



Making It Real

In her new recital disc, Renée Fleming explores the operas of Puccini, Mascagni, Leoncavallo and other masters of the “giovane scuola.”

Renée Fleming

□ “VERISMO” *Arias and scenes by Puccini, Mascagni, Catalani, Leoncavallo, Zandonai, Cilèa, Giordano. Coro e Orchestra Sinfonica di Milano Giuseppe Verdi, Armiliato. Texts and translations. Decca 4781533*

Listeners whose definition of verismo embraces the concept of “screaming near the pitch” may find Renée Fleming’s approach to material by Puccini, Leoncavallo, Cilèa and other Italian composers of the “giovane scuola” (young school) too refined. But what began as a literary movement imported from France, characterized by naturalness of expression and realism in subject matter, does not have to be shorthand for overacting and violent vocalism.

One characteristic of the verismo repertoire is its naturalistic word-setting, without text repetitions and long melismas, yet with sudden bursts of lyricism and emotion. Fleming handles these transitions with ease, especially in the horrifying “Un dì (ero piccina),” from Mascagni’s *Iris*, with its anxious, breathless phrases alternating with expansive, dramatic moments. Similarly, Magda’s nostalgic reminiscences in “Ore dolci e divine,” from Puccini’s *La Rondine*, find Fleming sweetly conversational yet able to pluck suspended and gorgeously shimmering top notes out of the air for the delicate, recurring waltz theme.

For those who insist that verismo be characterized by liberal use of chest voice, Fleming exhibits a rounded, resonant sound, not dangerously high, but one that balances the expansive bloom of her top notes. This is shown off nicely in Puccini’s manuscript version (recorded here for the first time) of “Sola, perduta, abbandonata,” from *Manon Lescaut*, which includes several extra measures before “Terra di pace mi sembrava,” along with a lengthy coda and final cadenza. Conductor Marco Armiliato keeps the tempo flowing here, as throughout the recital, taking some of

the desperation out of the high-lying phrase “non voglio morir” and moving the climax to the propulsive rising fifths and fourths of the violent cadenza.

In spite of her sweet sound in the subdued aria “Nel suo amore,” from Giordano’s *Siberia*, with its lovely final sighing “Amor, amor,” and the dark, urgent intensity of “O mia cuna fiorita,” from Cilèa’s *Gloria*, Fleming’s voice can sound cool and less charged with emotion than some of the more iconic twentieth-century sopranos, which means she has to work more conscientiously at the drama. If Giordano’s “Tutto tramonta” (from *Fedora*) and “Flammen perdonami” (from Mascagni’s *Lodoletta*) are too pristinely sung, Fleming makes a case for Leoncavallo’s *Zazà* in her masterly handling of a lengthy scene in which the heroine must control her emotions in a heart-breaking encounter with her lover’s innocent young daughter (the talented Emma Latis).

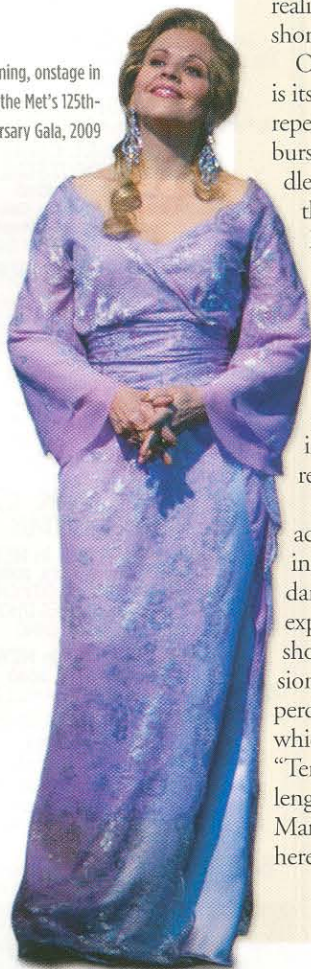
Fleming is both brilliant and bubbly in two arias from Leoncavallo’s *La Bohème*, in which Mimi and Musette (as she is known here) trade chatty descriptions of each other, and her luxuriant phrasing and gleaming high notes are on display in Mimi’s arias from Puccini’s *La Bohème* (the only work represented here that Fleming has essayed onstage).

In liner notes, both Fleming and Lyric Opera of Chicago dramaturg (and OPERA NEWS contributor) Roger Pines distinguish between two approaches to this repertoire, one favoring the drama, one emerging from an extended bel canto tradition. Supposedly the singers who created these roles around the turn of the century were vocally reckless, wild and emotional actresses. Yet a glance at the career of Rosina Storchio, the first Cio-Cio-San and creator of four of the roles represented here, reveals a singer who kept Bellini, Donizetti and Verdi’s Violetta in her repertoire, with voice intact — a worthy vocal model.

JUDITH MALAFRONTÉ

OPERA NEWS
Critic's Choice

Fleming, onstage in the Met’s 125th Anniversary Gala, 2009



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