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MUSIC BOX: POP, JAZZ, AND CLASSICAL.

The Goldberg Variations Made New

MOVE OVER GLENN GOULD, HERE'S SIMONE DINNERSTEIN.

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The year was 1955. Three things happened: Albert Einstein died, and Glenn Gould recorded the Goldberg Variations.

It is difficult to describe the impact of the second event, in part because I was a fetus at the time. (The third event, of course, was my birth.) But I will try. For those of us—beatniks, philistines, fetuses—who thought of classical music as something powdered and periwigged, that slab of vinyl struck with the force of a meteor. The stegosaurs who played Bach as if he were Lawrence Welk sniffed the heady, pomade-purged air and keeled, metaphorically, over. The Cretaceous Age of Music had ended. The Age of Gould had begun.

We hear a lot about meteoric careers, but Gould's—his *concert* career—really was. In 1964, at the height and breadth of his fame, he renounced the stage to devote himself to making records. Two years later he set forth the method to his madness in an essay in *High Fidelity* titled "The Prospects of Recording." In prose of a puckish fustiness as distinctive as his playing, he made three predictions: One: that recording would supplant live performance. Two: that much of the real action, musically speaking, would take place in the studio. Three: that, as technologies of sound manipulation got better and cheaper, the line between artist and audience would be smudged and maybe even—in a distant, Gouldtopian future—erased.

At last count Gould is two for three, which beats the hell out of Nostradamus, Ezekiel, and St. John the Divine, despite their far greater fudge factors and grace periods. Sampling, mashups, remixes, the laptop studio; the recognition, at long last, of the art I've called "phonography"—prophecies Two and Three have come true in spades, most strikingly in the realm of popular music (about which Gould had relatively little to say). Prophecy One, though, looks dead wrong.

Over the past eight years, concert ticket sales have doubled. For the average musician, recording has never replaced live performance as a way of paying the rent, and in the post-Napster age—unless you're a superstar or a studio regular—making a living from records is harder than ever.

All of this goes double for a classical player. Even if a young pianist can get people to consider paying for her recording of the Goldbergs, as opposed to downloading it from a P2P network or burning it from a friend's copy, she has to compete with several hundred

versions listed on Amazon, including 28 editions of Gould's four recordings—to say nothing (or very little) of Gould's ghost recreating his '55 version on a computer-assisted Yamaha Disklavier.

I'm as tough a sell as any. Perhaps because of my impressionable age at the time of its release, I seem to have imprinted on Gould's '55 disk. Nothing—not Murray Periaha's refinement, not Maria Tipo's grace, not even Gould's more spacious 1981 revision, the eerie capstone and *aria da capo* to his career—could shake my allegiance. Until, that is, last fall.

That was when I turned on my radio and heard Variation 13 played in a way I'd never heard it played before: pensively, wistfully, with an ebb and flow as natural as breathing. (For comparison, here is No. 13 in Gould's '55 reading.) I did not, as they say, touch that dial until I had heard the last 17 variations, the return of the Sarabande on which all 30 are based, and an interview with the pianist, a 34-year-old Brooklyn native named Simone Dinnerstein.

Remember the name: You'll be hearing it often, usually mispronounced. (She says her last name with a *steen*, Brooklyn-style, and her first name with a supernumerary *uh*, Berlin style; if you have a problem with this, take it up with her father, painter and Brooklyn cultural fixture Simon Dinnerstein.)

She'd made the recording in March of 2005, on her own initiative, with friends helping to defray the $15,000 tab. It had done wonders for her career: won her a contract with a major management company, solo gigs with major orchestras, recitals at major halls in New York, London, and Paris. Yet—in a most un-Gouldian twist—it had yet to be picked up by a record label.

Like many budding pianists, Dinnerstein idolized Gould. Yet her Goldbergs are—in every particular but quality—poles apart from his. This may have something to do with the circumstances under which they evolved. In his notes to the 1955 recording, Gould says the Sarabande's bass line is "pregnant with promise." So was Dinnerstein, when she learned the piece. In her case the promise was a son, Adrian, now 5 years old.

If she labored, so to speak, under a mechanical disadvantage (by the third trimester, Adrian was crowding her a bit during those daunting cross-hand passages), the metaphorical advantage was huge. In his brilliantly overwritten novel *The Gold Bug Variations,* Richard Powers marvels at the generation of nearly infinite variety from a bass line just 32 bars long. For him, it mirrors the spinning of what feels like (or used to) the infinite variety of life on Earth from the four bases of DNA—or, for that matter, the generation of a single organism, such as a human boy.

Another thing: One feels that Dinnerstein was, from the start, playing *for* someone—unlike Gould, who played for himself and maybe, if he was in a sociable mood, Bach. Gould was one of the first classical musicians to master the mode of phonography I've called "cool": Rather than reach out to the listener, he lets the listener come to him. Dinnerstein's performance is anything but cool; it glows with a warmth that I will, with difficulty, restrain myself from calling maternal. Yet it has its own profound inwardness. Dinnerstein sheds some light on this: "When you're pregnant, you're aware of having somebody else there, but it's also very much you. In a way, the most playing for yourself you could possibly do is playing with a baby inside."

Most people, I suppose, who have heard the Goldbergs have heard the origin story that is packaged with them. Bach wrote them for his pupil Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, musician to

Count Keyserlingk. A Balt by birth, a Pole by citizenship, serving as ambassador of the Imperial Court of Russia to the Electoral Court of Saxony, the count naturally had trouble getting to sleep. The variations were so many grains, which Goldberg, his sandman, would sprinkle upon his pillow—each a unique crystal, a dream world unto itself.

Until 1955 the story was plausible enough, on the strength of the few recordings available. Gould's Goldbergs, however, were crystal meth. If I were Keyserlingk and heard them, I'd leap out of bed and draft a treaty. If I heard Dinnerstein's, I'd happily cry myself to sleep. They are an extended fairy tale, a far-flung journey told by firelight, a lullaby.

In the dreamlike fugue state (or maybe canon state) that Dinnerstein induces, Bach seems to be channeling the next 200 years of Western music. Variation 14 has the spikiness of Prokofiev, 17 the mad jiggle of Nancarrow, 28 the ripple and shimmer of Debussy, 29 the manly rhetoric of middle Beethoven. In Variations 3 and 13, one finds the nursery reverie of Schumann's *Kinderszenen*; in 19 and 30 (and elsewhere) a glow, a sense of beatitude, that brings to mind Berlioz's *Enfance du Christ*. (For comparison, here are Gould's versions of 28 and 30.)

For Gould, live performance was a barbarism, a gladiatorial blood sport. For Dinnerstein, it is "almost a religious experience." I went to Dinnerstein's recital last fall at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (no Goldbergs, but she did play Bach, as well as Schumann, Copland, and Beethoven), and it *was* a religious experience—not just for the pianist but, I sensed, for a sizeable fraction of those present.

Dinnerstein is a throwback to such high priestesses of music as Wanda Landowska and Myra Hess. (Her teachers have included Peter Serkin and Maria Curcio, a pupil of Artur Schnabel: hierophants all.) Dame Hess is now best remembered for soothing breasts and stiffening lips with her recitals at London's National Gallery during the Blitz. It's not much of a stretch to picture Dinnerstein, too, calmly playing Bach as the Boche pitch the bomb balls in. (Actually, for someone used to practicing with a 5-year-old boy in the house, this would be child's play.) She likes to tell the story of her favorite piano, a 1903 Hamburg Steinway that lived in the town hall of Hull, Yorkshire, during the war. When the hall was wrecked by German bombs, the piano survived with hardly a scratch. After the war, it was used in a series of concerts to bolster Hull's spirit, and in 2002 it played a similar role at the reopening of the World Trade Center's Winter Garden. This is the piano on which she recorded her Goldbergs.

Why do I bother telling you this—any of this—if you can't listen to the record at all? Well, the story has a happy ending, which smudges but hardly erases our un-Gouldian paradox: Telarc has picked up the recording and will release it into the wild tomorrow. What's more, Dinnerstein is touring: She's taking her Goldbergs on the road.

Go hear her, and get religion. And if you can't, there's always the record.