



Thibaudet and Fleming: 'I fell in love with her voice,' the pianist says about his current touring companion.

Two great minds groove alike

American soprano Renée Fleming and French pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet have formed a delightful double-act

BY TARA WOHLBERG, VANCOUVER

Renée Fleming has her pick of centuries of music, from classical to jazz. But America's favourite home-grown soprano has her heart set on something else: A new work from Canadian singer-songwriter **Joni Mitchell**.

"She's my idol," Fleming confesses during a concert stop in Vancouver. "I tried to commission her to write a piece for me but it fell through. I would give anything if she would write a piece for me!"

Given Fleming's extensive repertoire, why not just take on *Big Yellow Taxi* or one of Mitchell's myriad other songs? Easy. "I just can't imagine anybody else doing her stuff any other way."

That's hard to believe from someone who has the skill to make every song she sings her own, whether it's a signature Strauss role, André Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire* or a Duke Ellington

tune. But she's leaving Joni Mitchell on a pedestal — for now.

Fleming was in Vancouver with French *bon vivant* pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet to launch their *Night Songs* CD and a six-city North American tour, which wraps up with a sold-out concert tomorrow at Toronto's Roy Thomson Hall.

"I enjoy touring," says Thibaudet, who is down from 140 concerts a year to about 100. He also enjoys sharing the stage with some of the world's most powerful female singers, including Cecilia Bartoli and Angelika Kirchschlager.

This is the first time Fleming, 41, and Thibaudet, 39, have toured together, although they've known each other for more than a decade.

"We met at the Spoleto Festival in Italy," Thibaudet told *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* earlier this month. "I fell in love with her voice. We wanted to do something together, but we were busy and it took a while to get together."

Between drags on a postconcert

cigarette in his dressing room at Vancouver's Chan Centre, Thibaudet oozes French chic. (He lives in Paris with his American companion and has a place in Los Angeles.)

Once a clotheshorse for Versace, he unveiled new concert garb in Vancouver, a shiny structured suit with laser-beam belt buckle — minus the red socks that were his trademark and which he said brought him luck. That, he said, "is passé." Moreover, since Versace's murder in Florida in 1997, "It just isn't the same for me," Thibaudet said soberly. "We did a lot of things together. I had to make a break."

Born in the French city of Lyon, to upper-class intellectuals, Thibaudet began playing piano at age 5 and made his first public appearance at age 7. He entered the Paris Conservatory at 12 and at 15 won the premier Prix du Conservatoire. Three years later, he won the Young Concert Artists Auditions in New York.

Yet he almost wasn't born.

"My father was very old and my mother had given birth to my sister only a year before and she had had difficulties," he told *The New York Times* in February. "They decided to terminate me. In those days, one went to Geneva. The lady doctor

made everyone spend the night there before the procedure. At a certain point, my mother said to my father: 'You know, something is singing in me. We should do this and yet. . . . ' They went back to Lyon."

Fleming was born in Rochester, N.Y., the daughter of high-school music teachers. Her musical studies were rounded out with a degree in music education from State University of New York's Potsdam campus, then the Eastman School of Music in Rochester and Juilliard in Manhattan. Her career effortlessly bloomed after a 1988 Metropolitan Opera National Audition win.

Fleming also loved composing — "I needed it as an expressive outlet" — and composed actively from age 13 through 22, at which point she describes herself as becoming secure, and then she no longer felt the need. "No one believes me now when I say it, but I really was shy." Her wide-brimmed eyes, full of caprice, soften at the thought.

Fleming has long been a devotee of what's called the New Music, that is the classical repertoire written by 20th-century composers. As a youngster, "at symphonic concerts, I always liked the Stravinsky better than the Brahms," she admitted. "I also feel that we have a responsibility to give new music the best chance by giving it the best performance possible."

And Fleming has indeed walked the contemporary music walk, having premiered such recent works as John Corigliano's *The Ghosts of Versailles*, Conrad Susa's *The Dangerous Liaisons* and Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Previn, in fact, dubbed her "the best soprano in the world."

For Thibaudet, it's jazz: his *Conversations with Bill Evans* won a Grammy Echo Award in 1998 and his *Reflections on Duke* won a Le Monde de Musique award in 1999.

Jazz "is so much a part of this century's music," Thibaudet says. "Prelude to a Kiss [by Irving Mills and Duke Ellington] is totally like Debussy. The quiet, moodiness is very 'night' to me."

Fleming's jazz credits include a recent recording of *American Arias*, *I Want Magic*, which includes Gershwin, and *Two Worlds* features a reworking of traditional jazz legends David Grusin and Lee Ritener. She also led her own jazz trio in college to "loosen up."

In Vancouver, when Fleming smuggled into the curve of the piano and gazed into Thibaudet's eyes, head in hand, as he took his solo, the audience knew it wasn't a cheap crossover trick.

"This is the first time I can use my jazz connection with a singer," Thibaudet beams, "and Renée is phenomenal at jazz."

Their respective dance cards are fully booked for the next five years.

Fleming has become a mistress of multitasking, learning roles while flying on planes or while getting a manicure. She'll even take scores with her while she's driving, scanning them at red lights.

Recently divorced, after a 10-year marriage to actor Richard Lee Ross, the new Rolex pinup girl is also anxious to spend more time with her daughters, who are 8 and 5.

As for Thibaudet, he says a tango recording is moving up his wish list.

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