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Cue guitar! Cue voice! Now bring on the molecules...!

BY [LEO KRETZNER](#) DECEMBER 3, 2010

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Cue guitar! Cue voice! Now bring on the molecules...!

BY LEO KRETZNER DECEMBER 3, 2010 NO COMMENTS

The Olson/de Cari Duo Straddle Science and Art Gloriously

Ask any scientist: It's a very demanding profession. It's hard enough to squeeze in a bit of exercise and a little socializing — but managing a whole other career on the side? There are some illustrious examples of scientists playing at music — [Einstein with his violin](#), and [Dr. Albert Schweitzer playing the organ](#). Let's just say they didn't get rave reviews from 'real' musicians. So how to do both at a professional level?

"I think for me discipline has been the key," says John Olson. "Also regular practice and an acceptance of the fact that with the demands of a science career it just isn't possible to maintain as large a repertoire or perform as frequently as I would if music were my main activity." While he may be ruefully aware of such limitations, the listener is not.

Working full time in biotech, with his PhD from MIT, John also excels at classical guitar. He's the current president of the [New York Guitar Society](#) — and he even plays organ "on the side." His wife, Gioia ("Joya") De Cari, earned a Masters degree in mathematics, also from MIT, before giving herself over completely to performance — and now has a play about her math experience. She is an accomplished actress, a polished soprano, and I hope it's not sexist of me to say she is gorgeous. Okay, really, they're both very nice looking people!

Now, let's acknowledge a known phenomenon right here, so that we can dispense with it and move on: Many people seem to feel some hesitancy, even trepidation, upon hearing the word "soprano." There's something about those high-end cochlear hair cells being tickled that reeally catches our attention.

My suggestion in this case? Don't be put off. Gioia's is a warm soprano, never strident, and the blend with John's classical guitar is milk and honey. (And I'm primarily a folk-and-blues kind of guy.) Make no mistake about it, this is art music — but it's not holy-toity.

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Not Just Juggling — Blending Music & Molecules

Olson/De Cari do more than just dashing back and forth from science to performance — they actively bring the two together.

Gioia's current one-woman show is "[Truth Values: One Girl's Romp through MIT's Male Math Maze](#)." The 75-minute solo show of course draws on her own experiences at MIT in math (or 'maths' as they now say in the pages of *Nature*). The incendiary spark of inspiration, however, came from infamous [remarks about gender](#) and math by Harvard's then-president Lawrence Summers a few years ago. One also speculates that a bit of Harvard-MIT rivalry could only have helped in that. Perhaps not surprisingly, 'Truth Values' was a smash hit at the Central Square Theater in Cambridge, MA, a five-minute walk up the street from M.I.T. As one reviewer wrote, Gioia was indeed, "returning to the scene of the crime."

However, there were surprises for many in attendance. MIT mathematician [Gigliola Staffilani](#), went to the show only out of a sense of dreaded duty. Afterward she said, "I was expecting 90 minutes of complaints and instead I enjoyed a fantastic monologue with moments of pure humor, sadness, intelligence and struggle. Gioia has the brain of a mathematician and the heart of an artist..." (This, more reviews, information and a beautiful line from the show itself at the web site http://www.unexpectedtheatre.org/truth_values).

Olson/De Cari's most ambitious move to meld science and art is their [Science/Music Commissioning Project](#), which is finding collaborators to make new music for guitar, voice and scientific imagery. The first work resulting from this was *Abyss of the Stars: A Mass for Voice and Guitar*, written by composer Terry Champlin, of the Mannes College of Music and Vassar College, with 'lyrics' — selected writings — by [Albert Einstein](#), [Pierre Teilhard de Chardin](#), and [Richard Feynman](#).

A second piece, *Scientiphilicity*, was written by harpsichordist, organist and composer Thomas Donahue. Again there is text by the likes of Einstein, Bohr, and Curie. While the texts for *Abyss of the Stars* were chosen to highlight awe and beauty in the cosmos, those of *Scientiphilicity* provide insight into what doing science entails, and draw parallels between art and science.

The Project's third piece was composed by Frank Wallace, a prolific composer of music for voice and guitar, entitled *Men, Women and Molecules*, using poems by Roald Hoffmann, a Nobel Prize-winning chemist at Cornell University. The poems explore life, love, and human relationships with insight and humor, from the unique perspective of a scientist. This work had its debut in New Haven, CT, on November 5 of this year at the annual meeting of the National Association of Science Writers. Though the hotel ballroom venue suffered from poor sound and a lack of intimacy, subsequent quiet reading of Dr. Hoffmann's unique poetry brought rewards. "Not every collision...leads to reaction.... And so it is for us. The hard knock must be just right." Indeed. I thank the Olson/De Cari duo for bringing Dr. Hoffmann's work to my attention — just as I heartily recommend them to yours.

‘Quiet Songs’ — CD Review

This debut recording by Olson/De Cari takes its name from a set of songs by composer John Duarte, Five Quiet Songs, making up part of the album. The CD opens with two pieces by [Heitor Villa-Lobos](#), a major figure in the classical guitar literature. The second of these is an “Homage to Bach” so it is fittingly followed by five short works by Johann Sebastian himself. These include not only the relatively well-known German Christmas carol, O Jesulein suss ‘Sweet Little Jesus’ (well, I grew up hearing it, but my father was from Vienna), but also the lengthier Allemande from Bach’s 3rd suite for lute. As in this set, then entire CD features guitar and voice quite equally, the former not limited to mere accompaniment.

After Bach, the album takes a definite modern turn, with the songs by Duarte as well as works from extant composers David Leisner and Frederic Hand. Leisner’s five song Outdoor Shadows is in fact the world premiere recording of this set of pieces. In places the guitar makes some very angular leaps (both acute and oblique), and classically-forbidden harmonies (“sour notes”) occasionally appear but work like spice in food and do not overwhelm the pieces.

“Quiet Songs” finishes with more contemporary music but of a familiar, popular bent, five pieces by George Gershwin, including Somebody Loves Me, Summertime, and They Can’t Take That Away from Me. In a couple of spots the classical singing style of holding notes to their full value (length) slightly mutes some of the syncopation one typically hears in these songs, but this is my only quibble and a small one. Overall, “Quiet Songs” is full of jaw-dropping virtuosity. For example, as a guitarist I was thunder-struck by parts of Leisner’s Seagulls, where fast right hand tremolo-strumming (like a drum roll) slowly grows in volume, peaks, and then very slowly subsides — all while chord voicings for the left hand continue to move on the fretboard. This is very hard stuff to do!

“Quiet Songs” mostly impresses in a quiet and artistic way — especially when you stop and think, “Wow, these guys know science and math, too?!?”

Learn more at <http://www.olsondecari duo.com>

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