

Renée Fleming's "Voice of Nature" caps off Tuesday Musical season (Apr. 21)

by Stephanie Manning



It's too bad that Earth Day — April 22 — didn't fall on a Tuesday this year. But the eve of Earth Day still felt like a fitting time to hear "Voice of Nature: The Anthropocene," the program Renée Fleming recently brought to Tuesday Musical.

The superstar soprano's current touring concert — based on her Grammy-winning album of the same name — is a product of

her increasing connection to nature during the early days of the pandemic. Fleming's visit to Akron's E.J. Thomas Hall on April 21st brought out one of the biggest crowds in recent memory, greeting her with a celebrity welcome.

Although the album and the concert program share a title, only some of the original tracks were present, specifically Nico Muhly's *Endless Space* and Kevin Puts' *Evening*. Pieces by Edvard Grieg, Gabriel Fauré, and Franz Liszt were swapped for a more eclectic combination of genres, including Björk's "All Is Full of Love" and Hazel Dickens' "Pretty Bird." Throughout, Fleming sang both with a handheld microphone, and unamplified.

The strongest new selections tended to hew closer to the album, including Joseph Canteloube's "Baïlèro" from *Chants d'Auvergne*. After a slightly unsettled start where Fleming identified a feedback issue with her monitor, the Canteloube was where she really began to settle in, singing smoothly and expressively over thoughtful contributions from pianist and Ohio native Howard Watkins.

During the first half, Fleming and Watkins performed ten songs without breaks for applause, timing each piece with the *National Geographic* nature footage being displayed on the screen above them. While the film is gorgeous, it lacked a consistent synergy with the visuals and the music.

Howard Shore's "Twilight and Shadow" from *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* produced a head-scratching example, where Fleming's peaceful lyrics about a beautiful star were accompanied with footage of a tree being struck aggressively and repeatedly by lightning.

As the credits rolled, she sang Curtis Green's "Red Mountains Sometimes Cry," a reflective conclusion that was somewhat upstaged by the suddenly upbeat encore, Burt Bacharach's "What the World Needs Now is Love."



Post-intermission, Fleming returned to some of her standard repertoire, including a sweet and gentle rendition of "Laudate Dominum" from Mozart's *Vesperae solennes de confessore* and the bouncy "Bel piacere" from Handel's *Agrippina*.

A brief two-movement set themed around the U.S.'s upcoming 250th included John Kander's fascinating *A Letter From Sullivan Ballou*, which sets the text of a real letter from a Civil War soldier. Fleming delivered Ballou's words of love to his wife and country with true pathos before revealing that he died in his first battle — a sobering moment.

Some of this emotional resonance was dispelled with a sudden pivot to Broadway, beginning with Cole Porter's jazzy "Down in the Depths (on the 90th Floor)." Swapping its position with "You'll Never Walk Alone" from *Carousel* could have eased this transition a bit.

Fleming and Watkins were clearly engaged in the music, despite the dense program structure and the unforgiving acoustic of E.J. Thomas Hall, a huge venue for a two-person recital. And almost everyone in the audience gave their all when Fleming invited us to sing along with "I Could Have Danced All Night" from *My Fair Lady* and Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah."

"There's something in the water here," the soprano said, pleased. Indeed, there is a catharsis to be found in group singing — and the opportunity to say that you sang with Renée Fleming.

Photos by Brian Lumley for the Cleveland Scene

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 29, 2026

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