



Free range: The top soprano attempts to expand her empire with *Dark Hope*, which features her spin on Leonard Cohen and Arcade Fire (right)

Renée Fleming updates her brand

The legendary soprano's new album covers songs by the likes of Arcade Fire

"THE NOTION THAT opera singers are Olympians who do not come down to Earth isn't relevant anymore," says American soprano Renée Fleming, by phone from her home in New York City. "I do not live in an ivory tower, and should sing and say what I please."

Which explains her most recent album, *Dark Hope*, put together by Metallica's managers and featuring Fleming's operatically tempered takes on songs originally recorded by the likes of Arcade Fire, Leonard Cohen and other rock legends. "I did it to get out of my comfort zone," she laughs. "It also brought me closer to my [teenage] daughters, who both sing on certain songs with me."

With its *American Idol*-esque orchestration, *Dark Hope* is easy listening, and features light tonal calisthenics rather than the usual vocal gymnastics Fleming's fans expect. Now 51, she is one of the most famous opera singers on the planet. The first woman in the Metropolitan Opera's history to solo headline an opening night gala, Fleming has a high-profile Rolex ad campaign, her own fragrance, and an eponymous chocolate dessert created by master chef Daniel Boulud. But she's always looking for new opportunities. "I believe you need to have more of a brand than ever—especially in opera," she explains. "We are competing in a marketplace without filters. There are 2,000 channels and endless YouTube spots."

"The necessity of having an image has become paramount, and that's an enormous change" in opera, says Fleming. "Everything

becomes a weapon: your costume, your tastes and the way you communicate." So, along with Facebook and MySpace pages, she consciously branches out to get people to notice her range. In December, she'll perform with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra; in January, she'll appear with Paul Simon and the Philadelphia Orchestra. And she recently released a DVD, *Renée Fleming & Dmitri Hvorostovsky: A Musical Odyssey in St. Petersburg*, in which she acts as tour guide to historical sites when not singing with baritone Hvorostovsky in various palaces.

What of the traditionalists who expect her to be a 21st-century Maria Callas? "I work in a field that has been documented in recordings for more than 100 years now, and the roles we are playing were written 300 years before that. Performances were criticized and reviewed back then, and we do get used to being compared with them. That's why it took [over 20 years] for me to sing *La Traviata*—I just thought, 'There have been so many Viollettas out there.'"

Fleming, who is often measured against such diverse contemporaries as Renata Tebaldi, Sarah Brightman and Kathleen Battle, waves off the comparisons as "absolutely inevitable. Although opera is one of the least sexist fields of music because the female lead is doted on, respected and so needed, divas do receive

more scrutiny and negative press than the men in this field. What is an opera without the soprano? Nothing."

This is not to say that she doesn't care what critics think, though their take on her is decidedly bipolar: she's been dubbed "the people's diva" and, more regally, "the Grace Kelly of opera." Fleming thinks her harshest critics have helped build her career. "If there is something consistent being said, I correct it," she says, adding that she's learned to read reviews only after a run of performances, because she finds "they can colour" her approach.

In at least one respect, this new-school diva is old guard: before performing, she imposes a 24-hour tech detox. She doesn't talk on the phone or check her BlackBerry, she turns off the TV and, except for writing the odd email, puts any laptop within reach to sleep. "I rarely go out the day I'm on, and do not want to engage in anything that might dis-

turb the equilibrium of my singing." Her routine was inspired by a meeting with legendary prima donna Leontyne Price. "This is all that matters," Price advised, pointing to her throat. "You have to learn to tune out the noise, the hype and the demands. Because the minute this goes, it will all disappear so fast, you won't even know what happened." Fleming, it appears, has every intention of remaining highly visible. **ELIO IANNACCI**

'I do not live in an ivory tower,' says the diva, now 51, of her new venture with Metallica's managers