

# THE NEWS & OBSERVER

## Pop meets classical, with surprising results

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To even the playing field between a folk guitarist and a classical pianist, ask the guitarist to read music and the pianist to improvise. That's what happened last month when singer-songwriter Tift Merritt and concert pianist Simone Dinnerstein began preparing for two concerts they will present next weekend at Duke University.

You could say that they fell back on the common language they know: music.

But that would be sentimentalizing and oversimplifying a rehearsal process that both artists describe as a challenge unlike any they have encountered in their separately successful careers.

That's because Merritt, who grew up in Raleigh, learned to sing and play guitar by ear, while Dinnerstein, a classical musician, has been sight-reading notes on a page since the age of 7. Together after much compromise and a little consternation they have prepared an 80-minute set list called "Night," which includes variations on a Leonard Cohen classic, a Schubert art song with a harmonica interlude and more.

"It's been a huge learning process for both of us," Dinnerstein said.

"It was very scary. At first," Merritt said.

The guitarist claims she came into the project unable to read scores, especially rhythms. Dinnerstein says she protests too much.

Merritt "can read music, she's just not used to learning to sing a song from reading the notes," the pianist said. "It's not how she processes music. It was actually really interesting, because we spent a very intense week rehearsing over the Christmas holidays ... at the end of the week, we had both really grown as musicians. We put on a run-through at my parents' house for our friends, and it went really well." They met about two years ago when Gramophone, the British magazine, was looking for someone outside of classical music to interview Dinnerstein before the release of her second album. (Her third, "Bach: A Strange Beauty," debuted last week at No. 6 on Amazon.com.)

Merritt and Dinnerstein hit it off so quickly they closed the Gramophone Q&A by saying they hoped to collaborate. A few months later, Dinnerstein gave a recital in Durham and noticed that Aaron Greenwald, the director of Duke Performances, booked genre-defying artists. She told him she and Merritt had an idea.

"He made it happen," Dinnerstein said.

Word of the collaboration got out, and three venues in Florida and California have booked the duo to perform this month.

In Durham, Merritt will try out a few new songs; Dinnerstein will play new arrangements of classical works and premiere variations on the Cohen song "Suzanne." Then there are the duets, commissioned songs by Patty Griffin, Philip Lasser and Brad Mehldau, plus four complete re-imaginings of opera arias and classical art songs.

### **All about collaboration**

Their re-imagining of Schubert's "Nacht und Träume" began with Dinnerstein translating the 1825 German text into English.

Then Merritt "changed the words into something contemporary, like a song she would sing, and then I changed the rhythm to support what she was singing," Dinnerstein said. During one verse, the piano picks up the melody and Merritt picks up the harmonica.

"The song is like country blues meets Schubert, and it's totally gorgeous," Dinnerstein said.

To commit the music to memory - and compensate for her difficulty reading scores - Merritt would record and take copious notes during their rehearsals in Brooklyn, where both women live.

"The next day she'd come in and have totally absorbed everything from the day before," Dinnerstein said. Learning folk rock and reworking classics didn't come easily to the pianist. "I've been reading a chord chart and trying to improvise, and that's something that I've never done before," she said.

Merritt would ask, "How do you feel this should go?" and Dinnerstein would riff on a theme she had been playing for years. "It was really exciting to see her say, 'I don't like how that goes' and cross something out, or even throw the music out," Merritt said, laughing.

The guitarist recalled one particularly stressful moment when Dinnerstein was struggling to improvise and playing more notes than necessary.

"Finally, I told her, 'Don't think about anything except the two and the four and maybe a little bit about sex, and you'll have it,'" Merritt said.

Not exactly the dialogue you'd expect to hear.

### **Life-changing for both**

Both musicians say preparing for the Duke concert has profoundly changed how they approach performing. The week after their rehearsals, Merritt was in the recording studio and Dinnerstein was in Ottawa, playing a Bach concerto with Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra.

"I thought about Tift when I was up there [onstage]. She's so passionate, and working with her, I felt free, like I didn't have to worry about the details involved with being a classical musician," Dinnerstein said. "I felt that creep into my playing this week when I was playing Bach. There's so much more freedom in expressing music than I dare to do, usually."

Merritt was alone in the studio recording demos, but finding freedom through her newfound knowledge of music theory.

"I'm preparing in a different way than I ever had before," Merritt said. "I've never rehearsed quite like I have with Simone. I've always relied on my guts and the time that I've spent with a guitar in my hands. But normal music theory is such a specific language. It gives me this new way of looking at my own songs and realizing that, 'Wow, there are so many more choices.'" Does she intend to start practicing "like, eight hours a day" as Dinnerstein does? No. But she does hope that this time next year, they'll be rehearsing together again, preparing for another tour, or even a recording.

"When you start a band, you don't want to quit it," Merritt said.

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