

Simone Dinnerstein plays Bach to whoops and cheers

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October 24, 2007



There's something semi-mystical about piano recitals; something about that enormous black god in the middle of the stage, waiting to be placated. When the recitals are in the pink-gold splendour of London's Wigmore Hall, performed beneath Gerald Moira's arts-and-crafts cupola, they're doubly so. And when the music is Bach's ... well, you see where I'm going.

So it was last night, for a performance of the Goldberg Variations by American pianist Simone Dinnerstein, her London recital debut. Glancing around the semi-dark of the auditorium as the opening aria arched through the air, I couldn't help noticing that most of those present appeared to be engaged in a form of supplication: some with head in hands, as if waiting to be delivered; others with their eyes closed, wrapped in private prayer. It might have been my imagination, but even the electric lights seemed to be flickering like votive candles.

This appearance by Dinnerstein (who blogged for us on these pages last week) has been much heralded, not least for the story of her career so far. Unable to win a recording contract, she went ahead and financed a disc herself in 2005, of Bach's Goldbergs, with the help of friends and family. She began learning them while pregnant, which understandably created some pressing challenges - according to a nice piece on her by Slate's Evan Eisenberg last August, by the time it came to the third trimester, certain parts of the keyboard were getting hard to hit.

But it also offered advantages, not least because the Goldbergs are one of Bach's most meditative, inward-looking works for keyboard. You don't even have to accept the (probably spurious) backstory of Bach writing it as a lullaby for an insomniac count - Goldberg was the court harpsichordist - to get a sense that the composer was writing for, as well as from, himself. His 30 variations on one of the most eloquent themes ever written could, you feel, cycle on and on, mutating and evolving simply at Bach's whim, irrespective of instrument, technique, audience or anything else. Even snoozing aristocrats.

Or slumbering babies. Listening to Dinnerstein's CD yesterday afternoon, I couldn't help thinking that the quieter, more transcendental moments (some of the disc's best) would soothe the most restless offspring, even if they currently happened to be residing mere inches from the keyboard. And was it my imagination, or did the opening of Variation 1 start with a kick that would have done a baby proud?

No matter. Last night's performance sold out, and even if it wasn't perfect, it still managed to rouse the usually sceptical Wigmore audience to cheers - and even a few polite whoops. The release of tension after a long journey might have played its part, as might Dinnerstein's unapologetically Romantic way with Bach, built on liberal use of both pedals and a flexibility with rhythm that let the notes unspool at times almost casually. Whatever you think to that approach (it's not much in fashion), it brought out the dreamlike, occasionally nightmarish, qualities of Bach's writing, and also made a strong case that the

piano is properly suited to this music - not apologised for, nor remade into a Glenn Gould-style harpsichord for the recording age, all crackling energy and steely tone.

Ah yes, Gould. If it's impossible to write about the Goldberg Variations without mentioning the man who introduced them to millions of LP-buying people (for a time they were known as the "Gouldbergs"), it must be impossible to perform them without being nervous of his shade lurking somewhere off-stage. It's a custom - actually it's a cliché - of music writers to compare every new Bach pianist to Gould, particularly when they happen to be playing the Goldbergs. (Yep, I've just done it too.) But for all that Dinnerstein claims to revere Gould, you wouldn't guess it from her performances, which have a spontaneity, an interest in passing moments and rhetorical colour, that seems pretty un-Gouldian. If she hasn't quite replaced Glenn as the high priest, at least for me, she does remind us that the church of Mighty Bach needs more than one representative on earth.