

Apollo's Fire: early Baroque treasures feature the bow of violinist Alan Choo

by Daniel Hathaway



Most people who work multiple jobs have to factor commuting time into their schedules, but Apollo's Fire concertmaster [Alan Choo](#), recently also appointed assistant artistic director of the ensemble, doesn't reckon his travel in hours. Home is in Singapore, where Choo founded Red Dot Baroque in 2018, and that's 9,465 air miles from Cleveland.

Choo is in town for a few weeks this time to be featured in Apollo's Fire's "Muse of Fire" programs that begin on Thursday, February 2, in Akron and end on Sunday, February 5 in Rocky River, with two nights at St. Paul's in Cleveland Heights in between.

His main assignment is the solo violin role in two of 17th-century Bohemian composer Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber's *Rosary Sonatas* — musical meditations on the five Joyful Mysteries, the five Sorrowful Mysteries, and the five Glorious Mysteries of the life of Christ.

Probably written in the 1670s, but unknown to modern ears until first published in 1905, the devotional work is preserved in a beautiful manuscript held in the Bavarian State Library.

"These programs were designed because I'm in the process of recording the complete *Rosary Sonatas* of Biber with Apollo's Fire," Choo said in a telephone conversation, a long-term project that has proceeded incrementally.

“We are planning for the album to be released a year from now. We have ten tracks in the can and I have six more to record. This weekend we’re going to have three more in the can, then three more in the summer.” The rest of the year will be spent editing and marketing, Choo said.

“At this week’s concerts I’ll be performing two of my favorite ones: The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, which is in d minor, and then the Assumption of Mary, which is a very lively and fun *ciacona* in D Major.

“Last season’s Biber Sonatas led directly to Bach, but this time the program will focus on the huge variety of music and composers in 17th century German-speaking lands. So we’re also going to be featuring music of Johann Heinrich Schmelzter, allegedly Biber’s teacher, with a really fun programmatic dance music suite called *Die Fechtschule* (The Dancing School).”

Choo said that the program will also feature a violin duet, Biber’s Ciaccona, from *Harmonia artificioso No. 5 in g*, played by Choo and Emi Tanabe, and vocal music by Dietrich Buxtehude, Franz Tunder, and Nikolaus Bruhns sung by soprano Andréa Walker and baritone Edward Vogel.

“The Bruhns *De Profundis* is amazing. It begins with very low tones, adding rich harmonies as it creeps upward,” Choo said. “At the end comes an ‘Amen’ that exudes sheer joy as its lines keep ascending, elevating us to be closer to heaven.”

Alan Choo admits that this weekend’s program is not as mainstream in terms of Baroque repertoire as Apollo’s Fire usually offers, but he hopes people will give it a chance.

Asked about the responsibilities that come with his new position with Apollo’s Fire, Choo pointed out that the title was assistant artistic director rather than assistant conductor. “I don’t exactly wave my hands. Moving into it has been quite a gradual process. Jeannette had already kind of slowly been giving me additional responsibilities before this title had been formalized.

“Last November I was in charge of Apollo’s Fire’s program *Violin Fantasy*, based around Biber and early Germans. I’ve been helping with social media marketing as well — writing publicity material and program notes, taking in meetings and chiming in when necessary. Getting to know the organization and how things are run, which is useful for me because I also run my own group in Singapore, Red Dot Baroque. I’ve learned so much artistically and organizationally from Jeannette under her leadership.”

Speaking of Red Dot Baroque, I mentioned the clever [parody](#) of Purcell's *Strike the Viol* that his ensemble put together to keep themselves busy during the lockdown at the beginning of the pandemic. "You remember that! Things are basically normal in Singapore now, but it's interesting to look back on those videos," Choo said.

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