



## Merritt and Dinnerstein enchantingly mix, match

By Edward Ortiz

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When two musical genres come together on one stage there's a feeling of an impending encounter with the unexpected – as if one were exploring a border town.

The unexpected was at play Saturday when alt-country singer-songwriter Tift Merritt and classical pianist Simone Dinnerstein appeared together in "Night" at the Mondavi Center's Studio Theater.

"Night" was filled with crossings between musical comfort zones. The music ranged from Bach to Brad Mehldau, with some Cat Stevens and Allen Toussaint in between.

The biggest chance taken was by Merritt, who with a soulful and rootsy voice tackled three well-known works in the classical repertoire along with her own songs and other arrangements of pop songs.

Merritt sang Henry Purcell's "Dido's Lament," from Purcell's "Dido and Aeneas," with soulful melancholy. Her voice brought the work into this century.

Later, Merritt sang Franz Schubert's "Night and Dreams" with sultry power, her body a vessel and an emotional communicator.

But at times it seemed as if Merritt was striving to make good on the classical repertoire instead of making it her own.

The concert's highlights came in the more unexpected pieces – namely those commissioned for "Night," and none better than Mehldau's "I Shall Weep at Night." This work saw Dinnerstein playing a tasty, bluesy piano line that gave way to Merritt's earthy, entrancing singing.

Although Dinnerstein often performed here as Merritt's accompanist, she also offered a stunning turn on Bach's Prelude, Sarabande, Gavotte and Musette, from his English Suite No. 3. Her takes on Bach are always noteworthy; Dinnerstein reveals an almost chasm-deep connection with the Bach repertoire. Her playing can be telekinetic and super-clear, as in the Prelude, or deeply introspective in slow movements.

On Stevens' "Trouble," Jenny Scheinman's arrangement expanded the piano part in this pleading song. Dinnerstein played with elegance and restrained emotion.

If you were seeing Dinnerstein for the first time, you may have assumed she was an old hand on pop and jazz music, and not a master Bach interpreter.

This concert was a leap of faith for both musicians – and their friendship provided the most fetching of musical landing pads.

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