



## **Musical worlds blend in unique concert**

By Jeff Hudson

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Simone Dinnerstein and Tift Merritt — who will appear together in a cabaret-style performance in the Vanderhoef Studio Theater on Saturday and Sunday — are a somewhat unlikely pair.

Dinnerstein is a native New Yorker and a classically trained pianist, who gained fame in recent years for her recordings interpreting the keyboard music by J.S. Bach.

Merritt, who grew up in North Carolina, is a singer/songwriter/guitarist, somewhat in the tradition of figures from the 1960s and 1970s like Joni Mitchell, Carole King, Neil Young and Emmy Lou Harris (but Merritt is a generation or two younger).

Even though they come “from different worlds” in the estimation of many, Dinnerstein and Merritt quickly took a liking to each other when Merritt was hired by Gramophone Magazine to write a profile of Dinnerstein. The two women quickly discovered they had several things in common — they're both in their thirties, they both live in New York City nowadays, and they soon found that they respected each other as performers.

“I went to one of Simone's concerts (at a club in Greenwich Village), and I just cried the whole time,” Merritt said in a phone interview earlier this month. “It was so beautiful, it had such depth.”

And Dinnerstein started listening to Merritt's CDs — and liked what she heard.

“I think we both responded to each other's music,” Dinnerstein said. “And we have so many similar experiences, trying to make a life for ourselves in music.”

The two started discussing a joint tour that would feature some solo piano by Dinnerstein, some songs by Merritt with guitar, and some numbers featuring both of them together. They settled on a title for the program (which also became the theme): “Night.”

“It was a very interesting process figuring out the program,” Dinnerstein said. “We introduced each other to a lot of new music, e-mailing lists of songs back and forth, and sending iTunes to each other.”

They ultimately picked some classical pieces by Schumann and Bach, as well as songs by Merritt — some of which she has recorded, as well as others that are new. They also commissioned new songs from composers Brad Mehldau (a jazz pianist), Philip Lasser (who teaches at Juilliard), and Patty Griffin (a singer/songwriter with folk and country roots).

Another new piece comes from composer Daniel Felsenfeld, who grew up in Southern California and now teaches in New York. “Daniel has written a piece for me called 'The Cohen Variations,' based on (folksinger) Leonard Cohen's poem 'Suzanne’” — which became a song in 1967, known for its haunting lyrics:

“Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river

“You can hear the boats go by

“You can spend the night beside her

“And you know that she's half crazy

“But that's why you want to be there

“And she feeds you tea and oranges

“That come all the way from China...”

“Daniel's piece sounds like Leonard Cohen meets (British 20th century composer) Benjamin Britten,” Dinnerstein said. “This will be the premiere.”

Merritt added that she and Dinnerstein “have been working on this (program) for about a year. We wade into classical music, and we wade into popular music. And we both define who we are as individuals, in order to show the profundity of the power of our music coming together.”

Simone Dinnerstein and Tift Merritt perform on Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. in the Vanderhoef Studio Theater at the Mondavi Center. Tickets are \$35 general admission, \$17.50 students, and are available by visiting <http://www.mondaviarts.org> or calling (530) 754-2787.

An hour before each concert, Dinnerstein and Merritt will take part in a free pre-performance talk hosted by pianist Lara Downes.

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