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Merchant partners with Pops, has never sounded quite so right

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By Joan Anderman



With her woody quaver, Natalie Merchant found her medium while performing with Keith Lockhart and the Boston Pops at EdgeFest last night. With her woody quaver, Natalie Merchant found her medium while performing with Keith Lockhart and the Boston Pops at EdgeFest last night. (PHOTO BY MICHAEL J. LUTCH)

From the moment Natalie Merchant uttered the sweet opening stanza of "Autumn Lullaby," a traditional British text set to Merchant's own melody and sure-handed orchestration, it was glowingly, elegantly, poetically clear that the Boston Pops EdgeFest has finally found a match.

More to the point, Merchant has found her medium. Yes, the singer-songwriter scored platinum sales with her pop band 10,000 Maniacs, and she forged a commendably searching solo career in the group's wake. But Merchant's woody quaver has never sounded quite so right as it did framed by flutes, a weaving clarinet, and a gentle harp. Keith Lockhart's orchestra - prone to frustratingly slight flourishes during the lion's share of previous EdgeFest outings - was a full partner in the rich, handsome music.

The concert wasn't without bumps. Without a rhythm section to anchor the songs, mistakes were freely made and gingerly corrected, prompting Merchant to explain that the single allotted rehearsal is what really accounts for this festival's suggestive title. She's right. Far from edgy, Merchant and the Pops performed six new songs and as many from her back catalog, each as literate and lovely as the next.

"Verdi Cries" was transformed from a 1980s folk-rocker into a densely textured art song (with orchestration by frequent Pops contributor Sean O'Loughlin), and it stood as an unexpected companion to "Sonnet 73," a Merchant-Shakespeare collaboration. Calm and formidable as a Plainswoman, in a long blue dress and dark red shawl, Merchant had the quiet bravura required to make unabashed eye contact while singing the Bard.

By contrast, she was moved to tears during "Life is Sweet." That emotional song from 1998's "Ophelia" was a vocal high point for Merchant, who bit off and savored her lines as if they were a last meal, but a sappy interlude for the orchestra, which can't seem to conceptualize anything beyond cheesy strings and toothless drums when faced with a pop tune.

Merchant has been on extended maternity leave for the past five years, and motherhood has made an indelible mark. She set an anonymous nursery rhyme, "The Man in the Wilderness," and "Spring and Fall: To a Young Child," a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, to earthy, graceful melodies; both are slated to appear on the artist's forthcoming Children's Poetry Project album, due out in December.

Thanks to the strength and clarity of her musical personality, her stately new works made surprising sense alongside "This House Is On Fire," reimagined by orchestrator Stephen Barber as a sinewy, restless meditation, and "The Letter," stripped of everything but its beauty.