



SOUTH KOREA – THE PIANO

Bach: A Strange Beauty

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It all starts with Bach, and ends with Bach

For a long period of time, pianist Glenn Gould had been the household name when it comes to playing Bach – no other great pianists dominated Bach's music like he did. Gould interpreted Bach's music to the utmost precision but was able to add his own stylistic imprints. He penetrated the essence of Bach's music, reaching its core to the point. Not only was he regarded as a Bach specialist, his legacy is still honored in the name of "*Gouldberg Variation*". While some raised eyebrows at his distinctive performances, no one could match his prowess when it came to performing Bach.

Following Rosalyn Tureck who dedicated her lifetime to the studies of Bach's music, Andras Schiff began to take over the spotlight in the 1980s as the music world acknowledged him as another Bach specialist. Recognized as "the authentic formula of Bach's music", Schiff struck hands with the German publishing house 'Henle' to work on special editions of Bach's sheet music. There have been many who also raised the bar even higher: Angela Hewitt recorded 18 pages of long major keyboard concertos from Bach's repertoire; and Martin Stadtfeld was the first to win the international Bach Competition after 14 years of vacancy and brilliantly followed the footsteps of Gould.

Then entered another significant Bach specialist. It's no other than the New York-based pianist Simone Dinnerstein. Her name is yet to resonate among the classical music lovers in Korea, but she has been a magnet of attention in the United States and Europe for quite some time already. Her performances at the Lincoln Center's 'Great Performers Series' in New York and in three sold-out recitals at The Metropolitan Museum of Art have catapulted her to fame, spreading awareness throughout continents and gaining tremendous recognition.

Dinnerstein has shown flawless performances of diverse music repertoires. Yet her heart has always been out to Bach as unassumingly represented by her high-profile performance of the Goldberg Variations. *Time Magazine* crowned her with an "arresting freshness and subtlety" review based on her debut performance of the Variations at the Carnegie Hall in 2005. Two years later, her recording of the pieces topped the US Billboard Classical chart and was chosen as the 2007 Album of the Year by *The New York Times* and *The L. A. Times*.

Admittedly, recording Bach's repertoires in a debut album is a risky choice. Bach's music does not possess an extreme or dramatic musicality or a romantic beauty. And unlike Mozart's, his music is far from popular appeal. There is so much to absorb and burdens to carry. However, against of all risks, Dinnerstein's decision became all the more clear after she experienced the true depth and authenticity of Bach's composition that reflected like crystal.

"I've consistently studied the "Goldberg Variations" for many years. I looked for ways to play his music and changes within interpretations. And I thought it would be a wonderful project to actually document each and every moment of these amazing discoveries on a record. Of course, I wasn't always interested in Bach. His music possesses deep profundity and complexity, and it was never easy at first. But I started to realize that there was something alive and breathing underneath. When I discovered the Goldberg Variations could be interpreted in many diverse ways – whether by a classical musician or an artist from different music genre – I was simply amazed. I couldn't believe the magic and power the pieces possessed."

Bach – revisited and reimagined

After enjoying a huge success with her recital debut album [The Berlin Concert], Simone Dinnerstein has returned to Bach with Sony Classical's [Bach: A Strange Beauty]. "Bach again?" one might ask, but considering Dinnerstein's deep affection toward Bach, perhaps the new album was simply meant to be. Indeed, what draws your immediate attention is its title. After all, it is difficult to associate Bach with words like "beauty" and "strange" as he is mostly known by his highly mathematical and structural composition styles.

"The title comes from a quote from Francis Bacon about beauty: 'There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion.' This resonates with me and applies to the way I think about the music of Bach. On the face of it, his music is about patterns, symmetry and logic, but in fact he deviates constantly and unexpectedly from these patterns. He changes a sequence slightly or alters the rhythmic stress in a measure so that suddenly you don't know where the downbeat is. Everything about the way that he writes is mysterious and unexpected. I think that's one of the things that makes his music so great and at the same time, unusual."

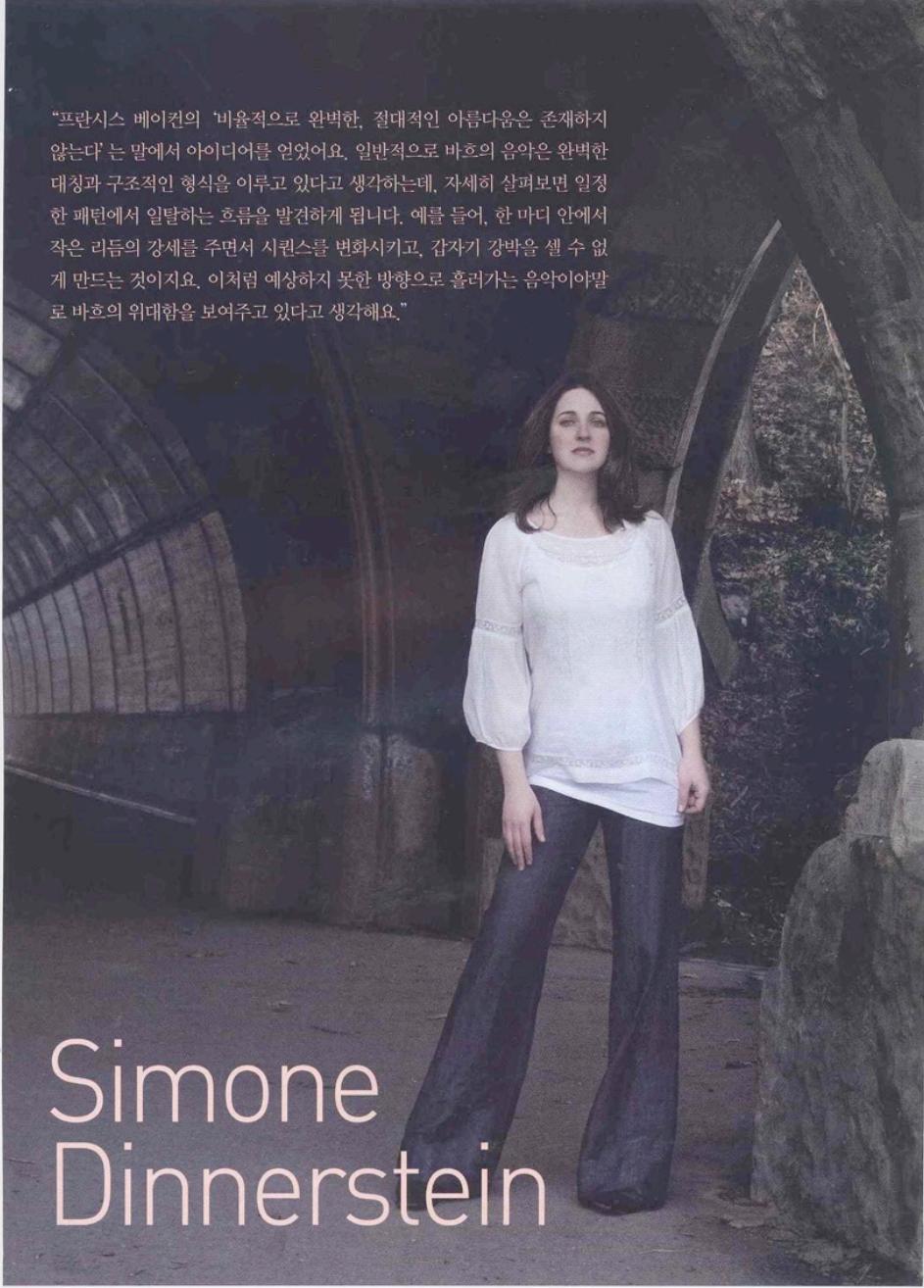
This intimate and unique approach to the music of Bach certainly has an affinity with her willingness to go beyond the notion of what other performers or musicologists have followed until today. To Dinnerstein, it wasn't about playing his music just the way it was written. It wasn't about downbeats and bar lines. What was written on the surface of the music sheet wasn't all there was to it. What she was looking for was Bach's underlying intentions – what the grand virtuoso attempted to convey through his notes.

"Composer Philip Lasser always says that real music doesn't have bar lines. And the fact that there is so much syncopation and displacement of the downbeat tells me that Bach wasn't being driven by downbeats and bar lines. I think that musical notation is a very crude way of transcribing a musical thought. In Bach's music in particular, where the markings are so spare. I think you need to look beyond notation. In the end, it's all about whether your music comes to life or not. Notation is just one small part that leads you to it."

[Bach: A Strange Beauty] features 'Keyboard Concerto No. 1, BWV 1052', 'English Suite No. 3, BWV 808', 'Keyboard Concerto No. 5, BWV 1056', the Busoni transcription of 'Ich ruf zu Dir, Herr Jesu Christ', the Kempff transcription of 'Nun freut euch, lieben Chirsten gmein', and last but not least, the Hess transcription of 'Jesus bleibet meine Freude'. Just as Bach freely reused, transcribed and re-worked on his own materials, so many pianists have created their own transcription of a variety of his works. And Dinnerstein wanted to continue the tradition by including the transcriptions in her album.

Dinnerstein joined hands with the members of Kammerorchester Staatskapelle Berlin, but what makes the collaboration so unique is that there were no conductors involved in the recording. After giving a lot of thoughts into the project, she believed that was how Bach would have written it to be played. The unusual yet apparent element about Bach's keyboard concertos is that while the keyboard plays the entire time, the rest of the orchestral instruments don't; thereby giving a pianist tremendous amount of responsibilities. Therefore, she naturally thought it was more sensible to approach the pieces as if they were chamber music.

“프란시스 베이컨의 ‘비율적으로 완벽한, 절대적인 아름다움은 존재하지 않는다’는 말에서 아이디어를 얻었어요. 일반적으로 바흐의 음악은 완벽한 대칭과 구조적인 형식을 이루고 있다고 생각하는데, 자세히 살펴보면 일정한 패턴에서 이탈하는 흐름을 발견하게 됩니다. 예를 들어, 한 마디 안에서 작은 리듬의 강세를 주면서 시퀀스를 변화시키고, 갑자기 강박을 셀 수 없게 만드는 것이지요. 이처럼 예상하지 못한 방향으로 흘러가는 음악이야말로 바흐의 위대함을 보여주고 있다고 생각해요.”

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white long-sleeved top and dark wide-leg pants, stands in a stone archway. The background is dark and textured, suggesting an underground or historical setting. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the woman against the dark background.

Simone Dinnerstein

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Simone's adamant devotion and philosophy towards music were largely shaped by her father Simon Dinnerstein, who is a renowned painter. In many of her previous interviews, Dinnerstein described how her father and his views about visual art have influenced her as a musician. Throughout the years, he inspired his daughter with questions such as "How is the painting represented?" or "What are the hidden values beneath the techniques?" And this is how she began to look at art differently and develop her own way of interpreting music.

"We used to travel a lot when I was a kid, always to see a particular museum or painting. My father used to have me copy what we were seeing in sketchbooks. Now that I think about it, I think he inspired me in terms of observing art and understanding the details of what I was seeing. My father and I used to talk freely about his art work as well. *'The Fulbright Triptych'* for example, contains jarring juxtapositions of high and low art. There's a whole mixture of textures clearly meant to evoke different mediums, and it's still very painterly. But when I talk to my father, he talks about how little of this he planned. You can describe it and discuss it in lots of different ways, but I'm not sure how close that analysis takes you to the experience of the picture."

No holds barred: turning prisons into intimate concert venues

Dinnerstein graduated The Juilliard School where she was a student of Peter Serkin, and also studied with Solomon Mikowsky at the Manhattan School of Music. However, her routes to stardom seem quite different from other traditional concert pianists: her secret recipe is to reach out to a wider range of audiences in most unexpected places. In so doing, she collaborated with the Piatigorsky Foundation and held recitals in nursing homes, community centers – and most notably, she gave the first-ever classical music performance in the Louisiana State prison. Dinnerstein took a step further and masterminded the foundation of <Neighborhood Classics> program, an open concert series to general audience hosted by New York City public schools. The program debuted at P.S. 321, the Brooklyn public elementary school where her son Adrian currently attends and her husband Jeremy Greensmith teaches fifth grade. She actively collaborated with the program, championing the fundraising efforts on behalf of the school's PTA.

"While there are many opportunities to enjoy music in traditional classical concert venues, you do need to create a stage where musicians and the audience are allowed to connect more personally and harmonize. You don't need a fancy recital to experience music. I realized how much I enjoyed playing in intimate venues for people who wouldn't go to concerts otherwise. By outreaching to the community, the audience can easily engage themselves in the delight of classical music and experience an intimate connection with the performer. That said, above all, [the program] is very meaningful because it allows the public school students with rich ethnic and cultural diversities to experience art in its finest forms. I definitely plan on continuing and pursuing these amazing programs and collaborations going forward."

As we watch Dinnerstein continue to pushing the boundaries of music with her exceptional gifts, we cannot help but reminded of how it all started: it was Bach, and it always has been. At the same time, we are also mindful that many of the greats somehow made their way back to their roots, to the grandeur of Bach's creations – which only gives us plenty more reasons to stay tuned to Dinnerstein and her future interpretations of Bach.

(CD review on the right half page on P. 25)

Rethinking Bach: a new perspective

Listening to Dinnerstein's [Bach: A Strange Beauty], you can't help yourself but to grab Bach's hand and get deeply absorbed into his musical journey, the one that Dinnerstein and Bach together take us to. It starts with a 'cantata' and ends with a 'chorale'. Indeed, the beginning of the journey enwraps us with a meditative and forgiving tone, and later when the curtain falls it leaves with us a calm sense of resonance.

Nevertheless, the middle part of the journey is nothing less than a whirlwind. 'Keyboard Concerto in F Minor' and 'Keyboard Concerto in D Minor' form a bilateral symmetry, creating a colorful contrast between orchestra and piano. And between these two bisymmetric keyboard concertos proudly stands the English Suite that exhales its expressive respiration stronger than ever. Dinnerstein was quite thorough and considerate in her selection and arrangements of Bach's repertoire, brilliantly materializing diverse scale of resonance. [Bach: A Strange Beauty] tells it all: how much sincerity Dinnerstein has put into studying Bach's music and how remarkably she's succeeded in doing so.

At one point, Dinnerstein brings up the subject of rubato, stating that sometimes in the music, she feels that there are “natural places to breathe even if they're not marked as such.” This highly original theory of rubato is clearly manifested in her musical phrasings. In the 'Sarabande' from the 'English Suite' and the slow movements from the 'Keyboard Concertos', Dinnerstein plays the melody lines as if they were played by string instruments. She colors her upbeats with great emphasis; and she emphasizes non-harmonic tones such as *appoggiatura* by bringing them forward and extending them. Even the smallest notes are so meticulously played that you would be able to feel the presence of the same sonic space usually created by the vibratos and bowings of a string instrument. It sounds almost as if she is playing the piano with four strings – that is how Dinnerstein created her very own unique musical space.

Even her non-legato articulations in fast movements are quite distinctive from the musical textures of others such as those of Kempff, Pogorelich and Perahia's. When playing a fast rhythm passage of non-legato, most pianists tend to tap the keyboards lightly as if bouncing a spring up and down. However, the tip of Dinnerstein's fingers drops with much higher density. It is the perfect marriage of gravitational force and repulsive force as if two opposite magnets were attached to her fingers and her piano. To have the ability to add a viscous touch to short staccatos requires endless practice and effort. It's definitely not something that can easily be achieved. But Dinnerstein doesn't hold back. Going beyond her phrasings, she shows no sign of hesitation in her musicality. Her musical articulations can be likened to those of a masterful speaker: precise, liberated, yet utterly convincing.

[Bach: A Strange Beauty] truly offers us an amazing insight – all the way from her selection and arrangement of Bach's repertoire to the texture of her sensitive touch; and the natural respirations heard in phrasings is simply eye-opening. Make no mistakes: Dinnerstein is one to be reckoned with. It is time for us to appreciate and discover the ultimate sincerity and cleverness that empowers her genius and creativity.