

**Preview****Cleveland Chamber Music Society:  
fifteen minutes with soprano Susanna Phillips**

by Daniel Hathaway



Two of the singers who joined James Levine in his triumphant return to the Metropolitan Opera for Mozart's *Così fan tutte* on September 24 will find themselves in Cleveland on different missions during the next week. Tenor Matthew Polenzani will appear with The Cleveland Orchestra in performances of Britten's *Serenade*, and soprano Susanna Phillips will bring two of her favorite chamber music collaborators to town for the opening concert of the Cleveland Chamber Music Society's 64<sup>th</sup> season on Tuesday, October 15 at Plymouth Church.

*New York Times* critic Anthony Tommasini wrote that Phillips “had what could be a breakthrough night at the Met as Fiordiligi...She has the purity and bloom of a Mozart lyric soprano. Yet her voice can lift phrases with penetrating sound and deep richness.” Asked in a telephone conversation about that night, Susanna Phillips told us that Levine's return was “an incredible experience — he's an incredible guy. It was a night I won't soon forget. It was great to see him back so full of joy and focus. Everybody was thrilled.”

Though Phillips is an international opera star, her feet are planted firmly on the ground, and she maintains a close relationship with Huntsville, the Alabama town where she grew up. When she made her Metropolitan Opera debut in *La bohème* in 2008, four hundred and fifty local fans flew up to New York to hear her sing. “It's very rewarding to have the community rally behind you — and they keep showing up and sending me emails and notes,” she said.

Phillips's parallel interests in opera and vocal chamber music led her to launch Twickenham Fest, a three-day summer chamber music festival in Huntsville which has just completed its fourth season. “I started it with a bassoonist friend who is now principal in Rochester,” she said. “Huntsville is a remarkable community filled with very smart people — it's hard to find a parking place near the public library — but at the same time, it's a very warm southern town. We wanted to invite friends we had met elsewhere to come down and play for that community. We try to keep the concerts free to the public and the programming accessible but not dumbed down, and we commission new pieces.”

Susanna Phillips's interest in chamber music also led to the concert the Chamber Music Society audience will hear on October 15, when Phillips will join pianist Anne-Marie McDermott and violist Paul Neubauer in an intimate program of songs with piano and viola obbligato ranging from “It's a Long Way from Tipperary” to art songs by Schumann and Rachmaninoff.

It all started with Paul Neubauer. “Paul was running a festival in Oklahoma and needed a soprano. I snapped at the chance. There's not a lot of opportunity to do vocal chamber music and I almost always say yes!” Phillips said. “I met Anne-Marie and several other musicians there and we decided to play around with some songs, which Paul loves — he's a very vocal player himself and he has a collection of hundreds of them. So we found a few we wanted to do together.”

Eventually a varied program emerged that engages all the musicians in different combinations. “I love the first group of pieces — they're such fun,” Phillips says of three English salon songs from the early 1900's, “and we'll follow Schumann's *Widmung* with Liszt's piano arrangement.” Neubauer will play Schumann's *Märchenbilder* and after a Russian set, the program will end with Italian salon music, “the songs that tenors and violinists used to do together — that brings out the old crying tenor in me,” Phillips said.

Susanna Phillips will return to the Met this season to sing Rosalinda in *Fledermaus* and Musetta in *La bohème*, and will play Ellen Orford in Britten's *Peter Grimes* both in St. Louis and New York. She'll also make a series of solo appearances with orchestras. Seeded among those big assignments are more chamber music appearances. The soprano acknowledges that those two sides of her musical life are very different in scale and approach. “At the Met you have costumes, wigs and makeup and you play one character all night. With chamber music, you have to change your characterizations more often and listen much more closely. And it's much quieter! In rehearsals, Paul sometimes has to tell me, 'OK, Susanna, tone it down.'”

You also get to see the people you're singing to. “There are so many bright lights at the Met that you don't see faces. But in concerts you can see if somebody's falling asleep or has a great big grimace on their face!” Or more likely, a great big smile.

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