

**This interview with
RENEE FLEMING
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on March 23, 2018**



Renee Fleming

Library of Congress: For you, what was the general experience of making the album like?

Renee Fleming: Recording “Signatures” was, for me, the ultimate experience--a chance to capture a wide range of iconic opera scenes from my core repertoire, with legendary conductor, Sir Georg Solti, and the world-renowned London Symphony Orchestra. Opera is a largely European tradition, but I was fortunate to have mentors in American icons Beverly Sills, Marilyn Horne, and Leontyne Price, who gave me invaluable personal guidance at the beginning and well into my career. And as the daughter of two public-school vocal music teachers, I grew up steeped in music, but I was also the beneficiary of a robust, wide-ranging education in arts in our local public school system.

To have “Signatures” included in the National Registry of the Library of Congress is an honor that is deeply meaningful for me; not only because I love these works so much, but also because I feel that now, more than ever, valuing arts in our culture is absolutely essential.

LOC: How did you go about choosing the particular selections for this album?

RF: I was offered a rare opportunity in this album—a luxury, really—of recording full scenes, rather than just excerpted arias. At the time, it was unusual to present so many different languages on one recording, and few Americans recorded in Russian or Czech. For “Signatures,” I recorded extended scenes: Tatyana’s letter scene from “Eugene Onegin,” the Willow Song and Ave Maria sequence from “Otello,” and Daphne’s transformation from Strauss’s opera of the Greek myth.

With the exception of Daphne, all of these selections were from roles which I had already performed onstage. Strauss, of course, later became a core composer for me. The Countess in “Le nozze di Figaro” served as my debut in many opera houses, and the Song to the Moon from “Rusalka” was a staple of my early auditions at a time when it was little known. I ultimately sang the role in Paris, London, Houston, San Francisco, San Diego, Washington, DC, four series of performances at the Metropolitan Opera, and recorded it in Prague, where my great-grandparents emigrated from. I had performed Tatyana in “Eugene Onegin” in a couple of productions then, but she was one of my favorite characters. I felt most aligned with her because of her initial shyness, and subsequent growth into a woman of strong convictions. Shortly before this recording, I had performed Desdemona in “Otello” opposite Plácido Domingo, for the

opening night telecast of the Metropolitan season; a real turning point in my American career. And I had also recently made my role debut as Ellen Orford in “Peter Grimes.”

LOC: What was it like working with Georg Solti?

RF: When I met him, Georg Solti, he was already a legend, and had conducted many legendary singers and orchestras. I filled in at the last minute on a concert and recording of Mozart’s “Cosi fan Tutte,” and I remember well walking into his London studio and seeing the multitude of Grammy Awards lined up on the window sills. He was a task master, especially about rhythm, but he was also tremendously supportive. “Don Giovanni” followed, along with this recording. We had many more plans when he suddenly passed away. It came as a total shock, because his energy and vitality made him ageless to me. I consider myself privileged to have learned so much from him early in my career.

LOC: Who were some of your favorite conductors to work with and what qualities did they have that made them stand out?

RF: I’ve been fortunate to work with many conductors over the years; besides Solti, with Christoph Eschenbach, Valery Gergiev, Christian Thielemann, Claudio Abbado, Zubin Mehta, Daniel Barenboim, Sir Andrew Davis, Michael Tilson Thomas, James Levine, and many more. People sometimes ask me what the role of the conductor is, since some conductors can make it look effortless that up to 100 players, choristers and multiple soloists manage to perform perfectly in sync. But the real role of a conductor is to foster a memorable and individual interpretation while following historic practice and style. At best, it’s a fully collaborative process that feels intuitive in terms of the give and take in a live performance. I always hope to be inspired, but never tyrannized. A sympathetic conductor also has a respect for singers that somewhat mitigates the risk we bear. Singers are often so preoccupied with the challenge of managing tone, volume, text, expression, and in the case of opera, acting and movement, that having a strong conductor on the podium is of enormous help.

LOC: What is one thing a teacher said to you that you still think of almost every time you sing?

RF: Singing for me now is not about remembered rules, although there are typically passages or pitches in any given performance that require technique. It is more an intuitive and non-verbal process now. I’ve incorporated all of my early training, so that my experience of singing is more like painting--coloring the voice, or more like coloring *with* the voice, utilizing style and text--being in the zone both in terms of communicating with the audience, and being a conduit for the music and words.

LOC: What are the challenges and joys of singing with an orchestra?

RF: The best orchestra for a singer possesses the flexibility to turn on a dime if needed, depending on who is performing and what kind of night they’re having. I admire instrumentalists for their cultivated musicianship. Their hours of practice that often began before most singers even knew they had a voice, would put them alongside any brain surgeon in terms of skill.

LOC: If you could do one thing to improve, or change, the opera scene today, what would it be?

RF: Honestly, what I would prescribe is already happening. In order for this centuries-old art form to stay relevant and attract new audiences, opera has to embrace the creation of new work. New operas on relevant subjects are being created by a wealth of gifted young composers right

now. They are often of a smaller scale--more intimate and shorter, which is appropriate for audiences today. Still, one of opera's singular strengths is that it allows you to hear a unique human voice, trained to Olympic virtuosity and power, without amplification. Because it involves music, including an orchestra, the visual arts of scenic and costume design, dance, and theater, opera is the most expensive performing art there is. But it rewards our support in so many ways. The shared experience of musical storytelling is part of human cultural DNA, and will continue, in one form or another.