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## How Do You Move a Career Into High Gear? By Breaking the Rules



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

The pianist Simone Dinnerstein had an unorthodox journey to concert success and her first CD.

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If you want to be a concert pianist when you grow up, there are certain rules. You do start playing as a young child. You don't drop out of Juilliard. You do win competitions and get the attention of managers at a young age. You don't end up at 30 with no management and no bookings, raising the money yourself for your first recording. And you definitely don't make your New York recital debut with Bach's demanding "Goldberg" Variations, which are supposed to reflect the wisdom of long experience, and Baroque style.

Simone Dinnerstein, 34, has made her career by breaking every rule in the book.

Ms. Dinnerstein's recording of the "Goldberg" Variations is being released today by Telarc. It is a distinctive approach to the work: colorful and idiosyncratic, a contemporary pianist's rather than a harpsichordist's account. It starts with a long, thoughtful, hesitant Aria that seems to be struggling to lift itself uncertainly out of silence.

"Everyone is somewhat taken aback by what she does with the opening Aria," said Robert Woods, the president of Telarc.

But precisely because she puts such an individual stamp on it, Ms. Dinnerstein's interpretation has won a lot of critical attention.

Allan Kozinn, writing in *The New York Times*, called Ms. Dinnerstein's account of the "Goldbergs" at her sold-out Weill Recital Hall debut in November 2005 "an individual, compelling performance," making use of "a level of coloration beyond the palette Bach knew."

And David Patrick Stearns, music critic of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, sent Ms. Dinnerstein's self-produced recording of the work to Mr. Woods at Telarc.

It is not usual for a self-produced album to end up on a major label, much less through the intervention of a critic. But Ms. Dinnerstein, who projects a kind of grounded calm, has all along followed her own path, and her own convictions.

"People were very discouraging when they heard the idea," she said, sitting at her dining table on the ground floor of her house in Park Slope, Brooklyn, her hands wrapped around a mug of herbal tea. "But I thought, somebody's going to hear it, and they're going to hear what is different about this recording, and it's all going to work out."

Ms. Dinnerstein has gone after what she wanted since she first begged her parents for piano lessons at age 4, and they started her on the recorder instead. Her father, the painter Simon Dinnerstein, knew little about music. She finally began lessons at 7 — late in life for a future pianist — and her parents ultimately sent her to Solomon Mikowsky at the Manhattan School of Music precollege program.

At 15, during a high school trip to London, she auditioned for Maria Curcio, a student of Artur Schnabel who had taught Radu Lupu and Mitsuko Uchida. She also met Jeremy Greensmith, six years her senior, with whom she bonded over a love of Glenn Gould. She wanted to stay, but her parents thought she was too young to be away from home. (They also nixed a once-in-a-lifetime invitation to study at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia.)

So she waited until she was 18, when she dropped out of Juilliard to return to London, study with Ms. Curcio and live with Mr. Greensmith, to whom she has now been married for 14 years.

Her musical personality was also striking early on, said Robert Sirota, now the head of the Manhattan School of Music. He first heard Ms. Dinnerstein at 13, when she auditioned for the high school program he administered at Tanglewood. Hearing her, he said, he and his wife burst into tears.

"That sort of mystical intensity," he said, "and the absolute intentionality of everything that she does, and the uniqueness of everything she does, is still there, but tremendously magnified."

Yet in her 20s, after returning to Juilliard and finishing her studies with Peter Serkin, Ms. Dinnerstein found herself with few career prospects.

"I auditioned for festivals, I did the whole thing, and I just never had any luck," she said. "I never got past the first round. I do have a particular way of playing, and if you don't like it, you don't like it."

She began to let go of her dreams of a glamorous career, and to understand, partly through performing in small American towns under the aegis of the Piatigorsky Foundation, that she was most interested in making music for its own sake.

When she learned that she was expecting a baby, she wanted to find a piece of music she could learn to accompany her pregnancy. When she told her husband she had decided to work on the "Goldberg" Variations, he tried to dissuade her; they both knew the Gould recordings by heart. He has since apologized, she said.

And “with all my idolization of Glenn Gould,” she added, “it turned out I didn’t play it like him at all.”

After the birth of her son, Adrian, the “Goldbergs” became a calling card, so much so that Ms. Dinnerstein wanted to record them. The freedom of recording for its own sake — of doing something she loved and getting it exactly right — turned into a kind of intense spiritual journey, she said. Sujatri Reisinger, owner of the Klavierhaus piano workshop, provided the 1903 Hamburg Steinway and voiced the piano himself; the recording technician, Adam Abeshouse, understood which variation she should play next.

“I was even having private yoga lessons,” Ms. Dinnerstein said. “I was only eating certain foods.”

As soon as the first five variations were mixed, she sent them to four managers. All called back, wanting to meet her.

But they also wanted to hear her in person, and she already knew that she hated auditions. Instead, she gave a concert. Having already raised the money privately to finance the recording in the first place, she found another patron willing to pay for the rental of Weill Hall.

And so began what appears to be a Cinderella story. Ms. Dinnerstein is now represented by IMG Artists. Her concert schedule is suddenly packed with orchestral engagements, solo recitals, debuts in Paris, London, Berlin. She is finding herself living out her childhood dreams of glamour, and trying to balance it with what she calls real life.

“I feel it’s really important not to focus too much on this,” Ms. Dinnerstein said of her sudden success, “because I really just want to focus on my playing. And I also want to always think about the fact that if for some reason it all collapsed, I would still be able to play the ‘Goldberg’ Variations.”