

After summer triumphs on the road, Apollo's Fire plans eight programs at home

by Daniel Hathaway



Following a series of sold-out concerts at Tanglewood and in England (London and Aldeburgh) and Italy, Cleveland's baroque orchestra Apollo's Fire is busy putting the finishing touches on the eight programs they are planning around the area this season. We reached founder and artistic director Jeannette Sorrell to chat about last summer's experiences and her plans for the season to come.

I began by asking about Apollo's Fire's debut at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood in Lenox, Massachusetts. "It was really fun," Sorrell said. "We had no idea that we were going to be sold out at Tanglewood. It was really a personal homecoming because I had studied in the conducting class there back in 1989 and I have such moving memories of that summer working with Leonard Bernstein and Roger Norrington. A lot of things happened that summer that shaped my career, but I had not been back since. It was wonderful to return with my own band. They played so well, and the audience was quite raucous! We met a staff member who had worked there for five summers. He said he goes to all the concerts, and he had never seen a concert at Tanglewood where the audience was as enthusiastic and animated as they were that night."

At Tanglewood, Apollo's Fire played their program called 'A Night at Bach's Coffeehaus.' "That's a theme we use quite a bit on tour, though the pieces change," Sorrell said. "Tanglewood had specifically requested Telemann's *Don Quixote Suite* because they were celebrating the 500th anniversary of Cervantes's novel. We also played Brandenburg 5, with its big harpsichord solo. It was really fun because there were so many Cleveland people there. I met a lot of Clevelanders who I didn't know at a party afterward, but they seemed to know us."

After Tanglewood came Europe, where Apollo's Fire's first stop was an appearance on the BBC's Proms in the 950-seat Cadogan Hall. "Having to play when you've just arrived the day before is a tough thing, so I was so proud of our musicians," Sorrell said. "You would never have known that they were jet lagged. They seemed completely fresh and energized. The concert was broadcast live, so we were dealing with microphones on stage and recording engineers. This performance had been sold out since May, three months in advance, so we knew we were walking out to a packed house. But there were some British people in the audience that we knew — the heads of the Avie record label, and people from Intermusica, which is our European agent. They told us that the very enthusiastic response from the audience was even more unusual than we realized — British audiences are usually much more reserved. There was a lot of cheering, and for people who may have listened to the BBC recording that was online for a while, you can hear that the audience was pretty wild. We had a lovely reception hosted by the U.S. Embassy in the garden, so all kinds of friends and colleagues were there, including some faculty members from Cambridge."

The next day, Apollo's Fire journeyed on to Benjamin Britten's hometown of Aldeburgh, for a concert on the Snape Proms. "The hall is a repurposed, medieval malt house — very rustic. It feels like a big barn," Sorrell noted. "That performance was also sold out, and Aldeburgh has already extended a standing invitation for us to return. My dream is to take [Sugarloaf Mountain](#) there."

After East Anglia, a smaller group of musicians moved on to the Tuscan Landscapes Festival. "Because we were playing a new program, we scheduled several days of rehearsal, and we made the most of our time with dinners, hiking, and plenty of Italian chaos," Sorrell said.

Now back in its hometown, Apollo's Fire is looking forward to a busy season of homestands and national runout concerts. I asked Jeannette Sorrell to share a few thoughts about each of the orchestra's programs.

October 15-18: The Splendor of Venice — an orchestral extravaganza. "The Splendor of Venice will show a new side of Vivaldi in his concertos *per molti strumenti* (for many instruments) — parts of which sound like Handel's *Water Music*. The concert will also introduce listeners to a composer they might not know, Evaristo Felice Dall'Abaco, whose wonderful *concerto grosso* will feature flutist Kathie Stewart and oboist Debra Nagy. We're also launching something new this year: a season of Afterglows following many concerts, including all four of the Venice performances. We'll have a cash bar and themed food items so the audience can mingle with friends and musicians in a lively atmosphere."

November 13-17: Benjamin Bagby in *Beowulf* — the medieval legend. “It’s unusual for AF to serve as a presenter, but I hope this performance will show how deeply I appreciate Ben Bagby, who is a riveting, world-class storyteller. Everyone who loves Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* should hear him. This is the first time he’s performed in Cleveland in eleven years.”

November 15: Amanda Powell’s ‘The Power of Love’ sendoff. “This is a single-evening event to launch her solo debut album with Apollo’s Fire. After Cleveland, we’ll tour the program to the Library of Congress, Penn State, Vassar, Cambridge, and the Naval Academy in Annapolis.”

December 9-13: Sacrum Mysterium — a Celtic Christmas, and December 17-20: Christmas Vespers — Music of Michael Praetorius. “These are repeats of our Christmas shows. ‘Sacrum Mysterium’ starts in Canton, and we’ll perform it for the second time at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The Praetorius program will include new children soloists and returning favorites.”

February 4-8: Sephardic Journey — Wanderings of the Spanish Jews. “We debuted this program two years ago and recorded it last February. Our performances are timed to coincide with the CD release, and they also mark our debut at the new Maltz Performing Arts Center. We’re hopeful that the Maltz can become a frequent new home.”

March 3-6: J.S. Bach’s St. John Passion. “We’ve always had some dramatic tendencies with this piece, but now because the project involves a new CD and DVD for international release, we want to bring the drama to a new fruition. We’re bringing in world-class singers starting with Nicholas Phan as the Evangelist, Amanda Powell, and Jesse Blumberg and Jeff Strauss as Jesus and Pilate. This is the big centerpiece of our season. We hope people will come to it ready to hear something moving, deeply spiritual, and dramatic. All the singers with character roles will be on a special platform, slightly staged and off book. The Evangelist, who is the storyteller, will be off to the side. But all our singers are deeply committed to storytelling.” Apollo’s Fire will repeat the Passion at St. Paul’s Chapel of Trinity Church in New York, at SUNY Purchase, and at the University of Michigan.

April 7-10: A Harlequin Romance. “This is kind of a romp featuring our wildcard dancer and guitarist Steve Player. He doesn’t really like to rehearse, so we never know what he’s going to do, but this program will be a wonderful collaboration between Steve and Julie Andrijeski — she will both dance and play violin — as we bring to life the various characters from the Commedia dell’Arte tradition: Harlequin, his girlfriend Columbine, Pierrot Lunaire, and all the others. I think it will be a very nice frolic to end the season.”

After all the activity of last summer, Jeannette Sorrell says she's looking forward to a bit of breathing space. "Apollo's Fire was pretty busy in September doing things without me — a Lully opera in Columbus, and a series of concerts in smaller Ohio towns. I've kept things quieter for myself this year, but I do have a conducting engagement in May with the Naples Philharmonic in Florida."

Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 6, 2015.

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