

## Apollo's Fire in *Sacrum Mysterium* (December 12)

by Timothy Robson



Apollo's Fire, Cleveland's Baroque orchestra, opened a two-night revival of their Christmas show *Sacrum Mysterium: A Celtic Christmas* on Saturday, December 12, at the First Baptist Church in Shaker Heights. It was an unseasonably warm December evening, with every window in the church open to cool the capacity audience.

*Sacrum Mysterium* is a musical/theatrical experience inspired by the early Scottish *Vespers of St. Kentigern*, patron saint of Glasgow. Although the performance did conform loosely to elements of the liturgy of Vespers (a series of psalms and antiphons, culminating with the *Magnificat*), it was not a slavish attempt at a strict historical reconstruction. Rather, the liturgy was the framework in which Sorrell could let her imagination roam, interpolating sung carols, instrumental music and dancing to Celtic reels and jigs.

Latin, English (both early and modern), and Gaelic were all interwoven into the mix. Some of the carols originally written in other languages were sung in English translation. Sorrell herself contributed a newly composed Alleluia that appeared as a musical refrain several times during the performance. The pre-existing music was freely arranged to suit the ensemble and liturgical/theatrical purposes, with a big dollop of improvisation along the way.

The Apollo's Fire ensemble and singers were joined by Ensemble la Nef of Montréal, who contributed the more exotic Celtic musical elements of the performance. There was too much music to discuss it all in detail here, but a few highlights must be mentioned.

The concert opened with a halting-step procession in the darkened church, led by bagpiper Peter Walker and the radiant soprano soloist Meredith Hall in the haunting

Manx Gaelic carol *Oikan ayes Bethlehem*. The opening elements of the Vespers — “Deus in adiutorium meum intende” (O God, make speed to save me), the “Gloria Patri,” and the the Kentigern responsorium — followed. Baritone Jeffrey Strauss and soprano Amanda Powell were the cantors. A set of carols completed the first half of the program, contrasting the liturgical with the more “popular” aspects of Christmas. Some were familiar: *Veni, veni Emmanuel*” (sung in English), the *Coventry Carol*, again with soprano Meredith Hall, and the French/Breton carol *Noël nouvelet*.

The set showed off the versatility of both singers and players, particularly the tight integration of the instrumentalists. The first half ended with the rousing Scottish dance tune *Wat ye what I got yestreen* of 1715, starting with bagpipe, and eventually building to the whole ensemble. Guitarist Steven Player did double duty as the dancer.

The second part of the program carried the inscription “The Song of Mary” and was based on the *Magnificat*, Mary’s song of joy following the angel Gabriel’s announcement to her that she will bear the Son of God. The women of the choir sang the Gregorian chant *Hodie Christus natus est* (familiar from its use in Benjamin Britten’s *A Ceremony of Carols*) from the back of the church, followed by a splendid performance of the traditional Scottish carol *Tallish Chrìosdàh* (Christ Child’s Lullaby) featuring harp, flute, hammered dulcimer, guitar and archlute. The instrumental texture of the plucked and hammered strings was magical.

Strauss and Powell were back to chant the *Magnificat* over drones, guitar strumming, and improvised arpeggiated chords on the harpsichord. The carol text *What Child Is This?* was sung to the Irish tune *My Lagan Love* rather than the much more familiar *Greensleeves*, casting a whole new, austere meaning to the words. The traditional Irish *Wexford Carol* (Good people all, this Christmas time) was followed by the rousing *Seven Rejoyses of Mary*, culminating in an Irish reel, appropriately entitled *Christmas Eve*.

Steven Player again led the dancing. He took a stumble, but his dance partner (and Apollo’s Fire violinist) Julie Andrijeski, stayed in character and the two were back in the swing a moment later. By the end, even Sorrell was singing and dancing. It was a brilliant conclusion to a beautifully evocative evening.

*Sacrum Mysterium* was the model of how to put together a thematic concert. If every presenter had as much imagination as Jeannette Sorrell, the concert-going world would be a much better place.

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