

Review

**Apollo's Fire Fireside Concert at
Rocky River Presbyterian (January 26)**

by Daniel Hathaway



During the first of her amusing asides to an audience who had just slogged through snowdrifts on Sunday afternoon, soprano Meredith Hall noted that the subtitle of this year's Apollo's Fire's Fireside Concerts was "Drive the Cold Winter Away." "We have failed!" she added, ruefully.

Well, maybe the Polar Vortex and its aftermath had chilled patrons to the bone on the way to Rocky River Presbyterian Church, but the English music from the 16th and 17th centuries that awaited them inside warmed the cockles of the soul, even with no fireplace in sight.

Hall was joined by lutenists Ronn McFarlane and William Sims (who doubled on theorbo) and flutist Kathie Stewart (who also played recorder) in an engaging, two-hour journey through the ballad repertory which supplied house music for the well-to-do and lyrics for Everyman to sing to familiar tunes during the flowering of poetry and music in Renaissance England.

The program, guest directed by McFarlane, drew heavily on the music and poetry of John Dowland, the leading lutenist of the period, who had a reputation for dolefulness even though he sometimes set his distraught lyrics to happy tunes. His *Flow my tears*, Hall said, aptly employing a familiar Elizabethan poetic device, is "an ecstasy of depression."

In addition to several works by the composer Ronn McFarlane calls his favorite (Anonymous), the playlist visited ballads and lute pieces by Thomas Campion, John Johnson, Francis Cutting, Nicholas Lanier and Thomas Robinson, and two much later selections by Godfrey Finger and Henry Purcell. Several songs and solos were based on the ubiquitous *Greensleeves* tune, some more obviously than others.

Singing with a clear and robust tone, Meredith Hall put the colorful lyrics across with verve and drama, especially Dowland's mercurial *Come again*, and Purcell's theatrical, Shakespearian-inspired *If music be the food of love*, the high point of the second half.

McFarlane and Sims were skillful accompanists and accomplished duettists who brought Dowland's four-hands-on-one-lute piece, *My Lord Chamberlain's Galliard*, off with gen-

tle humor and subtle sight gags. Kathie Stewart added perfectly-blended flute tones to ensemble pieces and played virtuosic divisions in Godfrey Finger's modern-sounding *A Ground by Mr. Finger*. Though the church sanctuary is hardly an intimate space, music carries well there, and even the quiet voices of lutes sounded warm and present.

As delightful as the program was, it ran a bit long. Satiety crept in midway through the second half, just following the Purcell song, and some of the remaining pieces seemed superfluous. Except the last one. Dowland got the final word on Sunday in a charmingly valedictory performance of *Now we needs must part*. Unlike the composer, the audience wasn't "driven hence with sad despair," but left with lovely words and music ringing in their ears.

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