

“No ‘Dark Hope’ – or, what happens when opera singers step off the High Art pedestal”

Elizabeth Pearse

Bowling Green State University

May 2011

Performers of western art (classical) music do not exist in a vacuum. Though “traditional” conservatory-style training requires a time commitment devoted to listening, practicing, and performing music of specific stylistic traits, it is the experience of this author that most practitioners of western art music do seek out music that falls outside this realm. Many listen to or perform jazz (which as a discipline is now incorporated as a separate-but-present department in some conservatories). Some are fans of rock or metal - heavy metal requires instrumental virtuosity that is on par with conservatory-trained performers. Anyone exposed to video or audio media (TV, radio, movies) is exposed to “popular” music, an umbrella term for an impossibly wide variety of musical styles.

It seems likely that those who have learned to make music and enjoy more than one type of music may wish to use their skills to perform more than one type of music. When one decides to pursue this sort of project, it is generally termed “crossover”. Certain instrumentalists have found success in such a venture - Vanessa Mae performing with Janet Jackson, Christopher O’Riley covering Radiohead, Wynton Marsalis winning Grammys for both classical and jazz albums. In addition, many singers - From Mario Lanza, Helen Traubel, and Beverly Sills, to Andrea Bocelli - have participated in “crossover” projects, with varying degrees of success. After presenting some context, the focus of this article will be the recent album *Dark Hope* – an album comprised of covers of a variety of rock/“indie” bands including Arcade Fire, Band of Horses, Leonard Cohen, Duffy, Death Cab for Cutie, Peter Gabriel, Jefferson Airplane, The Mars Volta, Willy Mason, Muse, and Peter Gabriel. Produced by David Kahne, this album is the most recent release by one of the most well known opera singers of this century – Renee

Fleming.

Fleming is revered as a soprano of singular talents on opera stages all over the world. That she would release a “crossover” album is not as surprising as it sounds – her first performing career during college was as a jazz singer. Indeed, her 2005 *Haunted Heart* release included arrangements of Stevie Wonder, Joni Mitchell, and the Lennon-McCartney half of the Beatles (not to mention Mahler, Paladivle, Stephen Foster, and Berg). Dark Hope should not be particularly notable in a media-saturated society where genre lines are constantly being drawn and blurred. However, the critical reception of Dark Hope – ranging from unquestioning adoration, to confusion, to outright distaste – underscores issues that have been present in the realm of singing for roughly a century (give or take a few decades).

The distinction of “opera singer” as a very specific entity far removed from any other type of singer has a few origins. One is the specific training required to learn production of the sounds required by opera. Most opera singers spend the better part of a decade (conservatory and private training) learning to achieve an operatic sound, and most continue studying with teachers throughout their careers. This is not by itself a compelling reason to place opera singers on a pedestal – singers of other stripes also spend many hours honing their respective crafts. Broadway performers must learn specific singing techniques, singer/songwriters labor over compositions, and even some metal singers take voice lessons! No - there is a more insidious origin for this separation – the deliberate manufacturing of opera as “high culture”. I will argue that this stratification of opera above other sung art creates much of the fuss over opera singers performing music of “lower” culture.

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

Though early operas were funded by and performed for the ruling class, opera has not historically been reserved for aristocracy. Jacopo Peri's *L'Euridice*, first performed in 1600 (though not the "first" opera, more information about it survives), was written as part of the wedding celebrations of Maria de' Medici and Henri IV. Monteverdi's *Orfeo* was first performed at the palace of the Gonzagas in Mantua. However, with the opening of the Teatro San Cassiano in Venice in 1637, opera was to be made available to a wider public. In fact, this opera house was the first of any musical establishment to open its doors to the public (Storey 33). Composers responded to the shift in audience. "Monteverdi, whose early works had been lavish court entertainments, now began producing operas of a more dynamic, less esoteric nature: for his final opera, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (The Coronation of Poppea) he abandoned the world of classical allegory in favour of a steamy, close-up view of aristocratic corruption in ancient Rome. Venice became Europe's main centre for opera, where it quickly developed into a genuinely popular art form." (Boyden, *The Rough Guide to Opera*, 4.) For much of the following two centuries, opera was popular entertainment. According to Bernard Zelochow (as quoted by Storey, 33), "By the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century the opera played a preeminent role in the cultural life of Europe. The opera was enjoyed and understood by a broad cross-section of urban Europeans and Americans. The opera house became the meeting place of all social classes". Levine (also quoted in Storey) adds: opera was "performed in a variety of settings, [it] enjoyed great popularity, and [was] shared by a broad segment of the population".

Through the early mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, opera was consumed by a large cross section of the populace. There was no divide - opera was *the* popular entertainment. What happened? According to Bruce McConachie, around 1825 the social elite of New York deliberately

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

engineered a separation of opera from “the everyday world of popular entertainment” (Storey 33) – in three ways. Buildings were erected for the sole purpose of opera performance. A dress and behavioral code was developed. Finally, there was an insistence that only foreign-language performances met a standard of excellence, “employing foreign words and specialized language impenetrable to all but the cognoscenti” (McConachie, 182). New York society had appropriated opera as its own, effectively alienating the middle class from what had been a shared experience.

Levine offers a slightly later timeline for this separation – claiming that it occurred nearer the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. “What was invented in the late nineteenth century were the rituals accompanying the appreciation... what was invented was the illusion that the aesthetic products of high culture were originally created to be appreciated in precisely the manner late nineteenth-century Americans were taught to observe: with reverent, informed, disciplined seriousness” (Levine 229). This illusion took root – as mentioned by Storey, Paul DiMaggio discusses the same process as it was performed by the elite of Boston: “Boston’s upper class had to accomplish three concurrent, but analytically distinct, projects: entrepreneurship, classification and framing.” (DiMaggio 454). He goes on to define entrepreneurship as the elite creating a form of organization of which they were in control, classification as creating definite boundaries between “art” and “entertainment” (with “art” being the cultural property of the elite), and framing as the “development of a new etiquette of appropriation, a new relationship between the audience and the work of art.” (DiMaggio 457). DiMaggio also explores the ways in which opera used the shift to non-profit, trustee-governed organizations in the 1930s to “legitimize” opera as a high-culture standard.

Whether one believes the origins lie in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, or in the early 20<sup>th</sup>, it

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

is clear that once the artifice of opera as “high culture” was engineered by the East Coast aristocracy, it remained. Instead of simply a form of popular entertainment (as it had been for the preceding centuries, “going to the opera” now carried with it a certain cultural capital. However, the singers involved in opera, at least in the United States, did not always stay on the high culture pedestal. Certain operatic performers, as mentioned in the introduction, enjoyed performing opportunities outside the opera house. One early such example is Mario Lanza. After beginning his career as a concert singer, he was drafted into the armed forces of WWII. Making a name for himself as the “Service Caruso”, Lanza’s career began when an MGM executive took notice of him at a concert at the Hollywood Bowl. He signed a contract with the movie studio, and after one opera stage appearance (a *Madama Butterfly* in New Orleans), Lanza’s career began to focus more on films. Though he performed opera arias in the context of his movie roles, Mario Lanza never again appeared on the opera stage – he was successful in his film career, and two of his soundtrack singles became million-selling Billboard hits. He was chosen to play Enrico Caruso in the 1951 semi-biographical film *The Great Caruso* – which won the Academy Award for Sound Recording the following year. This is bi-fold evidence of the continued popularity of opera – opera arias featured heavily in the context of these films, and the subject matter of an opera singer’s life became a highly grossing box office ticket in which another opera singer starred.

Mario Lanza found fame outside the opera arena early in his career – but Pinkerton in *Butterfly* was his only role. For an example of an opera singer who found fame in the popular realm *after* establishing herself as a successful opera singer, we may turn to Helen Traubel. After making her Metropolitan Opera debut in 1937, Traubel quickly rose in the ranks as a Wagnerian

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

soprano. Her Sieglinde in 1939, followed by appearances as other Wagner heroines (Elsa, Elisabeth, Kundry, Brünnhilde, and Isolde) established her as the leading American Wagner soprano of her time. During this time, Ms. Traubel had made several appearances singing in night-clubs, and it was a disagreement with Rudolf Bing, then General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera, that caused her to leave the Met's roster in 1953. "Her work in popular culture tainted her in the eyes of impresarios like Rudolf Bing...today an opera singer with such media exposure would be coveted" (Tommasini, "Even Sopranos Get the Blues"). She went on to perform in clubs, and in films and television spots (alongside comedians Jimmy Durante and Groucho Marx, among others). For her contributions to the recording industry, Traubel was awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. In fact, there are nearly two dozen opera singers with a star – others include Caruso, Renata Tebaldi, Maria Callas, Andrea Bocelli (whose inclusion will be discussed later) and Beverly Sills.

Perhaps the last great bridge between popular culture and the opera world, Beverly Sills' career began in childhood, as a singer and performer on several radio shows. She began touring with opera companies as a teenager, and her 1955 debut with New York City Opera, as Rosalinde in *Die Fledermaus* was a critical success. Her star was born in the 1960s, when performances of Handel's *Giulio Cesare* with City Opera showcased Sills' copious vocal talents. More critical praise followed in 1968, with her *Manon*, also at City Opera. Many more successes as a star soprano followed.

Off-stage, Beverly Sills made many appearances on talk shows. Though she was not the only operatic guest to be invited to the Johnny Carson "Tonight Show", she *was* the only one ever asked to guest host. She had her own television talk show, "Lifestyles with Beverly Sills",

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

and in was on the cover of *Time Magazine* in 1971, as “America’s Queen of Opera”. This moniker was apt – during an era when many aspiring young singers would travel to Europe to train, Ms. Sills was a product of American teaching. Also, due to family complications (both of her children have special needs) Sills had always limited her overseas travel.

After her retirement from singing in 1980, Beverly Sills was made the co-director of City Opera. While Sills was in this position, City Opera cut ticket prices, and became the first American house to use supertitles. Her legacy will endure as one who increased accessibility to opera in manifold ways. According to the first paragraph of her extensive New York Times obituary: she was “more popular with the American public than any opera singer since Enrico Caruso, even among people who never set foot in an opera house” (Tommasini NYTimes obit.) One memorable appearance in the public spotlight was on *The Muppet Show*, singing an aria from *La traviata* in competition with Miss Piggy and other Muppets. She was one of many classical-type performers invited to the program. Other singers invited to perform on *The Muppet Show* have included Marilyn Horne, Samuel Ramey, Placido Domingo, Denyce Graves, Andrea Bocelli, and Renee Fleming, all super-stars within the classical music world lampooning themselves and their art in the name of entertainment. (The depiction of these singers in opulent costumes, with Muppet Valkyries, boatmen, gypsies, and Miss Piggy as Cleopatra point to public perception of opera at the time, and is subject for another article!)

The inclusion of Andrea Bocelli on the above lists merits some discussion. He is the world’s top selling classical artist, a tenor with an enormous discography. Unlike the other singers on those lists, however, Bocelli has found success as a “crossover singer”. He sings with vibrato and has performed operas, opera arias, oratorio, and art song. However, several factors

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

have limited his acceptance in the opera world. First, Bocelli has had a difficult time being cast in stage productions (having vision impairments from birth, and having been completely blind since adolescence). Second, his voice is not of great size – and many critical reviews suggest that his recordings are carefully engineered to mask vocal faults that occur in live performances. Another factor limiting Bocelli's opera clout is his heavy involvement in popular music. He has toured with Italian and French pop singers. He has appeared on a Celine Dion album. His recording of "Time to say Goodbye" with Sarah Brightman (another crossover singer sharing many similarities to Bocelli) sold more than 12 million copies.

The question should be asked – why is it that these previous performers (Sills especially) were able to participate in the popular realm while maintaining opera careers, but here we have a classically trained singer who has the capability to sing opera (but just happens to have made an outrageous amount of money singing "pop" music) and he's generally derided by the opera community? Why is it that "The word crossover has become pejorative in classical music circles" (Tommasini, "Crossover Nightmares")? In the quoted article, Tommasini continues: "There is nothing wrong with crossover in principle. There are simply good crossover projects and bad ones" (Ibid). In the experience of this author, it would seem that critics have found more "bad ones" than successful projects. This brings us (finally) to *Dark Hope*.

To pose another question – why would one of 21<sup>st</sup> century opera's biggest stars make a crossover album? One should not guess that it is because she was struggling financially – her empire includes several sponsorships, CD and DVD sales, and singing engagements far into the future. Perhaps she is bored with opera? In a dialogue with Seth Colter Walls, Zachary Woolfe suggests: "Maybe...boredom most of all. She has only added 3 new roles in all of the last

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

decade” (Woolfe, “June Cleaver Does Muse”). Fleming offers her own explanation in the liner to the album: “One of the most exciting aspects of being a performer is the thrill of receiving an unexpected offer...Never, though, had I been blindsided by the chance to explore music that inhabits a completely different place in the genre universe. An idea that made me say, ‘Are you kidding?’” (Fleming, *Dark Hope* liner notes). She goes on to explain, as has also been described in several articles surrounding the release of the album, that the project was not, in fact, her idea. It was in fact an idea hatched by Cliff Burnstein and Peter Mensch of Q Prime (a management company whose roster, according to their website, includes the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Josh Groban, Metallica, The Mars Volta, and Muse, among others).

This raises an even more pressing question – why on earth would a rock/metal management company undertake a project involving an opera singer? Fleming herself states: “I wondered what they were thinking” (Conrad, “Diva goes to the dark side”). In the liner notes: “Cliff and Peter had long harbored an interest in combining some of their favorite songwriters with a classically trained voice...I was intrigued by the names of the bands...my teenaged daughters raved about this music they already knew and loved. As I listened, I was surprised by the inventiveness of the writing” (*Dark Hope* liner notes).

This explanation brings up several issues. First and foremost – of all possible album ideas, why an opera singer doing indie rock? According to Conrad, Mensch saw a Met advertisement for *Thaïs* featuring Fleming’s face, and decided she was the one he wanted for this pet project. It would almost seem, for lack of a better term, like a fetishization – the “high class girl goes downtown”. Bringing back to the fore the palpable separation of opera from pop

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

culture, what might be the implications of seeking out an opera singer to “cover” rock/pop tunes?

Much of *Dark Hope*’s critique (positive and negative) centers on this issue. The artists represented on this album generally fall under the category of singer/songwriter – that is, the bands are writing melodies for themselves to perform. As they are not classically trained singers, these pieces generally feature a fairly limited vocal range, and on recordings, a less than “perfect” vocalization. This is part of the current rock/indie/pop idiom – there is arguably no such thing as pop “perfection”. The hallmarks of a trained singer – clean pitch production, clear diction, and even *vibrato* are out of place in the contemporary pop aesthetic. If Mensch specifically sought out a classically trained singer, was he wishing to hear the chosen tunes rendered by a “clean” voice? Why? Was he anticipating such an adaptation would somehow “elevate” the tunes to a level that the original interpreter was unable to achieve?

If this was Mensch’s intent, he has an appreciative audience with at least one reviewer.

Peter Conrad of *The Observer* commented:

“Comparing Fleming’s covers with the originals, I can’t help feeling that she has a musical finesse and an emotional authority to which those whiny juveniles could hardly aspire. Welsh singer Duffy gargles her scales...while Fleming skips up the ladder with exhilarating exactitude. Songs about being crossed in love sound petulant and self-pitying when delivered by teenagers; the same words are given gravity by Fleming” (Conrad, “Diva Goes to the Dark Side”)

This review has a distinctly biased viewpoint – Conrad’s comments are overwhelmingly in favor of Fleming’s interpretation of these songs. His mention of “emotional authority” gave pause –

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

how interesting that the original performers, the *origin of the text*, are seen as lacking in authority compared to Fleming. It would seem that Conrad is equating Fleming's facility with vocalization with authority to deliver the songs in a way more meaningful than could a less-trained singer.

The perceived ease with which Fleming performs these songs is preferable, in Conrad's view, to the delivery of the untrained, rock originators.

This sort of preference for Fleming's polished vocals (perhaps a symptom of the "high culture" bias) is decidedly not universal. Referring to the same song Conrad discusses (Duffy's "Stepping Stone"), the Armchair Critic comments: "Whilst she renders the blues notes themselves perfectly they are delivered without the necessary soul . . . Fleming comes across as a confidant (sic) middle-aged woman who couldn't really care less" ("Dark Hope – Renee Fleming", [queeried.com](#)). Another reviewer states "Fans of these rock songs will probably consider these . . . bastard versions" (Victor, "Renee Fleming – Dark Hope"). Yet another: "The music is indie-rock, but the production struck me as very adult-contemporary" (Holmes, "Soprano Renee Fleming Turns to Rock"). A final example: "It's difficult not to view her indie rock persona as yet another character she's portraying" (Lessner, *Opera News* review). These reviewers seem to suggest that, to them, Fleming is *not* the authority on the music she's singing, and it is in evidence in her interpretation of the songs.

The concept of authority is a useful tool in this discussion. Renee Fleming certainly possesses the authority in her field to perform a wide variety of characters – her dozens of roles on opera stages around the world attest to this. She has built a very successful career interpreting the music of others – from Corigliano to Cherubini. However, does she possess the authority to interpret the songs of Cedric Bixler and Leonard Cohen? These reviews point to the possibility

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

of a negative answer.

For those who have not heard the album, some mention of the vocals is pertinent. Renee Fleming did not perform on *Dark Hope* using the sort of vocalizations that made her famous. She does not sing as a soprano on this album. “It was scary to shed so much of what I knew...I just whispered into this enormous mic in the booth...I’m using keys no soprano has ever sung in” (Renee Fleming, quoted in Conrad, “Diva Goes to the Dark Side”) In fact, when Peter Mensch presented a white-labeled, unnamed album to Universal executives, they were unable to identify the singer as Fleming (who is on the Decca roster, one of Universal’s holdings). Listening to the album, one does hear a singer clearly in control of her instrument, with a backdrop of very clean instrumentals - perhaps too clean, but that will be discussed later. What one does not hear is an opera singer doing classic renditions of indie rock (thank heavens!).

The vocal transformation Fleming undertook for *Dark Hope* is central to discussion in the *New York Times* reviews of the album. Anthony Tommasini, chief classical music critic for the *Times*, turned to his colleague, chief pop music critic Jon Pareles, for assistance in reviewing an album: “I must admit...I felt out of my depth listening to this record” (Tommasini, “Opera Diva Tries a Rock Album. Cue Controversy”). He explains: “I guess I was flummoxed by Renee Fleming’s rock singing because she was so unrecognizable.” (Tommasini, “Classical Crossover: If it Ain’t Got That Swing). Pareles’ own review offers: “In the end Ms. Fleming treated her rock hymns as an idiom that required certain authentic performance practices, and she learned them...The richness of her voice can make some of the original versions’ vocals...sound twerpy by comparison” (Pareles, “Letting Desdemona Rock Out a Little”). Here again, a reviewer offers a bit of a value judgment based on vocal quality (preferring the “richness” of Fleming’s

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

well-maintained instrument over the originals). Why would a pop reviewer harbor this bias?

Perhaps Pareles is showing his stripes – he (like Tommasini) is a Yale music graduate. Perhaps not.

Continuing on in the dialogue, Tommasini claims “It is so important to classical vocalists to explore and come to know the true natures of their voices” (Ibid). Tommasini seems to be hinting that he believes Renee Fleming’s “true” voice is that of an opera singer, and by deduction, that this rock idiom into which she delves is somehow “false”. This is absolutely absurd. No opera singer is born – most study for many years to train their larynxes to perform the feats of skill that project the sound of two small vocal folds out into an opera house. Yes, some singers have a naturally-ordained predilection toward singing in a classical style, but that can hardly be considered the “true nature” of a voice. This author would be astonished to discover anyone who ever came out of the womb crying with vibrato. Singing in a *bel canto* is nurture, not nature.

Fleming states in several interviews that she drew upon her speaking voice for *Dark Hope*, which falls in roughly the same range as the pieces on the album. This is part of the rock idiom – as singers in this arena generally use microphone-amplification, there is no concern of projection, and the aesthetic is generally aligned with that of one’s speaking voice. Indeed – Fleming had to de-train herself from using the sort of diction that she would otherwise employ to project text in an opera. “David [Kahne, the producer] kept saying, stop pronouncing. Stop with the consonants and the diphthongs and the clear vowels. So, ‘going to’ changed to ‘gonna’” (Fleming quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* “The People’s Diva Goes Pop”).

Perhaps what bothers Tommasini about this album is how little Renee Fleming sounds

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

like his concept of what Renee Fleming *should* sound like. Those familiar with Fleming can pick her voice out within moments of hearing a recording – she has a distinctive quality to her voice, a certain *grain* (to introduce a term borrowed from Barthes). Defined in *Image – Music – Text*, “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs”. (188). In his essay, Barthes discusses the *pheno-song*, (very loosely interpreted) – that which is on a page of music, and the rules associated with performing it; and the *geno-song*, the individual human element involved, the “space where significations germinate ‘from within language and in its very materiality’” (Barthes, *Music-Image-Text*, 182). He elaborates: “The ‘grain’ of the voice is not- or is not merely – its timbre; the *signifiante* it opens cannot be better defined, indeed, than by the very friction between the music and something else, which something else is the particular language” (Ibid, 185, italics author’s). Is there some “grain” in Fleming’s voice that Tommasini is not hearing? Conversely, is there something in the “grain” that others *are* hearing, and reacting against in critique?

Comparing track-by-track with the original tracks, one gets a sense of the amount of engineering that went into this album. Without a doubt, Fleming does a very good job suppressing her identity as herself – there are very few “tells” that this is *her* incredibly well-trained, disciplined voice. Some of the reviews mention issues of diction (as mentioned earlier, Fleming was aware of this possible issue, and did work to modify her diction). To these ears, that the diction remains prominent is not so much a fault of Ms. Fleming – it is a production issue. In the recording, the vocals are very, very prominent in the mix. It is as if (and reading the description of the recording sessions, indeed it *was*) Renee Fleming is speaking directly into the sound receiver – at very close range. This is a contrast from most of the

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

“originals”, where the vocals are less crisp (either due to pronunciation choices, or due to the fact that the singer was simply further away from the microphone). Because of issues of pitch projection, David Kahne may have had no choice but to closely mic Ms. Fleming – but this facet of the recording gives every track a very up-close-and-personal feel, which can be slightly off-putting.

Another, more harshly criticized, facet of the album is the homogeneity amongst the tracks. If the originals were lined up, there would be fully electronic outfits, a solo singer with guitar, and various other combinations of instrumentation, combined with a wide variety of vocal timbres. On *Dark Hope*, Kahne uses a very similar instrumentation for every track (keyboards, guitar, drums, bass, and background vocals by Renee Fleming’s sister and daughters). This does lend the album a sort of cohesion, but also serves to flatten out the individual identities of the tracks in a way that, in my opinion, does a disservice to all artists involved. In short, David Kahne’s production work on this album may have hurt Renee Fleming’s chances of critical success with *Dark Hope* more than it may have helped. Honestly, Fleming does sound for all the world like some amalgamation of Annie Lennox, Cher, Tori Amos, or one of the ilk of low-voiced female “indie” singers. One wonders – if “Renee Fleming” didn’t equate to “super-star soprano”, would this album have received as much ambivalent-to-rough critique from both sides of the opera/pop divide?

Returning to a previous query – why a singer in Fleming’s position would wish to undertake this sort of project (and the associated re-engineering of voice) - Fleming admits one more compelling reason. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, she offered:

“I’m more interested in this for what we can do for classical music, which became

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

marginalized in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kids, young musicians, have already figured this out. They're mixing in Coldplay with Paderewski. They really have found a way to bridge and to say great music is great music. I don't think it needs to be dumbed down. . .this gives us permission to do high quality work, and enables the audience to move freely through these various, what used to be, barriers" (Fleming, as quoted by Jurgensen, "The People's Diva Goes Pop", underlining mine).

Reminding oneself of earlier discussion - these very barriers, set up deliberately to separate and elevate opera (as the representative of the ultimate classical music) above the realm of "popular", are doing considerable harm now to opera's profitability. According to Alex Miller, GM of Sony Masterworks "Three percent of total music sales are in classical music" (Quoted by Midgette, "Classical artists..."). According to Ann Midgette in the same article, "The dirty secret of the Billboard classical charts is that album sales figures are so low, the charts are almost meaningless. Sales of 200 or 300 units are enough to land an album in the top 10." High culture, at least in regards to music, is not highly profitable. Though Fleming may have an entirely altruistic reason for wishing to "bridge" the classical-pop gap, money is ultimately compelling.

Though opera has donors, and high culture clout, it doesn't have the selling power that pop music has garnered. Opera "outreach" – specifically the "Met in HD" series now streaming to movie theatres across the US – is not simply an altruistic endeavor. Opera requires huge amounts of money to survive, and marketing executives for classical labels surely see a potential market in pop music fans. *Dark Hope* is not the first project trying to tap into this market. Placido Domingo duetted with John Denver on "Perhaps Love" (here is an example of a singer whose career wasn't hurt much by such a collaboration). The *Three Tenors* collaboration

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

(Domingo, Carreras, and Pavarotti) proved to be a short-term shot in the arm for the classical music industry – *The Three Tenors in Concert* became the one of the bestselling classical albums of all time. According to economist Julie Lee, “*The Three Tenors* instigated the industry’s relentless search for the next blockbuster that would immediately sell millions...some predicted this would help build a new, larger audience for classical music.” This optimism does not seem to have panned out – a 2006 article by Greg Sandow (a critic who continues to research audience age and has compiled the results on *ArtsJournal*) states “Orchestras therefore report (at least in private) that they’re facing structural deficits, or in other words that they see a long-term pattern of expenses rising faster than income. Their private projections can be very dire.” As classical music attendance statistics seem to be lumped together into one large group (rather than separating out symphony, opera, and chamber music attendance), statistics regarding orchestra attendance/finance can stand in as a useful comparison. With the current recession, several large orchestras have faced bankruptcy, and short or long-term shutdown. Classical music isn’t profiting very heavily these days. Was *Dark Hope* conceived as the latest scheme to bring in popular audiences? Compared to prior projects such as *The Three Tenors*, this ultimately seems far-fetched. Earlier “crossover” projects generally involved the opera singers maintaining their identities (and characteristic sounds) – here, we have an example where a singer sheds (or puts on, if preferred) a vocal persona in order to fit an idiom very different from classical singing. Perhaps this *was* an altruistic “Great music is great music” project on Fleming’s part. Maybe it was an innocent exploration of uncharted (for her) repertoire. However, questions linger.

Renee Fleming has the ability to be very discriminating in her choice of repertoire – she has not lately seemed to have been in a position of desperation, “taking any chance”. She says in

PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

the *Dark Hope* liner notes, “Typically I painstakingly research the concept and repertoire for each of my recordings, but in this case, because the genre was new to me, I went with Cliff (Burnstein)’s song suggestions”. It just strikes one as odd that for someone with such control over her career, she would choose first to jump into a new idiom, and leave the choice of repertoire up to a producer (whose name is not on the cover of the album). Of course, it can be wise to employ the opinions of experts, and Fleming did have her choice of a longer list of songs, but the question of “why, really?” remains.

It would appear that the classical and popular music worlds are at an impasse. After the deliberate separation for purposes of “high culture” creation, classical music is suffering from “unpopularity”. Certain opera singers were once able to maintain a public/popular spotlight, but it seems as if that era ended with the death of Beverly Sills. *Dark Hope* is the latest in what may be a terminally ill-fated project: trying to bridge the classical-pop gap. Though hers is certainly one of the most impressive “crossover” albums (rarely has a singer gone to such lengths to change her persona for a recording – even the album imagery is that of a rock goddess, not a prima donna), perhaps “opera singer does X type of music” is a dead-end, at least right now. This is a rather bleak conclusion, as it would indicate that opera singers (at least the famous ones) are stuck doing opera-or-nothing. It seems that “stepping off the pedestal” opens an artist up to critique from both sides (rather than unequivocal support from either) – *Dark Hope* is evidence of this. So, what’s a singer to do?

## Bibliography

- Barthes, Roland, trans. Stephen Heath. *Image – Music – Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Bernheimer, Martin. "Traubel, Helen." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. 4 May. 2011 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/28284>>.
- "Bocelli, Andrea". *Wikipedia*. Online, accessed 4 May 2011.
- Boyden, Matthew. *The Rough Guide to Opera*. London: Rough Guides, Ltd., 2002. Print.
- Chandler, David. "'What Do We Mean by Opera, Anyway?': Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* and 'High-Pop' Theatre". *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 21.2 (2009): 152-169. Academic Search Complete, accessed 1 May 2011.
- "Classical Crossover: Commercial Moves". *New York Times* 28 May 2010 12:43pm. Online edition.
- "Classical Crossover: Don't Forget the Bite". *New York Times* 28 May 2010 4:25pm. Online edition.
- "Classical Crossover: If it Ain't Got That Swing...". *New York Times* 28 May 2010 3:22pm. Online edition.
- "Classical Crossover: R.E.S.P.E.C.T.". *New York Times* 28 May 2010 1:57pm. Online edition.
- "Classical Crossover: What's All the Fuss?". *New York Times* 28 May 2010 11:44am. Online edition.
- Conrad, Peter. "Renee Fleming: Diva Goes to the Dark Side" *The Observer* 28 March 2010.
- "Dark Hope – Renee Fleming". Rev. of "Dark Hope", prod. David Kahne. *Queeried.com* online, <http://www.queeried.com/armchair-critic-dark-hope-renee-fleming/>.
- DiMaggio, Paul. "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America". In John Storey, ed., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice-Hall, 1998.
- Fleming, Renee. *Dark Hope*. Decca, 2010. CD and liner notes.
- Holden, Stephen. "A Bedroom Voice to Match His Eyes". *New York Times* 7 February 2011. Online edition.
- Holmes, Linda and Tom Huizenga. "Soprano Renee Fleming Turns to Rock and Pop with 'Dark Hope'". *Npr.org* 9 June 2010. Online.
- Jurgensen, John. "The People's Diva Goes Pop". *Wall Street Journal* 7 June 2010. Online edition.
- "Lanza, Mario." *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed. Ed. Colin Larkin. *Oxford Music Online*. 5 May. 2011 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/epm/15802>>.
- Lee, Julie. "A Requiem for Classical Music?" *Boston Federal Reserve Bank Regional Review* 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter 2003. Online edition. <<http://www.bos.frb.org/economic/nerr/rr2003/q2/requiem.htm>>
- Lee, Lindsay. "Renee Fleming: *Dark Hope*" Rev. of "Dark Hope", prod. David Kahne. *Pastemagazine.com* 17 June 2010. <<http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2010/06/renee-flemming-dark-hope.html>>
- Lessner, Joanne. "Renee Fleming: 'Dark Hope'". Rev. of "Dark Hope", prod. David Kahne. *Opera News* online, <[http://www.operanews.com/Opera\\_News\\_Magazine/2010/10/Recordings/Renee\\_Fleming\\_Dark\\_Hope.html?intcmp=Renee\\_Fleming\\_Dark\\_Hope](http://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2010/10/Recordings/Renee_Fleming_Dark_Hope.html?intcmp=Renee_Fleming_Dark_Hope)>
- Levine, Lawrence. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Midgette, Ann. "Classical Artists Such as Hilary Hahn Chart Big on Billboard with Little Sales". *Washington Post* 30 January 2010. Online edition. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/01/29/AR2010012904193.html>>
- McConachie, Bruce. "New York Operagoing, 1825-50: Creating an Elite Social Ritual." *American Music* 6. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Pareles, Jon. "Letting Desdemona Rock Out a Little". *New York Times* 28 May 2011. Online edition.
- "Sills, Beverly." *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed. rev. Ed. Michael Kennedy. *Oxford Music Online*. 5 May 2011. <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/oprt237/e9438>>.
- Sandow, Greg. "The Future of Classical Music?: Greg Sandow performs a book-in-progress". *ArtsJournal* online 6 March 2006. <[http://www.artsjournal.com/greg/2006/03/book\\_20episode\\_2\\_game\\_over.html](http://www.artsjournal.com/greg/2006/03/book_20episode_2_game_over.html)>

## PEARSE THFM 7680 FINAL

- Storey, John. "'Expecting Rain': Opera as Popular Culture?" *High-Pop: Making Culture Into Popular Entertainment*. Ed. Jim Collins. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. 32-55. Print.
- Tommasini, Anthony. "Beverly Sills, All-American Diva, is Dead at 78". *New York Times* 3 July 2007. Online edition.
- Tommasini, Anthony. "Crossover Nightmares". *New York Times* 7 March 2010. Online edition.
- Tommasini, Anthony. "Even Sopranos Get the Blues". *New York Times* 28 May 2010. Online edition.
- Tommasini, Anthony. "Taking Opera to the Heights and Down to Earth". *New York Times* 4 July 2007. Online edition.
- Tommasini, Anthony, and Jon Pareles. "Opera Diva Tries a Rock Album. Cue Controversy". *New York Times* 31 May 2010. Online edition.
- Townsend, Dorothy. "Helen Traubel" *Los Angeles Times* 30 July 1972. Online at <http://projects.latimes.com/hollywood/star-walk/helen-traubel/>.
- Victor, Greg. "Renee Fleming – 'Dark Hope'". Rev. of *Dark Hope*, prod. David Kahne. *Parcbench.com*, online. <http://www.parcbench.com/2010/06/15/renee-fleming---dark-hope-music-review/>.
- Woolfe, Zachary. "Superstar Tenor Grapples With the Operatic Canon". *New York Times* 14 February 2011. Online edition.
- Woolfe, Zachary. "Renee Fleming's 'Dark Hope': June Cleaver Does Muse". *TheAwl.com* 16 June 2010. <http://www.theawl.com/2010/06/renee-flemings-dark-hope-june-cleaver-does-muse/>.