

## Duo looks for grace in dissonance

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PHOTOS BY JILL GOSCHE

Morgen and Theo Stiegler as Dissonant Grace are pictured here performing at Java Rave in 2007. They also are to perform there this Saturday to open an art exhibit at the coffee shop on Sandusky Street.

More than a year ago, Morgen and Theo Stiegler launched a musical duo known as Dissonant Grace. The husband-and-wife team performs original compositions and their own arrangements of cover tunes. Their style ranges from indie jazz to ballads to contemporary chamber music.

In October 2007, the pair was featured as part of the brown bag lunch concerts organized by the Tiffin Area Chamber of Commerce and The Ritz Theatre. Saturday, they are to provide music for a reception at Java Rave. The event is to open an exhibit of photographs by artist Jes Takla.

A Hopewell-Loudon graduate, Morgen first met Theo in 1999 at a Tiffin University function. Morgen already was a student and Theo was visiting TU before enrolling. They wound up singing together in TU's a cappella touring ensemble, Up in the Air. They were married in 2003 and graduated from TU in 2004.

The couple has incorporated the vocal skills and techniques learned at TU into their performances as Dissonant Grace. Theo often adds vocal percussion and bass to complement Morgan's lead vocals. They also perform "jazzease" in which an instrumental composition is rendered by voices. A native of East Germany, Theo comes from a musical family. Both parents sing and play at least one instrument, and all his siblings are musicians. Several aunts, uncles and cousins also sing and play instruments, some professionally. "There was always music at our house," he said.

Likewise, Morgen's family also passed on a love of music, especially instrumental music. Various members play woodwinds, clarinet, saxophone, violin, flute and piano. Morgen began piano lessons at age 5, but her vocal instruction began much later.

"I did not study voice until college. First I studied with Brad Rees of Tiffin University, and now I am studying with Kim Nazarian of the New York Voices," Morgen said. She said Dissonant Grace had opened a concert for the prominent vocal jazz group. Morgen met Nazarian and struck up a friendship that led to voice lessons. Once a month, Morgen would drive to Pittsburgh for instruction until she started graduate courses at Bowling Green State University. "Once I started school, she started coming in to work with our group at Bowling Green State University," Morgen said. "The guy in charge of that group is Chris Buzelli. He's a jazz guitarist."

For Dissonant Grace, Theo plays cello, guitar and bass. He does much of the arranging, composes a few pieces and creates live vocal loops. Morgen contributes electric piano and vocals. At times, her voice evokes touches of Sarah McLachlan. Morgen also does most of the songwriting, with inspiration coming from a variety of sources. "Usually from an (often painful but sometimes very joyous) event in our lives, memory, encounter, emotion," Morgen said.

Theo said he starts with a melody and adds words, while Morgen prefers to start with poetry and add a musical line. Generally, they do not put their full compositions on paper. "Not usually as musical score notation, but we write down roadmaps and chord structures, similar to a so-called lead sheet in jazz," Theo said.

When it came to choosing a name for themselves, Morgen said it was a long process. "Dissonance" is a musical term that describes playing tones together that are not harmonious, producing a harsh sound. Another definition is "disagreement, strife." Morgen said she and Theo believe in finding the positives even in difficult times. "Even when life gets really tough, we can always find a certain amount of grace in it," she said. "And we like dissonance because we're jazz musicians."

The duo has made numerous appearances in the United States and abroad. A few months ago, Nathan F. Elias discovered the couple's MySpace page and invited them to be part of a documentary he is producing. Morgen and Theo also are in the process of recording a debut CD. Theo said he and Morgen have been recording at home and at the home studios of friends in hopes of finishing the album in mid-2008. "Between our daughter and Morgen's grad school, we have not recorded as much as we'd like," Theo said.

Morgen has an assistantship at Bowling Green State University while working on a master's in ethnomusicology and participating in the vocal music program at BGSU. With her degree, she intends to teach either at the high school or college level.

Theo is employed as a qualified mental retardation professional at Tiffin Developmental Center. He also uses his training as a sound engineer for various musical groups, and he presents clinics and workshops in vocal percussion and music technology.

Dissonant Grace has a Web site, [www.dissonantgrace.com](http://www.dissonantgrace.com), which lists the duo's appearances and offers music downloads and booking information.