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Music review:

Pianist Simone Dinnerstein at the Sixth & I Historic Synagogue

By Robert Battey
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(Lisa Marie Mazzucco /) - Pianist Simone Dinnerstein.

Pianist Simone Dinnerstein seems to inhabit several worlds. On the one hand, she is indisputably “grounded”; she saunters onstage in a sensible black pantsuit, lives in Brooklyn with her young son and husband (a public elementary school teacher), has never won a major competition, performs in nursing homes and prisons, and gives fundraisers for her local PTA. But her arresting neon-blue eyes (emphasized in all her publicity shots) radiate something from another plane entirely, and in the past six years, audiences and record companies have been clamoring to experience what that is.

Dinnerstein’s Cinderella story — a virtual washout at age 30 who set the world on fire with her self-financed CD of the “Goldberg Variations” — is well-known by now. Despite no powerful sponsor, a narrow repertoire focusing on the classics and appearances with only a few of the biggest orchestras, she is in striking distance of the top tier of the business.

The reasons why were clearly on display Saturday evening at the Sixth & I Historic Synagogue, in a program of Bach, Beethoven and Schumann. In Goethe’s final line from “Faust,” “The eternal feminine draws us upward.” Dinnerstein seems to commune equally with higher spiritual realms and deep maternal

instincts. Her sound, while varied and colorful, has a trancelike quality as well. The imagination, particularly in slow music, is extraordinary — the Lisztian anguish in the Sarabande of Bach's English Suite No. 3 seemed to invoke all human experience.

Not to get too carried away, this does have its limits. Sometimes her ornaments are a little cloying (as in "Des Abends" of Schumann), and too often she begins the repeats both softer and slower than the first iteration. In Schumann's "Traumes Wirren," the fingers certainly had fleetness but lacked the last ounce of power and clarity.

I don't get the appeal of the Bach Choral Prelude arrangements she included (by Busoni, Kempff and Hess). It's not as if there isn't enough Bach keyboard music out there now, and these modern constructions, with ponderous left-hand octaves and other anachronisms, illuminate nothing, particularly when juxtaposed directly against his original music.

The Beethoven sonata she chose as her closer, Op. 27, No. 1, is one of the composer's gentler works, with an operatic Adagio as its epicenter. With her hyper-expressive style, Dinnerstein eschews the sharpest staccatos and accents, which never harmed Beethoven when done in good proportion. But there was excellent rhythmic control in the faster movements, admirably undisturbed by a very wide dynamic range.

Encores by Schubert and Schumann again underlined Dinnerstein's flair for hearing familiar music in new ways. She is unquestionably an artist of true expressive force, striking a near-ideal balance of objectivity (accurately rendering what is on the page, even when technically awkward) and fantasy (searching for what lies behind the notes). This was one of the best recitals I've heard this season.

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