

“Christmas on Sugarloaf Mountain” — 20 minutes with Apollo’s Fire’s Amanda Powell

by Jarrett Hoffman



Building on their recent summer programs exploring the Celtic immigrant experience in Appalachia, Apollo’s Fire will celebrate “Christmas on Sugarloaf Mountain” with five area performances running from Saturday, December 2 to Sunday, December 10 (see our [Concert Listings](#) for times and locations).

Featuring vocalists Amanda Powell and Ross Hauck, Cleveland’s Baroque Orchestra will also greatly expand their band from the eight-musician summer troupe, adding to the mix the voices of Apollo’s Singers and the children’s choir Apollo’s Musettes, as well as bagpipes, additional fiddles, and dancers. Guitarist-singer Brian Kay will give a pre-concert talk an hour before each performance.

As artistic director Jeannette Sorrell said in a season [preview](#) in October, the program will begin with medieval music from Dublin’s 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.”

We spoke with [Amanda Powell](#) just as the singer was preparing to celebrate an earlier holiday, hosting her sister, parents, and their foreign exchange student from Palestine for Thanksgiving. Praised by *ClevelandClassical.com* for her “abundant vocal technique,” Powell is known for her striking versatility: she’s at home on the opera stage, in the jazz club, and in the national church arena.

With crossover programs like this one, Powell said she enjoys exploring the different styles and colors at her disposal. “This show starts with a reminiscing about old

Ireland, so there will be carols that are sung in a more early music style. Once we cross over into Appalachia for our American Christmas, then I go into a little bit more of a folk style. I'm singing with a very wide color palette. Last night in rehearsal with Jeannette, I was trying on different colors and she was saying, 'Ooh, try that with this!' It's a journey with vocal color and nuance."

Powell's interest in Appalachian music comes from spending summers in the Blue Ridge Mountains on her grandparents' farm in Lost River, West Virginia. "When I went to Shenandoah Conservatory, I would drive out on Route 50 straight to their farm in the middle of nowhere, this tiny little lost place. I love West Virginia, it's so beautiful."

A veteran of AF, Powell said that especially for the group's crossover shows, the ensemble feels like a family. "For the first time in seven years, I took off from singing with them last Christmas because I had just started a new church job. I truly missed my Christmas experience with Apollo's Fire because the people have really become such a tight-knit group." Powell remembers the last time the group was on tour with "Sugarloaf Mountain," when they stayed in a barn in the Catskills. "After our performance everybody went back to the barn and we all cooked a meal, ate together, and stayed up late hanging out and playing tunes. They're musicians of the highest level, but still the most open-hearted, warm people that I've had the chance to work with. I love doing these shows with them."

Building that kind of warmth and spirit of togetherness is a passion of Powell's that extends to many facets of her career. She recently partnered with keyboardist Anne Wilson to lead three gatherings in Cleveland Heights titled 'The Community Sings.' "In the current climate of our political system, our country, and our world, I wanted to bring people together to have fun and sing. I think that's my bigger artistic goal and the reason that I'm on this earth — to cultivate a sense of belonging. I try to do that through performing but also through facilitating events and community gatherings."

Another thread to that passion came unexpectedly. "I sort of stumbled into a part of my career as congregational song leader for Progressive National Church events. I went to Southeast Asia back in 2001 and was doing a lot of singing with people. That really began my deep interest in folk music, global folk music, and community-building."

That fuels her voice teaching at Cleveland State University as well. "This semester I'm super excited because I got to launch a class called Vocal Improvisation and Group Singing. I'm sort of pioneering this new method for, again, building community, this time using improvisation to engage people through global folk music." On Powell's YouTube channel you can see her leading a class [performance](#) of the Polokwane Chorale, a traditional South African song.

Coming full circle to “Christmas on Sugarloaf Mountain,” Powell said, “I’m honestly so excited for this show because it has the open-heartedness and the spiritual connection of ‘Sugarloaf Mountain,’ but at a bigger level because we have children’s choir, adult choir, Irish dancing — and I’ll give you a little teaser that I’m debuting as an Appalachian clogger in this show, so that’s exciting. And my children are singing with me — they’re in the Musettes — so that’s a really special thing for me as well.”

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