

**Apollo's Fire to reprise *Sephardic Journey*
and release new CD of the production**

by Christine Jay



“It seemed like this was the next challenge,” said Apollo’s Fire artistic director Jeannette Sorrell before the orchestra’s 2014 debut performances of *Sephardic Journey: Wanderings of the Spanish Jews*. “Our Celtic program in particular made me ready to tackle something new.”

Reprising the popular show from two years ago, Apollo Fire will present four performances of *Sephardic Journey*, culminating in two public CD release parties after the February 5th and 7th performances. The ensemble’s ‘Sephardic Week’ will begin on Thursday, February 4th at 7:30 pm at Fairlawn Lutheran Church, with subsequent concerts at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights (February 5), the Maltz Performing Center at Cleveland’s University Circle (February 6), and at Baldwin Wallace’s Gamble Auditorium (February 7).

“I’ve always loved this music,” Sorrell told us in a telephone interview from Houston two years ago, where she was conducting two complete cycles of Brandenburg Concertos — the kind of repertoire in which she’s made her reputation. “I’ve been working closely with Nell Snaidas and Jeffrey Strauss, who have sung Sephardic music all their lives.”

We spoke to Jeffrey Strauss himself recently by telephone. “Jeanette is amazing at pulling strands together and creating a narrative arc for a program, and then fitting in all these musical styles that really cohere. There’s modal chanting, or cantorial music, things you would hear in a mosque. Then there’s unison singing — most Sephardic vocal music is typically chant-like, melodic, and modal as opposed to composed polyphonic music. You hear this sound-world, and a number of pieces like it on the program.

“The concert starts with bells and drums. It’s almost like a theatre piece,” Strauss said. “Jeanette evokes not only a sound space, but an emotional space. It’s a call to prayer, introspection, and attention. In this particular case, she uses sounds that I associate with the Middle East. There’s percussion, a couple of violins playing in dialogue, and a drone. This could describe North Indian music, which I love. It’s the same impulse.

through the whole program. We go on from there to a set of three or four chants in Hebrew which are sung to this day in Sephardic synagogues. Then we shift gears into Salamone Rossi's gorgeous, polyphonic sonatas. It's not a jarring shift, the way it's set up. It makes sense. Then we go on to the section with Nell Snaidas, who is just brilliant. She and Karim Sulayman sing some quite famous, quite secular Judeo-Spanish love duets."

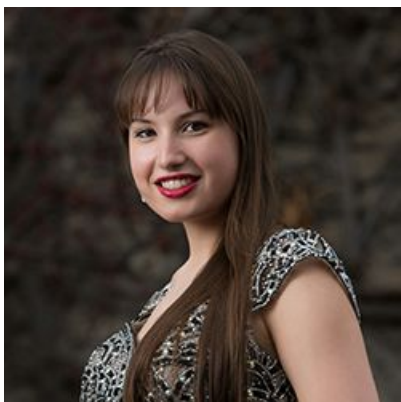
Joining Sorrell, Snaidas, Strauss, and Sulayman will be hammer dulcimer player Tina Bergmann, percussionist Rex Benincasa (“who will be coming from New York with a truckload of exotic instruments that will add wonderful color and texture,” Sorrell said), string players Olivier Brault, Julie Andrijeski, Adriane Post, Karina Schmitz, Cynthia Black, Sue Yelanjian, and René Schiffer, and guest artist Christina Patton, who will play harp, flute, and shawm — the latter, a loud “outdoor” instrument, made its first Apollo’s Fire appearance in *Sephardic Journey*. Adding to the musical textures will be the twelve members of Apollo’s Singers, who have been receiving coaching in Hebrew from Strauss.

For Strauss, a classically-trained baritone, Apollo’s Fire’s Sephardic program harkens to his Ashkenazi Jewish upbringing and childhood. “When I was a kid, I was actually trained to sing cantorial music. My first paying job, at sixteen, was leading prayers in a temple. Being able to improvise in Hebrew is something I learned to do at a young age.”

Strauss said, “I find this program very emotional. From the first time we did it two years ago, lots of people — by no means were they all Jewish — felt this music had a particular pull to it. There’s something very earthy about it. You can taste it. It has the grit of daily life. I can’t look at the CD cover without thinking of the Syrian refugee crisis. Now, in 2016, it’s a story that resonates politically and emotionally. In the end, it’s not so much a Jewish thing, it’s just a human story about people looking for their identity. It’s a reflection of the human experience. I think that’s what people are reacting to.”

Speaking to us in a separate interview, tenor Karim Sulayman said, “I think it’s a beautiful, beautiful program. Between the Rossi and the traditional music, it definitely speaks to the audience.”

Daniel Hathaway contributed to this article.



Christine Jay, Winter Term Intern, is a senior at Oberlin College and Conservatory majoring in Voice, Baroque Flute and Comparative Literature. As a soprano, she has participated in numerous masterclasses and summer musical institutes, most recently singing for Alan Curtis and Barbara Bonney in the Venice Opera Project summer 2014 and the AIMS Graz, Austria 2015 Lieder program. She resides in Norfolk, Massachusetts.

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