

Apollo's Fire: "Fencing Match: Round One" (Aug. 9)

by Peter Feher



Before the sound of armed conflict came to dominate classical music in the 20th century — think of the skittering strings or machine-gun rattle of snare drums in Dmitri Shostakovich's symphonies — combat didn't always mean life or death.

Among the aristocracy of 18th-century Europe, the clinking of swords was a cultivated pastime, an art on par with, say, practicing an instrument.

And that's the spirit with which Apollo's Fire took the stage at Case Western Reserve University's Harkness Chapel on Aug. 9 for "Fencing Match: Round One." The ensemble plans to reprise the program on tour next year, with this summer's series of concerts serving to sharpen the players' skills.

Only a few moments during Saturday afternoon's performance needed that extra bit of fine-tuning. Much of the repertoire was right in the sweet spot for Cleveland's Baroque orchestra, centering on well-known classics as well as a couple of signature pieces from the Apollo's Fire canon.

J.S. Bach's *Concerto in d for Two Violins* is one of the crown jewels of the double-concerto genre. With this score, the composer adopted the 18th-century trend of having two soloists locked in virtuosic battle and then added his own complex contrapuntal language. Alan Choo brought the requisite flash and style on first violin, but it was Susanna Perry Gilmore on second whose beautiful, sustained sound ultimately carried the performance.

Georg Philipp Telemann's *Concerto in e for Recorder and Flute* highlights the subtle contrast between two very similar instruments. The work's slow movements, featuring spare string accompaniment, show off all shades of woodwind sonorities,

while the rustic, folk-inflected finale has the soloists piping up like a set of bagpipes. There was no sense of competition here, just the collegiality shared by recorderist Daphna Mor and flutist Kathie Stewart, who playfully crossed their instruments like swords at the piece's conclusion.



Rounding out the duels and dialogues on the program's first half was a movement from Antonio Vivaldi's *Concerto in D for Two Violins and Two Cellos*, multiplying the musical combatants to dazzling effect.

After intermission, Apollo's Fire turned to a series of standby showpieces. Pride of place went to principal René Schiffer, who starred in his own *Tango Concerto for Two Violas da Gamba* alongside his section colleague Rebecca Landell.

Few Baroque composers ever penned solos for this soft-spoken cousin of the cello, so Schiffer had to mix musical styles to spotlight an instrument more often confined to an accompanying role. Fittingly, not only the gambas but also another continuo section of the ensemble got the chance to solo. An extended introduction from guitarists William Simms and Brandon Acker almost upstaged the proceedings.

Simms likewise challenged Choo in a charmingly choreographed moment during another Apollo's Fire favorite, Vivaldi's *La Folia* as arranged by artistic director Jeannette Sorrell. It was courtship meets concerto as the guitarist sought the favor of violinist Emi Tanabe, who in the end stuck with Choo as her sparring partner.

The drama flagged a bit at the start of the second half in a suite of dances by Jean-Philippe Rameau, which saw Sorrell stepping away from the harpsichord and embracing full-on conductor mode, though with a muted response from the orchestra.

But this was the exception in an otherwise dynamic concert that ended with one final riposte — an encore of a traditional Mexican dance that let each soloist improvise in the friendly spirit of one-upmanship.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com August 23, 2025.

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