

Renee Fleming - Dark Hope (2010)

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1. *Endlessly* 2. *No One's Gonna Love You* 3. *Oxygen* 4. *Today* 5. *Intervention* 6. *With Twilight As My Guide* 7. *Mad World* 8. *In Your Eyes* 9. *Stepping Stone* 10. *Soul Meets Body* 11. *Hallelujah* Musicians: Renee Fleming - soprano Rusty Anderson, Nick Valensi – guitar David Kahne – bass, guitar, keyboards Will Lee – bass Shawn Pelton – drums Jesse Mills, Cyrus Beroukhin – violin Dov Scheindlin, William Hakim – viola Wendy Sutter – cello Alexis Pia Gerlach – cello Amelia Ross, Sage Ross, Rachele Fleming – background vocals Mike Rossi – conductor

It's fitting that Renée Fleming, "the people's diva," would make an album of pop songs that feels more like a labor of love than a crossover attempt. *Dark Hope* is filled with songs and arrangements that wouldn't appear on a typical attempt to bring a classical vocalist into the mainstream -- witness her dark, intricate take on the Mars Volta's "With Twilight as My Guide." It should almost go without saying that Fleming's voice is just as remarkable here as it is in her usual milieu, but the album proves time and again that she is game for just about anything. Fleming learned how to sing in the more intimate, confessional style that *Dark Hope's* singer/songwriter and alternative rock fare requires just for this project; combined with her interpretive gifts, she does a masterful job of remaining true to the spirit of the original songs while offering her own twists on them. Her voice dances over the wordy, syllable-heavy lyrics of Willy Mason's "Oxygen," brings a mature moodiness to "Stepping Stone" that was lacking in Duffy's spitfire version, and remains connected to the intimacy in the Arcade Fire's "Intervention" even as the song swells around her. Indeed, *Dark Hope's* swelling arrangements are as much a weakness as they are a strength: at times, it feels like the album's producers didn't trust that her gorgeous voice singing these songs would be enough of a draw. Quite a few tracks have busy instrumentation that detracts from Fleming's singing; others have arrangements that try too hard to be tastefully contemporary, and dilute the songs' impact. Fleming is divinely torchy on Muse's "Endlessly," but her trip-hop-tinged surroundings are no match for her rich vocals. Her interpretation of Band of Horses' "No One's Gonna Love You" is let down by an arrangement that sounds like generic alt-pop -- though, on the other hand, it's a relief that it doesn't sound like A String Tribute to Band of Horses. Despite these problems, both of these songs are among *Dark Hope's* standout tracks, along with the subtly sultry electro-folk

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turn on Jefferson Airplane's "Today" and the urgent yet airy reading of Death Cab for Cutie's "Soul Meets Body." It's just frustrating that even songs as revered as Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" -- which is virtually a standard at this point -- are burdened with anything that takes away from a voice as remarkable as Fleming's singing a melody that powerful. She deserves credit for undertaking such a bold enterprise, but unfortunately Dark Hope's execution lets down the concept. --- Heather Phares, Rovi

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