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News

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MEZZO-SOPRANO JENNIFER LARMORE REIGNS IN REGAL ROLES ON NEW CD OF CONCERT SHOWPIECES

**Riveting Performances of Works by
Barber, Berlioz, Ravel, and Britten
With the Grant Park Orchestra,
Conducted by Carlos Kalmar**

*Cedille Records' Royal Mezzo Marks Unique Addition
to Acclaimed American Singer's Vast Discography*

American mezzo-soprano Jennifer Larmore, an international star of the opera and recital stage, solos in three cantatas — Barber's *Andromache's Farewell*, Op. 39; Berlioz's *La mort de Cléopâtre*; and Britten's *Phaedra*, Op. 93 — and Ravel's three-part orchestral song cycle *Shéhérazade* on *Royal Mezzo*, a new Cedille Records CD. Carlos Kalmar conducts Chicago's Grant Park Orchestra (Cedille CDR 90000 104).

Ms. Larmore, the world's most-recorded mezzo, makes her Cedille label debut with this imaginative program that expands the scope of her repertoire and her vast, distinguished discography. Her first recording devoted to orchestral concert works, *Royal Mezzo* features her singing the roles of aristocratic figures from myth, legend, and history. These are her first recordings of any of the four works. In fact, the Barber and Britten cantatas were new to her repertoire when she performed them at the concerts recorded for the CD.

The Barber and Britten works are rarely recorded and remain closely identified with the singers who gave their premieres: Martina Arroyo in *Andromache's Farewell* and Janet Baker in *Phaedra*. Those works almost always appear on discs devoted solely to the music of their respective composers.

“This is a vocal recital disc of epic proportions,” says James Ginsburg, Cedille Records president and the recording’s producer. “Here are a world-class singer, respected conductor, and superb orchestra performing music full of drama, sensuality, and powerful emotions, all recorded in audiophile-quality sound.”

The CD was recorded live in concert in Orchestra Hall, Chicago, in August 2006 and at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance in June 2007 during installments of the annual summer Grant Park Music Festival. Engineers were Bill Maylone, Christopher Willis, and Eric Arunas.

Repertoire selection was a collaborative process involving Ms. Larmore, Cedille’s Ginsburg, Maestro Kalmar, and James Palermo, artistic and general director of the Grant Park Music Festival.

Barber (1910–1981) wrote *Andromache’s Farewell* (1963) on commission from the New York Philharmonic. It’s an uncharacteristic work from a composer known for his “neo-Romantic,” lyrical style. “Barber employed a decidedly contemporary musical language for ‘Andromache’s Farewell,’ focusing on the fury in the text as much as on the grief and pathos,” observes WFMT music director Andrea Lamoreaux in her CD liner notes. Vocal and instrumental melodies emphasize dissonance and agitation. The vocal line requires wide leaps as Andromache, widow of a Trojan hero, bemoans the horrors inflicted on her and her young son by the conquering Greeks.

Berlioz (1803–1869) hoped to win the prestigious French Prix de Rome award with his *La mort de Cléopâtre* (1829). But its dramatic flair and colorful orchestration, which seemed radically new at the time, were too much for the French musical establishment.

An ominous, low clarinet theme leads to the soloist’s first recitative, in which the Egyptian ruler laments her inability to repeat her past political and romantic successes by failing to seduce and co-opt her foe, the Roman conqueror Octavian. Especially attractive is the beguiling first aria, which finds Cleopatra recalling her days of unsurpassed beauty and triumphant liaisons with Caesar and Antony.

Unlike the dramatic cantatas of Barber, Berlioz, and Britten, Ravel’s impressionistic *Shéhérazade* (1903) comprises evocative, descriptive narratives rather than starkly dramatic scenes. It’s also one of the relatively rare song cycles scored for orchestra rather than piano accompaniment. Ravel (1875–1937) conveys an other-worldly exoticism with his emphasis on tone colors, be it the haunting sound of the

English horn or the harp glissandi shimmering around the singer's words. "Asie," an arm-chair tour of a highly fictionalized Asia, "is like an extended recitative; voice and instruments present evanescent motives instead of shaped melodies," Lamoreaux writes. "La flûte enchantée" features a flute solo (performed here by Grant Park Orchestra principal flutist Mary Stolper), which introduces the main melody. The flute represents a young man serenading outside the house of his girlfriend, while the singer muses on the melody and on love. The dreamlike and elusive "L'Indifferent," depicts a girl who fails to capture the attention of an attractive, "indifferent" young man passing by her window.

Britten (1913–1976) conceived of *Phaedra* (1975) as a cantata in the tradition of Handel, whose music had been central to the repertoire of mezzo-soprano Baker, for whom it was written. The Baroque connection is emphasized by the use of a harpsichord-and-cello continuo part and a chamber orchestra of strings and percussion. Like so many of Britten's protagonists, including Peter Grimes and Billy Budd, Phaedra, an Athenian queen with a fatal lust for her stepson, "is a tormented outsider in the society that surrounds her," Lamoreaux writes.

Britten relied on Robert Lowell's English translation of Jean Racine's 17th-century account of the story, condensing the plot into a vivid vignette of obsessive, forbidden lust; intrigue and deception; and death. Many passionate, unmelodic vocal lines leap and quiver from the deranged heroine's lips as the work unfolds. Ms. Larmore's sumptuous tone and emotional range bring a stark communicative power to Britten's austere score.

The 28-page CD booklet contains complete texts of all the songs, plus English translations of the Berlioz and Ravel.

Jennifer Larmore has recorded more than 70 CDs for diverse labels, including, among others, Teldec, RCA, Deutsche Grammophon, Chandos, Opera Rara, and now Cedille. A leading exponent of the coloratura roles of the Baroque and bel canto eras, she made her Metropolitan Opera debut in 1995 and has since been a regular attraction at the Met, singing leading roles in works by Handel, Rossini, Offenbach, Strauss, and Humperdinck; and in the world premiere of Tobias Picker's *An American Tragedy*. Her symphonic repertoire includes works of Mahler, Schoenberg, Mozart, de Falla, and

Debussy, to name a few, performed with leading orchestras led by conductors such as Riccardo Muti, Leonard Bernstein, Donald Runnicles, Giuseppe Sinopoli, Daniel Barenboim, and Lorin Maazel.

Carlos Kalmar was named principal conductor of the Grant Park Orchestra in October 1999. Maestro Kalmar is also music director of the Oregon Symphony. Recent North American engagements include guest-conducting appearances at subscription concerts by the Philadelphia Orchestra and Los Angeles Philharmonic. *Royal Mezzo* is his sixth recording for Cedille Records.

The Grant Park Orchestra, founded in 1943, is resident orchestra of Chicago's Grant Park Music Festival, dedicated to providing the public with free, classical-music concerts of high professional quality. Among its past principal conductors are Leonard Slatkin, David Zinman, Zdenek Macal, and Hugh Wolff. *Royal Mezzo* is the orchestra's fifth recording for Cedille Records.

Grammy award-winning Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE) is dedicated to showcasing the most noteworthy classical artists in and from Chicago. The nonprofit label is an arm of The Chicago Classical Recording Foundation. For a free catalog and the locations of local retail outlets, contact Cedille Records, 5255 N. Lakewood Ave., Chicago, IL 60640-2220, call (773) 989-2515; E-mail: info@cedillerecords.org. Cedille Records is distributed by Allegro Corporation in the U.S. and Canada, by Metronome Distribution in the U.K., and by other independent distributors in major international classical music markets. Web site: www.cedillerecords.org.

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Royal Mezzo
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 104)

Barber: *Andromache's Farewell*, Op. 39 (1963) (13:10)

Berlioz: *La mort de Cléopâtre* (1829) (21:32)

Ravel: *Shéhérazade* (1903) (17:23)

Britten: *Phaedra*, Op. 93 (1975) (14:43)

Jennifer Larmore, mezzo-soprano
Grant Park Orchestra; Carlos Kalmar, conductor