

Classical review

Renée Fleming surprises and delights, as always

Iconic diva Renée Fleming surprised and delighted the audience in her performance with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra at Seattle's Benaroya Hall.

By Melinda Bargreen

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Concert Review |

Over the years, it has been highly enjoyable to watch the evolution of Renée Fleming from ingénue soprano to opera star to iconic diva. While her career has taken a consistently upward trajectory, she has never lost the knack of surprising and delighting her audiences — as she did in Friday night's recital at Benaroya Hall with the Seattle Symphony and its music director, Ludovic Morlot.

Most opera divas don't pick up the microphone in mid-concert and sing indie-rock songs from the repertoire of Death Cab for Cutie and Muse. Most divas don't include new works (like the eloquent "We Hold These Truths," by Todd Frazier) among the familiar bonbons ("O Mio Babbino Caro") in the encore lineup. But then Fleming always has been a singer who does it her way: singing the

blues as well as art songs, and bypassing a lot of the usual Verdi and Puccini roles in order to star in operas by Tchaikovsky and Carlisle Floyd.

At 53, Fleming is in the late-career phase, but there was little to suggest this in her Seattle recital — from her appearance, dazzling in two spectacular diva gowns, to the creamy warmth of her expressive soprano. As she always does, before she even started to sing, Fleming somehow drew the audience toward her just by standing there and smiling, and she enhanced that communication Friday evening with informal commentary from the stage. Introducing Gounod's famous "Jewel Song" (from "Faust"), Fleming quipped that "This song is about seduction by jewelry... it never worked for me."

What did work for her, vocally at least, was an expressive and sensuous account of Ravel's "Shéhérazade," in perfect sync with Morlot and the orchestra; a fervent reading of the "Jewel Song" from "Faust" and an exquisite performance of the "Vilja Song" from "The Merry Widow." For this listener, the evening's big surprise was hearing Fleming's heartfelt, lovely "Marietta's Lied" (from Korngold's "Die Tote Stadt"). Her first encore, "Io son l'umile ancella" (from Cilea's "Adriana Lecouvreur") was eloquently presented.

Less convincing were the miked selections; symphonic versions of rock are seldom successful, and Fleming's voice (even amplified) was hard to hear in that low register.

Morlot and the orchestra provided spirited overtures (to Gershwin's "Girl Crazy" and Offenbach's "Orpheus in the Underworld"), as well as a lively "Bacchanale" from Saint-Saëns' "Samson and Delilah." It was Fleming's first collaboration with Morlot; the cheering audience was clearly hoping it

will be the first of many.

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