

Concert review: Renee Fleming, Columbus Symphony provide evening of world-class music

Lynn GreenSpecial to The Columbus Dispatch

Soprano Renee Fleming

After 18 months of apprehension and uncertainty, of living with mandates and questions, we're ready for things to go back to normal. We're ready to venture out again. And the Columbus Symphony, kicking off its 70th season Saturday night, presented a concert — or, more of a pastiche — of fun, interesting, short works that were exactly what a world-weary audience needed.

Prior to the concert, the ticket lines outside the Ohio Theatre moved smoothly, even with the added step requiring proof of COVID-19 vaccination or negative test before entering the building. It seemed that, with a mostly older audience, this was a new experience, but most of the occasional confusion seemed to concern showing a photo ID that matched the name on the vaccination card.

Tickets were limited to roughly half the capacity of the theater, but specific seats were not assigned. Most patrons congregated in blocks of the best seats in each section, and others who wished to sit in seats more socially distant, took advantage. It's a concept that works for everyone, although the theater looked strangely empty at first glance.

Full symphony onstage at Ohio Theatre

Inside, the orchestra once again had its full personnel on the stage — a welcome sight, for sure. The string players still wore face masks, but wind players were no longer separated by plexiglass barriers.

They opened the season with Ravel's richly harmonic "La valse" under the leadership of Music Director Rossen Milanov.

The first few, mysterious bars had a touch of incoherence, and the quiet passages often felt hesitant, leaning on the violins to pull them along. Fortunately, the musicians quickly regained clarity and cohesiveness every time the volume and melodies swelled.

Soprano Renee Fleming wowed the audience

But, beloved as the orchestra is, everyone (or, at the very least, almost everyone) in Saturday night's audience had come to hear one thing: the guest artist.

Renee Fleming has become a household name, arguably the best singer of her generation for her command of both technique and artistry. She is a musician of such caliber that, last night, she received a standing ovation simply for stepping onto the stage. The concert was set up to showcase Fleming's expertise with a variety of styles, from art song to opera to film to theater, with orchestral interludes that supported her repertoire.

As an answer to "La valse," Fleming countered with Richard Strauss's "Vier letzte Lieder" ("Four Last Songs"). Composed when Strauss was 84, and exploring end-of-life emotions and acceptance, they are as artistically challenging as they are technically demanding.

Shading grief, reverence, peacemaking and a humble joy is no small task, and less so when layered on top of Strauss's rich melodies. Fleming handled all of it wonderfully, though. Even the demands of "Frühling," which lingers in a frequently-merciless vocal range, were no problem at all.

Even more striking, though, was John Corigliano's "And the People Stayed Home," based on Kitty O'Meara's well-known poem from 2020. The work was written for Fleming, and for her alone — literally. "(Corigliano) wanted to evoke the feeling of friends, alone in New York City, during the pandemic," she explained.

For a few minutes, the theater and orchestra were absolutely still, hinged on every word, while Fleming sang O'Meara's story of isolation and hope.

The orchestra lightened the mood with Giacomo Puccini's "Capriccio Sinfonico," the last of the composer's orchestral works at conservatory and full of motives that would later find their ways into his operas. The "Puccini sound," with waves of passion and tenderness, delicacy and expansiveness, was on full display.

Later in the program, the "Intermezzo" from Ruggero Leoncavallo's "I Pagliacci" hit all of its marks with brilliant color and tortured emotion.

Fleming offered varied repertoire from Puccini to Leonard Cohen

Switching gears to film music, Fleming sang “The Sound of Music” and “The Last Rose of Summer” (which was used in the film "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri"), stylistically different but both charming and graceful, letting her voice blossom.

Then, for a bit of comedy, she tossed out a solo version of "The Diva" from composer Andrew Lipka (who recently moved to Columbus and was in the audience).

“How many of you have a job where you’re reviewed in the paper the next morning?” the diva asks, while insisting that divas have mortgages and husbands and are practically just like you!

Finally, it was time for some opera. "Musetta svara sulla bocca" from "La Boheme" is much lesser known than Mimí’s other arias, but much more lighthearted; Fleming’s approach to it is perfect. And, what the famous “O mio babbino caro” lacked in teenage angst, it more than made up for in elegance.

And even with her encores, Fleming kept the audience on its toes: a sing-along to “I Could Have Danced All Night” from "My Fair Lady, " and Leonard Cohen’s tragically beautiful “Hallelujah.”

The beauty of opening the season with this program and its world-class guest artist was that, for the audience, it was a moment of escapism, sorely needed, with no demands. Each piece was substantial, yet the evening flew by quickly. Let’s hope it continues this way.

Correction: This story has been updated to correct the name of Richard Strauss.