

Apollo's Fire: "Elegance: The Harper's Voice" (video)

by Daniel Hathaway



With the novel coronavirus surrounded but not yet defeated, Apollo's Fire's February program "Elegance: The Harper's Voice" morphed from in-person performances to a recording session at First Baptist Church on February 27 that yielded a fine video of a high-quality concert, released on March 10. A few invited souls sprinkled throughout the pews

provided enough of an audience to make a brave noise when cheering was called for, and that was often.

Apollo's Fire moves so seamlessly from Baroque art music to folk tunes in programs like this one that Purcell and Playford sound like natural bedfellows, and Irish traditional music loses none of its allure when historically informed musicians take it on.



Jeannette Sorrell is a seasoned veteran at building programs with a narrative thread that loosely links music, poetry, and dance without putting too fine a point on details. In this case, the harp was the common denominator, and we heard that instrument in a number of roles, masterfully played by Anna O'Connell, who joined the project after a personnel change. She's also an accomplished singer who at several points in the program sang and played at the same time.

Fiddles are essential in Celtic music, and Carrie Krause and Emi Tanabe wielded their instruments with virtuosic authority. Brian Kay (plucked instruments), René Schiffer (cello), Kathie Stewart (Baroque and Irish flute), Luke Conklin (second harp and recorder), and Tina Bergmann (hammered dulcimer) completed the excellent band, led by Sorrell from the harpsichord.



The program opened with bright, lively performances of Purcell’s “Strike the viol” from *Come ye sons of art*, and Handel’s “O had I Jubal’s Lyre” from *Joshua* featuring soprano Amanda Powell, who was her usual clear-voiced and expressive self. Later, she delivered folk songs with unaffected charm.

Music by John Eccles, William Lawes, Solomon Eccles, and John Dowland represented the stars of late 17th-century classical music, while tunes by Turlough O’Carolan and traditional songs like *My Little Boat* and the *Skye Boat Song*, arranged by O’Connell and Sorrell, painted bucolic scenes of sea and sky.



The show ended, as Apollo's Fire programs often do, with an energetic finale featuring the entire cast, here as guests at an Irish wedding celebration.

This finely engineered video by Erica Brenner should become a historic document, preserving as it does so many details of the COVID-19 year — the vacant pews, the face masks, the enclosures separating performers that remind us that these times represent the apotheosis of Plexiglass.

This spring was to have featured the return of Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, but plagues different than frogs and blotches and blains have descended to confound plans. Apollo's Fire has soldiered on with altered programming and kept its mission alive. "Elegance" provides an example of the company's adaptability and resilience.

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