

Apollo's Fire: a chat with Jeannette Sorrell about the Baroque orchestra's 26th Season

by Daniel Hathaway



Apollo's Fire crowned its 25th anniversary season over the summer with sold-out performances at Tanglewood, Ravinia, and Cain Park. I reached Artistic Director Jeannette Sorrell to ask what's ahead for Cleveland's Baroque Orchestra in 2017-2018.

Daniel Hathaway: You've planned some big works to begin and end your new season — Handel's Israel in Egypt in the fall, and Monteverdi's Orfeo in the Spring. I understand that you've created a special version of Handel's famous, double-chorus oratorio for the October 12-15 performances in Northeast Ohio.

Jeannette Sorrell: I've always felt that *Israel in Egypt* is a great work, but performances I've heard didn't always work for me. The original piece was in three parts, beginning with the "Lamentation on the Death of Jeremiah" and continuing with "Exodus" and "The Song of Moses." Audiences today usually only hear the second and third parts, but the "Lamentation" contains some beautiful, poignant funeral music. I feel that the rejoicing at the end of the oratorio is more meaningful if you've gone through some grieving before, so I've reinstated 15-20 minutes of the Lamentation and shortened about a third of the choral movements. There will be fewer plagues on Egypt, but I believe the piece will be faster-moving. Our version will last just under two hours.

DH: Of course, in Handel's time, the audience probably didn't stay in their seats for the entire work anyway.

JS: No, they behaved very differently — wandering around, chatting, and throwing peanuts.

DH: And in April you'll be presenting a semi-staged version of Monteverdi's Orfeo.

JS: We've done the Monteverdi before, but this time we've cast Karim Sulayman in the title role. He has a commanding stage presence, and Monteverdi is his favorite music to sing. Erica Schuller, who will sing La Musica and Euridice, made her debut with Apollo's Fire with excerpts from *Orfeo* last season and got wonderful feedback.

DH: Tell us about the semi-staging.

JS: We'll be using digital projections including photos of the room at the Ducal Palace in Mantua where *Orfeo* was first performed. My Italian digital image specialist got permission to shoot there last summer. We'll interweave period paintings and supertitles into the images. One interesting thing about *Orfeo* is that the opera has two endings — one involving a *deus ex machina* who comes down to save our hero, and another where female followers of Bacchus attack Orpheus and murder him. Since stage machinery wasn't available in that room in Mantua, the audience at the premiere were given libretti with the second ending. Our version will have music reconstructed by René Schiffer.

DH: Tell us about Nicholas Phan's lute-song program.

JS: That program was originally developed for a recording, but Nick has performed it at least once before in a concert version. Apollo's Fire will include more instrumentalists — two violins, two gambas, and two theorbos — playing mostly dance music by William Lawes. The original title of the program was "A Painted Tale," but when I described it to our board, one of the members dubbed it "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover!"

DH: Another program with a clever title is "Three Duels and a Wedding," which takes place in February.

JS: That program includes Bach's "Wedding Cantata," which Apollo's Fire has never performed before, featuring Amanda Forsythe, who is a fantastic Bach singer, and oboist Debra Nagy. The "Duels" refers to three double concertos — Bach's Sixth Brandenburg Concerto, his Double Concerto for flute and violin with Kathie Stewart and Olivier Brault, and a Telemann piece for flute and violin.

DH: And I see that one of your summer Countryside programs, "Sugarloaf Mountain," now has a Christmas version.

JS: Those December concerts will add more fiddles, along with dancers, bagpipes, and Apollo's Singers to our summer troupe of eight musicians. It tells the story of an immigrant journey from Ireland, beginning with medieval music from St. Patrick's Cathedral and folk carols. Then we'll cross the water for "Wanderers Under The Sky," which combines the flight of Mary and Joseph into Egypt with immigrants wandering in Appalachia. The second half of the program takes place entirely in a little wooden church during a Christmas service, with Shape-Note hymns and spirituals. Apollo's Musettes will also take part in this family experience.

DH: Last but not least, Apollo's Fire will make its Carnegie Hall debut in March.

JS: That concert sold out the day tickets went on sale, but Cleveland audiences can hear three performances of our "Bach's Coffeehouse" program in send-off concerts on March 16, 17, and 18. That program is the same one we played at Tanglewood two summers ago and similar to the one we played at the BBC Proms: Bach's Brandenburg Concertos No. 4 and 5, Telemann's *Don Quixote Suite*, and our version of Vivaldi's *La Folia*.

DH: The Vivaldi has become almost proprietary for Apollo's Fire. Does La Folia get wilder every time the ensemble performs it?

JS: We certainly try to do it a little differently each time.

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