

Dreamy musical 'Night' is prelude to Seven Days

By Kati Schardl
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When the sun sets and night falls, dreams arise like smoke from the embers of the day.

When "Night" falls Thursday at TCC's Turner Auditorium, the dreams of two musicians will merge and flourish on stage in a musical collaboration that heralds the advent of this year's Seven Days of Opening Nights arts festival.

The concert features classical pianist Simone (see-MOH-nuh) Dinnerstein — who charmed and dazzled Seven Days audiences in 2009 — and singer-songwriter Tift Merritt. They'll perform a mixed bag of songs — some favorites reconfigured by violinist and arranger Jenny Scheinman, some specially created songs by such favorite composers as Patty Griffin and Brad Mehldau, some classical pieces, some of Merritt's finely crafted tunes, some works-in-progress.

"I have to give Simone credit for the 'Night' theme," Merritt said. "It's a wonderful umbrella — a place of darkness that you feel your way through, that holds emotion and is, in some ways, uncharted territory. "It's a metaphor for what we're doing together."

Dinnerstein conceived of the collaboration two years ago, and when in Tallahassee for the 2009 Seven Days appearances she asked festival director Steve MacQueen if he knew any arrangers who could handle both classical and roots rock music.

"I immediately suggested Jenny Scheinman," MacQueen said. "When they offered a chance to be in on the project, I jumped at it."

Seven Days co-commissioned "Night" with Duke University and the Mondavi Center. It's one of three special commissions for this year's festival. Seven Days will also present the Southeastern premiere of "A Chinese Home," by the Kronos Quartet and Chinese pipa virtuoso Wu Man. The festival also asked Florida State University College of Music students to compose new scores for three old silent films, which will be screened as part of the festival.



Eloquence meets elegance

Dinnerstein and Merritt met when Merritt interviewed the pianist for a *Gramophone Magazine* story. She subsequently invited Dinnerstein to be a guest on her radio show "The Spark," broadcast on KRTS Marfa for Texas Public Radio.

The rootsy poet — a North Carolina native transplanted to New York City — and the peerless classical interpreter found they had more in common than they thought they would.

"Before I went on the radio show, I listened to her CDs and she listened to mine," Dinnerstein said. "I really liked her songs a lot. When we did the interview, we just really hit it off and we became friends."

"We were thinking it would be interesting to do something together, but we couldn't figure out what that would be."

Merritt said, "When I first saw Simone play, I just cried the whole concert. She's so passionate and beautiful, very powerful. We found we had so much in common, without even trying."

"We are both very serious about our work and our lives. Working together has been such a treat, because we both go at it with a lot of intensity. In the rock 'n' roll world, there are plenty of times when people look at you like you're crazy for that kind of intensity."

From the get-go, the two wanted to meld musical worlds.

"We thought it needed to have classical songs and pop or singer-songwriter compositions, and then it would be interesting to have a diverse group of composers, and mix in Tift's music and my solo playing," Dinnerstein said. "We had quite a long time of sending lists of songs to each other and introducing each other to songs we liked. I have gaping holes in my knowledge of non-classical music."

Merritt brought a Nina Simone arrangement of the Billie Holiday classic "Don't Explain" for Dinnerstein to consider. Dinnerstein envisioned Merritt performing art songs. As "Night" began to take shape, the two helped each other strike out for new musical territory.

"We both are very detailed and thorough in how we approach the process," Dinnerstein said. "But we learn music in different ways. Tift learns a lot by ear — she recorded a lot of our rehearsals (to play back)."

"I was kind of stunned by how quickly she absorbed classical music and can make it her own. I don't feel like I'm nearly as good at absorbing her music. Both of us feel an element of exposing ourselves, of going out on a limb."

Common musical ground

Before going on the road with "Night," Merritt and Dinnerstein performed an informal house concert for friends. Both were more worried for the other than for their own contributions to the performance.

"We're both so supportive of each other," Dinnerstein said. "At the house concert, we both felt nervous for the opposite sets of pieces. We want 'Night' to be full of integrity, and we don't want to feel silly."

"The important thing is that we're being musical and we're interpreting the music in the way that feels right to us. The way I'm playing pop music isn't necessarily the way a pianist in a band would play it."

During the performance of "Night," Merritt and Dinnerstein are onstage together the entire time.

"We wanted to have a kind of intimacy and relaxed feeling," Dinnerstein said. "Sitting and listening to each other is nice."

Merritt said, "It's a full concert. We both have moments when we define ourselves clearly, so the weight of our coming together can be understood. The flow (of the show) is interesting. You get a sense of who we both are separately in order to get what we're doing with the collaboration."

The program for the concert will be handed out after the performance — in order to make the experience fresher for both audience and performers.

"I'm sure the program will evolve as we continue (performing it)," Dinnerstein said.