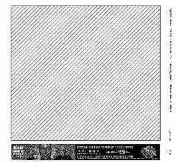




FRIDAY JANUARY 22, 2010  
THE TAMPA TRIBUNE  
**extra**

A VOICE WITH  
**VERISMO**

Renowned soprano Renee Fleming  
comes to Tampa on Tuesday.  
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# A DIVA IN HER PRIME



"I absolutely love  
discovering music.  
I love the element  
of surprise."

**Renee Fleming**

Photo from Decca/Andrew Eccles

By **CURTIS ROSS**  
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That might not be an aria you overhear coming from Renee Fleming's ear buds. It could be a banjo.

"I tend to love bluegrass," says the singer who The Washington Post dubbed the "Great American Soprano."

Or she might be listening to Joni Mitchell ("I was fanatically crazy about her," Fleming says of the Canadian singer-songwriter) or country music pioneer Hank Williams or alternative rock act The Arcade Fire.

"There's very little I won't listen to," Fleming says.

Fleming spoke by telephone before the holidays from her home in New York City. A tour spotlighting last year's "Verismo" album brings her to Tampa on Tuesday.

While "Verismo" doesn't venture into rock or country, some of its selections may be just as unfamiliar to all but true aficionados.

Alongside selections from Puccini's "La Boheme" and "Turandot," Fleming performs lesser-known works composed by contemporaries of Puccini, such as Pietro Mascagni, Alfredo Catalani and Ruggero Leoncavallo.

Taken together, the program explores the verismo style, referring to naturalism or realism, according to the album's liner notes. Although abundant, much of the work from this period remains underappreciated.

"I absolutely love discovering music. I love the element of surprise," Fleming says. "Once I've done something a few times I don't necessarily want to revisit it."

## ON TOUR

### Renee Fleming

**WHEN:** 7:30 p.m. Tuesday

**WHERE:** David A. Straz Jr. Center for the Performing Arts, Morsani Hall, 1010 N. MacInnes Place, Tampa; (813) 229-7827

**COST:** \$29.50, \$50, \$65, \$95 and \$125

As for the appeal of the music on "Verismo," Fleming says, "There's a sumptuous richness to the harmonies, a slight decadence. I'd love it even if it didn't suit my voice."

The period from about the late 1800s through the 1940s has been particularly good to Fleming. Her 2008 recording of Richard Strauss' "Four Last Songs," composed in 1948, drew rave reviews.

"It's my favorite period for my voice," she says. "It's a good match with Strauss. It goes with the character of my sound."

As the daughter of two vocal instructors, Renee Fleming's career in opera might seem to have been predestined.

But Fleming insists her decision to pursue opera was "a bit circumstantial."

Fleming may be one of the most renowned interpreters of the classical repertoire, but she initially pursued a career as a jazz singer.

"We were a singing family," Fleming says. "Music and singing were so much a part of our life that I took it for granted. And I rebelled."

She found some success as a jazz signer during her undergrad-

uate years, but turned down an invitation to tour with tenor saxophonist Illinois Jacquet.

"I was too young," she says. Besides, the non-vocal requirements of jazz performance didn't suit her.

"Singing in a club, you're supposed to talk with the audience," says Fleming, who confesses to a bit of shyness. "That was kind of traumatizing for me."

Still, she loved performing, and she also loved learning.

"I went to grad school and became involved in the process of learning how to sing," Fleming says. "I'm personally better suited for the intellectual process than interacting with an audience."

Fleming returned to school last fall, teaching a master class at Julliard. Having attended such classes during her college years, she had some insight into the students' experience.

"This is the most difficult thing for students, singing for someone you want to impress and them being criticized in front of an audience," she says.

"And it's odd to be in a teaching situation with an audience," Fleming says. "There's some added pressure."

Fleming's performance is part of Opera Tampa's 15th anniversary season.

Fleming "is the world's reigning opera diva and she is in her absolute prime," says Judy Lisi, general director and president of Opera Tampa.

"When you have the opportunity to present someone at their peak it is very, very exciting."

*Music critic Curtis Ross can be reached at (813) 259-7568.*

## Renee Fleming started out as a jazz singer but says she wasn't comfortable talking with the audience.