

Programme Notes by Carl Corcoran

March 2019



Rhiannon Giddens, voice/fiddle/banjo

Francesco Turrisi, percussion/accordion

An imagined circumnavigation along the 35N Parallel will allow you travel through many exotic and some not so exotic places, conjuring up a wide a variety of smells, senses, sights and sounds. From our vantage point akin to a Google Earth view we can see the troubled sands of Syria, crossing Asia, Korea, Japan and on to the Pacific Ocean which in turn brings us to the West Coast of the USA. We cross the contiguous states of California, Nevada, Arizona and more before kissing the Atlantic on the coast of North Carolina. Next time we hit land, it's the gateway to the Mediterranean as onwards we brush the southern tip of Sicily and feel the warmth of the Sirocco winds – having completed a rapid round the world excursion. And all this experience while straddling the 35th parallel North.

To reverse the direction just described and head West from the southern-most tip of Italy to the Atlantic Coast of North Carolina, we would make the connection that tonight's featured musical pioneers embody. For what lies ahead is a feat of daring, intrepid music making and musings that mix and re-mix the African Diaspora, the Islamic World - music that begins in Arabia, travels across East Africa to the Mediterranean before heading West to America where it fuses the 19th century minstrel banjo tunes with Sicilian Tamburello (frame drum) rhythms – a natural fit that convinced our featured artists tonight that these respective roots co-existed in the past.

North Carolina born Rhiannon Giddens and Italian native Francesco Turrisi had been travelling parallel lines of musical excavation, unknown to each other until a chance meeting brought them together and brought about a realisation that their shared musical fascination, almost obsessions were to forge a partnership that has culminated in a beautiful new collaborative CD recording due this Spring 'There Is No Other' and this unique Music Network presented tour. Describing the new release Francesco says, 'it's kind of us'.

Giddens was born into a biracial family in Greensboro, North Carolina. Her parents married only three years after the landmark Loving v Virginia decision (1967), which reversed the laws that made interracial marriage illegal. Her white father sang in a rock band. Her black mother loved classical music; and after their divorce young Rhiannon lived with her maternal grandparents who played jazz and blues while her paternal grandfather introduced her to bluegrass. The cornucopia of musical influences shaped this musical miscellany. Other elements shaped her strong and seldom silent convictions and opinions on Afro American history and traditions, along with her determination to only work on projects that 'serve the mission'.

That mission is influenced by growing up in North Carolina, which she says is a 'bridge state'. Neither black nor white; never red or blue; never one thing or the other. Giddens bridges black to white, country to blues, classical to secular. She studied opera at Oberlin College in Ohio and there, by mistake or by chance one night went to a contra dance (a folk-dance form where dancers pair up and switch as the band play fiddle tunes). This sparked her interest in black banjo music. Through this newly formed interest she met fellow aficionados which in turn led to forming the Carolina Chocolate Drops. Their 2010 album, *Genuine Negro Jig*, won the Grammy Award for Best Traditional Folk Album at the 53rd Annual Grammy Awards.

Winning a Grammy sets one's bar pretty high, and in the words of Charles Schulz's Peanuts, 'there is no heavier burden than a great potential'. But Giddens, whose firm belief and life philosophy is 'to be open to whatever feels right' took another step to realising that potential and was open to an invitation to work on incomplete Dylan tracks – hitherto lost lyrics from Bob's 1975 Basement Tapes album with the Band. The 2014 album *New Basement Tapes* which also included appearances by Marcus Mumford (Mumford and Sons) and Elvis Costello amongst others was produced by legendary T Bone Burnett, producer, songwriter and innovative artist. This in turn brought T Bone and Rhiannon together for her debut solo album *Tomorrow Is My Turn* in which she once again became a 'bridge' – this time bridging not only the racial divide with material by Charles Aznavour (which was also recorded by fellow North Carolinian Nina Simone) but also bridging the generational divide with songs by 1930's black blues singer Geeshie Wiley and American country singer Patsy Kline along with a song by Dolly Parton. After signing to Nonesuch Records, in 2017 Rhiannon released her highly acclaimed album *Freedom Highway* that carries the impassioned caveat "Know thy history. Let it horrify you; let it inspire you. Let it show you how the future can look, for nothing in this world has not come around before."

Giddens is renowned for her brave and articulate words and works. She is the recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship, often referred to as the genius Grant – awarded to those who show 'exceptional creativity'. This award allows her to continue to tell the stories that inspire her – to reclaim the narratives and 'restore voices to the ignored and silenced'.

Collaborations are part of Rhiannon's modus operandi. Her most recent collaborative work is her compositional contribution to choreographer Paul Vasterling's Nashville Ballet production of *Lucy Negro Redux* – premiered earlier this spring in Nashville. This exploration of Shakespeare's *Dark Lady Sonnets* (sonnets 127-154) is based on a book of poems by Nashville native Caroline Randall Williams. Some say that the Dark Lady was indeed dark skinned, a prostitute and madam who earned her living by running a brothel in London. Williams' poetry is both script and part of the music. And that music was performed live in Nashville by Rhiannon Giddens and Francesco Turrisi.

Rhiannon's research of minstrelsy and her passion for banjo music which she rightly claims is an African instrument, is matched by Francesco Turrisi's interest in the frame drum, which he says "originated in Central Asia (as far as we know from iconography) and travelled towards the Mediterranean via Turkey and then we see it spread to Greece, Egypt and Italy and probably spreading further West with the Roman Empire". But percussion is only one of the many talents of this Italian born multi-instrumentalist. He dazzles the listener equally with his percussion prowess as much as he does with the innovative sound-scaping on the accordion and his mesmerising and spellbinding piano work. He travels the world literally, these days dividing his time between this solo work, and L'Arrpegiata, European early music group led by Christina Pluhar. This ensemble blends early music with jazz and contemporary influences. These are the two worlds between which Francesco resides – jazz and early music. Having studied at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague, Turrisi manages to connect the two styles – both jazz and early music invite the opportunity and impulse to improvise.

Francesco has been called a musical alchemist who not only literally and metaphorically travels the world but travels through time and memory. A recent solo CD release, *Northern Migrations* captures this curated travelogue with pieces that are jazz-based, original tunes with traces of folk and early music. The now Wicklow resident's remarkable ability and penchant for improvisation are clearly transmitted in this beautiful recording. Family origins in Sicily resonate through the album as it looks to East and West. Arabic Taqsims, an improvisational mode are sensuously interwoven in these

musical meanderings which Turrisi describes as “musical experiences that come filtered through my ears and my hands”.

This tall charming Italian, who now exhibits occasional Irishisms in his conversation and sometimes even a hint of a Dublin accent, has contributed fearlessly and generously to the Irish music scene in various combinations and through a variety of recordings. He has pushed the boundaries, along with other Irish based musical trailblazers in such ensembles as Yurodny, Zahr, Tarab and Taquin Experiments. He has produced glorious collaborations with Irish sean-nós singer Roisin Elsafty, Catalan singer Clara Sanabras, Dublin based cellist Kate Ellis and saxophonist Nick Roth on his *Grigio* album which John Fordham of The Guardian described as ‘lyrical, sensitively assembled’ – a fascinating set that ranges from 17th- century Italian songs to avant-garde American composer John Zorn. His international collaborations include another musical alchemist Bobby McFerrin and American renaissance man Dave Liebman. Through his association with L’Arpeggiata he has forged a musical partnership with fellow Italian reedman Gianluigi Trovesi, Austrian guitarist Wolfgang Muthspiel and the mellifluous voices of two French giants of Baroque music, soprano Veronique Gens and countertenor Philippe Jaroussky. His 2009 release, *Si Dolce Il Tormento*, the title track of which is Turrisi’s interpretation of the seminal work of another Italian master Claudio Monteverdi, inspired Ian Patterson in his All About Jazz review to compare Turrisi’s piano playing to early Keith Jarret and influential Swedish jazz pianist Jan Johansson.

Another Music Network connection for Francesco is the Music Network supported purchase in 2016 of the Nils Frahm inspired unique sounding Una Corda piano, hand-made by German piano builder David Klavins. Francesco breathed a sigh of relief to discover that the apartment building to which he recently moved has an elevator that allows for easy transport to and from his practice space, while still enabling him to use the instrument at selected venues.

Francesco may have his Irishisms – Rhiannon tops that with her interest in (and not too fluent knowledge of) the ‘cúpla focal’. Her two kids Aoife and Caoimhin attend a local Gaelscoil in her adopted city of Limerick. This Music Network tour brings together these two exceptional musicians – both natives of foreign shores, both happy making their homes in Ireland as they present their musical globalism in many ways including reimagining the encounter of the banjo and the frame drum. Prepare to take a journey to exotic locations, recognising the 35th N parallel as the starting point but traversing far beyond.