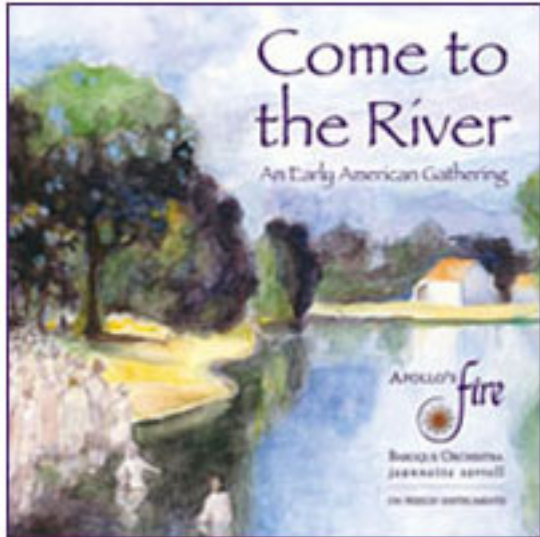


**CD Report: Apollo's Fire—
'Come to the River: an early American Gathering'**

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In anticipation of its world-wide release in 2011 by British label Avie, Apollo's Fire has issued a limited edition recording of its 2010 production, 'Come to the River' just in time for the seven-performance run of a revised version of the show this month.

Produced by artistic director Jeannette Sorrell, recorded by Thomas Knab and edited by Erica Brenner, the disc was recorded at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights last June following a sold-out run of ten performances. Its eighteen tracks represent a compendium of early American music: Appalachian dances, Anglo-American and southern ballads, hymns and spirituals from the Sacred Harp and Southern Harmony tradition, and dance music from a variety of sources.

Arranged in three sections -- Appalachian Wagon Train, Love and Death and Revival Meeting -- 'Come to the River' follows but doesn't depend on the plot line of the live show. The music can be enjoyed in its own right without requiring any connective narration.

The playing and singing are predictably first-rate. Sandra Simon, Abigail Haynes Lennox, Scott Mello and Paul Shipper contribute a variety of vocal styles to the mix ranging from solos to duets, trios and quartets. Simon is the lovely storyteller in Ravenscroft's "The Three Ravens" and delivers a

very funny version of "Fox Went Out on a Chilly Night" complete with Scots accent. Lenox is dolefully expressive in "Wayfaring Stranger", Mello affects a convincing country accent in "Old Virginny" and "Wild Bill Jones", and Shipper is resonant in "Hold On" and "Willie Prithee". As an ensemble, the quartet distinguishes itself in Shape-Note and Southern Harmony hymns, putting across the attractively primitive quality of their harmonies and textures without trying to appropriate the vocal style you can hear on "authentic" recordings.

Hammered dulcimer virtuoso Tina Bergmann is always a pleasure to hear, especially here in the opening "Appalachian Barn Dance", and "Glory in the meeting house". Rachel Jones makes a fine country fiddler, as does cellist René Schiffer, who moves into surprising territory in his own affecting solo arrangement of "The Girl who Broke My Heart". Kathie Stewart makes a fine showing on wooden flutes in her arrangement of the Irish "Lark in the Morning Medley". Gary Stewart contributes fine backup on guitar and banjo and is an equal partner with Bergman in "Ways of the World / Dusty Miller".

Other arrangements are the work of Jeannette Sorrell, who is prominently featured on the harpsichord, contributing a lute-like accompaniment to some songs and a charming set of dances from New England and Ireland in the middle of the Revival Meeting.

Those who saw the 2009 performances of 'Come to the River' already know that a lot of the repertory is not much of stretch for Baroque musicians, who take very easily to Anglo-American music of the early 19th century and can put a new sheen of artistry on the music. What was surprising was how readily Apollo's Fire adapted to Celtic country fiddling traditions and to ensemble pieces like "Down in the River to Pray". The nineteenth track, the Old Joe Clark barn dance encore, finds the ensemble letting its hair down in a really amazing way. Of course, Apollo's Fire doesn't sound quite like an Appalachian ensemble. Musical values are

intentionally more refined than their original models, but in no way does this detract from the charm of this “original cast” album.

The recording itself is crystal clear, preserving the feel of performing in a live, stone building without an obscuring halo of reverberation (though the last note of the bonus track hangs in the air for nearly ten seconds!) The program booklet is a fine piece of scholarship, citing musical sources, including essays on the program and a reminiscence of her first revival meeting by Jeannette Sorrell, complete lyrics, thumbnail bios of performers and a helpful paragraph which notes that the musicians “approach the music with the lively freedom of folk performers” and “strive to break down the modern barrier between art music and popular music and to revive the ‘crossover’ spirit of the 17th century, when great composers regularly wrote artful variations on street tunes and tavern songs”.

“Come to the River” will be available at two CD Release parties during this year’s run of the show: on Friday, June 18 at The Bath Church and on Friday, June 25 at Cain Park in Cleveland Heights.