

**Apollo's Fire — “Wassail!
an Irish Appalachian Christmas”
at CMA (Dec. 17)**



Apollo's Fire's 2023 Christmas Show, “Wassail! an Irish Appalachian Christmas,” was a reworking of its earlier crossover shows, “Christmas on Sugarloaf Mountain” and “Sugarloaf Mountain: an Appalachian Gathering” — attractive programs of folk music wrapped around the narrative of immigrants from the British Isles who brought their

tunes with them to the New World. I saw the most recent version in its final performance in Gartner Auditorium at the Cleveland Museum of Art on Sunday, December 17.

The narrative, delivered by Derdriu Ring (also credited with theatrical direction) opens in an Irish village on Christmas Eve of 1849 during the Great Famine, then fast forwards to immigrants' new homes in Appalachia on Christmas Day of the following year. A Wassailing segment captures the tradition of boozy, door-to-door caroling, followed by Winter by the Hearth, a celebration of coziness in the face of winter, then a segue into a telling of the Christmas story and preparations for the sea journey to America. Part Two is a tapestry of Christmas and winter carols that ends in a minimally choreographed Christmas barn dance that recapitulated the Wassailing theme.

The clear-voiced Fiona Gillespie and the appealing baritone Sam Kreidenweis did most of the heavy vocal lifting, assisted by Anna O'Connell, who sang beguilingly while playing a Celtic harp, and vocal ensemble members Ashlee Foreman, Elora Kares, Constantine Novotny, Francisco Prado, and Andréa Walker. Arrangements, which were more complex and layered in earlier versions of the show when Apollo's Fire had fielded a 14-voice chorus and the 20 young singers of Apollo's Musettes,

here mostly involved unison singing, making such previous show-stoppers as *Star in the East*, which marries elaborate poetry by an Anglican bishop to a rollicking shape note tune from *Southern Harmony*, a bit tame in comparison.

Musical excitement came mostly from fiddle reels interspersed throughout the playlist (performed with verve by Susanna Perry Gilmore, Caitlin Hedge, and Emi Tanabe), from Kathie Stewart's gorgeous flute solo in *Bright Morning Stars* and infectious penny whistling in *I Saw Three Ships*, and from hammered dulcimer virtuoso Tina Bergmann's musical duel with René Schiffer in *Frost and Snow / 28th of January*. Usually the central focus of Apollo's Fire's inspiration and energy, Jeannette Sorrell, the show's creator and conductor, was away for the last four of seven local performances on guest conducting appearances.

In a word, Sunday's stripped-down show didn't offer the high level of rizz we've routinely come to expect from Apollo's Fire. If "Sugarloaf" hadn't been so good, "Wassail!" might not have paled in comparison.

Photo: Apollo's Fire, from a 2023 Chicago performance.

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