

Review**Apollo's Fire: The Intimate Vivaldi at Rocky River Presbyterian (February 3)**

by Nicholas Jones



This weekend's concerts by Apollo's Fire were billed as "Fireside" concerts, implying intimacy, warmth, conversation, and refreshment. Understandably, there was no actual fire, at least at Sunday afternoon's performance at Rocky River Presbyterian. But as "host" Kristin Linfante (violist and Acting General Manager) said in her welcome on Sunday, Apollo's "Fire" ought to suffice.

In many ways, it did. The expert playing of the principal guest artist, lutenist Ronn McFarlane, was at times warm and gentle, at other times "hot" — dazzling enough to turn the snowy Ohio afternoon tropical. His solo, a short piece by one Giovanni Zamboni (not, as he said, the inventor of the ice-rink machine) glowed under his nimble fingers and brilliant colorations.

McFarlane joined a small band of strings — Olivier Brault and Johanna Novom on violin, Linfante on viola, René Schiffer on cello, and the wonderful theorbist and guitarist William Simms playing continuo — for two Vivaldi concertos. Opening the program was the C major concerto for strings, in which the lute was content to join, and amplify, the continuo. The ensemble's sound was big and joyful, even (tastefully) rambunctious at times.

Closing the concert was another Vivaldi concerto, the famous D major "guitar" concerto. It is often played by full orchestra and (electronically amplified) guitar. It was a pleasure to hear this warhorse in a far more appropriate instrumentation, in which the vibrant virtuosity of the soloist took front stage.

McFarlane also played solos in two Vivaldi trios for lute, violin, and continuo. He was joined first by Novom for an intimate and introspective piece in G minor. The *Larghetto* was particularly haunting. In the second part of the program, Brault joined McFarlane for another trio in C major. With some fancy lute-work, this trio was more brilliant than the earlier one. But overall, it sounded a bit as if Vivaldi had phoned in the composition.

In these trios, the violinist and cellist played with mutes to avoid overpowering the lutenist. I appreciated the fact that, as a result, we could hear the lute. But balance came

at a cost. The violin lacked the resonance of the full, unimpeded instrument and seemed unable to enter into dialog with the fully resonant lute.

The program also reached back to the seventeenth century, before the “red priest” had become the rage of Venice, to play pieces by two musicians who worked in Monteverdi's San Marco. A curious *Capriccio* by Biagio Marini was a musical parlor game in which each violin had to be responsible for two parts. More musical and profound was the *Sonata Concertante* of Dario Castello—mercurial and dazzling.

The program also included another pre-Vivaldi piece, a haunting *Sonata in E minor* by the late 17th-century Venetian composer, Giovanni Legrenzi.

As I said above, in many ways "Apollo's Fire" gave us the "Fireside" atmosphere of this self-styled "Intimate" concert. But intimacy cannot really be achieved at the scale of the normal Apollo's Fire venue.

In Rocky River Presbyterian, a large carpeted dais constitutes the musician's area; a considerable distance (also carpeted) separates them from the front rows of the audience. The space stretches a long way to the back, and spreads radically to each side as it goes further from the music. I was fortunate to be seated on the aisle only seven rows back, from where I could hear the lute adequately. Even so, it was an effort. I can't imagine that those in seats further back and on the sides could make out much of that excellent lute-playing.

Rocky River Presbyterian Church holds hundreds; St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights (the venue for Friday and Saturday's concerts), even more. These venues are too large for the intimate sound of the lute, and for the rapport (and conversation) that the program wanted to achieve. If we can't have a real fireside for these concerts, let's at least have the warmth that Apollo's Fire at its best can give.

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