

Renée Fleming & Friends at Severance (Oct. 15)

by Peter Feher



“Farewell” was the final word that the audience heard at Severance Music Center on Sunday, October 15. The evening couldn’t have ended in a more fitting fashion, considering the talent that made this performance in Mandel Concert Hall one for the history books.

In 2017, soprano Renée Fleming disputed *The New York Times*’

intimation that she was retiring from the operatic stage, but the no-nonsense diva has closed a certain chapter in her singing career in order to embark on another. Since turning 60, Fleming has focused almost exclusively on projects to which she has a personal connection, evangelizing on behalf of the composer-friends who have written pieces for her.

Penelope, by the late musical polymath André Previn, is one such work and something of an all-star chamber production. The piece — for soprano, narrator, piano, and string quartet — turned out to be Previn’s last, completed by the composer’s longtime editor David Fetherolf and premiered in 2019.

On Sunday, Previn’s work took on an added layer of significance. The Emerson String Quartet has been involved with *Penelope* from virtually the beginning, and now as the storied ensemble is set to disband — the group played its final concerts in New York City this past weekend — these musicians joined Fleming onstage in what you could call an early send-off.

Previn’s piece certainly invites a meditation on farewells and final gestures. With an original libretto by Tom Stoppard, *Penelope* tells the there-and-back-again story of Odysseus from the perspective of the hero’s abandoned wife. Stoppard’s modern gloss on the situation is one of the composition’s strongest features, the text alternating between

high and low registers in the playwright's inimitable way. "He looked like a god," Penelope sings when she sees her mortal husband naked.

At its best, Previn's music elaborates on the drama where words simply couldn't. A ruminative solo piano passage follows Penelope's announcement that she's heard "nothing" of Odysseus for seven years. At the keyboard, Simone Dinnerstein interpreted the moment with rich imagination.

It was a rare, welcome pause in a work that more often sounds like it's racing through too much material. The vocal part is set syllabically, but even that's not efficient enough to cover the entire libretto, so a narrator is tasked with reading sections of the text (sometimes unaccompanied). In this dual way, Fleming and actress Merle Dandridge shared the title role, and they did make the perfect pair, each woman mic'd and maintaining a regal presence, whether in song or in speech.

Penelope leaves some gaps for performers and listeners alike to fill. You can imagine a more finished version of the score that puts the instrumentalists to better collective use — as the piece exists now, the passages for piano are almost entirely separate from the sections for string quartet. But no great artist's legacy is ever truly complete, and when Dandridge proclaimed the libretto's final line ("And so farewell"), she seemed to be speaking for everyone onstage.

The members of the Emerson Quartet got the chance to say goodbye on their own terms during the evening's first half. Dinnerstein opened the concert with a sensitive account of Philip Glass's *Etude No. 6*, and the Emersons followed with a weighty reading of Beethoven's *String Quartet No. 14 in c-sharp*.

Late Beethoven is the obvious choice for an ensemble looking back on a long, celebrated history, and Op. 131 has the advantage of starting with a solo for each player. Entering one after another, violinists Philip Setzer and Eugene Drucker, violist Lawrence Dutton, and cellist Paul Watkins phrased their individual lines with a unity of purpose that only a quartet of this caliber can summon.

If the performance that emerged here was sometimes rough around the edges, it nonetheless had the masterful arc of a singular journey coming to an end.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 24, 2023.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)