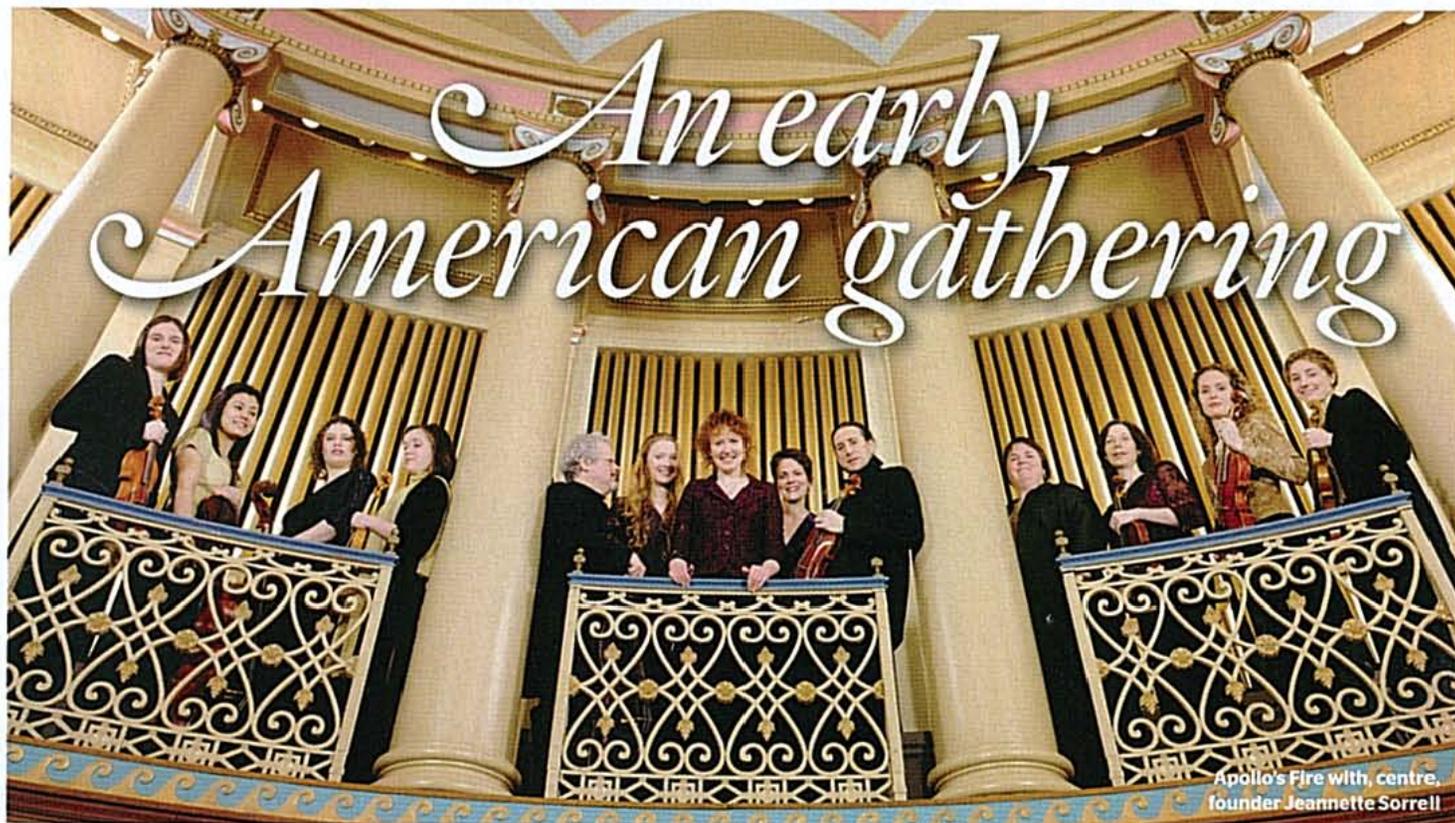


Sounds of America

Gramophone's guide to the classical scene in the US and Canada

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Apollo's Fire with, centre, founder Jeannette Sorrell

During the unreasonably protracted portion of the year when Cleveland endures climatic unpredictability, Jeannette Sorrell is happy to embrace the warm, resonant ambience of stone churches and concert halls for concerts with Apollo's Fire, the Cleveland Baroque Orchestra, which she founded in 1992.

Come summer, the musicians head to the region's splendid outdoors, not necessarily to the hills, but to a rustic setting that has inspired Sorrell to take artistic detours. The so-called Baroque Barn on an estate in Hunting Valley, a well-heeled suburb east of Cleveland, is home base to the Apollo's Fire Countryside Concerts, where traditional music of many nations is king,

A new CD of American folk music sees Apollo's Fire, the Cleveland-based Baroque ensemble, branching out. What will their fans think? asks **Donald Rosenberg**

rather than the Baroque fare with which Sorrell and company have captivated ears both domestic and foreign (London included, where the group made their UK debut last November at Wigmore Hall).

The music director's explorations into folk traditions of the British Isles and North America have resulted in sold-out al fresco performances – or at least semi-al fresco, since there's a roof overhead – and several CDs, such as a recording set to be released worldwide in May by Avie Records. The disc, "Come to the River: An Early American Gathering" is a rousing and poignant crossover programme

of ballads, folk songs, shape-note hymns and fiddle tunes arranged by Sorrell and colleagues, and played, she notes, "with a historically performed aesthetic on period instruments".

Sorrell has actually been immersed in traditional music longer than she's been a specialist in the Baroque world. As a 15-year-old pianist, she was hired to accompany chorus rehearsals and to play services at a Baptist church in Winchester, VA, near where her family had recently moved from Denver. In Virginia, she had no outlets for her violin playing and ballet, among other challenges. "It was a huge culture

shock. I could not understand the Southern accents at all. But for the first time, I was exposed to Appalachian ballad singing. I loved the modal qualities of the melodies and the soulfulness of the music."

A quarter-century later, Sorrell – now an award-winning harpsichordist and conductor, whose teachers included Gustav Leonhardt in Amsterdam and Leonard Bernstein at Tanglewood – tapped into her past to devise "Come to the River" with Apollo's Fire. "I don't think I would've been able to do this programme if I hadn't had that experience in Virginia in the Shenandoah Valley." The shift from the ensemble's successful British Isles crossover concerts to the American programme came in 2009, a year after Sorrell



embarked on a research project that reaped a massive amount of instrumental and vocal material. Sorrell shared the job of arranging the chosen pieces with Countryside players Tina Bergmann (hammered dulcimer), Kathie Stewart (wooden flutes/penny whistle) and René Schiffer (cello), with guitar/banjo and four singers added to the personnel list. Much of the substance was left to individuals in the improvisatory style of folk musicians.

To develop the first programme, Apollo's Fire received a \$15,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts stipulating that the ensemble had to give multiple concerts around the Cleveland area. The nine scheduled performances quickly sold out, so a tenth was added. The "Come to the River" recording was made that first year but only sold during the concerts in June 2010. The new Avie disc includes several additional pieces.

Sorrell knew when she began nudging Apollo's Fire into traditional music that crossing over would be tricky. "But I think in our case it fits very naturally to our approach to our work as a whole. I always tried from the very beginning to bring early music to everybody. We've never been focused on performing for a niche of early music academicians."

When Sorrell first ventured to the Baroque Barn with Apollo's Fire in 1998, the menu comprised Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*. She quickly decided Bach "was not intended for a barn," which led her to expand the ensemble's horizons with the British Isles programme. Branching out had been Sorrell's intention ever since Roger Wright, then artistic administrator of the Cleveland Orchestra and now controller of BBC Radio 3 and director of the BBC Proms, urged her to start a Baroque orchestra in Cleveland in the early '90s. Having just been turned down for the post of assistant conductor with the Cleveland Orchestra by then music director Christoph von Dohnányi, Sorrell consulted with

Wright, who'd heard her perform as a harpsichordist and concluded that she was "a very gifted musician".

Wright downplays his part in the creation of Apollo's Fire. "I tried to support and encourage her and helped her think through some initial ideas. I also introduced her to some possible funding bodies and individuals, but I'd left Cleveland before Apollo's Fire was formed, and the concert I attended in London in November was the first time I had ever heard the group, other than on disc." Even while he was in Cleveland, however, Wright was aware that Sorrell had the musical intelligence and energy to see the big artistic picture. "Although she knew that she wanted to build something locally, she understood the wider period-performance scene and the music-making level that she wanted to reach."

Apollo's Fire played their first concerts, featuring Mozart's Requiem, in June 1992, and

embarked on their inaugural season soon thereafter. The budget that first season was \$100,000. This season, the organisation is operating on a \$1.2 million budget, which supports concerts in the Cleveland area, around the US and in Europe. Aside from Wigmore Hall, the ensemble's European debut last November included concerts in Spain and the Netherlands. A board of trustees and other individuals helped with a segment of the expenses, with many costs picked up by presenters. For the group's second European jaunt this November to France, Spain and Portugal with countertenor Philippe Jaroussky following an extended US tour, presenters are footing the entire bill.

At home, 60 per cent of Apollo's Fire's revenue comes from touring fees and the sale of tickets and CDs – a high figure for a US orchestra, especially a period-instrument ensemble. The popularity of the group's

concerts in Cleveland stems from the combination of Sorrell's adventurous and entertaining programming, ranging from Monteverdi to Beethoven, and the performers' distinctively nuanced, invigorating style. Yet *The Guardian* wrote of the ensemble after the Wigmore concert, "The enthusiasm with which it presented itself was not so much infectious as virulent". Sorrell understands the observation: "All of the musicians I choose are very expressive players, so there's a lot to watch at an Apollo's Fire concert".

Sorrell ascribes the orchestra's close connection with audiences to qualities she has nurtured from the start. "I want every concert to be a special creation and event so that people can get interested in it not just as a way to spend an evening but as an entire contextual experience. It causes people to read the programme notes and look something up to read further and it helps take them into new areas they have never thought about before."

Another reason Apollo's Fire are succeeding in a competitive local and global market is the vibrancy of Sorrell's musical approach. "We're very focused on the 17th-century idea of *affekt*, the idea that the performer's job is to project the emotional world and character of the music, so as to move the emotions of the listeners. I've always tried to take the audience on some kind of emotional journey with us in concert. We do that in Baroque music as in traditional music."

As can be heard on "Come to the River," the orchestra's 17th recording – and their sixth on Avie (including a re-mastered version of Monteverdi's *Vespers* of 1610). The release of "Come to the River" coincides with radio broadcasts of the disc throughout the US and a tour of the programme in June and July to American music festivals. More Apollo's Fire discs are likely not far down the road as Sorrell and friends continue their forays into the Baroque and beyond. ©

APOLLO'S FIRE ON DISC

Bach: Brandenburg Concertos
Avie (F) (2) AV2207

Along with the six *Brandenburgs* are the Harpsichord Concertos in D minor and F minor, and a reconstruction of the Violin Concerto in D minor. Elizabeth Walfisch is the featured violinist, with Sorrell conducting from the harpsichord.

Christmas Vespers: Music of Michael Praetorius
Koch (F) KIC-CD-7673

Apollo's Singers, the Oberlin Choristers and various soloists feature in arranged selections from many works by the great German composer. "Magnificent...a musical gift to treasure" according to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.

Come to the River: An Early American Gathering
Avie (F) AV2205

Appalachian songs and dances, traditional Irish tunes, shape-note hymns and traditional Southern

folk hymns, released in May. This is what Sorrell means by branching out!

Handel: Messiah
Avie (F) (2) DVD AV2208

This is, of course, one of those works with which an ensemble sets out its stall and the competition could not be more fierce. Yet Apollo's Fire held their own, with *Gramophone* noting "a blend of scholarship and visceral intensity". Amanda Forsythe, Elizabeth Shammash, Ross Hauck, Ian Honeyman and Jeffrey Strauss are the soloists.

Mozart: Symphony No 40 and Ballet Music from Idomeneo
Avie (F) AV2159

Amanda Forsythe is again the soprano here, in a recording that also includes the aria "Parto, m'affretto" from *Lucio Silla*. Of this release, *Gramophone* said, "Apollo's Fire proves a lithe, spirited band. Amanda Forsythe sings with crystalline tone".