

## “Signatures”-- Renée Fleming (1997)

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Essay by Donald George (guest post)\*



*Album cover*

What a stroke of good fortune when, in December 1996, Decca turned its interests to producing a series of classical music CD recordings. The young, spectacular soprano Renée Fleming with the London Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of the eminent conductor Sir Georg Solti, combined their artistry to produce one of the most memorable recordings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the CD “Signatures.” It was recorded in London’s Henry Wood Hall from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1996.

Beginning with the melancholy 18<sup>th</sup> century “Porgi amor” from Mozart’s “Le nozze di Figaro” to the haunting 20<sup>th</sup> century “Embroidery Aria” from Britten’s “Peter Grimes,” the listener is dazzled by the lustrous voice of Renée Fleming. She triumphs in the evocative aria from Dvořák’s “Rusalka,” the “Song to the Moon,” which Ms. Fleming views as her calling card. Sir Simon Rattle is quoted as saying: “One of the most difficult things in opera is for people to suspend disbelief.” Fleming easily achieves this in the “Rusalka”; we believe she is the water nymph, singing:

*Moon be still for a while  
and tell me where my dearest is.  
... If this human is actually dreaming of me,  
may the memory wake him up!*

In her autobiography, “The Inner Voice,” Fleming relates that she first sang this aria, in English, upon her acceptance for study at The Crane School of Music, SUNY Potsdam. Fleming recognizes that being accepted at Crane was “the first great break in her career.” It was here that her voice teacher, Patricia Misslin, handed Fleming an “old-fashioned and weathered piece of sheet music.” The sheet music was the aria, “Song to the Moon” by Dvořák, which would become Fleming’s talisman, instrumental to her being celebrated as the “People’s Diva.”

In 1996, the Académie du Disque Lyrique in Paris, honoring Sir Georg Solti, established the Solti Prize to be awarded annually to an outstanding young singer. The first recipient of this prestigious award was the American soprano Renée Fleming. Six months later she and Solti would record the CD “Signatures.”

The list of scenes captured on the CD:

- “Le nozze di Figaro,” Mozart
1. “Porgi amor”
  2. “E Susanna non vien! ... Dove sono i bei momenti”
- “Eugene Onegin,” Tchaikovsky
3. “Letter Scene”-“Сцена письма: Пускай погибну я, но прежде”
- “Rusalka,” Dvořák
4. “Měsíčku na nebi hlubokém” (“Song to the Moon”)
- “Otello,” Verdi
5. “Mia madre aveva una povera ancella” (“Willow Song”) and “Ave Maria”
- “Peter Grimes,” Britten
6. “Embroidery in Childhood” (“Embroidery Aria”)
- “Daphne,” Richard Strauss
7. „Ich komme...ich komme“ („Transformation Scene“)

The crystal-clear vocal technique that is crucial to Mozart’s style, is immediately recognized in the two arias of the Countess from “Le nozze di Figaro.” Fleming states in “The Inner Voice” that singing Mozart in her early years was the ideal path to perfecting her technique. Her Countess in “Figaro” was polished as a student in Aspen and then perfected in her debuts in Houston, the Met, Teatro Colón, San Francisco, Spoleto Festivals, Glyndebourne, Geneva, and in Chicago.

One of the unusual things about “Signatures” is the inclusion of entire scenes such as the “Letter Scene” from Tchaikovsky’s “Eugene Onegin.” This is one of the great operatic scenes and Fleming, along with the outstanding Russian mezzo-soprano Larissa Diadkova, presents a consummate experience for the listener. Fleming evokes the young Tatyana writing a letter to Onegin, with whom she has fallen in love. As Tatyana says: “I am all alone here. No one understands me.” Fleming’s voice effortlessly expresses the sensitivity, the naiveté and youthfulness of the character as well as her fear of rejection.

The scene in “Otello” between Desdemona and Emilia (again sung by Larissa Diadkova) begins with the achingly tender “Willow Song” and ends with the exquisitely sung “Ave Maria.” This “Otello” scene is derived from the Shakespearian drama which makes the Verdian text painting of paramount importance to Fleming.

The same emphasis on word and text painting is also found in the scene from “Peter Grimes” by Benjamin Britten. Fleming presents the haunting “Embroidery Aria” of Ellen Orford along with the impressive Balstrode of Jonathan Summers. This aria allows Fleming’s near flawless skill in word and text painting to shine. Britten does not repeat text often in his operas, however, in the “Embroidery Aria” the poignant final text--“Now my broidery affords the clue whose meaning we avoid”--is repeated a fateful three times. Fleming gives each repetition a different meaning and stress. She gracefully masters Britten’s vocal leaps and long phrases, conveying the aria’s otherworldly sadness and beauty.

The final scene from the rarely performed “Daphne,” the “Transformation Scene,” in which Daphne metamorphosizes into a laurel tree, is a masterpiece of orchestral effects. Richard Strauss has created orchestral sounds of wind, the rustling of leaves and the singing of birds for a full bucolic effect. From Daphne’s opening plaintive cry:

*ich komme — ich komme—*                      I’m coming — I’m coming —

to the last words she sings on this CD:

<i>Menschen...Freunde...</i>	People...friends...
<i>nehmt mich...als Zeichen...</i>	take me...as a token...
<i>unsterblicher Liebe...</i>	of eternal love....

Throughout, we are enthralled with the sheer beauty of Renée Fleming’s voice, smoothly weaving through the glorious sounds of nature, magnificently played by the London Symphony Orchestra. Finally, Daphne/Fleming dispenses with words and begins a rapturous series of wordless melismata, in effect becoming pure music.

“Signatures” by Renée Fleming and Sir Georg Solti, combines one of the most distinctive voices in the world with a master of the orchestra. They guide us through the operatic universe of six different heroines from fantastical domains of myths and fairytales to the dramas of Shakespeare or Pushkin. We, the listener, gladly follow them on their journey into each separate realm. Renée Fleming, the “People’s Diva,” and a national treasure, has given us with “Signatures,” quoting Daphne: “a token of eternal love.”

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\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

