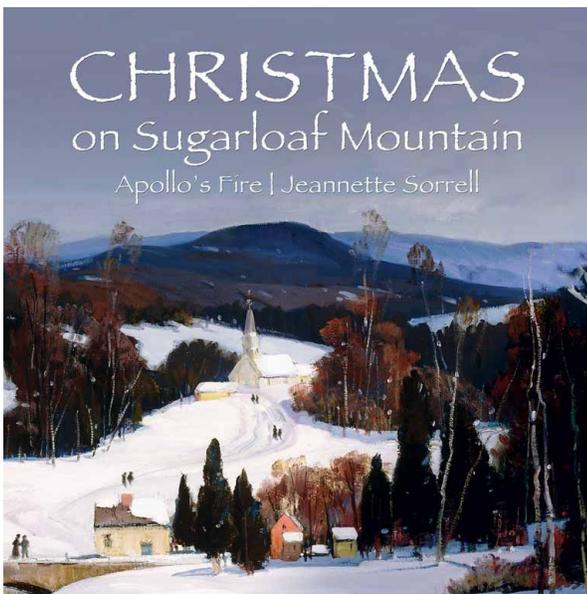


CD Review —
Apollo's Fire:
Christmas on Sugarloaf Mountain

by Hannah Schoepe



December evokes fantasies of snug fires, family festivities, and winter wonderlands. Cleveland's Baroque Orchestra Apollo's Fire provides a fitting soundtrack to these daydreams, in their new album *Christmas on Sugarloaf Mountain*. The tracks portray sounds of Christmas from the Irish hillsides to the Appalachian Mountains. Light a candle, and put your dancing shoes on, because this album traverses songs of community, faith, and history, as well as barn dances and Scottish reels.

Released by AVIE Records, the album spans 68 minutes over 19 tracks. Each of its six sections relates to musical journeys between Ireland and

the Appalachians — yet each tells a different story. The heartbeat of the project is Apollo's artistic director Jeannette Sorrell, who appears as arranger, conductor, and harpsichordist. But one heartbeat does not make an ensemble, and the group collaboration is truly remarkable. Sorrell's partners include Amanda Powell (soprano), Ross Hauck (tenor), Jeffrey Strauss (baritone), Susanna Perry Gilmore (violin and fiddle), Brian Kay (plucked instruments and vocals), Brian Bigley (Uilleann pipes and Irish flute), Kathie Stewart (wooden flutes), René Schiffer (cello), and Tina Bergmann (hammered dulcimer). Their strong personalities shine throughout the playlist, both as performers and arrangers.

Bringing holiday sensations of reverence and innocence are Apollo's Singers, and the young voices of Apollo's Musettes. The ensemble between the orchestra and singers is quite impressive. Even those few grinchy listeners who claim to dislike Christmas

music, must appreciate the musicality and technical precision that are brought to each track.

The first section, “Christmas Eve at the Crossroads,” opens with *Christmas Eve Reel*. It combines a traditional Irish melody with two American tunes, *Christmas in America* and *Old Christmas Eve*, which are sure to brighten up any Advent coffee hour.

The songs of “Celtic Memories” portray history and ancient communities. The nostalgic *The Truth Sent from Above* uses bagpipes to call for everyone to gather, and eventually transitions to a lonely wandering violin, making it a lovely and sentimental tune. *Sheep Under the Snow* maintains the melancholy sentiment in a song about a shepherd worrying that his sheep will die if buried in the drifts — a tragic problem that still occurs today. *Blow, Northern Wind* takes us to a warm fireside where a troubadour sings about his one and only true love. The collection of tunes ends with *Nowell Sing We, Both All and Some* on a powerful note of percussion and choir.

“Caroling Across the Waters” comprises five tunes that tell a story of immigration. It describes wassails that are enjoyed from Somerset to Kentucky, infusing the listener’s mind with images of apple cider, spices, and citrus.

“Christmas Morning in Appalachia” begins with *Bright Morning Stars*, sung by an capella trio that welcomes Christmas morning. That message transitions to one of the most stunning melodies on the album, *Christ Child’s Lullaby (Talladh Chriosta)* — a heart-rending tune conveying gratitude and peace. The idea of Mother Mary’s undying love shines with subtle beauty and potent emotion. The remaining songs are lush with plucked instruments, choir, and more fiddle music. *Star in the East* concludes the set with the Musettes beginning the chorus in solfege and text. The music then transitions to Apollo’s Singers, who continue the song with great prowess.

“Wanderers Under the Sky” includes the beloved *I Wonder As I Wander* and *Over the Isles to America*. The final section, “Christmas Barn Dance,” gives the album a joyful ending with *Hop High Ladies*, *Old Christmas-Breakin’ Up Christmas*, and a bonus track called *The Parting Glass*.

Christmas on Sugarloaf Mountain is available on [Spotify](#), [Google Play](#), and [Amazon](#).

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 10, 2018.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)