

# Classical duo Eleganza mixes it up musically

## Eclectic Elegance

by Elizabeth Pandolfi

Growing up in Greensboro, N.C., Eleganza's Rhiannon Giddens and Cheryse McLeod Lewis attended the same middle school, but they didn't make a vocal connection until after college. When they both returned to their hometown and ended up working day jobs in the same office, they discovered a common passion to continue singing and they opted to do it together. "We decided to put on a concert that summer, and we found out that we sounded good together," says Lewis. "The concert was well-received, and [Eleganza] really just took off from there." Eight years and one CD later, Eleganza continues to grow and evolve, with both singers embracing a wide range of musical genres. The program for their upcoming MOJA performance features duets by Andrew Lloyd Webber, Scott Joplin, and Johannes Brahms, among others.

Both singers stay busy with multiple other projects, and that's reflected in Eleganza's diverse repertoire. Lewis is not only a professional opera singer, but she's also a member of the Inspirata Quartet, an actress, and a model. Fans of the Carolina Chocolate Drops will recognize Giddens, who spends a good part of her time performing with the Grammy-winning string band.

At first glance, it seems that the folk and bluegrass-style music of the Drops couldn't be further away from the classical and opera that Giddens sings with Lewis; however, Giddens says, each project complements the other in important ways. "Both are about keeping a forgotten music alive. Classical is kind of a niche genre now." The same can easily be said of the old-time string band music played by the Drops. And for Eleganza, just like the Drops, "Entertaining is the first port of call," Giddens emphasizes. "Why else are we there, except to entertain?"

This is part of why she and Lewis enjoy performing a more eclectic program rather than sticking solely to classical or opera pieces. "We've been doing this mix for a while, and we've found that the audiences really appreciate it," Lewis says. "They get a taste of everything, and if there's someone in the audience who doesn't have experience with a certain type of music, then they get to have that experience, and hopefully enjoy it. But, they still get to hear what they came for, whether that's musical theater or spirituals or something else."

In keeping with the focus on entertaining, the singers make a point of introducing each song before they perform it. Different people appreciate music different ways, they say; some will get more from the story behind a piece, while others might simply love the composer or period.

Giddens and Lewis are looking forward to sharing their passion for music with audiences at this year's MOJA Festival. While the duo's first priorities are singing beautifully and putting on an enjoyable show, traditionally African-American music is something that's important to both of them. In addition to several spirituals, their Charleston performance will include lesser-known pieces like the Scott Joplin duet "Real Slow Drag." As Lewis says, Eleganza is "so excited that the arts community in Charleston... is spotlighting the contributions that African Americans make, and is very thankful to be a part of it."

**Tags:** Eleganza, Rhiannon Giddens, Cheryse McLeod, City Gallery at Waterfront Park