

A CONVERSATION WITH...



# Simone Dinnerstein

The pianist talks to **Jeremy Nicholas** about her unusual career path and unexpected success

**T**he routes by which an artist makes it to public and critical recognition are many and varied. Pianist Simone Dinnerstein's journey has been longer than most – with the added twist of a fairy-tale. Her first recording for Sony Classical, "Bach: A Strange Beauty", is just about to hit the stands. If it does as well as her two previous CDs for Telarc, her new partners will be pleased: both reached No 1 on the US Billboard Classical Chart.

Dinnerstein has had a rapid rise from obscurity to major-label prominence. From a non-musical family (her father is an artist, her mother a teacher), she began lessons at the age of seven before going to the Manhattan School of Music two years later. Despite having little money, her parents pooled all their savings and bought their daughter a Baldwin grand piano acquired from a nightclub (the late jazz pianist Hank Jones had played it regularly). "It had a certain kind of sound," Dinnerstein laughs.

When she was 15, she studied with Maria Curcio. "My dad had read about her in a magazine and thought I should have lessons with her, so we came over to England for three weeks in the summer. A friend said we could stay in his flat while he was away. I fell in love with his flatmate, the man who is now my husband. We had a long-distance romance for three years." They were married in 1993, when she was 20.

After graduating from Juilliard in 1996, Dinnerstein did what everybody else does – a lot of competitions. "They were not for me. They left me feeling very uncomfortable. I was playing all the time, I gave a lot of concerts but they were in very low-key venues, mainly in the United States. Then I won an audition for an organisation called Astral, located in Philadelphia, which helps young artists by presenting them in recitals and concertos. That was in 2001. Then I got pregnant.

I learnt the *Goldberg Variations* when I was expecting my son. He was born in December 2001 and I started performing it the next year."

It got to the stage when Dinnerstein felt she wanted to have a permanent record of her interpretation, so she asked various friends who had heard her play it if they would finance the project. Perhaps she might sell a few copies after concerts. The American Academy of Arts and Letters was booked, as was Grammy Award-winning producer Adam Abeshouse. An early edit, passed around among the cognoscenti as these things are, attracted some attention in New York music circles. One day, a complete stranger phoned Dinnerstein and asked if he could help in any way. This (anonymous) benefactor booked the Weill

Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. Word got around. As a result, the city's musical establishment was there in force for Dinnerstein's concert. Debut recitals are normally ignored.

This one proved to be life-changing. The *New York Times* gave her a rave review. CAMI signed her up. A year later, the CD of the *Goldberg Variations* was sent out to record labels. Bob Woods of Telarc picked it up and the rest is history. Dinnerstein was 35.

When Bob Woods left Telarc in 2009, Dinnerstein did not feel there was anyone else at the label she could relate to in the same way, so she asked to be released from her contract. "Then the new president of Sony Classical, Bogdan Rosci, approached my manager about me and I met him. He totally understood who I am, what kind of musician, and the kind of projects I have planned. So – I have been very lucky." The title of her new disc is derived from a quote by Sir Francis Bacon: "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion." It could also describe Simone Dinnerstein's route to the top. ©

*Simone Dinnerstein's "Bach: A Strange Beauty" will be reviewed next month*

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