



# Duo

"The whole concept of the white male hierarchy in classical music has got to go"

ST. JOHN'S

WORDS BY ARLAN VRIENS | PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

## Concertante

Under the moniker of Duo Concertante, violinist Nancy Dahn and pianist Timothy Steeves are among Canada's most important and prolific chamber music artists, with over 69 newly commissioned works and 13 albums. When they're not on globetrotting tours to concert halls in New York, London, or Shanghai, the Duo make their home in foggy St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, perched on the easternmost edge of North America. Through their work at the Tuckamore Chamber Music Festival, Dahn and Steeves are helping this small city become an unlikely hotspot for aspiring Canadian and international musicians. *smART Magazine* welcomed both members of the Duo to chat about citizen artistry, setting the stage for a more diverse and interdisciplinary classical music world, and their dedication to commissioning new works.

**sM | Commissioning new works is one of your calling cards, and increasingly you've turned to interdisciplinary collaborations. How do you choose your collaborators?**

**ND** — I wish we could say that we have a really clear master plan that leads to every



Timothy Steeves and Nancy Dahn

collaboration, but ultimately we just stay open and responsive to new ideas and new people. Tim has a John Lennon quote in his office that says: "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans." We pay attention to the collaborations that light us up inside. We also love silver linings! Our *Ecology of Being* commissioning and performance plans were completely halted by COVID-19, but overcoming that obstacle made the project into so much more: an amazing film project with poetry and drama, directed by our good friend Nicola Hawkins, a visual artist and dancer who's branched into filmmaking. All of that would have looked very different if the project had gone as we'd initially planned.

**sM | How did your interest in commissioning take shape?**

**TS** — As far as commissioning goes, we've been really active in that area since the beginning. At first it was a way of finding our niche in a very competitive field, and the support landscape for Canadian artists was also really different in those days. Organizations like the Canadian Broadcasting Company were very invested in giving artists opportunities to

premiere new Canadian works. We used those opportunities to platform a lot of marginalized composers, and we've carried that impetus forward to today.

**sM | Duo Concertante advocates strongly for citizen artistry. What does that idea mean to you, and how do you implement it?**

**ND** — Citizen artistry is a fancy phrase, but to us it really just means citizenry, period. No matter what our job is, all of us need to be thinking about how to effect positive change in the world. My mother, who some might have written off as "just" a homemaker, was active in social justice and protests all her life; in her seventies, she slept in a tent in Labrador while supporting Innu protests against aircraft disruption of caribou herds. I grew up believing that every person can make a difference, and music is one way we can do that. Music has a special way of reaching out. It's a non-preachy platform that slips through the back door of people's psyche.

**TS** — We've done more and more work addressing the climate emergency specifically, and I think it's because Nancy



Duo Concertante

and I are extra tuned in to science; we each have siblings working at high levels in scientific fields, so it was natural for us to start thinking about what we could do for the climate with our own work. Music can get something like scientific messages across in a way that gives people hope and inspiration to do something. Right now we're collaborating with playwright Robert Chafe and composer Randolph Peters to create a new work called *Talking on Water*, which tells stories about ocean changes and the climate emergency from small coastal communities around Newfoundland and Labrador. That project is supported by Future Ocean and Coastal Infrastructures, a research group finding ways for coastal communities to survive and thrive in a changing climate; we're trying to bring together a lot of different voices.

**sM | Has this idea of citizen artistry impacted how you approach mainstay works from the classical canon?**

**ND —** We approach works by the classical greats from the same perspective: how can we catalyze positive change? We can frame historical works to prompt reflection on contemporary issues: telling the story of how the Black violinist George Bridgetower was the original dedicatee for Beethoven's "Kreutzer" sonata, or highlighting Haydn's implied social commentaries on his restrictive society. Even if the music was written long ago, it's subtle and reflects so many ways of feeling and seeing.

**sM | Through your work at the Tuckamore Chamber Music Festival,**



Timothy Steeves at Tuckamore Chamber Music Festival

**you've helped transform the small city of St. John's into a well-respected training destination for young Canadian and international musicians. How did that take shape?**

**TS —** We wanted to create an opportunity for young artists that we didn't see in other places at the time. Our primary goal was to give young performers and composers a chance to be a part of a real chamber music festival, treating them as professionals and colleagues. We still do that: 20 years later, the final concert of our Festival is always given by the young artists.

**ND —** I also think that Newfoundlanders are somehow hardwired for music. Our guest artists always comment in amazement that our audiences are so quiet and really listen deeply. But that care for music has also made our festival possible; our

volunteers are amazing and we've had some of them for the entirety of these two decades. The Festival is a success because the people of St. John's got hold of our project and made it part of their personal musical landscape.

**sM | As leaders training the next generation of musicians, what changes do you see on the horizon for classical music?**

**ND —** The whole concept of the white male hierarchy in classical music has got to go, and as leaders we need to do that work. It's up to us to clearly communicate change to boards of directors, to encourage experimentation and equity initiatives, and to implement diverse repertoire mandates when we bring in guest artists. We think about it all the time, and even if we don't always find the best way forward, we do find *some* way forward.

**TS —** As teachers we're also doing what we can to communicate these priorities to students. We want to set examples for them through our work, but also create ways for them to follow their own paths and respond to the needs of their present and future. The goal is for the brilliant work of these young musicians to ultimately make us obsolete.

**ND —** The students lead us too. Sometimes they'll ask me, "Why do I have to learn a Mozart concerto when I could instead play something by Chevalier de Saint-Georges?" Then I say, "Yeah, there's actually no good reason. So let's do it."



Nancy Dahn at Tuckamore Chamber Music Festival