

ASPECTS OF ASPEN

RENÉE FLEMING TALKS TO MARC SHULGOLD

Aspen. There's much to love about this compact town, nestled in the western edge of Colorado's towering Rocky Mountains. Each winter Aspen Mountain welcomes skiers from around the world—at least those unfazed by the high cost of lift tickets, lodging and restaurants. But when the warmth and natural beauty of summer arrives, it brings a different crowd.

During July and August the Aspen Music Festival and School attracts thousands of people for concerts by some of the world's finest musicians, who are joined by a small army of young musical stars-in-the-making. These seasoned artists and their young charges present a few hundred orchestral and chamber concerts in the 2,000-seat Music Tent and the subterranean 500-seat Harris Hall next door. In

town, operas are presented in a vintage opera house—but we'll get to that in a moment.

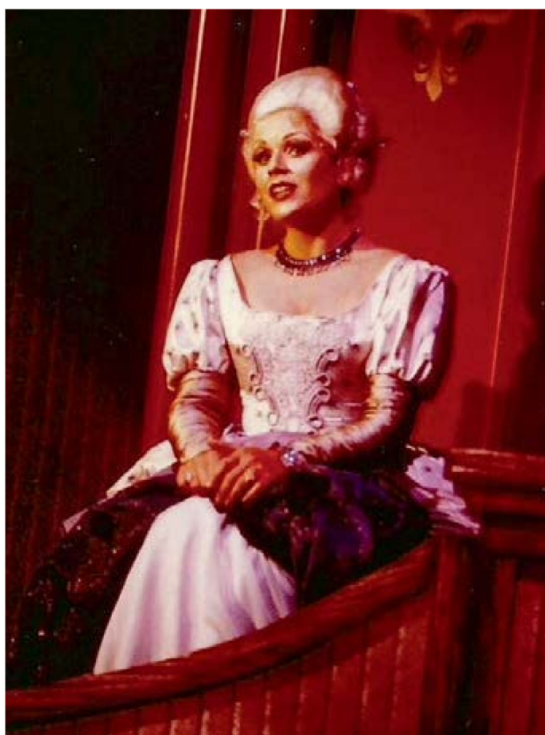
Renée Fleming

The festival began in 1949, when Albert Schweitzer was keynote speaker at a two-week celebration of Goethe's bicentennial. That year, the Aspen Institute and the Music Festival and School were established. The Institute has since hosted major conferences with big-name thinkers, and, alongside the music venues, is located among a grove of aspen trees outside of town.

The glories of the scenery and all that high-quality music prove irresistible—just ask one of the Festival and School's most illustrious alumni. 'Aspen was always my escape fantasy for a summer job,' Renée Fleming recalls of her student days. In conversation, the soprano speaks fondly of her



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Fleming's first Mozart role: as the Countess at Aspen in 1984

numerous performances there. Yet she has trouble remembering just how her Aspen Music School experience began. Suddenly it comes to her. 'It was [the famed teacher] Richard Pearlman at Eastman,' she said. 'He got me my first audition.'

That was the summer of 1983, and it went very well. Fleming, then 24, studied with the mezzo Jan DeGaetani and sang Anne Sexton in Conrad Susa's *Transformations*, with Edward Berkeley directing (it was his first year working at Aspen). The following summer she returned to Colorado, singing her first Mozart role—the Countess in *Le nozze di Figaro*.

But let's jump ahead—to the current year. A lot has happened for her, but Fleming has never really left Aspen behind. Those early memories still

linger: the hours of study, rehearsals and performances. But also the joyous mornings hopping on her bike and riding up to the famous, majestic twin peaks known as the Maroon Bells—located just south-west of Aspen. She's since returned for concerts in the Music Tent, and she sang at the gala opening of Harris Hall in 1993.

Then, in 2020, her occasional links with Aspen were solidified with an appointment as co-director of the newly created Aspen Opera Theater and VocalARTS (AOTVA). It seemed an obvious move for her.

'I have a tradition in my family of giving back to the next generation,' she said. 'Both my parents were teachers.' Fleming and Patrick Summers, the music director of Houston Grand Opera, were named to head the programme, part of the Festival's Music School. AOTVA focuses on training and coaching auditioned young singers (most of them with professional experience) in opera and song repertoire, culminating in two fully staged productions in Aspen's 136-year-old Wheeler Opera House.

This venture, officially launched in 2021, succeeds the programme led for nearly 40 years by Berkeley, who was set to remain as AOTVA's stage director until his sudden death in July of that year. This summer the programme has brought together 30 singers. Fleming, Summers and a faculty of 16 will work with the singers each day throughout the festival. The soprano will be on hand for the first month and elaborates on her work: 'I didn't want to do this on my own, and Patrick is the perfect partner. We talk all the time. There's a lot of planning. I'd heard all the

[singers'] auditions. It's a lot of work—it's actually a lot more than I realized. I guess there's always a problem of maybe doing too much.'

Still, she's ready for more. In late July, Fleming will make her directing debut at AOTVA with Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. Could this be the beginning of a new career? 'This is likely to be my only foray into directing,' Fleming writes a few days later in a separate email. 'I had plans to direct it a few years ago, but the pandemic intervened.' (She was originally scheduled to direct *Così* at Washington National Opera in 2021.) 'I chose a piece I know well,' she writes, 'and one that presents some challenges that fascinate me.' Word has already spread that Fleming's concept is far from traditional.

The red-brick Wheeler Opera House stands among the town's pricey shops and eateries. Seating only 503 and with a smallish stage, for decades it has been a welcome place for Aspen Opera's young professionals to shine before an audience, under the imaginative stage direction of Berkeley and the baton of such prominent guest conductors as Jane Glover. Productions usually lean toward the unpredictable and unexpected. For example, *Carmen* was set in modern Morocco, with soldiers wearing khaki shorts and dark sunglasses, and Escamillo sporting a shaved head and rolling in on a bright red motorcycle. Berkeley also embraced offbeat repertory, such as H.K. Gruber's *Gloria—A Pig Tale*. Fleming's concept for *Così fan tutte* seems to fit right in with the Wheeler's quirky opera tradition.

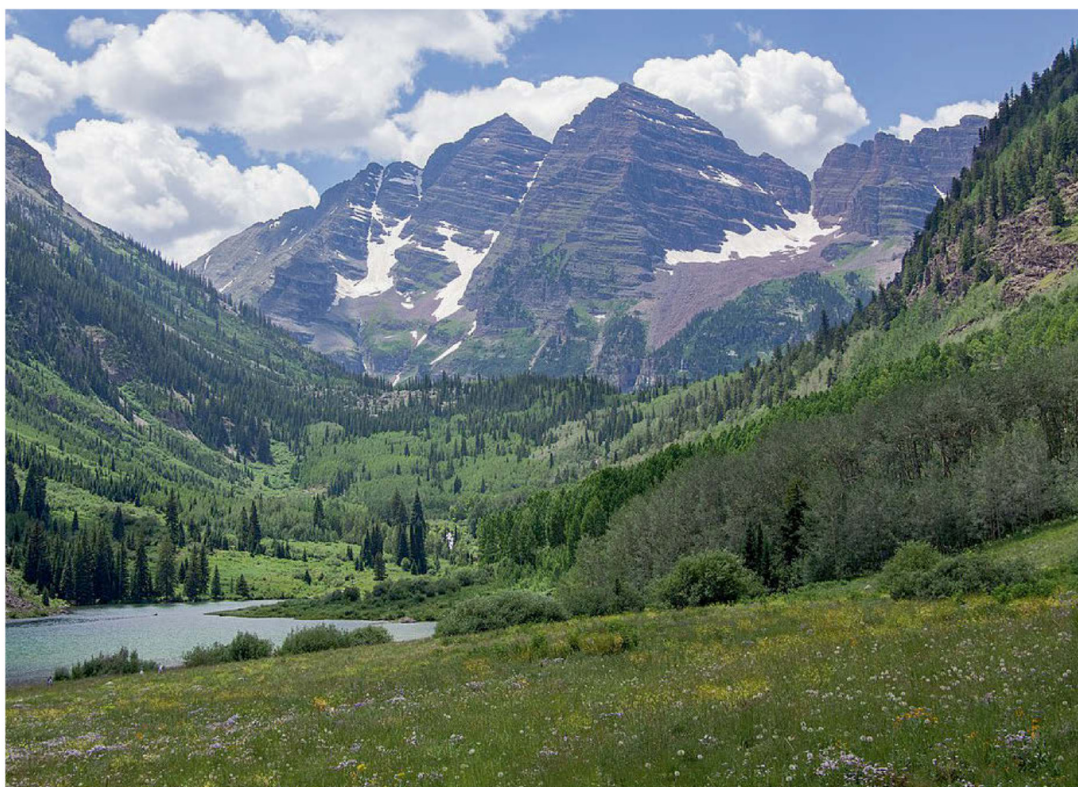
'Having performed *Così* early in my career [as Fiordiligi],' she writes, 'I've long had thoughts about how to make this comedy come alive for contemporary audiences. It's more than two centuries old, and, while the music is timeless, the battle of the sexes that propels the plot is viewed differently now. I wanted the two young couples at the heart of the story to be high-school age, because this is absolutely a coming-of-age story.'

'These young people are starting to exercise their emotional muscles, and testing their limits. I wanted to set it in a time and place that would be colourful, recognizable, and offer possibilities for physical comedy. And so I hit on the idea of a community gym in the early 1980s. The *Rocky* movie franchise was going strong. At the same time, the fitness movement for women was really taking off for the first time, with Jane Fonda leading the way. And Yarmouth was where the professional wrestling craze in the US got under way, right at that time. That suggested

Aspen's Wheeler Opera House



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Backdrop to Aspen: the Maroon Bells

opportunities for theatricality, especially the disguises that are central to the plot of *Così fan tutte*.' The setting, then, is Yarmouth, a small town in Massachusetts on the south tip of Cape Cod. Safe to say, this will *not* be your grandmother's *Così*.

Meanwhile, her AOTVA co-director Patrick Summers will focus his responsibilities as the production's conductor on the singers' technique, helping them get inside 'the hidden art of opera. That will involve a lot of teaching,' he says during a Zoom call from Houston. 'But really, this *Così* doesn't change things as far as running the programme. The director's conception does change things for a conductor, but all that will be seen in rehearsals.'

Summers views his responsibilities more philosophically. 'You learn to read the instincts of a singer, how they digest a note.' He refers to his charges as 'young artists'. ('They're *not* students,' he says.) 'What they gain here will happen later. You can create an environment where chemistry can blossom.'

Fleming's time in Aspen is scheduled to begin on June 27 and end after the third and final performance of *Così* on July 26. A few days later she will head to Virginia to begin a tenure at Wolf Trap Opera's training programme as artist development advisor, guiding young artists in auditions and repertoire. Beyond that, there's her packed calendar of public appearances and performances. At 66 it's her life as a teacher that holds a special place for her—and her enthusiasm is unmistakable.

'I love working with young artists, and with young composers,' she says. 'That's the fun part. We all know how incredibly competitive the environment is for singers

these days. That's why this programme [at Aspen] is so valuable.' Fleming points out that AOTVA is being offered free of tuition charges for every singer for the first time this year. 'It's remarkable how the quality at the conservatories is so consistently high,' she marvels. Approximately 600 applications were received, making the selection process all the more difficult.

Every singer in both *Così* and the second Wheeler production, *La Bohème* (which opens in August), will get plenty of time for individual study and opportunities to perform on stage. Beyond voice lessons, there will be time for private counselling about what the future holds. 'We'll talk with them about ways they can work in their chosen field. That's why we encourage those still in college to choose a double major. The landscape [in opera] is always changing.'

One landscape that remains unchanging is the surrounding beauty of Aspen, such as Fleming's beloved Maroon Bells. It can help bring a sense of peace to even the most anxious young singer. Summers is quite aware of that, and he encourages his resident artists to breathe the mountain air. 'I tell them to notice where they are,' he says.

And will the co-directors of the Aspen Opera Theater also be able to enjoy the surrounding countryside? 'I'll go for walks,' Summers says, 'and Renée will bike to the Bells.'

'Così fan tutte', directed by Renée Fleming and conducted by Patrick Summers, opens at the Aspen Music Festival on July 21.

www.aspenmusicfestival.com



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