

Apollo's Fire to begin season with Bach, then it's Monteverdi at home and on the road

by Daniel Hathaway



Although it seems odd for an ensemble who have performed together for over two decades, Apollo's Fire is beginning its season with some first-time performances of well-known works by Johann Sebastian Bach — at least in their best-known versions.

“The E-Major Violin Concerto is popular and famous, and probably everybody, including our soloist,

Olivier Brault, has played it many times elsewhere,” Apollo's Fire artistic director Jeannette Sorrell said in a Skype conversation. “It just so happens that we've never programmed it with Apollo's Fire before. It's a sparkling piece!”

The same goes for two other works on the program, which Apollo's Fire will tour to venues in Akron, Cleveland Heights and Rocky River from October 9-12, but that's largely due to Bach's habit of repurposing his musical materials for different situations.

The double harpsichord concerto on the Bach program (BWV 1060 in c minor) has already appeared on the orchestra's playlist in a version for oboe and violin soloists, and the ensemble has previously programmed Bach's B-minor Orchestral Suite in a version for solo violin and orchestra. “Some feel that is the original, but only the flute version has survived,” Sorrell said. “It's fun for people to hear how Bach recycled his own music. Kathie Stewart, our soloist, has really come into her own as one of the leading baroque flute players in the country. She's a very poised performer.”

Also on the program is a piece by Johann Sebastian Bach's most celebrated son, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, the Symphony in b minor. “That we *have* performed before,” Sorrell said. “It's fiery and virtuosic, typically capricious and moody — a nice contrast with pieces by Papa Bach.”

Sorrell will share solo duties on the double harpsichord concerto with Joe Gasco, recently appointed professor of harpsichord at the University of Michigan. “It’s something of a blind date,” Sorrell said. “We’ve never met, but Kathie Stewart knows him really well. We’re getting together this weekend to rehearse. What’s really cute is that in Apollo’s Fire’s first or second season, I played the other double harpsichord concerto with his predecessor in Ann Arbor, Edward Parmentier.”

Gasco will bring his own harpsichord down from Ann Arbor, and the Apollo’s Fire stage crew will get to move not one, but two instruments between venues this week. “It’s going to be a challenge fitting both instruments on the stage in the churches,” Sorrell noted, adding that the double concertos were meant to be heard in a Leipzig coffee house with the audience close by rather than in churches seating 400-500 people. “We’ll nest the instruments, facing sideways, which works best for getting the sound out into the audience.”

Speaking of portability challenges, after the Bach performances, Apollo’s Fire will give four performances of Claudio Monteverdi’s famous *Vespers of 1610*, then take the piece on tour with soloists and a chorus of 18 singers from venues ranging from Stanford to Ann Arbor and Champaign-Urbana. “I feel like we know how to tour with the Monteverdi after our big tour in 2010,” Sorrell said. “That went remarkably well — we went over our checklists afterward and found nothing that went wrong.”

A number of performers, including cornettists Bruce Dickey and Kiri Tollaksen, will be returning for the Monteverdi, which makes life easier for Sorrell. But there are still surprises to be expected. I ask about where she plans to locate the singer for the famous echo tenor parts. “On the last tour, he would just find his own spot during the warmup rehearsal. He never told me, and I never knew where his voice was going to be coming from!”

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