

# The Post and Courier

## Singing for MOJA: Eleganza brings versatile selections to annual arts festival Oct. 6

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provided

Rhiannon Giddens (left) and Cheryse McLeod Lewis bring their Eleganza duet to the annual MOJA Arts Festival.

Childhood chums with a gift for music, Rhiannon Giddens and Cheryse McLeod Lewis grew up in Greensboro, N.C., with larger-than-life dreams.

Today, they are living that life.

Giddens, a member of the Grammy-winning Carolina Chocolate Drops, and Lewis, who performs with the Inspirata Quartet among other gigs, together form Eleganza, a versatile duo that brings its wide-ranging repertoire to the annual MOJA Arts Festival on Oct. 6.

Showcased will be selections from opera, art songs, spirituals, jazz, sacred works and musical theater. Pianist Ben Blozan provides accompaniment.

Eleganza will perform against the backdrop of the MOJA visual arts exhibition “Special Moments: Works From the Collection of Dr. Harold M. Rhodes III,” which runs through Oct. 19 at the City Gallery at Waterfront Park, 34 Prioleau St. downtown.

### **Confluence**

“When we graduated from college, we moved back to Greensboro and happened to be working at the same office in our day jobs,” Lewis recalls. “We loved to sing, and to keep ourselves singing, we put together a recital in the summer of 2003. Wow! We had such fun and sounded really good together, so we decided to collaborate on more things.”

The duo quickly discovered audiences responded most enthusiastically to an eclectic program. With

their love of all forms alloyed to operatic training, Giddens, a soprano, and Lewis, a mezzo-soprano, decided to keep it fresh and natural.

“It can be challenging to segue from opera to pop, but our classical music foundation has served us well,” says Lewis, now an Orlando, Fla., resident. “For the most part, we just speak to the audience when we transition from one form to another. But we’ve discovered over the years that people appreciate the fact that we talk to them from the stage. With a classical recital, you just get up there and sing. But we like to be interactive; it’s entertaining for us, as well.”

Giddens, who still lives in Greensboro, agrees.

“We want to be as accessible as possible. And this is something that classical music can learn from. The audience for classical is ‘aging out’ and changing. People are not as educated about classical music as they once were. Cheryse and I feel strongly that we have to be real. We’re not untouchable up there on stage.”

### **Staying in touch**

While Lewis credits Giddens with being Eleganza’s chief webmaster and graphic designer, Giddens defers to Lewis in public relations matters, adding that Lewis is the duo’s sustaining force. Both compose their varied repertoires. That is, when they can extract the time from busy schedules to perform together.

### **If you go**

**WHAT:** Eleganza at the MOJA Arts Festival.

**WHERE:** City Gallery at Waterfront Park, 34 Prioleau St.

**WHEN:** 7 p.m. Oct. 6.

**TICKETS:** Adults \$26, seniors/students \$21. Call 866-811-4111 or visit [www.mojafestival.com](http://www.mojafestival.com).

“That’s less and less these days,” Lewis says wistfully. “She’s with the Carolina Chocolate Drops, and I’m singing and doing my thing. Since we did our first CD (‘Because I Knew You’) in 2009, it’s been infrequent. We got together to perform at Piccolo Spoleto earlier this year. Performing at MOJA is not only exciting for us but a gift because we haven’t had much chance to sing together the last two to three years. Whenever we get together to perform, we say, ‘Gosh, we should do this more often!’ ”

Giddens’ work with the Carolina Chocolate Drops, a string band, draws on the traditional music of the Piedmont region of the Carolinas. Eleganza enables her “to keep in touch” with her classical voice.

“It is a lot of work and sometimes excruciating,” says Giddens, a graduate of the Oberlin (Ohio) Conservatory and who as an actress has performed the lead role in a number of productions. “But once you know your instrument and have that discipline, it never leaves you.”

For both 30-something performers, the prime and most distinctive aspect of their collaboration is how remarkably attuned to each other they are.

“We are so in tune with each other musically and as artists that it is uncanny at times,” Lewis says. “We read each other so well. In 2003, we were young and our act was novel. Audiences might not have expected to see two African-American females singing opera and classical music.”

It’s much like having sung with a family member for many years, according to Giddens.

“And we got to that point pretty quickly, which is rare. In a way, it’s never been work for us to put something together. Most of the time, our ideas just connect. I’m just grateful that Cheryse keeps it (Eleganza) going and is willing to put up with me being so busy.”

### **A full cup**

Not that Lewis, a model and actress as well as a singer, is twiddling her thumbs.

A graduate of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (where she earned her master’s in vocal performance) and the A.J. Fletcher Opera Institute at UNC, she has played an array of leading roles with the Asheville (N.C.) Lyric Opera and South Carolina Opera, among others, most recently headlining the world premiere of the new American opera “Picnic” by Libby Larsen.

She also has performed with the Capital Opera in Raleigh, Mansfield Symphony in Ohio, Connecticut Opera, Greensboro Opera, Piedmont Opera, Houston Ebony Opera, New Britain Symphony, North Carolina Symphony and the Opera Company of North Carolina.

As the mezzo-soprano for the Jacksonville, Fla.-based Inspirata Quartet, she’s basking in the glow of that group’s inaugural CD, recorded last January.

“We are starting to get bookings now, and it’s an amazing group of such talented singers. My cup runneth over. I love my life,” Lewis said.

*Reach Bill Thompson at 937-5707.*

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