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Photo: Andrew Eccles

**Renée Fleming brings Los Angeles an angelic sound for the holidays.**

RENÉE FLEMING  
RECITAL  
LOS ANGELES OPERA  
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By: Carol Jean Delmar  
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It is almost as if Renée Fleming can do no wrong. I feel as if it would be politically incorrect for me to find one single fault with her perfection, or worse yet, for me to write about it if I found it. Don't worry, though: I didn't. But I did feel lukewarm about certain elements of her program.

Fleming is on a multi-city recital tour. Before gracing the stage of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles, she sang an almost identical program in Seattle and San

Francisco, with Baltimore after LA. You would have never guessed that LA Opera was in deep financial trouble if you had looked around the room. It was a sold-out house. It didn't take a lavish \$32 million theater-of-the-absurd production to make this happen. All it took was one grand piano, two flower arrangements, a pianist and a singer.

The essence of opera is beautiful music. That is what sells tickets. The people who head LA Opera are a little mixed up. Opera is about orchestra and voice coming together to make beauty. That's what those of us who live in LA want to hear. Quality is what elevates a company. So now that LA Opera has been granted its \$14 million loan, will the management learn? That is the question. We want a company with integrity that lives within its means and provides us with the music we love, not a failing bank with a tarnished image. Good old-fashioned quality is what works best, and that is what Renée Fleming represents.

She looked beautiful in a gorgeous green evening gown, but didn't hit her stride until the second half of her recital in a black-and-white evening gown with Strauss Lieder. That was when she was in her element. Her voice soared freely without constraint as she sang of seduction, love and dedication in the environs of a brook that scarcely murmured, a breeze that scarcely stirred, complemented by the agile finger dexterity of pianist Gerald Martin Moore.

From German to rarely heard verismo arias by Leoncavallo, Giordano and Riccardo Zandonai – Fleming first described the character she portrays in Zandonai's "Conchita" as "Carmen on steroids":

"Yesterday three fine gentlemen followed me from the Triana factory. . . . Softly I whispered into the ear of the first: I'm going crazy for your lips. . . . The second had a pair of languorous eyes. . . . But capriciously I turned away when I came to the third. . . . He's the one I love!"

Singing Stephana from Giordano's "Siberia," her unbridled lust was tempered by an awakened conscience: "If one thought torments my mind it is this: that my beloved should never find out about the Stephana he knows nothing of."

From Leoncavallo's "Zazà," she dreamt of the serenity of others. From his "La Bohème," she flirted coquettishly.

Yet it was the first part of the program that seemed more significant to Fleming: the French repertoire of Olivier Messiaen, Jules Massenet and Henri Dutilleux. By far the most enticing for me was her "J'ai versé le poison dans cette coupe d'or" from Massenet's "Cléopâtre." The seductress pours poison into a golden cup. Those who drink from it will die, yet they drink it because she has promised them a taste of her lips and the gentle gaze of her eyes. I wonder what Tiger Woods would have done in a similar situation.

The Messiaen songs which celebrate the composer's domestic bliss with his wife did not

enthrall me. I wondered if any other soprano but Fleming could have gleaned such light. The harmonic and rhythmical complexity of the pieces enabled Fleming to soar as a bird in the framework of what appeared to be set serialism. The beauty was there; however it was not due to the compositional makeup of the harmonies, but rather to the color and agility of Fleming's instrument.

Likewise, the song cycle entitled "Le temps l'horloge" composed for Fleming by Henri Dutilleux evoked from me similar hesitation. Crescendos, decrescendos, extreme highs to plummeting lows – Fleming was able to show the breadth and depth of her sound both expressively and technically in the composer's atonal yet lyrical canvas attuned to time and memory. Yet I was somehow lost in his sound and vision although fascinated by Fleming's flute-like versatility and by the song "Le dernier poème," which some people believe was "The Last Poem" found on the body of poet Robert Desnos in the Terezín concentration camp. The text seems eerily haunting when you realize that the poet was dying when it was written.

"I've dreamt so strongly of you. . . . I'm left to be the shadow . . . that will appear and reappear in your sun-filled life," Fleming sang with meticulous musicianship.

Yet when the evening was almost at its conclusion and Fleming said, "I'm just warming up," I realized that indeed that was just how it seemed. I found myself waiting and waiting for something that would stimulate me more than what I had heard. Even though her voice was colored like the hues of a rainbow, I still wanted more from her emotionally, yet her voice was exquisite. It all seemed so easy. There was absolutely no tension. My father, who was an opera singer in Vienna and Prague in the 1930s, often told me that if he listened to a singer with a relaxed throat who was singing correctly, he could then sing more effectively himself. That is what Ms. Fleming is able to give to other young singers. After one-and-a-half hours of her singing, we were certain she could have gone on for another two. But the problem was that when she sang "O mio babbino caro" from "Gianni Schicchi" as an encore, we breathed a sigh of relief. Suddenly we were hearing something melodic that we could identify with. We could then mentally compare Fleming's sound to other sopranos and conclude that it was flawlessly pure. When she sang "O mio babbino caro," there was silence in the room. Nobody dared take even a breath.

Artists believe that it is their duty to introduce audiences to uncharted territory. Yet many of us simply want a mix so that we can hear what made us fall in love with the artists in the first place. Strauss was as close as we got. Hopefully singers will include more familiar melodious arias and songs in their recitals in the future. Ms. Fleming is not the only one whose program disappointed. Many other great singers have been similarly guilty. At least this time we were able to watch a beautiful woman in glamorous gowns sing with an angelic voice that flowed effortlessly into the heavens.