

## **Apollo's Fire begins new season: a conversation with Jeannette Sorrell**

by Mike Telin



Apollo's Fire is moving full steam ahead into their 2023-24 season, which opens this week with four Northeast Ohio performances of their program "Splendour in London." The concerts also mark the beginning of a busy fall for the musicians and for the ensemble's founder and artistic director, Jeannette Sorrell. In fact, with all the forward motion that Apollo's Fire has experienced over the past couple of years,

Sorrell can certainly be described as a person on the go.

I caught up with her via Zoom in Chicago while she was literally in transit and began our wide-ranging conversation by asking her to reflect on Apollo's Fire's recent European tour.

**Jeannette Sorrell:** It was a wonderful experience. That was our Exile program, which we first took to Chicago, New York City, and San Francisco. The New York concert was especially fun — it was at the Met Museum and we were sold out two weeks in advance. When you have an audience that really wants to be there, there's always a special energy.

We then took the program across the pond to London at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, the Aldeburgh Festival, and the Heidelberg International Spring Festival, which was our German debut. It was special to take that program, which is about the Jewish exile experience, to Germany. The audiences were intensely involved emotionally — we could see tears on people's faces.

*Mike Telin: How long was the tour?*

JS: Two weeks in the U.S. and two weeks in Europe. And we played three different programs at St. Martin-in-the-Fields — the Exile program, Vivaldi's Four Seasons, and a late night program called "Blues Cafe 1610." We kind of moved into the place for a few days.

*MT: I understand that you're returning to New York this fall.*

JS: Yes. The Apollo Singers and I are going back to do Handel's *Israel in Egypt* with the New York Philharmonic (October 25 and 26). I conducted the *Messiah* with the New York Philharmonic in December of 2021, and I brought Apollo Singers that time, but it was not at Lincoln Center because David Geffen Hall was under renovation. So this year will be my and the Apollo's Singers' Lincoln Center debut.

*MT: Israel in Egypt is playing an important part in this year's season.*

JS: You're right. We recorded it and the CDs have arrived. We'll be selling them at the *Israel in Egypt* concerts later this month. And in addition to the Cleveland and New York performances, we're also taking it to Chicago and Indiana.

*MT: Before we get into the Cleveland season, how did you end up establishing a second base in Chicago?*

JS: It's been in our strategic plan to explore a more regular presence in Chicago. It's a very large market that hasn't had a period instrument orchestra on a consistent basis.

The main reason we felt there would be interest is that we were hired to play on the series at the University of Chicago, maybe seven years ago, and after the concert, many people came up and said, "You need to play here twice a year." After that, we started thinking about how that could happen. And now we have a mini series there.

We're playing seven concerts there this season — it's four programs, but seven performances. And last year, two of the concerts sold out. So it's going well but it's still very new.

*MT: Do you have a support mechanism there?*

JS: We have a board of wonderful arts patrons and a part-time managing director named Judy Bundra. Clevelanders might remember her because she was the dean at CIM for four years.

*MT: Out of curiosity — I know when The Cleveland Orchestra announced their residency in Miami, people were afraid they were going to leave town. Have you encountered anything like that? I take it you're not leaving Cleveland.*

JS: No! We are happily rooted in Cleveland. But honestly, playing our programs in Chicago, or at least some of them, helps to strengthen the organization because it amortizes rehearsal costs. If you're going to spend the money on rehearsals, then you want to do as many performances of the program as possible. So, that's essentially what Chicago is doing for us.



*(Having arrived at her destination, Sorrell settled into a lovely patio garden.)*

*MT: On to Cleveland. Your first series of concerts is coming up soon.*

JS: Yes, "[Splendour in London](#)" (October 12-15). This summer there was so much excitement and pageantry with the coronation of King Charles — the whole world seemed to be watching. So that kind of inspired our program. It's partly a choral concert with beautiful music by Purcell and Handel. We're also doing Handel's *Water Music*, which he wrote for a royal boating party on the River Thames. Apollo's Fire has not performed it for a really long time, so we're excited to bring new insights to it.

*MT: What new insights have you had?*

JS: They were published as individual dances. But I've been conducting the *Water Music* with other orchestras quite a bit during the last five years, so I've had a lot of chances to experiment a bit with how to connect certain movements, and with the pacing, to try to create more of an overall arc for a unified work rather than just separate dances that keep stopping. So, we'll see whether people like it or not.

*MT: Back to [Israel in Egypt](#) (October 21), what attracts you to that piece?*

JS: You know, it's such a thrilling storytelling opportunity for an orchestra and a virtuoso choir. It's a little bit like the movie *The Ten Commandments*. You've got the plague of the locusts, the plague of the hailstones, the plague of the flies, and then the very creepy shadow of death coming to take the firstborn of each Egyptian family. And singers are all storytellers as musicians — we really love to sink our teeth into a good story.

I also think it's a story that resonates in modern times because Handel so brilliantly depicted all of these natural disasters — and it reminds you a lot of the things we see in the news today with the recent natural disasters due to climate change.

*MT: Then there's "[Nights in Venice](#)" (November 9 and 10). You come up with the most interesting program titles.*

JS: The program is basically about the idea that the popular music of the time, essentially Italian folk music, was in the air, and it was inspiring art music composers like Monteverdi and Vivaldi. And even though Monteverdi and Vivaldi were 100 years apart, they were walking the same narrow streets of Venice, and responding to tavern songs, and café music. And you hear this in many of their pieces.

*MT: Tell me about "[Fire & Joy](#)" from Bach and Vivaldi (November 16-19).*

JS: That will feature an instrument that I think our audiences might never have seen, the viola d'amore. And our principal violist, Nicole Divall, will play Vivaldi's Viola D'amore Concerto, which will be a new adventure for all of us. And Debra Nagy will play Bach's F-major Oboe Concerto. The program ends with Brandenburg Four with our concertmaster Alan Choo on the pyrotechnics of the violin solo.



*MT: Speaking of Alan, he's now the Assistant Artistic Director.*

JS: This will be his second year in that position. He really embodies the spirit of Apollo's Fire — the combination of historical curiosity and research along with an engaging, animated spirit on stage to bring the music to life. That's what Apollo's Fire has always been about, and I think he embodies it beautifully.

*MT: As the Assistant Artistic Director, what are his behind-the-scenes duties?*

JS: He will be leading the February program. But in addition, he helps with some of the marketing that needs artistic guidance, like the scripts and music for the radio ads. And he's very good with social media.



*MT: And you'll wrap-up the calendar year with "[Wassail!](#)" (December 6-17).*

JS: Yes, there are six performances in Cleveland, and we're taking it to Detroit and Chicago. So we're actually running that program for two weeks.

If people enjoyed our program "The Fiddlers of Dublin" this summer, "Wassail!" has a similar spirit. It follows the stories of the Irish immigrants who were suffering during the potato famine in the 1850s. And while it basically begins with a Christmas Eve party of an Irish family who are trying to be merry, there's a tinge of sadness because they're packing their trunks and some of them are going to be heading to America because there are no jobs, and really no food in Ireland at that time.

*MT: In addition to attending concerts, people can now watch Apollo's Fires programs on [Medici TV](#).*

JS: Thank you for mentioning that. Medici contacted us last fall and we were surprised, but they are starting to work with some American groups and we are the first American

Baroque orchestra they have worked with. Two of our programs are on Medici already — the “Four Seasons” and “Mozart and the Chevalier.”

*MT: Thanks so much for talking. Is there anything else you would like readers to know?*

JS: We’re excited because last year we reached 17,000 individual ticket sales, which was a nice return from the pandemic. And we sold out the six *Messiah* concerts in advance. So we feel like audiences are really back, which is wonderful. And we’re very grateful that people are still making time for live music.

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