

# Opera star sings praises of Shepherd orchestra

SHELBY HODGE, Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

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With opera star **Renée Fleming** casting a magical spell onstage and with \$2.4 million in the bank, it was a glorious night for Rice University's Shepherd School of Music last Thursday.

"An Evening With Renée Fleming" played to a sell-out crowd in the school's Stude Concert Hall, where heavy-hitters from both coasts and points in between gathered in their black-tie best to salute the diva and the music school. Fleming captivated the audience with a triple threat of charm, glamour and amazing talent. Standing ovations and cheers greeted her performance and encores.

Fleming had major praise for the school's symphony orchestra, which accompanied her in the second half of her program.

"The quality is so high, the level of musicianship so great ... that it rivals a lot of professional orchestras," Fleming said.

And that, of course, sent Shepherd School music director and conductor **Larry Rachleff** over the moon.

At the end of the concert, the traditional bouquet of flowers was presented, and Fleming, clearly surprised by something unknown to the audience, kissed the young man making the delivery. She later explained that she doesn't ordinarily shower kisses so freely. However, this tuxedo-clad delivery man was her younger brother, **Geordie Alexander**, a first-year master's student in the school's opera program.

At the seated dinner and dance that followed, gala chairs **Phoebe** and **Bobby Tudor** could hardly contain their enthusiasm for the soirée, which had the dinner crowd of 700 buzzing with excitement. Joining the Tudors in the post-concert spotlight were co-chairs **Susan L. Baker** and **Michael Lynch**, both of New York, Shepherd School dean **Robert Yekovich** and Houston Grand Opera chorus master **Richard Bado**, who accompanied Fleming on the piano in the first half of her program.

A number of arts leaders joined the dinner scene in a dramatic tent lined in star-speckled black and hung with scores of crystal chandeliers and Fortuny lanterns. Houston Grand Opera's **Anthony Freud** and Houston Symphony's **Matthew VanBesien** were in the mix, as was former HGO impresario **David Gockley**, in from his post with the San Francisco opera.

Among guests were **Margaret Pack**, whose gift of \$1 million for the evening will establish a foreign-language institute for singers, and other top donors, who included **Charlotte Rothwell**, **Molly** and **Jim Crownover**, **Nancy** and **Rich Kinder**, **Susie** and **Mel Glasscock**, **Vicki** and **Paul West**, **Cynthia** and **Bucky Allshouse**

**Joe Hudson**, **Jim Murdaugh** and **Gary Smith**.

Also on hand were **Lynn** and **Pete Coneway**, he making his first big charity splash since just returning from his post as U.S. ambassador to Switzerland. And we can't forget Rice University president **David Leebron** and wife **Y. Ping Sun**.

The Tudors tapped Jackson & Co. for the dinner; the Events Co. for décor and the Richard Brown Orchestra to provide the music that inspired dancing into the late hours, even on a school night.

## Diva digs

Rather than book a hotel for her Houston stay, Fleming accepted the invitation of longtime friend **Lynn Wyatt** to bunk in her River Oaks abode. Wednesday night, Fleming requested dinner at *chez* Wyatt with her younger brother, Geordie

Alexander, as the only guest. How grand for Wyatt when, after dinner, Fleming sat down at the piano and the brother and sister performed a number of duets.

## Sight 'ems

Comedian **Robin Williams** having a late-night supper at the Four Seasons Hotel on Wednesday after his performance at Verizon Wireless Theater. His dinner partners — **Beverle** and **Marc Ostrofsky**, who met Williams years ago when he introduced the comedian to **Bill Gates** at a technology conference in Las Vegas ...

Gov. **Rick Perry** dining at Sullivan's Steakhouse with a host of Republicans and supporters including former Judge **Ken Wise**, Harris County Tax Assessor-Collector **Leo Vasquez** and **SuZanne Feather**, **Charles Hurwitz**, **Sean Hurwitz**, state Rep. **Jim Murphy**, **Jacob Monty**, **Jared Woodfill** and **Madeline Collier**...

Tri-Star Financial partners **John Bott** and **Bill Payne** holding court at Mo's ... A Place for Steaks, where the table talk focused on upheavals in the financial world. Joining the chat were **Tom Roe**, **Brenda Cheney**, **Don Otto**, **Joe Diosana**, **Jon Trevelise**, **Tony Zummo** and **Jack Warkenthien**...

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