

The Washington Post

Dinnerstein, Casting a Spell With A Whisper

By Philip Kennicott
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, February 9, 2009; C02

Simone Dinnerstein is the sort of pianist who should play by candlelight, in small rooms, to rapt listeners sprawled on pillows and thick rugs. She is an artist of small gestures, intimate ideas, little insinuations and graceful sleights of hand. She can make the modern grand piano, a machine-age beast, sound as tentative and delicate as a simple reed flute, piped on by a solitary shepherd.

Dinnerstein is a phenomenon in the world of classical music, which is a world in disarray. Everything has contracted, everywhere there is anxiety about lost audiences and a dying art form. But as Dinnerstein's fascinating Kennedy Center debut recital Saturday afternoon demonstrates, strong-willed artists can still find a path through the wreckage.

Since self-producing her breakthrough recording of Bach's "Goldberg Variations" in 2007, she has managed to rise to the top doing something once thought almost impossible in the old world of big record labels and high-powered agents: She has retained her independence and her individuality.

That was clear from the first notes of her Terrace Theater performance. Schubert's C Minor Impromptu, D. 899, begins with a plaintive little melody, unadorned, meant to be played about as softly as humanly possible. It is a sad, desolate theme, which the composer repeats, obsessively, as if it were stuck in the head of some love-addled romantic poet. This musical bleakness is Dinnerstein's happy place, where she can exercise her superhuman control over the shadows, shades and whispers of the piano's lowest dynamic range.

She took it painfully slowly, which is her hallmark style. If there's a daisy anywhere in range, Dinnerstein will stop to smell it. If you don't surrender to her spell, it will be a long afternoon. But if you forgive her the occasional liberty with the text -- that Schubert melody is meant to be played "very moderately quickly," not as a dirge -- the reward is like a slow-motion raft trip in the late-autumn sun, a succession of beautifully framed moments.

Throughout the afternoon, it was the slow movements, the hymns and little arias, the delicate dances in a suite by Bach, the hypnotically iridescent colors in a new piece by composer Philip Lasser, that cast the strongest spell. In Bach's French Suite No. 5, Dinnerstein turned the Sarabande, a slow dance in a triple meter, into a wide-open impressionistic canvas, ornamenting its lines, the second time through, almost to the point of re-invention. The Loure, another slow dance and one that few pianists properly inspire, was a revelation, a gentle, swinging, playful thing, like a gigue in slow motion.

This style of playing is like tightrope walking. Some pianists master the machine with muscle and stamina. Dinnerstein's control is diplomatic and intellectual, a series of carefully controlled illusions -- it is amazing how she calculates a diminuendo -- that come from intimate knowledge of how tones fade and the minimal force necessary to move a key. But there is a Martha Stewart danger to this kind of playing, the specter of lovely gestures concentrated to the point of preciousness.



In a Saturday Terrace Theater recital, Simone Dinnerstein displayed her intimate style in a program with music from Schubert, Bach, Beethoven and Philip Lasser. (2007 Photo By Mary Lou Foy For The Washington Post)

Dinnerstein never crossed that line, but there was a noticeable difference in confidence and execution when the music turned stormy. The heavy, almost desperate dance that breaks out in the middle of Schubert's Impromptu in E-flat wanted more clarity and fire and even ugliness. And the thunderbolts at the opening Beethoven's Piano Sonata, Op. 111, were not as confidently thrown as the Arietta, which follows, was perfectly finessed. There are moments in this sonata that sound like proto-jazz, but Dinnerstein didn't indulge them.

So there are limits to the playing, and those limits begin when the music starts speaking with the piano's big, hectoring, public voice. Which only puts Dinnerstein in the same league with a long and honorable tradition of intimate players -- she has welcomed comparison to the great British artist Dame Myra Hess, and it's easy to see why the comparison has been made. But if she did everything equally well, she wouldn't be the mesmerizing player she is. It is miraculous enough that she has remained *interesting*, with more ideas in an afternoon than many pianists have in a lifetime.