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OPERA OF  
CHICAGO

*Renée Fleming  
and Inon Barnatan*

# Voice of Nature

## The Anthropocene

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Lyric

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# The **2025 | 26**

## Season

**Lyric**  
OPERA OF  
CHICAGO

*Richard Strauss*

**Salomé**

January 25 - February 14, 2026

*Mozart*

**Così fan tutte**

February 1 - 15, 2026

*Renée Fleming in Recital*

**Voice of Nature: The Anthropocene**

February 5, 2026

*Puccini*

**Madama Butterfly**

March 14 - April 12, 2026

*Gabriela Lena Frank & Nilo Cruz*

**El último sueño de Frida y Diego**

March 21 - April 4, 2026

*Movie Nights at Lyric*

**Mary Poppins in Concert Live to Film**

April 10 & 11, 2026

*avery r. young*

**safronia**

April 17 & 18, 2026

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*Lyric*

# Voice of Nature: The Anthropocene

**Renée Fleming in Concert**

**February 5, 2026**

RENÉE FLEMING, soprano  
INON BARNATAN, pianist

Featuring an original film created by the National Geographic Society

Renée Fleming appears by arrangement with IMG Artists, [www.imgartists.com](http://www.imgartists.com).  
Ms. Fleming's jewelry is by Ann Ziff for Tamsen Z.

*Lighting Designer: Chris Maravich  
Stage Manager: Alaina Bartkowiak  
Assistant Stage Managers: Daniel Sokalski, Gemma DeCetra*

**LYRIC'S 2025/26 SEASON IS PRESENTED BY**  
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Lyric Opera of Chicago thanks its Official Airline, **United Airlines**, and  
acknowledges support from the **Illinois Arts Council**.

# Program

*The following is accompanied by a film provided by the National Geographic Society.  
The audience is asked to kindly hold applause until the end of the film.*

HAZEL DICKENS (1935 - 2011)	"Pretty Bird"
GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL (1685 - 1759)	"Care selle" from <i>Atalanta</i> , HWV 35
NICO MUHLY (1981 - )	"Endless Space"
ROBINSON MEYER (1991 - )	
THOMAS TRAHERNE (1636 - 1674)	
JOSEPH CANTELOUBE (1879 - 1957)	"Bailèro" from <i>Chants d'Auvergne</i>
MARIA SCHNEIDER (1960 - )	
TED KOOSER (1939 - )	"Our Finch Feeder" from <i>Winter Morning Walks</i>
BJÖRK (1965 - )	"All is Full of Love"
SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873 - 1943)	"Moments Musicaux no. 4"
HOWARD SHORE (1946 - )	"Twilight and Shadow"
PHILIPPA JANE BOYENS (1962 - )	from <i>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</i>
KEVIN PUTS (1972 - )	"Evening"
DORIANNE LAUX (1952 - )	
CURTIS GREEN (1995 - )	"Red Mountains Sometimes Cry"
PEARCE GREEN (1998 - )	
BURT BACHARACH (1928 - 2023)	"What the World Needs Now Is Love"
HAL DAVID (1921 - 2012)	

## INTERMISSION

**ENTR' ACTE (recording)**

JACKSON BROWNE (1948 - )  
Arrangement by  
CAROLINE SHAW (1982 - )

"Before the Deluge"  
Rhiannon Giddens, Alison Krauss, Renée Fleming,  
& Yannick Nézet-Séguin, piano

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

"Oh Sleep, why dost thou leave me?" from *Semele*  
"To fleeting pleasures make your court" from *Samson*

GIACOMO PUCCINI (1858 - 1924)

"O mio babbino caro" from *Gianni Schicchi*

J.TODD FRAZIER (1969 - )

"We hold these truths"

JOHN KANDER (1927 - )

"A Letter from Sullivan Ballou"

EARL WILD (1915 - 2010)

From "7 Virtuoso Etudes after Gershwin"  
No. 3. "The Man I Love"  
No. 7. "I Got Rhythm"

JOHN KANDER

"Love and Love Alone/Winter" from *The Visit*

FRED EBB (1928 - 2004)

FREDERICK LOEWE (1901 - 1988)

"I Could Have Danced All Night" from *My Fair Lady*

ALAN JAY LERNER (1918 - 1986)

**Estimated Running Time:** 2 hours including one intermission.

# A note from Renée Fleming

**When I was 14**, the film *Soylent Green* was released, a sci-fi thriller about a dystopian future of worldwide pollution, dying oceans, depleted resources, and rampant starvation. The story was set in the year 2022.

The movie has faded from memory, but one scene left a profound impression. An aged researcher, unable to go on, has chosen assisted suicide at a government clinic. To ease his last moments of life, he is shown videos of a world that no longer exists: flowers and savannahs, flocks and herds, unpolluted skies and waters, all set to a soundtrack of classical music by Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, and Grieg.

This scene captured my imagination in a terrifying way. The impact increased when I later learned that the actor playing the researcher, Edward G. Robinson, was terminally ill at the time it was filmed.

Fast forward to the pandemic. After more than two decades of constant touring, usually to urban cultural centers, performances abruptly ceased, and I suddenly found myself at home. I sought comfort in long walks outside near my house. I needed this time outdoors to maintain my emotional equilibrium, and I was reminded that nature would always be my touchstone. At the same time, the news about climate change grew more alarming: the extinction of animals we took for granted when we were children, the knowledge that white rhinos had disappeared from the wild, and daily reports of heat, fires, and flooding. I realized that the crisis we had been warned of for so long had arrived.

I thought of the great legacy of song literature that I love, when Romantic-era poets and composers reveled in imagery of nature, finding reflections of human experience in the environment. I decided to record some of this music, and to juxtapose these classics with the voices of living composers, addressing our current, troubled relationship with the natural world.

The result, in collaboration with my friend Yannick Nézet-Séguin, was the album *Voice of Nature: the Anthropocene*. When it received the 2023 Grammy Award for Best Classical Solo Vocal Album, I was thrilled, and I had the idea to tour music addressing this theme of nature as both our inspiration and our victim.

I was incredibly fortunate to connect with the imaginative, dedicated leadership at the National Geographic Society, the global non-profit committed to exploring, illuminating, and protecting the wonder of our world. It has been so exciting to work with this universally respected, landmark institution. I am deeply grateful for the help of President and Chief Operating Officer Michael Ulica, Chief Executive Officer Jill Tiefenthaler, and Producer/Editor Sam Deleon, whose expertise and vision have been instrumental in creating the video you will see in the first half of tonight's program.

Thankfully, the stunning natural world depicted in this film still exists, unlike that movie scene so upsetting to my younger self. In blending these beautiful images with music, my hope is, in some small way, to rekindle your appreciation of nature, and encourage any efforts you can make to protect the planet we share.

Sincerely,  
Renée Fleming

# Artist profiles



## RENÉE FLEMING SOPRANO

**Previously at Lyric:** 10 roles since 1993, most recently Hanna Glawari/*The Merry Widow* (2015/16), The Countess/*Capriccio* (2014/15).

Renée Fleming is internationally celebrated for her vocal and dramatic artistry, as well as her dedicated advocacy for the powerful impacts of the creative arts in health. A 2023 Kennedy Center Honoree and winner of five Grammy awards and the U.S. National Medal of Arts, she has sung for momentous occasions from the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony to the Super Bowl. In 2023, the World Health Organization appointed her as Goodwill Ambassador for Arts and Health. In 2024 at the Metropolitan Opera, she reprised her role in *The Hours*, an opera based on the award-winning novel and film. This winter, she returns to the Opéra National de Paris with her acclaimed portrayal of Pat Nixon in *Nixon in China*. Her anthology *Music and Mind: Harnessing the Arts for Health and Wellness* was published in 2024. A prominent advocate for research at the intersection of arts, health, and neuroscience, she created a live program called *Music and Mind*, which she has presented in more than 70 cities around the world. The Renée Fleming NeuroArts Investigator Awards fund interdisciplinary research projects by early career scientists in collaboration with creative artists.

Fleming appeared at Lyric in the 2022/23 Season in *The Brightness of Light* with Rod Gilfry and the Lyric Opera Orchestra under Enrique Mazzola. She previously served as curator of Jimmy López and Nilo Cruz's *Bel Canto* (2015/16), Lyric's tenth new opera commission, and spearheaded *Chicago Voices*, a groundbreaking Lyric Unlimited initiative during 2016 and 2017 that engaged audiences through participatory arts experiences and dynamic cross-genre programming.

Known for bringing new audiences to classical music and opera, Renée has sung with Elton John, Paul Simon, Sting, Josh Groban, Dead and Company, and Joan Baez. Co-Artistic Director of the Aspen Opera Center and VocalArts at the Aspen Music Festival, Fleming is also Artist Development Advisor at Wolf Trap Opera. Other awards include the 2023 Crystal Award from the World Economic Forum in Davos, the Fulbright Lifetime Achievement Medal, and honorary doctorates from 10 major universities.



## INON BARNATAN PIANIST

**Lyric debut**

Highlights this season for the acclaimed pianist include Beethoven's Triple Concerto with Stefan Jackiw, violin, and Hayoung Choi, cello, at the Baltimore Symphony with Music Director Jonathon Heyward, concerto performances including *Rhapsody in Blue* with the Dallas Symphony and Music Director Fabio Luisi, *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* with the Minnesota Orchestra, and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 with the Charlotte Symphony. Solo recital appearances this season include Tippet Rise Art Center, Noe Music, Tryon Concert Association, and a return to Wigmore Hall. Continuing with Pomegranate Arts' project of the complete Etudes of Philip Glass, he will appear this season at Krannert Center and University Musical Society. As a collaborator, he continues his long-term partnerships with cellist Alisa Weilerstein in duo recitals at the Ravinia Festival, Spivey Hall, and McCallum Theatre; and with Renée Fleming at Cal Performances, Schubert Club, and Philharmonic Society of Orange County. He will make his debut at the Taipei Music Festival and repeat his Fauré Piano Quartet program with violinist James Ehnes, violist Jonathan Vinocour, and cellist Raphael Bell at the Philharmonic Society of Orange County and Seattle Chamber Music Society. Barnatan appears regularly with the world's foremost orchestras and conductors. He was the inaugural Artist-in-Association of the New York Philharmonic from 2014 to 2017 under then Music Director Alan Gilbert, and has performed regularly with the symphony orchestras of Boston, Chicago, and Cleveland, the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl, the BBC Symphony at the Proms, and most major U.S. orchestras. Abroad he has appeared with the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Zurich Tonhalle, Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony, Helsinki Philharmonic, and the London, Hong Kong, and Royal Stockholm Philharmonics. He has given complete Beethoven concerto cycles with the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields and the Orchestre Philharmonique de Marseille, played Copland's Piano Concerto with Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony at Carnegie Hall, and toured the U.S. with the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, leading from the keyboard. I

# Back to Nature

Renée Fleming returns to Lyric with an exceptionally thought-provoking recital

By Roger Pines



**Every appearance** by Renée Fleming at the Lyric Opera House is an occasion for rejoicing. It's particularly momentous this season, as the internationally celebrated American soprano, a company favorite for more than three decades, has brought to Chicago *Voice of Nature: The Anthropocene*, one of the most fascinating projects of her entire career. It's also her long-awaited first solo recital on the Lyric stage.

The meaning of "Anthropocene" is not entirely settled, but one online source defines it as "the current geological age, where human activities have become the main force shaping the Earth's environment, climate, and even its geological makeup." In response to that all-encompassing reality, Fleming determined to focus this recital on nature, in all its beauty and mystery. The result is this captivating, deeply thoughtful program, previously

presented with great success in numerous prestigious venues nationwide.

"When we were all cut off from our work, I'd recently moved to Virginia, right outside of D.C., and I fell in love with being outside — gardening, and taking walks in what is an extremely verdant area," she says of how the recital was conceived. "I'd always thought about the fact that, historically speaking — at least, in my repertoire — the song literature I'd loved and performed really connected the poetry not only to every aspect of the human experience, but also through this lens of nature."

The recital itself grew from the success of the project that these experiences inspired, *Voice of Nature*, the 2021 album Fleming recorded with Met music director Yannick Nézet-Séguin at the piano. The disc features a good deal of contemporary music, including several

pieces commissioned by Fleming. Contemplating the environment, biodiversity, and sustainability confirmed the soprano's realization that "we're not so connected to nature now." She kept those concerns foremost in her mind in the album. When it won a Grammy, she says, "I thought, *I want to take this on the road* — and I wanted to do it with media." A random dinner party introduction led to a meeting with the head of the National Geographic Society. "It was like a one-minute phone call," Fleming remembers. "He said, 'I definitely want to do this — we'll make your films,'" and thus the path was clear for creating the program's exciting visual component.

In short order Fleming was able to structure her recital, with every piece in the first half of the program having a clear connection to nature. The basic framework also had flexibility, allowing Fleming to switch out particular pieces easily whenever she felt a new addition was needed.

The opening song, Hazel Dickens's "Pretty Bird," is folk-like in character, and mesmerizing when sung *a cappella*. "People are surprised that I'm thinking and working in this style," says Fleming. "But there's something about folk music that has always touched me immediately."

Another highlight of the recital will be one of Handel's most breathtaking arias, "Care selve," the only familiar music from his opera *Atalanta*. The composer "very often uses nature to help characters work through problems," Fleming observes. "To me, it was completely logical to include it in this program." The sheer loveliness of particular pieces is, not unexpectedly, an essential element of this recital; it plays a role not just with the *Atalanta* aria but also with "Baïléro" from Canteloube's *Songs of the Auvergne*. Fleming admits she's performing the latter simply because "it's just so beautiful! They're talking to each other across a river, but despite that distance there's something charming and intimate about it at the same time."

**Among the commissioned pieces** in the program is Nico Muhly's "Endless Space," which takes its texts from both 17th-century poet and theologian Thomas Traherne and a journalist writing in our own time, Robinson Meyer. Fleming has wide experience collaborating with living composers, a process with a strong collaborative element. "I'm always involved in thinking about the text, and certainly in creating and fashioning the theme," she notes. "And of course, I always check that it's vocally congenial for me. In this case it was easy — I love what Nico did!"

Another remarkable American composer, Maria Schneider, created the memorable song cycle, *Winter Morning Walks*, in 2013, to texts by former Pulitzer winner and U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser. Fleming was entranced when she first heard the piece, in a Grammy-winning recording by Dawn Upshaw. "I've sung the whole cycle," Fleming says. "It's actually very hard for me to find

up-tempo numbers, because my voice and my sensibility want to languish. This was an attempt to break up the languor!" From Schneider's cycle, Fleming has chosen "Our Finch Feeder," the text of which includes some notably striking imagery — for example, the finch feeder being "oily and dark as ammunition."

The biggest surprise for the audience will surely be Björk's "All Is Full of Love," a song that is "really about the earth," says Fleming. It impressed her that the Icelandic singer-songwriter was influenced by world-renowned naturalist David Attenborough (at the time of Björk's 2011 album *Biophilia*, Attenborough met with her to discuss the nature of music and the intersection between music, nature, and technology). "Björk is a soprano," Fleming adds, "so that helped a lot. I did a set of three songs of hers with a fantastic orchestrator, Hans Ek, and recorded them with the Stockholm Philharmonic a long time ago. They just really worked. I remember that I sang [another song from the cycle] 'Virus' with the New York Philharmonic on the eve of the announcement about Covid, which was a little unfortunate!"

Not all the music to be heard by the Lyric audience comes from the *Voice of Nature* album — the soprano has chosen to include certain pieces she's rarely performed before. Recalling Fleming's contribution to the soundtrack of one of the most successful fantasy films ever made, Fleming's daughter told her, "*The Lord of the Rings* is our touchstone — why don't you ever perform it?"

"I thought it would be perfect," Fleming says.

**For this recital** the exceptionally gifted American/Israeli Inon Barnatan has been Fleming's onstage collaborator. "He's an exquisite pianist, with a major international career as a soloist," Fleming says simply. "It's a luxury to sing with him." Neither of them is daunted by the prospect of performing in the expansive Ardis Krainik Theatre. Fleming scored a great success at Lyric in 2013, singing an elegant, all-French duo recital with Susan Graham. "It's not so intimate that you can whisper," she notes, "but beyond that it's no different. You always have to project!"

Wherever *Voice of Nature: The Anthropocene* has been presented, the second half of the program has tended to be on the lighter side. After the first half, "as much as the audience can sit there and think this music is incredibly beautiful, it's clear that humans are not being very good to the earth right now — you can see that on people's faces. So it's great if at the end they can leave humming, singing, and ultimately uplifted." L

*Roger Pines writes regularly for Opera magazine (U.K.), programs of America's most distinguished opera companies, and major recording labels. A faculty member at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music, since 2006 he has been a regular panelist on the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts' "Opera Quiz."*