

Early Folk Band musicians to join Apollo's Fire in "Far Beyond the Sea"

by Daniel Hathaway



Apollo's Fire's Countryside Concerts will feature a new trans-Atlantic collaboration this month. Ian Harrison, Gesine Bänfer, and Steven Player of Europe's The Early Folk Band will join Clevelanders Amanda Powell, Tina Bergmann, and Brian Kay in five performances of "Far Beyond the Sea" from June 6 through 10. This genre-crossing project involving old world ballads has been contemplated for some time but is just now coming to fruition.

"Jeannette Sorrell is one of our greatest fans, and we've been trying to get this sort of thing together for six or seven years," Harrison and Bänfer said in a tag-team Skype conversation from Freiburg, Germany. "Either we weren't free or they weren't free, or we couldn't decide how to do it, but we're very happy that it's now working."

Like Apollo's Fire, The Early Folk Band moves effortlessly between the worlds of early music and folk music, thanks to circumstances during the Baroque period, when ballad texts began to be collected and instruments were similar. "It's taken quite a long time for musicians like us to realize that folk music is early music," Harrison said. "It was written down in manuscripts or in printed editions in the time of Bach and Handel, Vivaldi, Purcell, and Monteverdi. So we can work on this music the same way we work on early music, to see how it was performed, what instruments were used, and how we can present it in concerts to an early music audience."

Harrison and Bänfer got the idea for establishing a folk ensemble after playing a concert of Medieval music in the Swiss Alps some years ago. “The presenter kept wanting us back, but every time they wanted something new, and they said we could ask whoever we wanted to play,” Harrison said. “This was a real luxury. Gesine and I had been concentrating our efforts on Medieval music from the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries, but at heart, we both were — and are — secret folkies who grew up with that music. Early in our adult lives, we had been involved with both, but we hadn’t really been able to combine the two.”

Bänfer chimed in: “The very start of it was at our kitchen table. We don’t have a television, so when we had had a hard day at work researching Medieval music and playing shawms, Ian and I sat down and played some Northumbrian tunes from Newcastle upon Tyne, the region he comes from. He plays the Northumbrian small pipes and I play guitar, so in his private life, he just loves to play these tunes, which were written down with lots of ornamentation. Living in Germany, every time he got homesick, he got out his pipes. So when the Swiss asked us what we wanted to do next year, we said it would be really nice to bring this music onstage with what would be our dream team — including a ballad singer who lives in Sweden and also sings early music, a great Medieval fiddle player, and course Steven Player, who has been playing music with Ian for 35 years.”

The group decided on a program, which turned out to be a great success. “Very soon after that first gig we got an offer from Deutschlandradio Kultur to record it,” Bänfer said. “It was like a gift.”

These days, the musicians switch back and forth between folk and early music. Later this month, they’ll provide a wind band to perform Machaut’s *Messe de Nostre Dame* with the boys’ and men’s choir of Freiburg Minster. On the other side of the repertoire, they perform and have recorded programs of ballads about Robin Hood and King Arthur.

The original idea for the Cleveland collaboration came from Jeannette Sorrell. “She had heard our *Northlands* CD and said she’d really love to do that program,” Bänfer said. “But if you’re in Cleveland and you play a concert called ‘Northlands,’ people might think it’s music from Canada rather than about King Orpheus of Scandinavia. So the solution was very simple. We just called the program ‘Far Beyond the Sea.’ That’s where you are — and where we are from your point of view — and there are actually a few ballads which have that theme.”

The program will begin with a very simple Medieval song, *I have a young sister far beyond the sea*, which has survived through the centuries. “It’s the same tune as *I*

gave my love a cherry, and it's still being sung in Ohio," Bänfer said, "so we thought we would start with a Medieval version of the song. Then we thought we would like to do highlights from our Robin Hood and King Arthur programs, which were brought to America on printed ballad sheets." She noted that Medieval versions of ballads about those historical figures are "very, very weird. Robin Hood isn't the same hero we know nowadays. He kills people and just takes everything for himself for revenge."



For sources, Harrison said that the musicians turned to books and manuscripts of the 16th through the 18th centuries, but also to broadsides — single printed sheets which were sold at markets for a penny, but which only gave the words of the ballads. "The process of putting words and tunes back together has been very interesting. Many tunes were collected much later, but some of them come from the 16th and 17th centuries, preserved in keyboard and lute variations that people preferred to play rather than Dowland. So there were folkies then as well! There was also quite a big market for dance tunes, so a lot of ballad tunes got printed that way."

The music and words may be old, but The Early Folk Band and Apollo's Fire planned the Cleveland concert in a very modern way: via Skype and email. "The Internet is a treasure," Bänfer said. "You can find original manuscripts online. Before, Ian spent a lot of his life transcribing Medieval music by hand from microfilm in the music historical department in Basel."

As for instruments, Bänfer will be bringing her copy of an old English guitar made in 1704 in Dublin. Harrison will be traveling with his small pipes, a set of whistles or flageolets, and a small harp he's confident will fit in an overhead bin. Add those to Steven Player's Renaissance guitar, Amanda Powell's vocals, Tina Bergmann's hammered dulcimer, and Brian Kay's lute, guitar, gourd banjo, and long-neck

dulcimer, and the audiences for “Far Beyond the Sea” can look forward to some colorful sounds in the forthcoming joint concerts.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 3, 2019.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)