

Review: Pianist Simone Dinnerstein offers unexpected complexity, technical finesse

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Pianist Simone Dinnerstein opened her Wisconsin Union Theater concert with the spare, weighty tones of the theme of Aaron Copland's 1930 Piano Variations. Her encore, by contrast, was the innocent, even tentative "Of Foreign Lands and Peoples" from Robert Schumann's collection *Scenes from Childhood*.

What was most striking about these two very different pieces was the shared approach that Dinnerstein brought to both and her work throughout the concert. Whether playing pieces in the style of high modernism or 19th century romanticism, Dinnerstein resisted the impulse toward melodramatic extravagance. This was hardly a deficit in her performance. Rather, it was the ground from which she engaged other registers of expressiveness.

In its 20 brief variations, the Copland ranged from an initial gravitas through moments of delicacy and guarded playfulness until reaching the coda, in which the theme is re-presented with the support of sustained, dissonant chords that temper the severity and stridency that characterized the outset of the piece.

Anton Webern's *Variations for Piano* from 1936 followed the Copland. Despite Webern's stature in the world of contemporary composition, the abstruse logic of his music defies easy listening, and even 70 years after its composition the piece may still challenge audiences. Dinnerstein, however, brought an expressive richness to this subtle piece. Her ability to pull the quietest tones out of the piano and linger in the spaces between notes built a sense of intimacy during the first and third movements, while at moments the second movement had an almost dancing jauntiness.

Dinnerstein's interpretation of Franz Schubert's *Impromptu*, Op. 90, from 1827 was the surprise of the evening for me. Rather than shaping her performance from simplistic emotionality, she resisted the impulse toward romantic pathos. Especially in the first piece, Dinnerstein's playing was almost crystalline, treading lightly with the melody instead of weighing it down with maudlin indulgence.

Even in the remaining three flashy and technically challenging *impromptus*, Dinnerstein offered unexpected complexity. Amid the kaleidoscopic swirls of the second piece, she repeatedly emphasized particularly crunchy dissonances, and in the third her playing floated through temperate dynamic waves. Fast descending gestures filled the last *impromptu*, making it glittery and almost mystical without being showy.

The second half of the program was devoted to Bach's *French Suite No. 5* and Philip Lasser's *12 Variations on a Choral* by J.S. Bach. Both are pieces Dinnerstein has been performing for some time, and both have enormous internal variation. The Lasser manages both to reference a broad array of styles and to maintain a high degree of individuality and coherence. A number of people around me commented on how much they liked this modern piece (though I'm saddened that even in Madison classical music audiences assume "modern" and "likable" to be mutually exclusive). In the Bach, too, Dinnerstein managed both a lively cleverness in movements like the *Gavotte* and *Gigue* and an elastic, singing quality in the *Sarabande* and *Loure*.

Dinnerstein's technical finesse was unsurprising. But at times her playing also challenged an aesthetic paradigm, and in asking audiences to think in new ways, she also asks us to feel in new ways. And both of those are good reasons to listen to music.