

Is God in the Notes?

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The Fulbright Triptych by Simon Dinnerstein

Pianist Simone Dinnerstein plays Bach's music the way Beethoven wanted his *Große Fugue* to be performed: free-spirited and strict, eccentric, subjective yet still clearly structured.

The short presto is a real shock. Are the members of the orchestra sitting behind a wall of glass? Is the piano even playing along? Oh yes, there it is, well hidden amidst an underbrush of strings. It then presses forward and races into its solo. The characteristic syncopated notes of the theme seem to have been carved out with a knife. The dissonant trills at the end are approached as though they were the intermediate results of a relay race; the final beats and cadences as if this were a piece by Chopin and not Bach. Restrained strength emanates from every phrase. The bass line is dominant, the left hand at least as vigorous as the right. It's like a press stamping out the lines. It's easy to imagine an invisible guest sitting alongside the pianist on the bench, turning the pages, a fanatical old teacher from the early history of classical performance who is tempted to rap the player on her fingers every now and then.

Is this permissible? Is it still Bach? The booklet included in the new album by the American pianist Simone Dinnerstein (her third solo recital and her debut for Sony, to be released on January 3) contains an interview that discusses this very question. At the end the interviewer poses his query again, in somewhat different form: "Is God present in the notes?"

Dinnerstein answers with a riddle. "My father talked a lot about this," she says. The father in question is the painter Simon Dinnerstein, and his piano-playing daughter often refers to his colorfully realistic, pseudo-naïve works with their Protestant austerity. He was the one who taught her to see, she asserts in a different part of the interview. As a child, she says, she spent more time with him in Italian cathedrals and European museums than she did attending concerts or practicing piano.

Anyone who reads the fine print that accompanies Dinnerstein's recordings and concert programs can learn a lot more about her various artistic and literary connections and her attitudes toward music. You learn, for example, that she is friends with Marie Warburg and Michael Neumann (her "Berlin family"); that she "didn't become a musician to become a historian;" that she greatly admires jazz pianist Jacques Loussier; and that she put together the program for her album like a home-made folding altar, centered around the English Suite in G-Minor, whose prelude is reminiscent of a variation of a *concerto grosso*. It's buttressed by two concertos in which Bach adapted himself and others as well as three choral preludes, scored for piano by the legendary pianists Ferruccio Busoni, Wilhelm Kempff and Myra Hess. Finally we learn that Dinnerstein considers the word "authenticity" to be a "fetish."

Do you need to know all this to understand Dinnerstein's interpretation of Bach? No, of course not. Are the personal confessions of the interpreter that are part of almost every booklet these days of any use at all? Under no circumstances! Nonetheless, the personality show that shrouds the phenomenon Dinnerstein is thoroughly authentic (sorry). Nothing seems staged by a PR manager.

Musical interpretation is an act of translation, a transferal from one language to another. Simone Dinnerstein plays piano as if she's translating her father's way of observing and understanding the world into the making of music. That applies to the dialectic of concreteness and transcendence as well as the contradiction between naiveté and complexity, depth of perspective and the variety of quotations and references contained therein. Simon Dinnerstein painted one of his major works, the so-called "Fullbright triptych, between 1971 and 1974 around the time his daughter was born. It depicts the entire Dinnerstein clan, father, mother and child, stylized as the Holy Family. Yet they only appear in the side panels. The focus of the altar is on the artist's work table with a view of the outside world.

It's an empty space that needs to be filled, a symbol of the creative process. The pianist herself can be seen to the far left as a naked baby Jesus on her mother's lap. This is probably as good a response as any to the interviewer's unanswered question. God becomes man not just in notes and paintings, but everywhere where people wish Him to take human form.

Simone Dinnerstein plays Johann Sebastian Bach's F-Minor piano concerto BWV 1056 in a way our ears are no longer accustomed to hearing. Her rendition is subjective, extremely eccentric, explosively expressive and mannered while still making the formal structures clear in cleverly and considered fashioned. The concert piano sweeps like pianoforte or perhaps an organ (especially in the Kempff arrangement of the choral prelude BWV 734 or in the immediately following prelude to the English Suite BWV 808). But sometimes it ducks down, thins and gilds itself, as if it were a harpsichord (for instance, in the final movement of the Piano Concerto in D-Minor BWV 1052). It is always unbelievably powerful, bursting with life. If we compare this extraordinary interpretation with previous landmark recordings of Bach concertos, we find that the former never achieves the elegant delicacy of Angela Hewitt or the cool classicism of Murray Perahia. In contrast, Dinnerstein seems wild and untamed.

This may be because her phrasing and coloration is in fact audibly influenced by "authentic" performance practices. It's no accident that some of the Staatskapelle musicians who accompany her are also members of the Academy for Ancient Music Berlin. In Dinnerstein's rendition of the G-Minor Suite, other very different references can be heard. She plays the musette, for instance, in an exaggerated spritely and playful fashion reminiscent of Glenn Gould. And her sarabande arches like the heavens, endlessly slow (even slower than Gould's), like a prayer to sing along to.