

The Herald-Sun

Musical convergence

By Cliff Bellamy
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DURHAM -- Songwriter Tift Merritt and pianist Simone Dinnerstein come from musical worlds that at one time seldom communicated.

The popular music world from which Merritt comes cherishes originality in its artists and their contributions. The classical world from which Dinnerstein comes is an art of interpreting another artist's work, often with fairly strict performance traditions.

Both artists have pursued individual paths within the rules of their different spheres.

In her recordings (among them "Another Country" and "See You On the Moon"), Merritt has steadfastly refused to be cast in the confines of genre (which she calls "something that marketing people made up").

Dinnerstein garnered critical accolades for her debut recording of Bach's "Goldberg Variations," which she financed herself before a major label finally picked up the recording, allowing her to put her individual interpretation and vision on the composition.

Friday and Saturday, both worlds meet for the world premier of "Night," a series of songs Duke Performances commissioned that were written specifically for Merritt and Dinnerstein. They will perform songs written by Patty Griffin, Brad Mehldau, and Philip Lasser. Jenny Scheinman, a violinist and arranger, also has contributed arrangements of some of both artists' favorite songs, which they also will perform.

This project comes at a time when collaborations among musicians from diverse backgrounds are

becoming more common. (Cellist Yo-Yo Ma's recordings of Brazilian and traditional folk music are among many examples.) This opening of the ears, this taste for eclecticism is something Dinnerstein also sees in her experience.

"My colleagues, my contemporaries in the classical music world tend to listen to different types of music, so there's certainly an openness on the part of classical musicians," Dinnerstein said.

While older listeners of classical music tend to be more conservative in their listening habits, Dinnerstein does see more of a willingness among younger listeners to venture outside of styles.

Merritt now lives in New York, but got her start in music while a student at UNC Chapel Hill and has a strong local following. Her friendship with Dinnerstein began when she interviewed her for Gramophone magazine, and later for her radio show The Spark. Both musicians also have attended their respective concerts and admired each other's work. "It was a very very natural friendship," Merritt said in a phone interview. "I felt very lucky and excited that Simone wanted to do something musically, because I had admired her so much."

Rehearsing for this premier has presented challenges and rewards, both artists said. "What is new is that a lot of this music is starting on a page, and I've never in my musical life worked that way," Merritt said. "My challenge with all this was to speak Simone's language technically and proficiently. I do not speak the language of music theory, and Simone is the most nuanced speakers of music theory," Merritt said.

For Dinnerstein, being handed a chord chart and improvising melodies based on the chords has been a challenge, she said. "I think we both have very different styles of learning music," Dinnerstein said. At the same time, both musicians are very detailed in terms of what they want musically, and "have a similar work ethic," she said.

During rehearsals and sessions with the composers, Merritt and Dinnerstein have been able to work through those differences in approach. "We've been trying to find a place where our two ways of interpreting music meet, and where neither one of us feels compromised, or inauthentic to our musicianship," Dinnerstein said. "We've tried many things in different ways until it feels right."

"I think the point is to bring out the strengths in the music in each other in ways that we didn't know was there," Merritt said. Arranger Scheinman, who has collaborated with artists like David Byrne and Madeleine Peyroux, was important in that process because "she could really understand both of our worlds," Merritt said. "I think we really needed her to be our translator."

Working with the composers on the new songs has been an exciting process, "very musician-to-musician with a lot of excitement and respect," Merritt said. With new music, "there's always an element of the unknown," Dinnerstein said. "You don't know what's going to be handed to you in the end."

Audience members should come expecting surprises, and in that spirit, the set list for the concerts is not being released, Dinnerstein said. "I think it might be nicer that way," she said. "Each piece is completely different from one another, and yet I feel that every one of them suits us down to the ground," she said.

"I think you will get a sense of who Simone is and a sense of my work," Merritt said. "When you see these two worlds come together, you'll see how unusual and interesting that is," she said.

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