

SIMONE FROM THE BLOCK GETS BACH

By BARBARA HOFFMAN
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Simone Dinnerstein, on her Brooklyn stoop, makes her New York Philharmonic debut next week. Finally.

THE Philharmonic's billing her as "Brooklyn's own Simone Dinnerstein."

They're not kidding.

New York's hometown band is welcoming its hometown gal made good: a pianist who did what most aspiring classical musicians never do: start lessons late, marry early, drop out of Juilliard, have a baby, make a CD.

It's that last -- an introspective, haunting take on Bach's Goldberg Variations, Hannibal Lecter's fave -- that helped propel her from Brooklyn into the stratosphere.

In fact, hers is such a Cinderella tale -- the whole Billboard-topping, Oprah magazine-raving, globe-hopping trip -- that playing with the Phil could seem almost anticlimactic.

Yeah -- as if.

"I never thought I'd play with them!" says Simone (sah-MOAN-ah), who'll play Liszt, not Bach, at Avery Fisher Hall on Tuesday and Wednesday.

"I went there last week to try out the piano on the stage, and I could barely get out the words to the guard to tell him where I was going. This is what I saw, growing up, as completely unattainable."

She grew up where she lives now -- in Park Slope, the daughter and niece, respectively, of painters Simon and Harvey Dinnerstein. (There's a jewelry designer in the family, too.) She fell in love with the piano when she heard Chopin at dance class, but she wasn't given lessons till she was 7, which in these prodigy-ridden times is practically elderly.

BGV -- Before the Goldberg Variations -- she did what many aspiring young pianists did: gave lessons and played in schools, nursing homes, a Louisiana correctional facility . . . and my mother's living room.

Full disclosure: Dinnerstein, 36, is a cousin of my cousin. (And there happens to be a great Steinway in Mom's living room.)

It was while pregnant with her son Adrian, now 7, that Dinnerstein decided to learn the Bach, the daunting, 80-minute masterpiece immortalized by late piano great Glenn Gould.

Not only did she find it "interesting and meaningful," but she thought it would make a nifty audition piece for a solo recital.

Her husband thought not.

"Why would you want to play a piece that everyone's going to compare to one of the greatest recordings of all time?" he asked, and she could see his point.

Then again, she thought she had something new to say.

Long story short: She won the audition, Telarc picked up her self-financed CD and it topped the charts, giving the White Stripes a run for their money.

She's since performed it, and other pieces, around the world. In May, she came home to Park Slope, where she practices six hours a day. (The neighbors don't complain because she and her husband own the building.)

So much for the music: What will she wear? Her usual Indian tunic over slacks -- or a gown?

She knows what she'd like not to wear: "I always practice without shoes, because you can feel the vibrations and you're more grounded," she says.

"But I won't have the guts to take my shoes off in Avery Fisher Hall!"