

Renée Fleming and friends join in special Severance concert

by Mike Telin



On Sunday, October 15 at 7:00 pm, the celebrated soprano Renée Fleming will host a gathering of friends in a Severance Music Center concert featuring the late André Previn's unfinished — but now completed — final work. *Penelope* celebrates Homer's heroine in *The Odyssey*, who faithfully waited 20 years for her husband, Odysseus, to return from the Trojan War while fending off more than a hundred suitors.

She'll be joined by actress Merle Dandridge (*The Last of Us*), the Emerson String Quartet — Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer (violins), Lawrence Dutton (viola), and Paul Watkins (cello) — and pianist Simone Dinnerstein. In addition to *Penelope*, musical selections include

Philip Glass's *Etude No. 6* and Beethoven's *String Quartet No. 14*. Tickets are available [online](#).

Although the score was left unfinished at the time of Previn's death on February 28, 2019, it was completed by David Fetherolf, Previn's longtime editor. The monodrama received its world premiere at Tanglewood on July 24, 2019.

Fleming graciously agreed to answer questions by email.

Mike Telin: Who originally had the idea for this project?

Renée Fleming: The Emerson Quartet and I shared a friendship with André Previn. (André had composed the opera of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which I premiered, as well as some concert works and song cycles.) We decided to try to commission him to compose something for us. I knew that one of André's good friends was playwright Tom Stoppard, of whom I am also a great fan. I thought, 'Well you never know, why not ask them?' It turned out that they both liked the idea, and they had already discussed writing something for my voice. I believe it was Tom who suggested Penelope, the classical heroine, as a subject.

MT: Does the story of Penelope personally resonate with you?

RF: I certainly admire her cleverness in outwitting more than 100 aggressive suitors for 20 years.

MT: How did the original team for the Penelope project come together? Have you worked with Eugene Drucker and Simone Dinnerstein before?

RF: I think I first performed with the Emerson String Quartet in a concert in 2011. But we worked together more closely for "Vienna: Window to Modernity," a concert at Carnegie Hall in 2013, when I was the Perspectives Artist there. We subsequently recorded some of the repertoire from that concert, which included the Berg *Lyric Suite*, and Egon Wellesz settings of sonnets by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. *Penelope* is the first work I performed with Simone Dinnerstein, in the world premiere. She is a remarkable artist, and in this story about a woman, I am especially glad to have a woman in the instrumental forces onstage.

MT: Have you collaborated with Merle Dandridge?

RF: The first time we performed together was in *Penelope*, earlier this year at LA Opera. Of course I had seen her on television, and knew of her impressive Broadway career. When we did *Penelope* in Los Angeles, the city was still buzzing about her rave reviews for *A Little Night Music* in Pasadena.

MT: What about performing the piece brings you pleasure?

RF: Naturally, delivering original text by Tom Stoppard, one of our greatest playwrights, is rewarding. I've been a huge fan of his since I first sang in London and saw the original production of *Arcadia*. It's fantastic to share the stage with a great actress. We were fortunate to premiere the work with Uma Thurman, and I've done subsequent performances with Jennifer Ehle and Victoria Clark, and now Merle, who is superb. Each time it's been different and exciting. And I have always loved singing André Previn's music. Collaborating with him was simply a joy. He wrote beautifully

for the voice, in a musical language that marries late Romanticism with a contemporary sensibility.

Photo by Andrew Eccles

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