

## Rhiannon Giddens Laffan returns for a classical duet

### Hitting the High Notes

by Dee Dee Arthur

Eleganza is gearing up for its Spoleto debut, but the festival is nothing new for member Rhiannon Giddens Laffan — she performed as a member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops in 2008 and 2010. The Grammy-winning musician teams up with opera singer Cheryse McCloud Lewis for Eleganza, Laffan's side project that performs classical vocal duets.

A far cry from the down-home twang of the Drops, Eleganza specializes in a diverse and highbrow program of opera, musical theater, sacred music, spirituals, and an art song where the singers meow in operetta, accompanied by a pianist. (An art song is a classical vocal selection, not from an opera or musical, that can be used as a stand-alone piece. Don't worry, we had too ask, too.)

Both singers see broad appeal in their show's musical diversity and the duet form. "You can go see soloists any time you want, but it is a rare thing to have a concert full of duets," Laffan says. "I just think it's so unique, finding someone who your voice matches with and who you can sing with."

That voice, Lewis, is the mezzo to Laffan's soprano. The two go together like sorghum on a hot biscuit. They're the same age, both have studied music at the master's level, and they share the same hometown of Greensboro, N.C. They've been performing together as Eleganza since 2003, and they recorded a CD in 2009 called *Because I Knew You*.

Both women have known about Spoleto since their years in music school. Laffan had heard of it as a "great classical music festival" and Lewis was an A. J. Fletcher opera fellow with Spoleto in 2002 and worked as an understudy for the summer.

It's rare for Piccolo to host national acts or performances that previously appeared at Spoleto, but they made an exception for the ladies of Eleganza, who approached festival organizers. Laura Thompson, operations and public relations coordinator of the City of Charleston Office of Cultural Affairs, says it was one of the best audition CDs they've ever received.

"I don't get to sing classical music much anymore because the Chocolate Drops are so busy, so I'm just really, really excited to be doing it," Laffan says. "It's neat to be able to come back here and do what I originally thought I would do at Spoleto."

**Tags:** Eleganza, Rhiannon Giddens Laffan, Cheryse McCloud Lewis, Spoleto Preview