

Duo Noire to make Cleveland Classical Guitar Society Debut

by Mike Telin



Although they wouldn't meet for some time, Thomas Flippin and Christopher Mallett long shared a musical trajectory.

They both grew up in Southern California and were steeped in their local punk rock scenes, playing in bands during high school. They both found their way to the classical guitar in their late teens. They both did their undergraduate studies in the Midwest — Flippin at the University of Chicago and Mallett at Oberlin Conservatory — and they both went on to study at Yale University, becoming the first two African American guitarists to be admitted into the program. Yale was also where they formed

[Duo Noire](#), taking the name of the French term for both “black” and “quarter note.”

On Saturday, March 5 at 7:30 pm at Plymouth Church, the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society will present Duo Noire in a program that explores the many ways music expresses the essence of place. Tickets are available [online](#).

The Duo's recent highlights include the release of their critically-acclaimed debut album, *Night Triptych*, and their recording of Flippin's *A Dark Winter in a Lost Year* at Severance Hall with Cleveland Orchestra members Kathleen Collins (violin) and Tanya Ell (cello) as part of CCGS's Creative Fusion video series. Click [here](#) to watch.

During a telephone conversation, Flippin and Mallett said they like to create programs that represent the whole of America. “That's why it's so important for us to include women composers, composers of color, European composers — to show what the concept looks like when it is well-implemented,” Flippin said.

Another topic important to their programming is community. Stating the obvious, without community there is no audience. “But we also think of it in different terms,” Mallett said. “We love collaborating with composers. That’s why we commissioned everything on our album, *Night Triptych*. There was a lot of back and forth, so with each piece we really got to know the person who wrote the music.”

For them, young people represent another key aspect of the word community. “We love going into schools like we’ll be doing in Cleveland, and we’re always thinking about what the kids would enjoy,” Mallett said. “Maybe when they think of classical music they’re thinking of something that’s hundreds of years old — they have no idea that the term classical guitar can mean something that is contemporary as well.”

An adult audience is also on their minds. “My wife and I go to a lot of classical concerts, and I’m always interested in her opinion as someone who is a general audience member,” Flippin said. He added that their conversations often center around one question: what is the purpose of a concert? “When Chris and I were putting this program together, we were thinking about what the audience actually needs at this moment in time — coming out of a two-year pandemic and with all of the political turmoil in the country.”

The guitarists agreed that the key word to Saturday’s program is fun.

The evening will include three movements from Benjamin Verdery’s *Some Towns and Cities*. “Ben was our professor at Yale and he has been a big influence on us,” Mallett said, adding that the work is inspired by the composer’s favorite cities in the U.S.

“Miami” features an ocean sound that is achieved by “rubbing the guitar strings to make it sound like wind on the beach,” Mallett said. “Ben wrote ‘Mobile’ for himself and his slide guitarist friend Ry Cooder — it’s very bluesy.” Mallett described ‘Milwaukee’ as a fast, up-beat bluegrass tune. “It’s a total hoedown,” Flippin added.

Nathaniel Dett’s “Juba” (from *In the Bottoms*) depicts life on a plantation. “The Juba is a dance that was performed by enslaved Americans,” Flippin explained. Because drums were forbidden, the dance features the slapping of hands, legs, and the body in order to produce rapid, complex rhythms. “It ends with an extended passage where Chris and I are trading off little musical figures. It’s a really cool, early American sound that you don’t usually hear on the classical guitar.”

Providing something more traditional, the Duo will include Albéniz’s *Mallorca*. “It was made famous by Segovia, and every guitarist for the past hundred years has played it, but it is a great piece,” Mallett said.

Flippin described Courtney Bryan's *Soli Deo Gloria* as dramatic and meditative, with a sense of catharsis at the end. "This is one of our favorite pieces," he said. "Courtney is a brilliant composer, and a crazy-good jazz musician. We totally clicked with her when we did this residency together in New Hampshire."

Raymond Lustig's *Figments - 7E* pays homage to the apartment number of the unit the composer and his wife lived in just after they were married. The Duo described the work as post-minimal. "It's in 7/8 and written so that each part only makes sense when they are played together," Flippin said. "In the middle there's this virtuosic shred-fest — which I imagine as the turbulence in his relationship before he got married — but it ends with a beautiful uniting of the two parts."

Clarice Assad's three-movement *Hocus Pocus* was commissioned by the Duo for their debut album. "We've been playing her music for years," Mallett said, "so when we kicked off our 'Women of the Classical Guitar' project for the album, the first person we thought of was Clarice. The piece is dark and quirky and exactly what we wanted from her. There's a great improvisation section in the middle movement, 'Shamans.'" Although they don't want to give anything away, the Duo said that the movement may involve cutlery.

Finally, Mallett said that Paulo Bellinati's *Jongo* — named for the traditional fire dance that combines African drumming with Brazilian rhythms — is "the ultimate closing piece."

Returning to the topic of how Flippin and Mallett came to form Duo Noire, they credited their teacher Benjamin Verdery, who put them together at the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival. "We showed up and he said, 'There's this composer Ray Lustig who's written a duet and I'm giving it to you guys — go work it out,'" Flippin recalled. "We just hit it off at our first rehearsal."

The guitarists agreed, one thing that made them click was their rock backgrounds. "I think what really made us hit it off musically is that we're well-versed in strumming, rock & roll power chords, and driving rhythms," Flippin said. "And we're not afraid to improvise because we grew up doing it."

They also agreed that it is their musical voice that sets them apart from other classical guitar duos. "I think if we were only playing traditional classical guitar music, we wouldn't be getting as many concerts as we are," Mallett said. "In addition to commissioning composers and playing works that people have never heard, Thomas is

also an accomplished composer. We play his music too, which is unusual for a guitar duo, so we do have a lot of different things to offer.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com March 2, 2022.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)