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Apollo's Fire opens 35th season with "Ben Franklin in Paris"

by Mike Telin



When America's Founding Fathers needed to drum up French support for the Revolution, they sent 70-year-old Ben Franklin to Paris as their Ambassador, where he immersed himself in the cultural life of the Capital.

That period of time became the fodder for Jeannette Sorrell's "Ben Franklin in Paris," a program of orchestral works that were performed during his 9-year stay. The new program will kick off Apollo's Fire's 35th season on Thursday, October 12 at 7:30 at First United Methodist Church in Akron. A pre-concert talk with clarinetist Dominic Giardino will begin one hour before each performance. Concerts run through October 18, click here for times and locations. Tickets are available online.

I spoke with Jeannette Sorrell by phone to learn more about the program.

MT: Benjamin Franklin was a very interesting and colorful character: What drew you to him as a subject for a program?

JS: We like to apply for a grant every year from the National Endowment for the Arts, and this year they were encouraging organizations to create a project related to America's 250th birthday. As a period instrument Baroque Orchestra, playing American music from 1776 was not going to be a good fit for us because there's not a lot of strong repertoire. I tried to think of how to tie that into European music, so I came up with the idea to focus on the nine years Ben Franklin spent in Paris as ambassador.

MT: Which I'm sure netted you a lot of discoveries.



JS: Yes, indeed. A lot of really fun research has gone into it. The program focuses on three composers: Mozart, Joseph Bologne, and André Grétry.

Grétry was the leading opera composer in Paris at the time, and Bologne was the leading conductor and composer of concertos. And during the summer of 1778 those three composers and Ben Franklin were all in Paris at the same time, which I thought was kind of fun.

Mozart was staying next door to Joseph Bologne. They were both house guests in small villas in Passy outside of Paris.

It's interesting to investigate to what degree they influenced each other. And which of them met Ben Franklin, who was famous and respected in the capital, and attended lots of parties, concerts, and salons.

We're pretty sure that he would have met Grétry and Bologne because they were going to those same salons.

But the one who was obscure and ignored was Mozart. He was only 22 years old and had arrived in Paris in March of that year with his mother hoping to find work. He did receive a commission to write a symphony, which is the Paris Symphony, but he did not find an actual job.

MT: Did Mozart write anything more when he was in Paris?

JS: He wrote some movements for a ballet called *Les Petits Riens*, ("*The Little Nothings*,") and we're playing the overture from that.

It's kind of a sad story because a few different composers contributed music for that ballet, but Mozart was not even credited because he was considered unimportant.

MT: You'll be playing "La Voltaire et La Franklein."

JS: This is a short contredanse, essentially a folk dance written on the occasion of Ben Franklin meeting Voltaire. It's in two parts. The first is a kind of jig, but it's a little jagged and a bit awkward. It's meant to suggest the slightly stumbling movements of Voltaire, because he was quite elderly at that time. The second half is a gavotte that's

more flowing and confident. That is meant to suggest Ben Franklin, who was 72 at that time, but was more vigorous than Voltaire.

MT: Did you discover anything that surprised you?

JS: The fact that they didn't credit Mozart for his contributions to the ballet was a little shocking. I knew that he was not particularly well-received in Paris, but to not credit him — that's pretty bad.

Joseph Bologne was of African descent, but he was French. And Grétry was Belgian, but French-speaking. So with Mozart you have an Austrian who was only 22 and probably didn't speak French. They probably didn't give him the time of day.

MT: Did you discover anything about Ben Franklin that surprised you?

JS: I was able to visit his former house in London last month, which has been turned into a museum. They have a very nice exhibit with a lot of information about him. And at this exhibit, I learned more about his history with slavery and the abolition movement.

He did have an enslaved servant when he was a younger man. But he lived a long time, and through the course of his long life, it seems that his feelings about slavery evolved as American society's feelings about it were also evolving during that period of about 80 years. So by the time he was in his older phase he had decided that slavery was wrong. It was partly through getting to know his servants as human beings whom he respected and admired.

I also wonder if getting to know Joseph Bologne, who was quite a sensation in Paris might have also influenced him.

MT: Is there any documentation of the two of them meeting?

JS: There's just a general knowledge that they both attended various salons that were run by aristocratic women. So it seems pretty likely that they would have met.

MT: Congratulations on Apollo's Fire's Season 35. You must be pinching yourself.

JS: I never imagined that it would last this long. When I started it, I thought, I'll do this for a couple of years and see what happens.

MT: You also have a new CD coming out.

JS: Our 35th CD album, Bach's B-minor Mass. For a Baroque orchestra, that's a really important milestone in our repertoire.

The recording is currently available as pre-order. People can save a little money by pre-ordering it between now and October 23rd. After October 23rd, the price goes up a bit. But if people want to order it in advance, they can pick up the CD at our November concerts. We'll have it ready and waiting for them.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com *October 12, 2026*

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