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Simone Dinnerstein makes herself at home in New York

by Ronni Reich/The Star-Ledger
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TELARC

Pianist Simone Dinnerstein performs this week at Avery Fisher Hall in New York.

Brooklyn native Simone Dinnerstein spent many hours of her childhood backstage at the New York Philharmonic, where a friend's father was a violinist. She never thought she would be on the other side, facing the audience.

The pianist will make her debut appearance Tuesday as part of the Philharmonic's Summertime Classics series, playing Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2 on a program with selections from Brahms' Hungarian Dances, Johann Strauss II's Overture to "The Gypsy Baron" and Richard Strauss' "Der Rosenkavalier" Suite, to be conducted by Bramwell Tovey. The series, which began this week with performances of Russian music, also includes a Fourth of July program Friday and Saturday with Tovey, pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin and the music of Gershwin, Copland and Sousa.

Although she has risen to rapturous critical praise since her 2007 Telarc recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations -- a debut that rose to No. 1 on the Billboard classical chart -- Dinnerstein's success doesn't seem to have sunken in. As she sips coffee at a Park Slope cafe, she smiles at what seems to be a dream and speaks softly as though not wanting to break it.

"When I walked in to rehearse on the piano and went through the stage door, I thought about all the times I've gone to Avery Fisher Hall," she says. "When I was in the lobby and saw the poster with my name on it, it didn't seem like this was actually happening."

It's a big summer for Dinnerstein. In August, she will perform the Goldberg Variations at the Mostly Mozart Festival and release Beethoven's complete works for piano and cello with cellist Zuill Bailey. "In many ways I prefer recording," Dinnerstein says. "It's more like being an artist, a painter or a sculptor. They have an idea in their head and they keep on working on it until it gets to be exactly what they wanted, and then they frame it."

Growing up, Dinnerstein was inspired by her father, a representational artist with whom she spent hours in museums and churches, paying particular attention to Renaissance paintings. They cultivated a common vocabulary.

"He didn't know a lot about music, so he would always try to draw parallels to the work he was doing," she explains. "So he talked about color, line and texture, all those things you can transfer to music." As one example, "I started thinking about a musical phrase as the line of a woman's body." Bach, a specialty, was closely linked for Dinnerstein to work by painters like Jan van Eyck, whose subjects she describes as having impassive faces but powerful subtext. "There's incredible pain and depth and joy and emotion in it without it being completely on the surface," she says. "You have to dig deeper to find it."

Her sense of exploration has been crucial to her approach to the Liszt she will play with the Philharmonic, a piece that had not previously been in her repertoire.

"I went through a really long period of not wanting to listen to Liszt at all and thinking it was very showy and superficial," she says.

After intensive study, Dinnerstein came to see the concerto for more than its virtuosity, as imaginative and forward-thinking, sophisticated in its architecture and harmony. She became intrigued by its introspective and mystical aspects. "He was thinking more as a composer," she asserts. "Not as a showman."

Noting the solitary nature of her practice sessions, Dinnerstein says she looks forward to communing with Tovey and the orchestra at Avery Fisher and to feeling the warm excitement of an audience. "The most inspiration can take place in a concert," she says. "The thing that's so special about concerts is that it's something that's happening in that very moment. I think sometimes when you go to the circus, it seems even more spectacular when the person slips, because then you realize how difficult it's been."

Unlikely missteps or not, Dinnerstein hopes to take in the concert in all its fullness.

"I want to enjoy the experience, to feel how amazing it is to play with such a great orchestra in my own hometown."