith Square, London SW1. Tickets: 020 7222 1061

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