

# Effortlessly, Fleming can capture all the nuances

Renee Fleming in recital Friday evening at Symphony Hall.

By KEITH POWERS

How to describe Renee Fleming's Celebrity Series recital Friday evening at Symphony Hall? Don't even try.

Try questions: What is the ultimate human sound? Where do thought and feeling meet? Why is music the greatest art? Can a performance attain perfection?

## MUSIC REVIEW

Of course this is hyperbolic, but Renee Fleming's singing captured all of the nuances of musical emotion in the most effortless manner. From Purcell to Handel to Berg to Schumann and Strauss, Fleming let us know that while her famous face might help sell everything from Rolexes to roadsters, the lyric soprano voice is the real reason for her fame.

The sold-out hall buzzed with excitement when Fleming and stylish accompanist Hartmut Holl took the stage.

Her shimmering cream-colored gown — de la Renta, don't you know? — and blonder than blond hair gave the diva an otherworldly angelic appearance. (Her own take on the gown: "I feel like I'm channeling Glinda the Good Witch.")

Twenty-five songs and four encores later, the angel had transported every listener to their own private heaven. Not a note out of place — and not a single sign that any of it was a strain. Fleming sang early music before intermission — Purcell and Handel — juxtaposing that with Berg and Schumann in the second half.

Purcell's "Blessed Virgin's Expostulation," which begins presciently "Tell me, some pitying Angel," and "Sweeter than roses" showed off the creamy coloratura Fleming summons with effortless grace. Arias from Handel — in particular as Cleopatra singing "Calm thou my soul" from Alexander Balus, demonstrated her dramatic flair.

Berg's "Seven Early Songs" shifted the focus to German romantic poetry, with Fleming's idiomatic use of the language making her sound like a native.

More German poetry, in settings by Schumann, deepened the Romantic mood. Two translations of Robert Burns, including a soft and airy reading of "Highland Lullaby," showed that Fleming's instrument, which had no trouble filling the back of the hall powerfully, could step lightly as well when the music called for it.

Four encores were not nearly enough. A reading of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," which can sound schlocky rendered by an artist of lesser repute, confirmed the obvious: There is nothing Renee Fleming cannot sing beautifully.