

Undaunted by rain, Idina Menzel and Cleveland Orchestra work their magic at Blossom (July 26)



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CUYAHOGA FALLS,
Ohio — Misfortune almost
strikes during Act 1 of the
musical “Wicked” when
Elphaba, the future Wicked
Witch of the West, gets

caught mid-song in a rain shower. Funnily enough, she doesn’t melt. For an audience that knows “The Wizard of Oz,” it’s an early hint that the show is destined for a happier-than-expected ending.

You could say it was an auspicious sign, then, that the skies opened up right before Idina Menzel took the stage at Blossom Music Center on Sunday, July 26, even as the rain persisted throughout her first several numbers.

A distinctive voice in theater and film for three decades now, Menzel has a characteristic way of transforming any setback into a kind of encouragement — a power ranging well beyond her Tony Award-winning turn as Broadway’s original Elphaba.

That defiance has been there from the start, beginning with her breakout role as the protest-and-performance artist Maureen in the rock musical “Rent.” She’s navigated the tension between fear and fearlessness ever since, belting out anthem after anthem, none more potent than “Let It Go” from Disney’s “Frozen.”

It takeschutzpah to pack an entire career of showstopping hits into a single concert — accompanied by The Cleveland Orchestra, no less. If there were a few rough

patches to weather during Sunday's performance (some fumbled lyrics, shouted phrases, and issues with sound balance), Menzel nonetheless gained strength with every song and ended the evening on a signature high note.

That climax, of course, was the soaring battle cry from "Defying Gravity," which she delivered with a raw force that's simply unmatched by anyone else (movie version of "Wicked" included). No encore was necessary after such a bring-down-the-house finale.

And to be fair, Menzel had exhausted her hit catalog by then. Earlier in the program, she made a full production out of "Let It Go," introducing the number with that infamous recorded clip of John Travolta mispronouncing her name at the 2014 Academy Awards. ("Please welcome the wickedly talented ... Adele Dazeem.") A dramatic reenactment of her inner monologue followed, all building up to the song itself.

Whenever possible, Menzel encouraged audience participation, holding her mic out to the crowd during the big repeated choruses. Having dispatched Maureen's verses of "Take Me or Leave Me," she naturally invited several fans onstage to finish the duet. Everyone in the pavilion and on the lawn would soon get to share in the "Rent" love, singing and waving their cellphone flashlights along to "No Day But Today."

Menzel has something of a rock star's presence, which can't always be contained by musical theater. If you asked her for a tune from "Annie," she might give you an aching pop ballad (Annie Lennox's "Why"), a nimble jazz standard (Annie Ross's "Twisted"), or a Broadway chestnut about how the sun'll come out ("Tomorrow"). We heard all three at Blossom, in arrangements that tended to favor Menzel's four-piece rhythm section situated at the front of the stage.

In fact, even the musical theater selections more often leaned pop — whether they were conceived as contemporary (a synth-driven track from Menzel's latest Broadway show, "Redwood") or just thoroughly modernized (a medley of "There's No Business Like Show Business," "Anything Goes," and "Everything's Coming Up Roses").

But there was a good dose of Golden Age theater on the concert's all-instrumental first half, with guest conductor Andy Einhorn leading the Orchestra in a rumble with Leonard Bernstein's Symphonic Dances from "West Side Story." Not many singers could successfully follow a 25-minute orchestral storm.

Photo courtesy of Yevhen Gulenko

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