

Finding Parallels in Paintings

By Barrymore Laurence Scherer
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'I never formally studied art,' notes pianist Simone Dinnerstein. "But art is what I remember most from my early youth, because we never vacationed just for fun, but traveled for only one reason—to see a particular work of art."



Simone Dinnerstein

Chris Serra

Ms. Dinnerstein and I are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It is Monday, when the museum is closed except to invited visitors, and as the Brooklyn-born daughter of the acclaimed realist painter Simon Dinnerstein revels in the quietude, she says: "For someone who has always come here as just another member of the crowd, this is magic."

In 2005, Ms. Dinnerstein decided to take her career in hand. Still relatively unknown, she self-produced a CD of Bach's Goldberg Variations. Telarc released the disc in 2007, and within its first week it clinched the No. 1 spot on Billboard magazine's classical chart. International critical plaudits led to subsequent recordings of Bach and Beethoven. This January she made her Sony label debut with "Bach: A Strange Beauty," which not only hit No. 1 on Billboard's classical chart, but also made its Top 200 chart of bestsellers in all genres.

While reading the press release for that disc, I was struck by Ms. Dinnerstein's observation that "strangeness in some proportion is what I like in all of the arts. . . . I have no interest in neatness and regularity as ends in themselves." And upon reading that "I prefer [Jan] Van Eyck's mystical realism to Gerard David's cold perfection. This certainly affects the way I want to play the piano," I was inspired to visit the Met with her to discuss some of her favorite paintings and how they relate to her musical life.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art/The Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls Collection
Amedeo Modigliani's 'Reclining Nude'

Our visit occurs just before her March East Coast tour with clarinetist Richard Stoltzman, and a series of solo recitals culminating with a May 13 appearance at the museum itself.

Ms. Dinnerstein, 38, initially established a connection between art and music during her family's years in Rome. "My father won an American Prix de Rome and was working at the American Academy," she explains. At age 5 she began to take ballet classes there. "They were accompanied by a pianist, my first real experience of a live musician. So I asked if I could take piano lessons." Because her parents neither owned a piano nor knew about musical training, Mr. Dinnerstein sought advice from a composer colleague at the academy, who suggested that Ms. Dinnerstein begin with recorder lessons. Her private recorder teacher specialized in Renaissance music, whose dance forms and polyphonic textures pointed the way to the contrapuntal fabric of Bach.

"As with music, I've always been drawn to art with a directness of expression," she says. Among the elect in her personal pantheon is the 20th-century Italian master Amedeo Modigliani. In his 1917 "Reclining Nude," sensuality not only radiates from the wonderfully stretched torso but resides in the strong, dark, undulating line running from the figure's right elbow, along her back, buttock and thigh. When I remark about the way this line visibly thickens and thins, Ms. Dinnerstein observes: "One of the most important things I've learned from looking at art, especially with my father, is understanding how the quality of line holds a form together. This visual idea directly relates to musical phrasing. The pulse of a tempo is never mechanically even, but always expanding and contracting, like Modigliani's line."



*Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Claude Monet's 'Ice Floes.'*

Strolling to the French Impressionist galleries, I ask if imagery passes through her mind while she plays. "Not really," she replies. "I think of nothing but the music itself. But I have drawn analogies between the two. When I was studying Beethoven's 'Emperor Concerto,' my teacher [the late, celebrated Italian pianist] Maria Curcio was trying to convey the concept that music is both vertical and horizontal in its harmony, its counterpoint, its textures. I was having trouble absorbing this. Meanwhile, my husband and I visited Paris, where we went to see Monet's 'Water Lilies' in the Orang erie. On one hand you could view these paintings as flat arrangements of colors or layers of paint. But most vividly you could concentrate on the layers of water lilies floating on the water, submerged in the water and also reflected on the surface of the water. Suddenly I realized 'that's exactly what Maria's talking about.'"

Arriving at Monet's 1893 "Ice Floes," we discuss how the artist uses fairly thick opaque oil pigments to describe the infinite varieties of light falling upon natural surfaces. Ms. Dinnerstein observes that, up close, where we can see the colors' opacity, "the painting looks completely different than from across the room, where his depiction of light is more persuasive." We discuss how painters at work often step away from their canvas in order to see how the composition looks from a distance and not just close up.

"My father does this all the time to see his work from every angle. There's a similar perspective to sound," she says, "but musicians can't run to the back of a hall to hear themselves play. However, because I have been playing in increasingly larger halls, I'm constantly thinking about how to make the sound spin out from the stage to fill the hall."



*The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund
Jan van Eyck's 'The Crucifixion' and 'The Last Judgment'*

From here we walk to the early Netherlandish galleries to see Jan van Eyck's two altar panels, respectively depicting the Crucifixion and Last Judgment (c. 1430). Essentially crowd scenes arranged in a narrow vertical format, both are wonderfully animated examples of van Eyck's meticulous workmanship and eye for minute detail. "The first thing you see is his technical virtuosity," she says, "but that's just the means to his narrative end. In these crowds of people, the faces and gestures each convey so much complex personal expression."



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman
Georges de La Tour's 'The Penitent Magdalen'

After walking among the Renaissance masters of North Europe, we make our way to the final work on our visit, "The Penitent Magdalen" by the 17th-century French master Georges de La Tour. Here, instead of conventionally weeping or reading, Mary Magdalen, her face averted, sits in a dark room, her hands gently folded on a skull. Only the indistinct glint of her red hair alludes to that traditional attribute, the fine scarlet fabric of her skirt hinting at her erstwhile profession as a harlot. She is dramatically illuminated by a single candle, a La Tour hallmark, its mesmerizing flame reflected at a slight angle in the opulently framed mirror on a low dressing table.

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