

Preview: Apollo's Fire—'Come to the River' gets a makeover for 2010 Countryside Concerts

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Emboldened by the success of last summer's Countryside Concerts, which brought ten sold-out performances of 'Come to the River' to relatively rural venues in the Cleveland area, Apollo's Fire has doubled its summer offerings this time around. Montreal-based Ensemble La Nef and Feux d'Archetistes are ending their six-concert run of "My Love is like a Red, Red Rose" this week, and Apollo's Fire itself embarks on a seven-performance, second round of 'Come to the River' beginning on Friday, June 18 and continuing through Friday, June 25.

But a number of things will be different in the 2010 iteration of "An Early American Gathering". We reached Apollo's Fire artistic director Jeannette Sorrell via Skype in Holland last week to ask about this year's version of "Come to the River".

"Last year was a huge experiment. It was thrilling that people liked it so much, but I personally was not completely satisfied with it. It was really a learning process through the ten performances".

The three-act program, based on Sorrell's recollections of growing up in rural Virginia, wrapped an extensive selection of early American music around the story of a preacher who moved his family from Pennsylvania to Kentucky during the Great Awakening around 1800. The plot takes a dark turn when a member of the family gets into trouble and shoots a man. Wild Bill Jones is ultimately redeemed during a revival meeting in the second half of the show.

What's different in the story line in 2010? "I'm changing the first half of the program around so it's perhaps a little bit more reminiscent of Lake Woebegone. I'm going to set the context of the music based on my own experience growing up in the Shenandoah Valley and actually share with the audience how I encountered my first barn dance and my first ballad singer. Then we'll work our way a little more gradually into the story of the early American preacher who was prominent last year. I felt like we needed to do a little better job preparing the audience for that".

Although the instrumentalists and the four principal singers will remain the same in 2010, there will be two new musical elements. "The instrumentalists will still participate in a cappella pieces but there will be more singers from the Apollo's Fire chorus. I've also engaged a fantastic Appalachian percussive dancer named Matthew Olwell who will bring the rustic side of the program to new heights".



We asked Jeannette Sorrell what a percussive dancer does. "Two things. He does Appalachian clogging or flat-footing, a type of step dance related to the Irish form but different. He's also a hambone performer, or body percussionist. He'll use his body in percussive -- and very improvisatory -- ways. This will help create the atmosphere of a happening in a tavern and the addition of the guest artist will make the whole show seem like a new experience".

Another major difference in 2010 is the choice of venues. This year's show, except for

two performances at Huntington Playhouse in Bay Village and two performances in which Apollo's Fire will make its Cain Park debut, will take place indoors at Morley Music Hall in Painesville and at The Bath Church. Sorrell notes that some changes in the performance of the music go right along with the choice of performance spaces.

"You know, the program was designed for a barn, which is a very rustic setting, and it made us take a rustic, theatrical and somewhat gritty approach to the music. Then after that run of ten concerts was over, we went into St. Paul's Church in Cleveland Heights and recorded a CD. Being in the beautiful acoustic of the stone church just made us take a different approach to the music and we decided to go for the beautiful and luminous. When all that was over, I realized that I would really like to try this year to somehow have both of those qualities. This year we're doing it in different venues, not the Baroque Music Barn, and we're doing it in larger places because we have a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to bring the program to larger, mainstream audiences".

Hence the addition of more vocalists. "In order to go for beauty as well as rustic, I've engaged some additional singers so we can achieve a more blended vocal power in the Shape-Note Hymns".

In its first appearances at Cain Park in Cleveland Heights on Friday, June 25, Apollo's Fire is offering both a 1:00 "Highlights for Kids" performance and an 8:00 debut celebration. "I'm really excited to be performing in my own neighborhood, and to be doing a program that's well suited to that audience".

For performance details, see the concert listings. For ticket availability, click here to visit the Apollo's Fire website.

A CD report on the limited edition release of 'Come to the River' appears on CC.com's commentary page (the disc will be released worldwide on the Avie label in 2011). CD release parties will take place at The Bath Church on June 18 and at Cain Park on June 25.

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