

Duo Noire's Christopher Mallett (L) and Thomas Flippin



# WHO'S AFRAID OF NEW MUSIC?

**D**uo Noire—named for the African American ancestry of guitarists Thomas Flippin and Christopher Mallett—has a wonderful way of promoting humanitarianism and contemporary guitar chamber music without needing to shout about it. It all comes naturally.

Supported by Yale University (where both men completed master's study) and by the St. Louis Classical Guitar Society, the duo has introduced classical guitar to kids in economically disadvantaged areas, including Harlem and Ferguson, Missouri. "When they saw us, it kind of altered their perception," reports Mallett. "We would ask them, 'What had you thought about classical music?' and they would say, 'White guys with wigs.'

"But it wasn't just who we were, it was the music we were choosing to play," he continues. "We'd play a piece like *Miami*, by Benjamin Verdery, where you

**Not the African American Duo Noire, whose new album exclusively features modern female composers**

BY JEFF KALISS

rub your finger on the guitar to make an ocean sound, and it's very fast-paced and has a lot of licks that are rock-influenced. So the kids were like, 'This is classical music?' And they were surprised that composers are still writing this stuff."

*Night Triptych*, Duo Noire's latest release on New Focus Recordings, sustains the surprises. Not only does it feature six new compositions for guitar, but it certifies that new music can be as tuneful and entertaining as it is ground-breaking. And it may be the first such compilation for ensemble guitar featuring all female composers, who Mallett tags as "representing another under-represented group in classical music."

Mallett, the son of an African American father and an Italian-American mother, found more African Americans—but few females—in the rock and punk bands he grew up playing with in Southern California.

At Grossmont College in San Diego County, he heard teacher Fred Benedetti perform Ernesto Lecuona's *Malagueña* and "realized you could do a lot more on a guitar using the fingers of your right hand than you could with a pick. So I started growing nails and teaching myself as fast as possible to play Bach's 'E minor Bourrée.'"

Benedetti referred the young guitarist on to private lessons with George Svoboda, and soon his former fellow rockers "were wondering what had happened to me, because a big part of playing in a rock band is going out and partying, and I was staying at home on weekends and just wanting to get better at classical guitar."

Soon enough, Mallett began to perceive the boundaries between classical, rock, and other techniques as being more flexible. "My dad took me to my first classical guitar concert, with Pepe Romero [another San Diego County resident], and I heard him play *Gran Jota*, by Francisco Tárrega. It was a piece where you cross the strings and play the guitar like a drum. It blew my mind that you could make an acoustic instrument sound that way, changing the color and dynamic.

"And I heard a classmate of mine play Nikita Koshkin's *Usher-Waltz*, and it opened my ears even more, because Koshkin had the vocabulary of rock, as well as classical." Like his later inner-city students, Mallett "thought classical music was from the 19th century and before, I didn't know people were still composing it. So I started going down the road of looking up different contemporary composers, like Carlo Domeniconi and Roland Dyens. Even though I'd dropped electric guitar, my ear was still into that kind of sound, and I wanted to achieve it on a classical guitar." And those composers "are all still firmly grounded in the classical-guitar world."

From Grossmont, Mallett transferred to studies with Stephen Aron at Oberlin College in Ohio, "where everything was music and I could practice all the time. Steve did a great job refining my technique and making me a more solid classical player, because I played a lot of traditional repertoire there." But rock remained in his mind's ear, and he went on to graduate study with Ben Verdery

at Yale, "because Ben was somebody who was playing a lot of rock-influenced stuff. He played [Jimi Hendrix's] 'Purple Haze' and 'Little Wing' on classical guitar, and did a lot of hitting of the instrument. He's also great at getting musicians to find their own voice."

Even before receiving Mallett on the New Haven campus, Verdery had paired him with Flippin, an older student who'd come to Yale from the University of Chicago as the classical guitar program's first African American. The two were asked to showcase a piece by Juilliard composer Ray Lustig at the Norfolk Festival in Connecticut. "We'd never met each other, and as soon as we started playing together, it was like we'd been friends for our whole lives," Mallett says of Flippin. "Both of his parents are African American, and neither of us had ever met an African American classical guitarist

before." Lustig ended up writing five more pieces for the newly-formed Duo Noire, recorded in 2014 on their debut album, *Fragments*, released by the composer.

The duo's outreach programs in New England, New York, and Missouri were intended, among other things, to show minority schoolchildren "that there are other African Americans doing this kind of music." Throughout the decade, the St. Louis-area program became sustainable, with repeated visits from the duo, and one of their high school participants went on to undergraduate studies on classical guitar at nearby Webster University.

"Thomas and I played a lot of traditional stuff," says Mallett. "We arranged some Scott Joplin and Nathaniel Dett [both early 20th century black composers], but we also enjoyed creating, not just new things, but different things. From there, we started thinking: What kind of project can we do that will not only benefit us, but also the music community at large?" His wife, Nathania, had studied guitar at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where "it was difficult for her to find music written by living female composers."

*Night Triptych* was conceived to shed

some light on the potential of women in guitar music, prompted by Flippin's attendance at Eric Clapton's Crossroads Festival in New York City, where Flippin lives. "He was amazed," Mallett reports, "that out of multiple days of concerts—blues, rock, and even jazz-fusion—there was not one female leading act. And out of all the concerts I've been to in the past year, it's been very rare to see a female guitarist; even rarer to find a female composition." (Guitarist Connie Sheu had, in 2012, self-released *The Woman's Voice*, solo works by woman composers, but not all of them still living.)

The Diller-Quaile School of Music in New York, where Flippin teaches, commissioned Duo Noire's concept album, and they sought potential composers through Lustig and Sarah Kirkland Snider of New Amsterdam Records. "We didn't reach out to Clarice Assad because she was Sérgio's daughter or anything—we just knew she would create something for us that we would love," says Mallett. "She came up with the perfect work in *Hocus Pocus*," comprising three short and delightful sections, and, as the album's opening selection, an engaging introduction to extended technique.

"What I like about the piece is how much improvisation she left up to the performers," notes Mallett. "In the first movement, we have pizzicati where we pull the strings, and as we're pulling, we're leaning into each other; the theatrics are things we decide to add ourselves. At first [in live performance at the New York Guitar Society, in 2017], we were worried about playing the middle movement live for a more traditional classical audience, putting the guitars flat on our laps and bringing out spoons [for percussion on the strings]. But people became intrigued. The third movement is more traditional, but there's a sense of humor in it, as well.

"We didn't want to steer our composers in a particular direction, we wanted them to bring their own voices to it," Mallett continues. "Mary Kouyoumdjian is a great electro-acoustic composer, and she came up with a piece for two guitars and backing track: *Byblos*, inspired by her visit to that ancient city in Babylon. We played amplified, so we wouldn't get drowned out.

"Courtney Bryan was a fun person to work with. We were fortunate to meet her during a residency at the Avaloch Farm Music Institute in New Hampshire. She's



## VIEW FROM THE FRONT ROW

an amazing jazz pianist and composer, and *Soli Deo Gloria* is the first piece she ever wrote for guitar.” Though Bryan was inspired by a prayer, “there are very thick harmonies and a lot of chord comping, so it sounds almost like jazz improvisation. She wanted us to get a rumble sound, with open strings and the right hand close to the bridge, like you’re get on the low end of the piano.

“We discovered Golfam Khayam from an album she recorded with a clarinet player [Moma Matbou Riahi] for [the progressive jazz label] ECM Records. She’s the only composer on the recording who’s an actual guitarist, and her piece [the album’s titular *Night Triptych*] is the most atmospheric of them all,” to a degree sourced in Khayam’s study of Persian instrumentation and modes. “For the second movement, she asked for barbecue sticks for my part, and Thomas hits his guitar with a pencil with one of those large erasers on it, using it as a mallet. She goes from my rubbing the treble strings with the barbecue sticks—which produces almost an angelic sound, like Bernard Herrmann’s violins on the *Vertigo* soundtrack—to rubbing the

bass strings, creating this brilliant scratching sound that gets louder and louder.

“For someone who had never written for guitar before, Gity Razaz was pretty amazing—we barely had to edit her *Four Haikus*. It’s almost the most traditional of all the pieces; it sounds like something that could have been commissioned by Julian Bream—so beautiful, so lyrical, it kind of clears the palate after all the crazy sound effects. And with Gabriella Smith [composer of the final track, *Loop the Fractal Hold of Rain*], we liked that she was using alternate tunings, taking the sixth string down to a low G, which is the lowest I’ve ever played anything on the guitar, and saying, ‘Play so loud that you distort,’ while Thomas is playing with a glass slide. And throughout the piece, I’m constantly tuning while I’m playing from a low G to an E. It almost sounds like warped Americana minimalist, and it was a fun challenge.”

“We didn’t set out to do this, but almost every composer was from a different country,” Mallett points out. The duo’s double-top guitars are thoroughly American, however, created by California luthier Glenn Canin: “My guitar is an all cedar double-top

and Thomas’ double-top is spruce on top and cedar below. The back and sides on both instruments are Indian rosewood. I like their power,” Mallett testifies.

With fellow guitarist Robert Miller, Mallett founded the California Conservatory of Music in 2011 “to create the best young guitarists we could.” Enrollment expanded to 450 youngsters studying violin, cello, and piano, as well as guitar, at two San Francisco Bay Area locations: Santa Clara and Redwood City. Its students have appeared on NPR’s *From the Top* and have won prizes in GFA competitions. Mallett also teaches at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and co-founded, with Miller and Alexandra Iranfar, the Peninsula Guitar Series. Mallett and Miller have also performed and recorded as DuoSF.

Duo Noire hopes to concertize behind their album within the next few months, continuing to demonstrate that new music can be listener-friendly. “Our audiences always come to us,” Mallett chuckles, “and they say, ‘I’ve never seen anything like that before, and I didn’t expect to enjoy it, and to laugh, too.’”

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