

# Arresting, thoughtful, accessible

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*The Great Deep* provides an escape to serenity

By Jonathan E. D. Richmond

ADVISORY BOARD

I am sitting on an American Airlines flight when they have just served the same vile plastic egg-y mess they have always dished up for so-called breakfast. Untouchable — I simply fail to understand why they persist in throwing such muck at their passengers. The 777 is surprisingly noisy, at least where I am sitting. But I have a pair of noise-canceling headphones, and I have *The Great Deep* — a new album from Duo LiveOak — within reach.

Within a minute, the atmosphere is transformed into gentle contemplation, blood pressure is reduced, and the most nutritious food for the brain induces a feeling of serenity.

Composer Frank Wallace and singer Nancy Knowles were amongst the first artists I encountered when I first came to MIT as a graduate student. In the 1980s, Wallace and Knowles performed a repertory of early Spanish music with great insight as well as

drama. The duo has continued their focus on drama as they have moved to a new career centered on Knowles' singing compositions written and accompanied by Wallace, her husband, on guitar.

Wallace's music is cleanly modern while drawing on ancient themes. In a talk he gave at a recent Keene State College symposium, the composer emphasized the necessary connection between the guitar and the human voice. He understands that the guitar is itself one or more dramatic characters, sometimes adding characterization to the vocalist, at other times confronting her with fresh ideas to reflect upon. Even when there is no human voice — as in the purely guitar composition "Paca La Rosetta" performed at an April Keene State concert — the guitar seems to sing. The piece is rhythmic and driven, yet also lyrical and reflective.

"Ovejita," with words from the poet Federico García Lorca, is an evocation of madness. Wallace's music somehow suggests a waterborne journey, oars propelling the character forward, an old woman

overcome by insanity as she sings to a lamb she imagines to be her child. Knowles' singing is brilliant — her sharp characterization and perfect sense of timing freezes the mind in rapt attention. Wallace's guitar seems so gentle, but also urgent. Knowles projects imagery of a lost soul hanging on to the only beauty she can envision — a lamb reminding her of the closeness of a child and temporarily washing away the reality of her aging years, decline into madness, and eventual death.

Not on the CD, a new composition titled "Epitafio a un Pájaro" ("Epitaph to a Bird") was premiered at Keene State. The two guitars of the piece (Jose Manuel Lezcano joined Wallace on stage) are joined by a flute (played by Jennifer Yeaton-Paris) that follows the soul of the bird with an otherworldly gentleness. Knowles showed great flexibility in her singing: an actress able to convey the idea of life in death, crossing boundaries between mournfulness, love, and an inner celebration of a life departed. This is a memorial to a bird, but the strik-

**The Great Deep**

**Duo LiveOak**

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**Gyre Music**

ing music Wallace has written has universal meaning.

For the first measures, I was trying to identify the sources of his inspiration — was it the Renaissance? Benjamin Britten? Then I let go of the distraction of thought and fall into the abyss of a musical creativity that has a voice of its own, that takes us on a contemplative journey through not only the soul of a bird or even humanity, but of the state of being that is the planet earth. Wallace is one of our age's truly important composers, his music at once arresting, thoughtful, accessible, revealing and — protected from the outside world by my noise-canceling headphones — restful.