



EARLY Music

A M E R I C A

Volume 18
Number 2
Summer 2012

A Critic's Perspective
**BAROQUE OPERA
ENCHANTMENT?**

Renaissance Revolution • Neumes and Notes • Caldwell Collection

The Renaissance Comes to Brooklyn



PHOTOS: JOHN FELTON

FIVE CHILDREN are precariously holding lyra, tenor and bass viols with their knees in Hilary Corbitt's classroom at the PS 321 elementary school in Brooklyn. Viola da gambist David Saphra calls out "Push!" and the children—definitely not in unison—push loosely held bows across the strings.

The result is at once awful and beautiful: the tentative sound of first-graders attempting to play a musical instrument none of them had ever heard about just a few minutes earlier.

"Pull!!!" Saphra commands, and a similar sound returns, as do worried looks on the children's faces.

"That's wonderful, absolutely wonderful," says Saphra, a retired New York City school teacher who now spends his time playing and advocating for the lyra viol. The worried looks instantly turn to broad grins, and the children resume their bowing, this time with more vigor.

Saphra and the children are participating in a "Renaissance Revolution" at PS 321, organized by pianist Simone

Dinnerstein, herself an alumna of the school. On this day in late March, Dinnerstein has brought 17 musicians, most of them specialists in Renaissance and Baroque music, to the school as a prelude to a concert the following evening by lutenist Paul O'Dette. O'Dette's concert is part of a companion Neighborhood Classics series Dinnerstein began in 2009 to generate financial support for and interest in music education at PS 321 and PS 142 in lower Manhattan.

Throughout the day, musicians spend 20 to 30 minutes in each classroom, describing their instruments, performing short pieces, answering questions, and in several cases, giving the students an opportunity to make music themselves.

A striking example of student performance takes place in the auditorium, where Rebecca Pechefsky is demonstrating her harpsichord for two classes of fifth-graders. After playing music by Handel, Pechefsky invites the students to line up for a moment or two at the key-

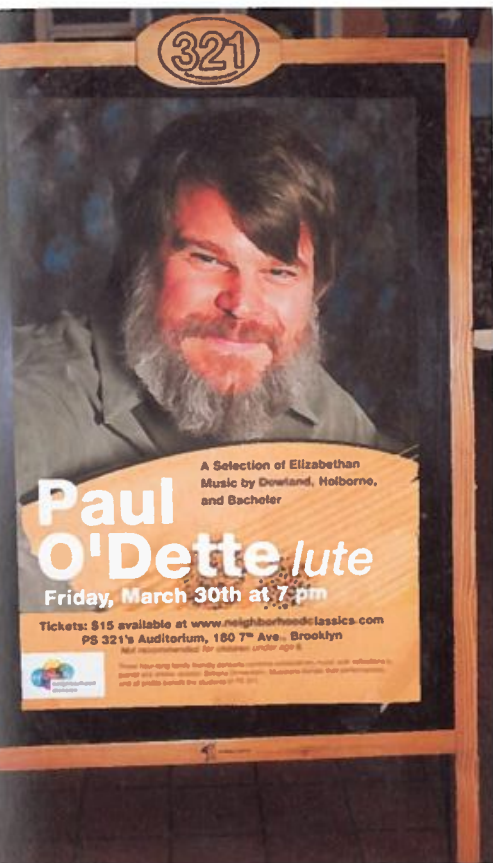


PHOTO: USA MARIE MAZZUCCO

Simone Dinnerstein

A concert pianist with roots in Brooklyn prepares students for a Paul O'Dette concert with a day-long show-and-tell involving a host of area Renaissance musicians

By John Felton



After Dinnerstein introduces O'Dette, a group of fifth-grade students at the rear of the auditorium scream out: "Paul, Paul." They repeat it enthusiastically after each of O'Dette's sets of music by Dowland, Bacheler, and other Renaissance composers.

board. Of the first five students in line, three actually play tunes on the instrument, one with astonishing ease.

Asked if she has ever played a harpsichord before, the girl responds: "No, but I play the piano."

PS 321 is not just any ordinary American elementary school. It's at the heart of the increasingly trendy Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn and is a school where parents are deeply involved in the education of their children. Perhaps most exceptional of all, the school has a vibrant music program, with two full-time and one half-time music teachers for the 1,400 students.

Dinnerstein, who in recent years has built a very successful performing and recording career specializing in Bach, says she created the concert series as a way of giving back to her community and its school, where her son Adrian is a fifth-grader and her husband is a teacher.

"Classical concerts can be very intimidating for people who are unaccustomed to going to them, and I thought that people would be drawn in if the concerts were presented in a familiar and comfortable setting," she says. All of the musicians donate their services, and the income from ticket sales goes to support the school's music programs.

With the school's cooperation, Dinnerstein recently added the musicians-in-the-classroom element because, she says, "I thought it would be very exciting for the children to have a day when lots of musicians came to the school and played in their classroom for them."

Eighteen cellists came to the school in October 2011 for a "Bach Invasion" preceding a concert by cellist Zuill Bailey.

"Wherever you walked in the school, you could hear Bach," she recalls. "That was such a success that I decided to organize a 'Renaissance Revolution' with musicians playing period instruments." The search for musicians willing to come to the school was "pretty labor intensive but rewarding and interesting," she says. Fortunately for Dinnerstein, several well-known early music specialists live near the school and readily accepted her invitation, including Pechefsky and lutenist Pat O'Brien.

Students in Lisa Rosado's third-grade class greet O'Brien with "wows" when

he first strums his lute, producing its unfamiliar, delicate sound. O'Brien describes the lute's prominent role in music history, but the students seem interested primarily in the instrument itself. "How much does it weigh?" they ask, and, "Why is it [the neck] bent like that?"

To answer the first question, O'Brien holds out the lute for the children to touch, bringing more "wows." In answer to the second question, O'Brien acknowledges: "We don't know, but the early lutes that came from Arabic lands were bent like this, and it holds the strings really tight."

Students in four other classrooms have a chance to hear the Middle Eastern predecessor of the lute: the oud. Guitarist and oud player Harvey Valdes entertains the inquisitive students (who also are intrigued by the bent neck) and challenges them to figure out the unusual (to Western ears) time signatures of several Middle Eastern pieces.

In the fifth-grade class of Jeremy Greensmith (Simone Dinnerstein's husband), many of the students have a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of time signatures and other musical technicalities. Their first answer to questions about time signatures is "four-four," and they usually fail to guess the correct answers, but some of them come close and can even explain their guesses. Even Dinnerstein, who has stepped into the classroom for a few minutes, acknowledges later that she had trouble following the beat in some of the pieces Valdes played.

A few minutes later, three members of the Parthenia Ensemble troop into teacher Alex Messer's fourth-grade class. Lawrence Lipnick asks the students to name famous people who lived in the Renaissance and eventually teases out the names of Leonardo da Vinci, Christopher Columbus, and William Shakespeare. As Lipnick and Rosamund Morley hold out their viols ("rhymes with smiles") and recorders, he tells the students: "These are the instruments those people listened to and played."

In between musical selections, actor Paul Hecht gives dramatic readings of Shakespeare: Sonnets 18 and 29 and a comic scene from *Two Gentlemen of*

Verona. Even though much of the language is unfamiliar, and the emotions of the love poems a bit beyond their years, the children seem enthralled by Hecht's readings and anxious to answer his questions about what Shakespeare's words mean.

Paul O'Dette's concert takes place in the school auditorium the following evening in something of a rock concert atmosphere. Some 300 parents, teachers, students and neighbors seem genuinely excited to a degree rarely seen in regular early music or classical music concerts.

After Dinnerstein introduces O'Dette, a group of fifth-grade students at the rear of the auditorium scream out: "Paul, Paul." They repeat it enthusiastically after each of O'Dette's sets of music by Dowland, Bachelier, and other Renaissance composers. Energized by the response, O'Dette keeps playing well after the advertised one-hour limit for the concert, and the audience keeps asking for more.

Interviewed by Dinnerstein at mid-concert, O'Dette recalls his own excitement, as a child in Washington, D.C., when musicians from the National Symphony Orchestra came to his school several times each year. "That kind of thing doesn't happen very much anymore, and

it's a shame, which is why I am so happy to be here," he says.

Principal Elizabeth Phillips says Dinnerstein's music series "has been truly phenomenal" for the entire school community, including students, teachers and parents. "Having musicians in the classrooms playing for the children and then talking to them about the music and their careers has had a huge impact on our students," she says. "There is a buzz in the school about classical music, and I have no doubt that this will have a lasting impact on the children—and the teachers—in our school."



John Felton is a free-lance editor and writer. A former foreign editor at National Public Radio, he also helped develop the "Milestones of the Millennium" feature about the history of music for American Public Radio's *Performance Today*.



Lawrence Lipnick and Rosamund Morley of Parthenia perform a duo on viol and recorder.



Pat O'Brien describes the lute's prominent role in music history, but the students seem interested primarily in the instrument itself. "How much does it weigh?"