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# North America focus

Spotlight on the classical scene in the US and Canada



## Doing it her way

Pianist Simone Dinnerstein's DIY approach to success has made her a chart-topping star, says Anastasia Tsioulcas

**L**argely unknown just a year or two ago, pianist Simone Dinnerstein's rise to the highest echelons of the classical music world has had all the benchmarks of a meteoric ascent. The top-selling classical album in the United States? Check. A legion of smitten fans? Check. Access to the rich and famous? Check. A beer endorsement? Check.

Wait – what was that last bit? Yes, that's right; the 34-year-old Brooklyn resident might well

be the only classical artist whose receptions feature cold brews courtesy of a corporate sponsor. The story of how the pianist teamed up with Cooperstown's Ommegang Brewery in New York is a quintessentially Dinnerstein anecdote – an artist whose unique voice has made her as beloved as she is controversial, and one who has created her own opportunities along the way.

The media has made much of the fact that Dinnerstein didn't

emerge into the big time through some of the more traditional avenues: no child prodigy ado, no competitions won, no influential agents or bookers paving the way for a triumphant introduction to the public.

The pianist has a different opinion, however. "I think that I actually have a very *typical* story," Dinnerstein asserts. "I think that my life and path have been very much like those of most musicians, which is to say not at all similar

to most musicians who have very prominent international careers. What I've been doing up until now is what a lot of musicians do: doing whatever came along in order to earn a living."

What turned the tide for Dinnerstein was to do something that, while common in the pop music world, is pretty unusual among aspiring classical musicians. Rather than waiting around for an agent or record label to "discover" her, she took matters into her own hands and made her own album, with the intention of selling the finished recording to a label to then market and distribute.

The recording in question became her Telarc debut, a traversal of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* that hasn't received much in the way of mild reviews: most critics have either absolutely adored it or loathed it. Smitten reviewers have unabashedly compared her to Glenn Gould, Dame Myra Hess and Wanda Landowska. Nevertheless, the pianist's detractors find her interpretation infuriatingly inannered, beginning with a glacially paced Aria that clocks in with repeats at 5'39" (For Jed Distler's review, see the Awards issue, page 102; for a different perspective, see William F Buckley's "My Music" on page 138 of the November edition).

Dinnerstein shrugs off such criticism coolly. "I knew when I made this recording that people would either love it or hate it," she says evenly. "And that's what happened – I've received very strong reactions from both ends of the spectrum, and very little in the middle."

Then 30 years old, Dinnerstein, whose calendar at that point was limited to playing recitals in mostly small towns across the United States, knew the Catch-22 of contemporary solo career-making. In order to attract powerful managers and agents, she would already have to have a fair amount of buzz in place already; the best-case scenario would be a few major concert dates, some good publicity, and maybe even a recording or two under her belt. However, most labels of any size these days are quite wary of signing an artist unless he or she already has



## As a matter of fact, how different is breastfeeding from being a pianist?

all those other elements in place, including a manager.

So Dinnerstein decided to forge her own path with the same self-knowledge and assurance that has made her *Goldbergs* so fascinating. By all accounts from friends and acquaintances, she has a remarkable knack for meeting new friends from all walks of life in remarkably short order and bringing them into her fold. "I thought I could ask a few people I knew for some advice,"

she says simply. "They listened to the recording, and they all wanted to talk to me about it. It became a kind of web of contacts. I was pretty amazed.

"The freakiest thing was a phone call I received from a man in Israel who said, 'You don't know me, but my friend heard you play the *Goldberg Variations* at a house concert a few days ago. My friend knows I love Bach, and he told me about you. I looked you up online,

heard an excerpt of you playing the Aria, and I want to help you'. He's become my patron – and he just called me out of the blue! He's been like an angel."

Indeed, this man funded a rental of Carnegie's intimate Weill Recital Hall in November 2005 so that Dinnerstein could present a recital for various managers, label executives and critics to hear her play the *Goldbergs* live after she began circulating excerpts of her recording to influential people in the industry. The concert sold out, and quickly became one of the most discussed events of the season.

"I think people are generally happy to help when they're asked in a genuine way," the pianist says, "in terms of advising you or making an introduction to someone else or something like that. But I was

**Simone Dinnerstein: 'I expected my Bach to divide the critics'**

In fact, the Telarc release soared to No 1 on the Billboard Classical Chart in the first week of its release, beating competitors like Yo-Yo Ma and Joshua Bell.

"However, I thought that the response to my recording would be much more gradual," she says, "and I certainly didn't expect it to go to No 1 on the chart right away. That completely took me by surprise." Telarc, which hasn't tried to launch a classical artist since signing Lang Lang some six years ago, can't be displeased at the results, either; they have already committed to issuing another Dinnerstein album, this time including Bach's French Suite No 5, American composer Philip Lasser's Twelve Variations on a Bach Chorale, and Beethoven's Opus 111 Sonata.

Another publicity angle that has been played up quite a bit is the fact that Dinnerstein is the mother of a five-year-old son named Adrian. "There's no ignoring gender," she points out. "While I don't want to be marketed as a female artist per se, I like the attention that's being focused on my dual life as an artist and as a mother. When I was studying and becoming a musician, I didn't have any role models in that regard. The female pianists

I really admired generally either didn't talk about their families – they were very private – or they just weren't mothers.

"Having a child has certainly made me firmer in my musical ideas. It's also made me more careful about articulating my ideas in my playing. When you're suddenly responsible for someone else, you need to be responsible for yourself too. You are making all of these decisions on behalf of your child – even things as small as what he is eating, or what you're eating too, if you're breastfeeding. As a matter of fact, how different is breastfeeding from being a pianist? At the keyboard, you're thinking about what you're putting into it, and what someone else is going to get out of it.

"For the longest time, I was living under the shadows of my teachers – I thought that in some way they were responsible for me. I would play according to what I thought they would like. In becoming a mother, I finally realised that I would have to play according to what I like. I have to not be afraid of whether or not people would like it. You see yourself as you are, and accept the consequences." ●



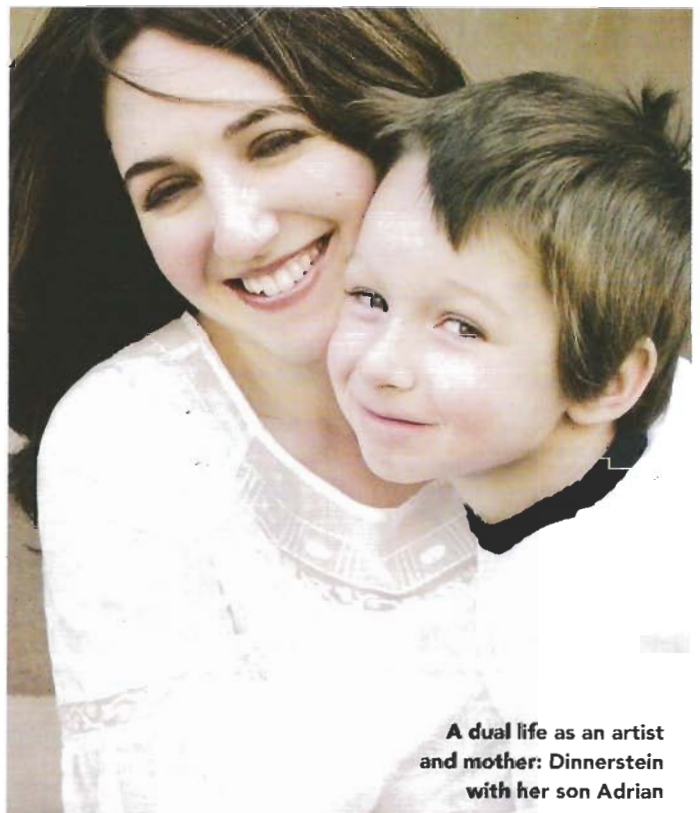
really afraid to come out and ask for money. I mean, I knew people might well say 'no' to that, and I wasn't afraid of that response. But it's hard to reach out for money.

"When it was time to make the CD I thought of about three friends whom I could call and ask. With the first one, I was so frightened! He's a slightly intimidating guy, an investor, very business-minded, but he'd seen me perform and had enjoyed it." She recalls that she fumbled around verbally for a bit, but eventually found her stride. "By the end of our conversation, he told me, 'Simone, if you weren't such a good pianist, you should have gone into PR!'"

The same sort of confident self-marketing is what led to the beer endorsement, by the way. After

giving a recital in Cooperstown, Dinnerstein went out to dinner with a small group that happened to include the head of Ommegang. She asked him off-the-cuff if he had ever considered setting up a deal with a performing artist, and the rest followed.

"Even after the success of the concert," explains Dinnerstein, "most of the labels who had heard me were just afraid to take risks. My version of Bach is quite different than how they were used to hearing the piece, and I didn't have all these other career elements in place – it was all quite frightening to them. But I believed deeply that it was more of a chicken-and-egg thing; if they took on the recording project, then it would generate concert dates. And that's exactly what has happened!"



**A dual life as an artist and mother: Dinnerstein with her son Adrian**