

Stifters Dinge

[Lincoln Center at the Park Avenue Armory as part of the Great Performers New Visions Series](#)

<http://www.backstage.com/bsa/images/CriticsPick.jpg>

Reviewed by Jason Fitzgerald

December 17, 2009

Halfway through "Stifters Dinge," the newest "staged concert" from German auteur Heiner Goebbels, we hear a radio interview with Claude Lévi-Strauss. The late anthropologist mourns the lack of undiscovered corners of the planet and, worse, the loss of his faith in humanity to take care of what's already been revealed. But he counters his nihilism with a rhapsody on the thrill of exploration. It is this combination of starkness and wonder, of the desolation of the manufactured and the dynamism of the natural that permeates this actorless, plotless theatrical event. It's probably the most beautiful stage show one could see this weekend.

The achievement of "Stifters Dinge" is to teach us to see again. Its inspiration, Adalbert Stifter, was an 18th-century novelist whose prose is so distracted by the details of the outside world—icicles, house roofs, fruit carts—that people and plots get lost in the shuffle. Goebbels is interested in staging not so much Stifter's worlds as the rewards of his distraction.

Contrasts are built into the show's visual and aural landscape. For height, there's an upstage tableau consisting of five pianos stripped to reveal the vibrating strings beneath, played by automated machinery, and presented in various angles alongside bare tree trunks and pipes. For depth, there are three reflecting pools, which start the evening by being filled and conclude it by bubbling like a prehistoric swamp. Four screens, layered back to front, are occasionally lowered to present images of a forest or of a Boschlike Paolo Uccello painting. Sounds of the mechanical world—clicks, whistles, whirrs—coincide with that most natural sound of all, moving water (including a live rainstorm).

Gertrude Stein, in her quest to reveal the "bottom nature" of things (dinge is German for "things"), once imagined plays like this. She called them "landscapes," and she described her own with characteristic passivity: "I put into the play the things that were there." Eighty years later, Goebbels' landscape makes good on Stein's dream of leaving the familiar free to be just there, fresh from the Creation. Somehow, together, the conflicting elements of "Stifters Dinge" yield a haunting musical composition, casting a new shade onto Lévi-Strauss' cynicism: The world mankind leaves behind may be no less beautiful than the world it inherited.