

The Ivories, Polished in Germany

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Simone Dinnerstein, a Brooklyn-based pianist, plied her art in obscurity until last year, when her recording of Bach's "Goldberg Variations" became something of a sleeper hit. This success, in turn, led to concert bookings at some of the world's most prestigious venues. Now there is "The Berlin Concert," a recording of Dinnerstein's debut in that city, at the acoustically perfect Kammermusiksaal of the Philharmonie. The CD is filled with playing of personality, verve and thoughtfulness.

This is a pianist who remains rooted in Bach, alive to learned counterpoint and the way that such elements as tempo, rhythm and shape imbue the music's textures with strength and vibrancy. Bach's French Suite No.5 receives exuberant treatment, with the pianist moving from the lofty trills of the opening measures to the graceful dances of the ensuing movements. Like her hero Glenn Gould, Dinnerstein threads the needle between robotic fidelity to the printed score and willfulness. Here, joy in the simple process of musicmaking marries an intelligence that has thoroughly worked out balances among interweaving voices.

Bach, for this artist, is an entryway into other styles, as a reading of Philip Lasser's Twelve Variations on a Chorale by J.S. Bach highlights. Lasser, a Juilliard composition professor and longtime friend of the pianist, uses his command of harmony to build moments of steely percussion and misty impressionism far removed from Bach's generally courtly sound. Dinnerstein makes this evolution feel natural as the sound fabric expands and grows more diffuse, culminating in moments of grandeur and poetry.

And just when an alternately powerful and wistful performance of Beethoven's final piano sonata, Op. 111, seems to signal new directions for this breakout pianist, she comes back with a touching encore of Variation 13 from "Goldberg." It could be a fond send-off to Bach recording, or perhaps a sign that he will remain an eternal touchstone for Dinnerstein.

-- Daniel Ginsberg