



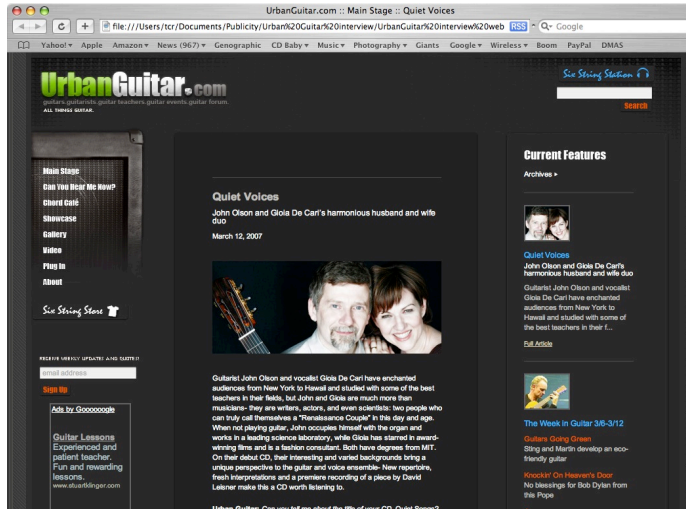
Quiet Voices

John Olson and Gioia De Cari's
harmonious husband and wife duo

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Guitarist John Olson and vocalist Gioia De Cari have enchanted audiences from New York to Hawaii and studied with some of the best teachers in their fields, but John and Gioia are much more than musicians- they are writers, actors, and even scientists: two people who can truly call themselves a “Renaissance Couple” in this day and age. When not playing guitar, John occupies himself with the organ and works in a leading science laboratory, while Gioia has starred in award-winning films and is a fashion consultant. Both have

degrees from MIT. On their debut CD, their interesting and varied backgrounds bring a unique perspective to the guitar and voice ensemble- New repertoire, fresh interpretations and a premiere recording of a piece by David Leisner make this a CD worth listening to.

Urban Guitar: *Can you tell me about the title of your CD, Quiet Songs?*

John Olson: We chose that title for a couple of reasons. First, one of the song cycles on the CD is John Duarte's *Five Quiet Songs*. This is a piece we have played together for a long time, and it is such a beautiful and under-appreciated contribution of Duarte's to the voice and guitar repertoire that it seemed appropriate to refer to it in the title of the album. The other reason is that the phrase "Quiet Songs" captures something of the nature of the guitar/voice duo. It is an intimate combination, and the music invites the listener into that intimacy.

Gioia De Cari: Yes, the guitar is a quiet instrument, and I like it when the voice matches its intimacy. I had originally envisioned using a cover photograph of us playing in Times Square, such intimate music taking place in the loudest circumstance possible. As classical musicians, that's our life — creating art that requires careful listening in this incredible, frenzied, loud world.

Urban Guitar: *How did you choose the repertoire for this CD?*

John Olson: Since this is our first CD, we wanted it to represent the range of repertoire we most enjoy. We also wanted to include music that one doesn't hear all the time. Coming up with the final list and the order was actually a pretty long and iterative process. In the end, we decided to include a few very familiar pieces, like the aria from the *Bachianas Brasileiras*, but also some Bach songs not usually heard with guitar, the first recording of David Leisner's wonderful *Outdoor Shadows* cycle, the Duarte piece, and a great but little-known collection of arrangements Duarte did of Gershwin

songs. We also included a few guitar solos by Villa-Lobos and Bach, plus Fred Hand's beautiful *Missing Her* — all music I love to play and that complemented the vocal pieces nicely. Overall, it's a diverse set, and we worked hard to make sure the CD would hang together as a whole.

Gioia De Cari: I had long adored David's *Outdoor Shadows*, particularly the last song, *Sing a Song of Juniper*. I loved the rhythmic choices in it, and I have a thing about juniper — I could relate to the poet's passion for it. (And no, I don't drink gin!) Once we learned the cycle and realized it had never been recorded, we thought it would be wonderful to include.

Urban Guitar: *When did you begin performing together?*

Gioia De Cari: We began performing together it seems like just barely after we learned to walk! OK, I'm exaggerating, but we met when we were very, very young.

John Olson: Music was one of the things that first brought us together - and we've now been married over 20 years! I think the first piece we played together might have been a Beatles song. Our first performance was probably of some Italian art songs — or maybe it was a Billy Joel number — I'm not really sure, but that's probably a mystery best left unsolved.

Urban Guitar: *Are there any guitar and voice duos that inspired you?*

John Olson: One of my early guitar teachers, Jon Harris, and his partner Debra Golata performed as a duo, and introduced us to a lot of the repertoire. For me, watching other types of ensembles is also inspiring, as is watching how pianists approach vocal accompaniment.

Gioia De Cari: I adore the work of Christopher Parkening and Kathleen Battle, and also Salli Terri and Laurindo Almeida. Why? Because Parkening and Battle are such virtuosos, and Almeida and Terri balance so bewitchingly on the edge of so many different styles.

Urban Guitar: *What are your individual musical backgrounds?*

John Olson: Like a lot of guitarists, I started out on the instrument because I wanted to play rock music. Pretty early on, I got serious about classical music, largely because, again like so many other guitarists at that time, I loved the Segovia recordings so much. I've been fortunate to have a number of excellent teachers over the years, including Neil Anderson and David Leisner. At some point along the way, I decided to learn another instrument, one that is quite different from the guitar — the pipe organ. The main attraction was the music of Bach. I really wanted to be able to play the actual instrument that he wrote some of his most magnificent music for. While I think that someone who takes up an instrument like the organ late will always feel like a beginner on it, I do think that studying it made me a better guitarist — it was good to get a different perspective, particularly on the performance of baroque music. It was also interesting to learn how to deal with an instrument whose challenges are very much the opposite of the guitar's. The guitar doesn't sustain; the organ will go on forever if you keep the key down. The guitar is quiet; the organ can be overpowering. The guitar is a delicate instrument you embrace; the organ is a massive instrument that requires you to use all four limbs.

Gioia De Cari: I started playing the piano as soon as I was old enough to crawl up onto the piano bench and pick out songs by ear, about age five. After my mom's goodhearted attempts to get me into ice skating (I hated it — too cold!) she switched me to piano lessons, which I had a greater affinity for. I continued studying piano until I was a teenager and suddenly discovered I had a voice. It was very surprising because I was such a quiet, shy little thing. But once I began to sing, I fell in love with that and focused all my musical efforts on it. I have studied privately for more years than I dare mention, and at one point had some excellent training with an avant-garde opera company. I

adore my current teacher, Irene Gubrud. Of course, I am leaving out my extensive acting background here. I consider myself far more of an actor than I am a singer or musician, so much so that I would describe myself as an actor who "sings a little."

Urban Guitar: *Gioia, you put a lot of acting into your singing. What are the similarities and differences of working on song text as opposed to a role in a play or movie?*

Gioia De Cari: Great question! For me, this is work in progress. I like to explore just how closely I can take my approach to songs towards what I would do with poetic texts as an actor. This is extraordinarily tricky, of course, with classical repertoire, since the demands of the music are so precise. And I'll be the first to admit I'm not there yet! I'm tremendously inspired by both Audra McDonald and Dawn Upshaw, who, in my opinion, are geniuses at this sort of thing. This is an area in which my various types of training have had an interesting intersection. I began opening up to these possibilities when I was doing dramatic poetry text work with my acting teacher, the incomparable Wynn Handman. It so happened that at the same time, in the vocal studio, Irene was encouraging me to approach singing in a spoken way, even though we were working on a strictly classical kind of sound. This convergence is great, because I love poetry, and find it exhilarating to unite that with classical music and a dramatic way of illuminating the text.

Urban Guitar: *Both of you are involved in many other activities- writing, acting, organ playing, science, among other things. What role does music play in your lives, and how does it relate to your other activities?*

John Olson: Music has always played a very big role in our lives and in our relationship. I would say it is the main area where our creative lives intersect, and it has been wonderful to have that as something we can share and work on together. For me, music and science provide an interesting balance. In the abstract, they aren't so different; both are creative activities that have a significant intellectual component. Both have their own language and methods for pursuing and expressing truth. And of course, music has a very deep and fascinating mathematical basis. But in practice, of course, doing scientific research and playing the guitar are pretty different activities; there's no getting around that. Both are fun. Science pays better.

Gioia De Cari: Yes, we are definitely Renaissance people. We both have science backgrounds in addition to our artistic work. I used to be terribly embarrassed about it, and tried to hide my various lights under various bushels. It's been recently that I have begun to realize that eclecticism is a strong component of many creative people, is part of the essential nature of what it is to be an artist. I've been heartened to notice how many creative types exhibit this — in particular, David Byrne, whom I greatly admire, who has done more different things than I could ever dream of. And so, I have concluded that the only thing to do is to take a deep breath and accept myself all of a piece.

Urban Guitar: *What has been the biggest challenge of the recording process?*

John Olson: Recording is certainly a challenging process, and those challenges are quite different from performing. Recording forces you to listen to yourself in a way that you probably should all the time but usually don't. That is great, as it makes you a better player, but it can also be excruciating! Another challenge for us was getting used to a very different physical configuration while playing. We decided with our engineer to mike the two of us separately so that we could better adjust balance and sound quality in the final product. But as a result, we had to get used to performing in different rooms, separated by glass. Being used to the intimacy and responsiveness of side-by-side performance, it took some getting used to in order for us to get that same feeling across, even though physically separated.

Urban Guitar: *What has been the biggest learning experience?*

Gioia De Cari: Where do I begin? This being our first recording, the whole thing was an immense learning process. Early on, I realized that this work had some similarity to film acting, which helped enormously. Both are performances under a magnifying glass, and since I was very comfortable with the camera, I figured I could translate that to the recording studio. To take this visual analogy further, I also realized a recording is a snapshot, really, of your artistry at a point in time, a quick capture of something that is truly much more fluid and changing. I'd add that I listened to myself so much through this process, I can honestly say I am familiar with every one of my strengths and also every one of my imperfections, which ultimately is a good thing. Most of all, I learned to let go into Zen-mind; it's the only way.

John Olson: The process of recording, then listening, then recording some more is itself a great learning experience for a musician. The recording as a whole has been so instructive because it has involved so much more than just playing music. So much of a classical guitarist's musical life is pretty solitary, and it's been very rewarding to be able to work with a lot of great people to make this whole thing happen. Our engineer, Paul Vazquez, was just fantastic, and such a pleasure to work with. I can't imagine doing this without someone as knowledgeable and supportive as him. Working with David on his piece was a wonderful experience. We received some great coaching from Ben Verdery in Hawaii. Ray Burley graciously shared the Gershwin arrangements. Our friend Dan Eickmann contributed a great arrangement for the CD. I could go on. All these people made the experience great on so many levels.

Urban Guitar: *What plans do you have for the future?*

Gioia De Cari: We have concerts to celebrate the CD release coming up on March 31 in Berkeley, California, and then on May 4 at The Monkey in New York City.