

Happily Vanquished

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Quality friends open the door to other quality friends . . . So it was in 2004 when the members of the gifted Chiara String Quartet introduced me to their colleague Simone Dinnerstein, a uniquely talented pianist who was dancing to her own career tune, quietly and inexorably. Like many others, I found her rendition of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* riveting, a performance that unfolded note by glorious note, sometimes as peals of laughter, sometimes as a muted intonation. Without having yet exchanged much more than pleasantries with Simone, her command over such a wide emotional breadth suggested to me pivotal figures in her life likewise of mercurial and deep feeling.

I was not wrong, as I would soon find out. Simone's parents, Renée and Simon, are lovely warm people, and of that Jewish New York sensibility familiar to me from my own father. The fact that they had already heard my music as performed by the Chiara String Quartet fast-tracked our connection, albeit in absentia, and what remained was for me to know Simon's work as a painter. "It's intense." Greg Beaver, the cellist of Chiara, told me, flipping his Little Prince hair. His eyes widened: "You'll like it."

Bueno, I was definitely über-curious. I can still feel the torrent of rain and snow I braved to visit the Dinnerstein family home in Brooklyn, stumbling in from a black shiny night to the startling luminosity of various oils stacked against the walls of the living room. I don't remember much of the house, so immediately arrested was I by unsettling eyes gazing from the canvases of surreally impossible situations made possible under Simon's skilled brushstroke. I do remember my cheeks flushing uncomfortably from an intimate feeling of déjà vu as if I was staring down the last vestiges of a receding dream in the early morning hours of my own bed. This man has a vivid dream life, I thought. These paintings are not even remotely unprecedented.

What followed was, simply put, a conversation. Hot tea. Watching and admiring Simone's toddler son play. And I think there was a towel offered so that I could dry my hair off. Over that evening and in subsequent conversations and get-togethers,

Simon and I perhaps made an unlikely pair: a Brooklyn Jew and a Berkeley-bred gal thirty years younger descended from Lithuanians, Peruvians, and a solitary merchant from mainland China. And yet our mutual fascination with revealing that which is hidden made us artistic cousins. Simon revealed himself as a man who may carry his intensity close to the vest, but given a bit of time, the veil of cordial shyness readily lifts. He is eager to converse on any number of subjects, and is deeply invested in his art, stirring a profound reaction in others that is heartfelt and honest, not charlatan. These are the kinds of people I fall in love with, time and time again, and very quickly, it was a natural and inevitable decision to compose a piano quintet for Simone and the Chiara String Quartet inspired by Simon's vivid body of work.

In April 2005, *Ghosts in the Dream Machine* premiered in Philadelphia under the sponsorship of Astral Artistic Services. From my program note:

I've long held a deep and deeply private enjoyment of my dream life. As a young girl, I used to share my wild forays into adventure and fantasy with my older brother, himself an avid dreamer. I went on to become a composer, often tapping a similar well of invention and creativity for my music; and my brother became a neuroscientist specializing in sleep research. Is it too great a leap to say that our early fascination with the odd sleep-journeys our minds took dictated the paths of our adult lives?

Ghosts in the Dream Machine for piano quintet derives its inspiration from the creative mind of Simon Dinnerstein, with whom I feel real artistic kinship. I find his artwork to be fantastically evocative, casting ordinary subjects in a decidedly unordinary light. Simon accesses that imaginative spirit tucked away in the recesses of our dream world, and the recurring themes of mystery, night, and wonder are what drive this quintet. Originally, I held Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* as a blueprint. As a musical work, it likewise finds inspiration in artwork and as a result, encompasses many short and rather direct movements. I worked a good while with this model . . . to little avail. The music I was coming up with was nice, but Simon's work is not "nice." In subsequently studying the drawings that inspired Mussorgsky, I quickly identified my conundrum:

Mussorgsky's pictures of Russian daily life are straightforward and pictorial. Two old men. An oxcart. Chicks playing. On the other hand, Simon's work is psychologically rich without being promiscuously diffuse, and in reworking my initial ideas, I found that a two-movement composition encompassing large dimensions and focusing intensely on mood and color was more fitting than a collection of miniatures dancing lightly over multiple themes. In addition, I wished to highlight the special relationship between the premiering pianist, Simone Dinnerstein, and her father, and have consequently scored the first movement for solo piano. Simone is ably joined by her colleagues the Chiara String Quartet in the second movement. In this way, I hope to have succeeded in musically rendering the potency of Simon's art.

The first movement, "Nocturne-Sonatina," draws inspiration from *Nocturne* (1982) and *Sonatina* (1981). The second movement, "Night Scenes," draws inspiration from *Night Scene I* (1982) and *Night Scene II* (1983)."

Several years have passed since *Ghosts* was unveiled, and it's gratifying to note the performances that have occurred in the hands of the originating musicians and others. In digging into the compositional coffers of my old sketches that managed to escape the recycling bin, I laugh to read the notes, both in music and words, scribbled to myself, especially from the early (i.e., wildly flailing) stages identifying which of Simon's paintings I would work with:

Passage of the Moon: This sheen, and the strrrretch! A Copland-esque widely-spaced chord in piano with messy-pedaled reverb picked up and then delicately (tip of bow, choked high on string) glissed down by Chiaras, voiced likewise wide? Wide how? Parallel always or changing? I'm hearing twelfths around tenths. Game this.

Rear Window: Totally unflinching in this gaze. I hear a diminished triad, not train-like, tundralike (but not silly, think directly), in pinched strings . . . All grace-noted by piano. And a wellspring, very dark, *muy oscuro*. Lovely C# minor sitting like a cloud over the piano strings. Again, messy pedal. Game this.

Purple Haze: Simon lingered on this in the gallery. I need to try, run it through my mill to each person in quintet, see what they would do with her, this Floating Lady. Julie on 2nds: Cats yawling, in a great way. Becca on 3rds: Definite motor hum. No 4ths, veers you too close to the cliffs of Peru. Jonah on tritones: Reminding you of ragtime licks. Ack, must thwart. All on 5ths: Chiaras would kill me, ha ha, as they should. I'll spring this on them later, psych! Greg on 6ths: Stretching. All on 7ths: Like this, but too comfortable for me. Could convert to 9ths for Simone, though. Hmm . . . Do I need to rewire these associations I have? Am I fossilized?

Joel's Shoes: I hear drop-outs. Full on, everyone, and then whoops, pull rug, and you're left with just one tone that's quiet but a little rough. Hearing a tritone *con sordino*? Scrubbing a bit? And where, oh where, does this little doggie go? Into the shoes? Becca and Julie do a toss-and-turn between them? Jacob's Ladder-like? Game this.

Flower Market, Rome: Impressionist, shimmer, F# major against C major for something of Ravel, Scriabin, but rhapsodic within squares, a dizzy grid? And me who does not like Scriabin, and me without my spoon, lol. Too obvious to do tremolos in strings—Simply sing arco, *senza vib*, no forced lyricism? Ack, three melodies crowding me at once. If I were ambidextrous, I could get at least two down now. Hurry, fool-ette!

Garfield Place: Undulating lines, but not sexy, sinuous. A bit clockworky but rich, not able to tell the difference between the strings and piano. Middle register best with the piano then, a lovely B minor buttressed against A^b major. Violins must stay on G string, even up high. Gaming.

Studio Still Life: Busy. But this is supposed to be Studio. Still. Life. But it's busy to me. Busy stillness? . . . Annnnd . . . Whoop, there it is: Interlocking tight figures, can totally get that. I could chain-link pizzicatos with truncated and intermittent arpeggios for Simone, some up, some down. Game this.

And finally, one lone confession, unadorned by accompanying music scribbles, regarding the following:

The Fulbright Triptych: There is no room for me to add to this one. This is a veritable memoir. Simon still sits like that! A-slump in his middle. It's so much him, I'm not a good enough composer to be able to enhance or reflect this. My brain's gone too literal. Maybe in ten years I'll have the skill . . . ? . . . ? . . . ? Nope, not even then. Nada comin' to me except the most trite and unworthy of ideas. Dinnersteins deserve better. Ungame. Game a-over. Don't even ASK for overtime. Deadline and all. Go along now, woman-cita, nothing more to see here.

From all of the paintings that I surveyed in the preparation for *Ghosts*, my sketches reveal that *The Fulbright Triptych* defeated me from the onset. But, to be perfectly truthful, I was *happily* vanquished by this painting, a dizzying yet well-spaced kaleidoscope of everyday painter's objects, wooden floor panels, children's drawings, a beckoning town vista, and Simon's own suspiciously corduroy pants as he sits with Renée and an infant Simone in what appears to be a sunroom. My music to this? I think I would have crowded Simon, not walked hand-in-hand with him. Beyond the pictorial content, the execution itself of *The Fulbright Triptych* still holds me in a vise, but an oddly secure one. Simon chose to only use oils, but magically managed to suggest decidedly different media—the evocation of pencil and crayon in the pictures intimately tacked on the wall behind the Dinnersteins still takes my breath away. Such skill! Music already streams through this, and I'm glad I had the wisdom to step aside. There are other cracks into which I can pour my restless ego, bubbling and attention-demanding. *The Fulbright Triptych* stands as an effervescent whole.

In retrospect, I realize that it is amazing, exciting even, to retrace and relive how Simon has touched me, from the startling first reveal in Brooklyn that miserable wet night, to the act of thumbing through my humble sketches for *Ghosts*. In the cuttings and unfinished ideas that wound up on the editing-room floor of my composing studio, there is lingering life, little embers that still glow. Some I have indeed pivoted toward other works, and one could say there is a little bit of Simon in this symphony, or that woodwind quintet, or these arias composed since *Ghosts*. Others still await

corporeal form. Whichever the case, I can't deny the compelling testament chorusing volumes about the longevity of Simon's work. In other words, just as Simon's paintings are not even remotely unprecedented, neither are they even remotely finite. To me, there is a kind of immortality, an immortality of moving tenderness, to be able to stir such a strong response of emotion and creativity in others. It has been a privilege to stumble across Simon's path, and I know that countless others will delight in his vision as I have.