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THE MUSIC & THE MIND OF Renée Fleming

A conversation with the luminous soprano who, as with her appearances at Festival of the Arts Boca, is living up to her reputation as “the people’s diva” in ways that transcend music.

By Greg Carannante

COURTESY OF RENEE FLEMING



When President Obama placed the National Medal of Arts onto the lofty shoulders of Renée Fleming, acknowledging her in 2012 as “the people’s diva,” he couldn’t have known just how prescient he actually was.

Fleming’s unparalleled contributions had earned the soprano America’s highest honor for an individual artist. But it was her down-to-earth dynamic, accessibility and artistic versatility that had already pinned the catchphrase to her persona like an operatic nametag:

“Hello, My Name Is Renée, The People’s Diva.”

Like a crossover soprano, she and her illimitable, crystalline voice have commanded the attention of untold people who, far from being opera buffs, couldn’t tell an aria from a cantata. She’s gone on to sell well over 2 million records and has been nominated for 18 Grammy Awards. She’s won five, including last year’s Best Classical Solo Vocal Album for *Voice of Nature: The Anthropocene*. In 2015, her place in the operatic pantheon secure with over 50 international leading roles, Fleming graced the Broadway stage for the first time in the comedy *Living on Love*, earning a Tony nod three years later for her role in *Carousel*.

However, and here’s the thing, she’s also showed up in the least diva-esque of places: singing Letterman’s Top 10 list; recording a *Lord of the Rings* soundtrack in the original Elvish; classing up the Super Bowl as the first opera singer to deliver the National Anthem at the game; releasing an indie rock album and performing a duet with, uh-huh, Lou Reed; and rotating in outer space as “31249 RenéeFleming,” an actual asteroid named in her honor. That’s some literal star power, there.

And still, beyond all this, Fleming is now influencing people’s lives in ways that transcend art for art’s sake. In ways that reinterpret music as therapy. In ways that bring deeper meaning to the term, “the people’s diva.”

Her more recent collaborations with the scientific and medical communities investigating and espousing the healing power of music — indeed, her international championing of its acceptance as a clinical therapy — have developed into a side-by-side symbiosis with her musical career. Such is the case when she performs a recital at Festival of the Arts Boca on March 3 and returns the following night to host a presentation and panel discussion with local health practitioners titled, “Music and Mind.”

Fleming comes by her interest in the topic painfully.

"I was especially interested because I had bouts of horrible stage fright," she says. She also suffered somatic pain, which she's previously described as "pain that your brain and body are making up so that you can be distracted from what's distressing you, which in my case was performance pressure."

"So," she says, "I just started reading things that I could find about the mind-body connection."

Her research reached a turning point with a 2015 dinner-party introduction to Dr. Francis Collins, then director of the National Institutes of Health.

"I said, 'Hey, do you think we could create a platform for science? Because I really think the public would be really interested in knowing about the benefits and the research around music and health.'"

The chance meeting initially resulted in intensive workshops at which scientists explored ways to bring neuroscientists and music therapists together. Fleming even took to singing in an MRI machine to help identify the parts of the brain activated by music.

Fleming had already been appointed Artistic Advisor At Large for the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts when, in 2016, her collaboration with Collins evolved into a partnership between the Center and the NIH to explore and promote the health benefits of music. Named Sound Health, the interdisciplinary, fund-raising initiative sponsors a series of live and online panel discussions, performances and other endeavors.

"So we've been doing this now for seven years, and it has just exploded," Fleming says.

Thanks in no small part to Fleming's advocacy, Sound Health has raised upwards of \$20 million for research into music and its connection to children's disorders, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and other neurological conditions.

Fleming herself has become the face of the issue. As with her Boca Raton appearance, she performs concerts in tandem with panel discussions. She's hosted a free online series of conversations with scientists and health practitioners, accessible at *Kennedy-Center.org*, and is also the editor of a new book that reflects her work. *Music and Mind: Harnessing the Arts for Health and Wellness*, a collection of essays from leading scientists, artists, therapists, educators and healthcare providers, will be published in April.

in downtown Boca Raton, now boasts the added prestige of a Kennedy Center honoree.

Fleming spoke with us just after the telecast of the 46th *Kennedy Center Honors* in December, in which she was among five honorees — with Dionne Warwick, Queen Latifah, Barry Gibb and Billy Crystal — celebrated for their enduring contributions to American culture.

“Basically I was trying to keep from breaking down and just sobbing outright because, you know, it was just such an overwhelming experience,” says Fleming, a mother of two



Also, her altruistic efforts have now made her a player on a different kind of international stage. She was recently appointed Goodwill Ambassador for Arts and Health by the World Health Organization.

daughters, who turned 65 last month.

The tribute featured performances of signature Fleming pieces, highlighted by a bravura *Song to the Moon* performed by a soprano quartet of Julia Bullock, Ailyn Pérez, Angel Blue and Nadine Sierra. Also Susan Graham, Tituss Burgess and Christine Baranski joined voices for *You'll Never Walk Alone*, and Dove Cameron sang *The Light in the Piazza*.

“She uses her voice to call out for change, helping us understand the intersection of music, health and neuroscience,” said actress Sigourney Weaver in a presentation honoring Fleming’s non-diva accomplishments. “It all springs from that amazing voice. And yes, it is a God-given gift. But it’s what you’ve done with your voice, Renée, that brings all of us here to the Kennedy Center tonight.”

Left: Fleming with Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. Right: Speaking at NIH in 2019.

“**T**he audiences in Florida and especially southern Florida are reminiscent of the audiences in New York and the major Eastern capitals,” says Fleming, who lives outside Washington, D.C. “So I feel like I’m at home.”

It’s those audiences, she says, that keep her coming back — this year’s double-bill marks her second return trip to Festival of the Arts Boca since christening the inaugural event in 2007. The already distinctive program, which runs through March 10 at Mizner Park Amphitheater

Our conversation picks up with her impressions of the show.

Each time they showed a closeup of you in the audience, I wondered what must have been going through your mind as you took it all in.

Yeah, it was incredible. Because I've performed on Broadway as well as my constant touring and opera, I've made friends in various worlds. Christine Baranski and Sigourney Weaver. And Vera Wang made my dresses. I mean, I have a lot of fabulous women friends. And I was just really, really blown away to see them there.

You managed to control yourself pretty well.

Oh, God. Wasn't easy. I knew that the camera was going to be close because it was right in front of me. I just thought, oh gosh, my cheeks are shaking. [Laughs.]

that correspond with each of the pieces. It's about 30 minutes long, and it's very beautiful. The idea, and the idea behind the original album, is our relationship to nature — you know, a hundred years ago, when every human emotion by poets and composers was about basically our relationship to nature and how the lens of nature is how we viewed ourselves. And then juxtaposing that with our relationship to nature now, which is not so great. We have not had a great influence on the planet. It's meant to encourage people to stay involved in climate and caring about climate.

Will that be the program of your recital in Boca?

No, the recital in Boca is more general. It starts with Handel arias, and then I have some French song and arias, Italian arias, and then I go to the American Songbook. And I have an aria from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It's a broad spectrum of music, which is typically what I do now when I'm touring, because

“What inspired me was really just, first of all, being fascinated by how music has affected me over my lifetime, from a very young age.”

If you yourself had been part of the tribute, what would you have performed?

Well, I think [Dvořák's] *Song to the Moon* and [Puccini's aria] *O mio babbino caro*, which they worked into the film [*Now You See Me 2*], are kind of the two hit pieces. *You'll Never Walk Alone* [from *Carousel*] was also really inspired because it's so popular anyway. But to have been in *Carousel* on Broadway was a really special experience. So I think they got it right, honestly.

Your accomplishments are so boundless. Is there something you want to do that you haven't tried before?

Not at this point. I am doing a really interesting new project. I'm touring a film that *National Geographic* has created for me based on my Grammy-winning album last year, *Voice of Nature: The Anthropocene*. It's absolutely beautiful, and I hope to be touring that for quite some time.

Can you describe it?

Basically, I gave them the track list that I'll perform with either orchestra or piano. And they created films

that's the way my whole career has been, to share that and talk to the audience.

What can you tell us about the following night's program?

I typically give a presentation, an overview of the intersection of the arts and health, and especially music and health, because there's been so much research done about the benefits of engaging with music, from children to creative aging and various disorders in between — disorders of aging in particular, like Parkinson's and stroke. So it's really informative-gathering. I always invite scientists, researchers and healthcare providers who are nearby to present their work. People often are thrilled to learn that these things exist and that they work. The field is growing exponentially.

What first inspired your interest in this?

What inspired me was really just, first of all, being fascinated by how music has affected me over my lifetime, from a very young age.





Fleming tours an NIH Lab with then-Director Francis Collins, standing behind her.

Was it a health benefit?

It's a developmental benefit. If you're a child, playing an instrument can really change your brain. You'll find that so many people who work in the medical profession are amateur musicians. CEOs have often had some kind of music training as children. It definitely makes a difference because now we're unfortunately in a place in time where we're too often parking children in front of screens. And whereas playing an instrument or actively engaging with music or drawing or any of those things develops the brain further. Because you're also using hand-eye coordination, creativity and on and on.

From your discussions with doctors, what are some specific instances of music therapy helping patients?

We just had a large summit, as it were, with the NIH. And we discovered that if you're somebody who has Parkinson's and can't walk anymore, or is freezing up — it's such a debilitating disorder — that just singing a song in your head, like *When the Saints Go Marching In*, can enable you to walk fluidly and cross the street. It's just really incredible things like that. Or if you've had a stroke and you can't speak, one session with a music therapist can start you speaking again through singing, because singing takes place in a different part of the brain. So it drains our brain's plasticity and enables some

of these therapeutic values to take place in a way that's quick and it works. And the other thing about these therapies is they're low-cost. They're non-pharmaceutical, they're non-invasive. And if you're working with creative arts therapists, you have a face-to-face human contact, which is very beneficial for healing. And most people don't know about it. Wouldn't occur to them to try.

Has there been any progress in getting more insurance companies to cover these therapies?

Yeah, there is. In Texas, for instance, just now they've decided they're actually going to put it on the ballot. And the other thing about this is it's totally bipartisan. People on both sides care about healthcare. And once they learn of the benefits and that it's also cost-reducing, they get very excited. It's all over the country. There are 12 states that are much further along. Most of it is covered philanthropically. But it's definitely moving along. The main thing that convinces people quickly is how much money it saves. Mainly insurance companies.

One last question, off-topic: Do you know of any other opera singers who've recorded a rock album, like you did in 2010 with *Dark Hope*?

There was a German tenor who did one, but it is pretty rare. I didn't know the music and I love learning about new things, trying new things, working on the voice. I have eclectic taste in music. It was a really interesting project.

Festival of the Arts Boca tickets range from \$15 to \$150 and are available by calling 561-757-4762 or at festivalboca.org. Also, at 3 p.m. March 5, Fleming will give a lecture, "My Life in Music: An Afternoon With Renée Fleming," for the Society of the Four Arts in Palm Beach. For more info, please visit fourarts.org. The event, however, is fully booked.