

Simone Dinnerstein interview/essay
Aspen, 2019

A spark of a thought is usually the initial inspiration for pianist Simone Dinnerstein when she plans a recital program. “I think about some kind of idea that will inform the whole program,” she explains. “Then I figure out what kind of shape the program might have, exploring relationships between various pieces of music and composers, how different pieces of music relate to each other.” At a certain point it becomes clear what kind of narrative arc the program should trace. “But it’s a risk,” she adds.

For this season’s solo recital at the Aspen Music Festival, Dinnerstein was captivated by musical works and composers that address the theme of “circular thinking.” This could be expressed in the localized forms of the pieces chosen: cyclic motifs, rondos, repetitive modules, refrains, ostinato patterns, and so on. But it also emerges in the thought processes of composers, like Schumann and Satie, whose music could at times denote a cyclically obsessive mindset. (And Dinnerstein admits that circular thinking can exert a beguiling effect on the performer, as well.) After choosing the pieces to perform, she linked them together in an order that emphasizes their cyclical relationships—“circles within circles, over the entire program,” as she describes it.

The opening work, François Couperin’s “Les Barricades Mystérieuses ” (from his *Sixième Ordre de Clavecin* of 1717), was one of the pieces that fascinated Dinnerstein. “I couldn’t stop thinking about it,” she admits, “It’s a completely gripping piece. Is it hopeful? Nostalgic? Wistful?” There is no distinctive melody in this work. Rather, it is driven by harmony, rhythm, and especially the subtle shifting of the beat, which Dinnerstein observes “can confuse the listener.” In rondo form—another way of thinking about musical circles—it also seems to transgress chronological time on a larger, stylistic scale. “This piece doesn’t feel particularly baroque,” Dinnerstein asserts. “There’s something contemporary about the treatment of harmony and rhythm.” The disruption of time and style progression opens up the hypothetical thought-game Dinnerstein plays throughout the entire program: “What if something old could be influenced by something new?” This work is also well-known to audiences through its use in Terrence Malick’s 2011 movie *Tree of Life*, a film that similarly plays with notions of asynchronous time and cyclic recurrence.

Robert Schumann’s 1839 *Arabesque* in C major also follows a modified rondo form, and again seems strangely “not of its time.” Typically for Schumann, whose compulsive personality is a well-known aspect of his life and music, the *Arabesque* shifts rapidly between two contrasting musical dispositions, the pensive and lyrical “Eusebius,” and the more intense, impetuous “Florestan,” both of them moderated by a recurring refrain. These bipolar opposites abound in Schumann’s music, and are reflective in general of a 19th-century Romantic fascination with emotional extremes.

Though this work has been one of Dinnerstein’s favorite pieces for years, since childhood, she has never performed it. But it was the *Arabesque*’s unexpected ending that caught her attention, and cemented its place in this program. “It ends like a 20th-century work,” she explains, “with the feeling that it could transition naturally into Philip Glass’s piece.”

Just as the Couperin and Schumann works were both curiously “not of their time,” Philip Glass’s *Mad Rush*, originally conceived as an organ work in 1979, breaks the constraints of time and period-style in several ways. Glass’s music is very much like Bach’s in its “absoluteness,” its use of repeating patterns, and adaptability to various instrumentations. And like the Couperin piece that opened the program, it employs an expanded rondo form while focusing on local-level patterns of bass line and harmonic arpeggios that create cross-meters, and displace time. And it is, of course, relentlessly obsessive, where “the whole idea of circularity is really magnified,” Dinnerstein observes.

As the longest work in the first half of the recital, *Mad Rush* functions as the pivotal piece. “Everything around it helps you hear what’s in the Glass,” Dinnerstein explains. In this work she continues to explore the claim that even if the cyclic return of motifs and themes is literal, “it’s not mechanical, it’s not the same each time it returns. People have a misconception about Glass’s music, that it’s extremely rigid and the same over and over again. But I truly think that’s missing the point.” The enormous concentration required to play and hear Glass’s music pays off, Dinnerstein clarifies, when everyone is aware of the human aspect of repetition, the acoustic experience itself, of hearing the same motifs in different contexts, and of following the variety of changes over the longer time periods that Glass creates in his works. It is no more “mechanical” than the repeating cycles of breaths, heartbeats, seasons, and lives.

The first half of the program ends with another Couperin miniature, “Le tic-toc-choc” from the *Dixhuitième Ordre* of 1722. Also called “Les Maillotins,” it is one of the less philosophically-titled of Couperin’s keyboard pieces, pointing toward the simple and delightful exploration of mechanical action, as might be found in a clock, a children’s toy, or a keyboard instrument. Couperin labelled this a *pièce croisée* (“cross-piece”) intended for a double-manual harpsichord in which the hands cross each other, but on the understanding that adaptations for single-keyboard instruments were possible, and even encouraged. Like all the works in this first half, it is in a rondo form, with repeating patterns, ostinato accompaniments, and interlocking rhythms that tease with our perceptions of mechanical time. That its figurations and repetitions resemble those in Glass’s *Mad Rush* (which is in the same key of F major), is not a coincidence. And again, as Dinnerstein notes, it seems much more recent than its 300 years would suggest, as if Couperin had written it after hearing a piano arrangement by, say, Percy Grainger, or even Philip Glass.

The second half of the recital begins with a composer whose music has sometimes been unsympathetically labeled as “aural wallpaper,” precisely because of its unassuming, cyclic, repetitive qualities. But to take Erik Satie’s music at face value, Dinnerstein reminds us, is to miss the details that mark his works as brilliantly *avant-garde*—ahead of their time. Satie was the first composer to work completely outside the shadow of Wagnerian Romanticism, and his studied banality was a radical departure, an exit strategy for composers hoping to break free of Wagner’s thrall. As representative examples of Satie’s new approach, his six *Gnossiennes* from 1889 feature simple chordal progressions in the left hand, while the right hand circles through unpretentious modal formulas with an exotic flavor. This kind of repetitive, abstract, and static musical style connects these works to the esoteric spirituality of Satie’s other Rosicrucian pieces (including the better-known *Gymnopédies*). There are no bar-lines in the score, which is littered

with whimsical and mystifying instructions observable only by the performer. In *Gnossienne* No. 3, these include “Counsel yourself cautiously,” “Be clairvoyant,” and “So as to be a hollow.”

Dinnerstein planned for the juxtaposition between Satie’s *Gnossienne* No. 3 and Schumann’s 1838 cycle *Kreisleriana* to be intentionally jarring, “but it sets you up for the jarring nature within Schumann’s work.” She regards *Kreisleriana*, with its insistent, compulsive revisiting of musical concepts, as “the most obsessive work in the entire program. Schumann is chewing on ideas that he can’t let go of.” In this work, as in so many of Schumann’s other piano collections, the almost neurotic fixation with particular musical motifs, played out in recurring oppositional personalities, is autobiographical.

In E. T. A. Hoffman’s writings, Johannes Kreisler is a bumbling, antisocial composer whose musical genius consistently collides with his moody temperament, very much like Schumann himself. Throughout the eight “fantasies” of *Kreisleriana*, Schumann reflects this erratic character in wild contrasts; seven of the movements include score markings that indicate emotional extremes (*Äußerst* and *Sehr*—or “extremely” and “very”). And each piece alternates between impulsiveness and dreamy reflection, with the entire set united by a simple five-note motif that Schumann’s beloved, Clara Wieck, had devised herself. Dinnerstein sees in this work “a kind of endless return to the same idea that, in the end, completely falls apart. It doesn’t really end, in a way. Rhythmically, the two hands completely separate and the whole thing breaks down. It’s a really shocking conclusion.”

In this recital program, the ideas of cyclic repetition and circular thinking merge in a progression that itself traces a circular trajectory. It would not be difficult to imagine, for example, that the end of Schumann’s *Kreisleriana* could segue neatly into Couperin’s “Les Barricades Mystérieuses,” and the program repeat *ad infinitum*. Each listening would perpetually inform and color the experience of hearing the works over and over again. With the advent of recording, this is actually feasible. But that very possibility, Dinnerstein reminds us, should prompt us to reflect seriously about repeatability in music. “It’s worth considering,” she warns, “that most of this music was written before there was any possibility of recording it. So hearing it again was really a worthwhile experience.” The potential for fixating on or fetishizing recorded music, especially music that is itself cyclical in nature, can be unhealthy. It threatens to rob the live performance of one of its most distinguishing features, that is, its uniqueness. This makes Dinnerstein’s recital about “circular” music especially distinctive—you won’t hear anything exactly like it again.