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Mourning, Bach and a 9/11 Theme

By Steve Smith

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Simone Dinnerstein, in a recital Monday at St. Paul's Chapel at Trinity Church, played on the Peace Piano.

Among the many fascinating details that have punctuated the pianist Simone Dinnerstein's long and winding road to success, one in particular resonated during a brief recital she gave on Monday evening at St. Paul's Chapel in downtown Manhattan. On learning that she was expecting a baby in 2001, Ms. Dinnerstein decided to master Bach's "Goldberg" Variations as an accompaniment to her pregnancy. Seven months into both personal journeys, she was at home in Brooklyn on the morning of the Sept. 11 attacks.

It seemed fitting, then, to find Ms. Dinnerstein, a civic-minded artist since early in her career, participating in Our Better Angels: New Yorkers Commemorate the 10th Anniversary of 9/11, a three-concert series presented by the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Union Theological Seminary. Housed in the hardy chapel used as a staging area for rescue workers after the attacks, the series features discussions among scholars from the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths, jointly addressing issues related to comprehending and coping with the tragedy.

Each event examines a specific theme and concludes with a concert; Monday's program, the second, dealt with concepts of mourning. Clergy members made up a notable portion of the small, rapt audience that heard Ms. Dinnerstein play music by Bach on the Peace Piano: a restored 1903 Steinway concert grand that survived German bombing in Hull, England, and was played at morale-boosting postwar events by notable artists like Britten, Moiseiwitsch and Bachauer.

Ms. Dinnerstein's program featured works from her most recent CD for Sony Classical, "Bach: A Strange Beauty." The album's title refers to a Francis Bacon quotation but also brings to mind her idiosyncratic, deeply personal manner of interpretation. In the English Suite No. 3, she played with ample clarity and brilliance but took expressive liberties with her pedaling, phrasing and dynamic shading. The tender Allemande shimmered through the chapel, lingering in its far corners; in the Gavottes, passing dissonances rang out with the puckish wit of Thelonious Monk's minor-key jabs.

The somber majesty of Bach's chorale prelude "Ich Ruf' zu Dir, Herr Jesu Christ" in Busoni's arrangement opened the concert, and the gentle familiarity of "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" as arranged by Myra Hess closed it. Ms. Dinnerstein's parting gesture, the Aria from the "Goldberg" Variations, was less an encore than a benediction.

Our Better Angels concludes on Monday evening in St. Paul's Chapel at Trinity Church, 209 Broadway, at Fulton Street, Lower Manhattan; (212) 233-4164, jtsa.edu/x15363.xml.

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