



KEEP AN EAR OUT

High Folk Art

A period-instrument ensemble embraces Americana.

By Brian Wise

WHEN CONDUCTOR-HARPISCHORDIST

Jeannette Sorrell took her period-instrument band, Apollo's Fire, on its first European tour last fall, she discovered that audiences and reporters were not so interested in asking about its program of Handel and Rameau, nor about early music at all. Most of the questions were about *Come to the River*, a collection of musical Americana—including fiddle tunes, ballads, hymns and spirituals—recorded and sold on the group's website last year. It's due for an

international release in June on Avie Records.

"They don't really know what shape-note singing is," she says of European response to the boisterous hymn-singing tradition.

Of course, classical musicians like Yo-Yo Ma and Edgar Meyer have embraced Appalachian folk styles, but Sorrell comes to it with unique personal experience, having moved to Virginia's Shenandoah Valley as a teenager. "That was the first time I heard a hammer dulcimer player, an Appalachian ballad singer, and I just loved the social quality of the music," she explains. "When we moved to Virginia, my first job was playing piano at a little country Baptist church. And they were doing some of the *Southern Harmony* songs. I just loved the sparse harmonies, which really have a medieval quality with their open fourths and fifths."

For *Come to the River*, Sorrell supplemented Apollo's Fire's core roster of Baroque strings, winds, brass and percussion with country fiddles, hammer dulcimer, guitar and singers. The group applies the same level of

scholarship to folk styles, she says, as it does to Bach or Monteverdi.

"This terrible chasm that has developed between popular music versus art music did not exist back in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries," she explains. "You can hear great composers, like William Byrd, who were writing polyphonic masses that were variations on street songs and folk tunes. There's a close relationship between early music and folk music." She adds that scholars have traced the roots of many Appalachian folk songs to Elizabethan and other European sources.

Sorrell believes that folk music can only enhance an approach to Baroque composers: "It shows up in the way we approach Vivaldi and Telemann. Those two composers had a more rustic side to them, in certain pieces anyway. Telemann did because of the time he spent in the countryside. I think that we probably play those movements in a more earthy way than we did when we didn't have the folk background." ■