

Review

Roberta Flack with the CIM Orchestra: *Set the Night to Music* at Severance Hall (January 26)

by Mike Telin



When the incomparable Roberta Flack entered Howard University on a full music scholarship at the age of 15, her aspirations were to become a concert pianist. “The romantics are my guys” she told ClevelandClassical.com during a recent interview. “Chopin, Schubert, Schumann, Liszt and Rachmaninoff. I love all of them, they are all heavy on the melody.” Although it would be her voice rather than the piano that lead to stardom, on Saturday, January 26 in Severance Hall Ms. Flack proved time and again that like the romantics, she knows how to shape a melody when she joined Carl Topilow and the Cleveland Institute of Music Orchestra in a benefit concert titled *Set the Night to Music*.

Ms. Flack, who is well-known for her narrative skills as a singer as well as her purity of tone, possesses a voice that is timeless. Now in her early 70’s, she is still capable of moving from a whisper to a full-bodied sound seemingly without effort. And, Ms. Flack is one classy entertainer as well. For one hour she, her top-notch back-up band and the talented CIM Orchestra enthralled a capacity audience with stories and song.

Derick Hughes was the perfect vocal partner during *Where Is the Love* and *Back Together Again*, songs Ms. Flack made famous with the late Donnie Hathaway. From her latest album, *Let It Be Roberta – Roberta Flack Sings the Beatles*, she brought an insightfulness and joyousness to the George Harrison tunes *Isn’t It a Pity* and *Here Comes the Sun*.

Seated at the piano, as she was throughout the evening, Ms. Flack revealed her humorous side with an almost too close for comfort Janet Jackson imitation, and offered a hilarious introduction to *Sweet Georgia Brown* — but Flack’s Georgia Brown had on fishnet stockings and six-inch “do me” pumps.

For many of us it was difficult not to become a little nostalgic hearing a few of Ms. Flack’s solo hits. *Feel Like Makin’ Love* brought instant applause from the crowd. *Killing Me Softly* was as beautiful as ever and the haunting *First Time* can still bring tears to the eyes — and afterwards brought the appreciative audience to their feet.

Returning for an encore, and once again to the Beatles album, is there a better way to send people out humming than the rousing and audience-participatory *Hey Jude*?

An added bonus was the precise coordination between Ms. Flack and conductor Carl Topilow. The CIM orchestra sounded brilliant and added just the right punch. Too many times at “shows with orchestra” one is left wondering why bother, but Flack and her arrangers used the orchestra with artistic intelligence, recalling the days when the use of a live studio orchestra was commonplace.

During the first half of the evening Topilow and his players gave a rousing performance of George Enescu’s *Romanian Rhapsody No. 1* and Arturo Marquez’s *Danzon No. 2*, with its Latin Jazz rhythms put everyone in just the right mood.

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