

SIMONE DINNERSTEIN:
the pianist's new disc finds
'strange beauty' in JS Bach



NORTH AMERICAN FOCUS

Bach for our times

American pianist Simone Dinnerstein's modern approach to Bach has won the composer a new generation of listeners. *Jessica Duchon* meets her

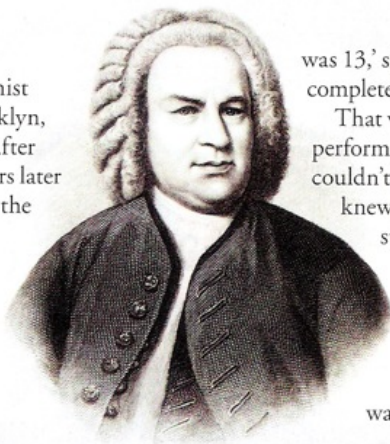
It was one of the musical sensations of 2007. Simone Dinnerstein, then an unknown pianist and an unassuming young mum from Brooklyn, had recorded the Bach *Goldberg Variations* after raising funds for the project herself; two years later Telarc had heard the recording and took a punt. On the day it was released it went straight to the top of the classical charts, reaching places that most classical discs do not. 'If you only have 1 hour, 18 minutes: listen to pianist Simone Dinnerstein's recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*... a timeless, meditative, utterly audacious solo debut,' declared *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

What, then, is so special about Dinnerstein? To venture a note of cynicism, all too often if a woman pianist is good at Bach, she is dubbed the 'high priestess of Bach', or similar. Sure enough, *Slate* magazine wrote that Dinnerstein is 'a throwback to such high priestesses of music as Wanda Landowska and Myra Hess.' Not that there's

anything wrong with being compared to Myra Hess, but Dinnerstein, at home in Brooklyn, laughs off the charge. 'All I can focus on is how I want to play,' she declares. 'That's enough of a challenge.'

The 'high priestess' term also suggests a rarified approach to life and art that is not quite Dinnerstein's. At 38, she keeps her feet firmly on the ground, juggling her time between her career and her husband and nine-year-old son. 'It can be an almost schizophrenic existence,' she admits. 'I switch between being incredibly focused on my work, which is by nature a self-absorbed task, and being a mother and a wife, which is the opposite. When I'm on the road it's all about me; when I'm home it's all about them.'

Still, there's no mistaking her vocation for music and especially for Bach. You can hear it both when you talk to her and when you hear her play: the same clarity and commitment shine out of her voice and her piano tone alike. 'It all started when I first heard the second recording by Glenn Gould of the *Goldberg Variations*, when I



was 13,' she says. 'It stopped me dead in my tracks. I became completely obsessed with Bach and Gould.'

That was a mixed blessing: at first she shied away from performing Bach. 'I was so overwhelmed by Gould that I couldn't imagine Bach being done any other way – yet I also knew you couldn't imitate his playing.' Later, though, studies with Peter Serkin (son of Rudolf) opened her to new ideas. 'Gradually I realised that what I felt about Bach was in fact very different from Gould. It had been brewing within me for a long time – it just took a while to come to the surface.'

Even if her Bach crystallised slowly, Dinnerstein was single-minded about music from the start. She is

an only child from an artistic family: her father, Simon Dinnerstein, is a painter and was a winner of the American Academy's Prix de Rome. Thus the Dinnersteins spent three formative years of Simone's childhood living in the Italian capital.

'I attended a ballet class there when I was five, and there was a real pianist

playing Chopin,' she recalls. 'I loved the sound and asked to have lessons, but my parents thought I was too young.' On advice from a Prix de Rome composer, they started her on the recorder instead.

Back in New York, aged seven, Simone again pressed her parents, this time with success; soon she proved as determined as her father characteristically was: 'He is also incredibly single-minded and as an artist he's very idealistic and uncompromising. I felt I needed to have as much integrity in my art as he did in his. I also inherited tremendous stubbornness from him, so my parents understood it and decided it was better to work with me than against me!'

'I wasn't a prodigy at all,' she adds, 'but when I listen to recordings of myself as a kid now, I hear the same musical personality that I have today. I'm a certain type of musical person and always have been – you're just born that way.'

It was her quest for a special sound, though, that led her to study in London with the famous pedagogue Maria Curcio. 'She was well-

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THE GRAND PLAN:
‘I want concerts to be normal experiences... like a movie or a play’



known for her sound, and it was an unusual type that related to pianists in the earlier 20th century,’ says Dinnerstein. ‘I’ve always responded strongly to that transparency of tone, so I sought her out because I wanted her to help me with that sound. It had always been part of me, but she helped it to come to the surface.’

Her sound is indeed translucent, extremely clear, always beautiful. It is shown off to advantage in her new Bach disc on Sony Classical, *A Strange Beauty*, which places the English Suite No. 3 alongside two keyboard concertos with the Berlin Staatskapelle Chamber Orchestra and three transcriptions of chorale preludes. The central thread is Bach’s reworkings – and other people’s – of his own music.

Most of the works exist in at least one other format; the exception is the *English Suite* No. 3, but its first movement is written like a concerto, with episodes suggestive of full orchestra or solo passages. ‘Bach spent so much time recycling his music that I think he was not particularly concerned with instrumentation, but more with abstract ideas,’ Dinnerstein says. ‘He would constantly redo his works for different instruments or voice.’

She acknowledges that around the music world there is still ‘a lot of fear of what the historical performance experts would say’. But to her it seems only natural to play Bach on a concert grand. ‘I think his music is incredibly glorious on the piano because there are so many colours, textures and touches. The fact that he kept using and reusing his music for many different instruments probably meant he was interested in different kinds of sonorities; I think he’d have been very excited by the modern piano.’ The argument is almost the same as that of another of those ‘high priestess’ Bachians: the late Rosalyn Tureck.

Closer to home, well out of any ‘priestess’ sphere, Dinnerstein has launched an inspiring initiative: a concert series at three state schools

Bach
The Goldberg
Variations
Glenn Gould



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in the New York area, including the one where her son is a pupil and where her husband, Jeremy, teaches fifth grade. Entitled Neighbourhood Classics, the events are given free by Dinnerstein or her friends and colleagues, with the ticket payments donated to the host establishments. ‘There are terrible budget cuts here,’ she says, ‘and we’ve raised a lot of money for the schools.’ The concerts are not educational, but local, informal,

weekend events that are open to all: ‘They last an hour and I interview the performers on stage, so it’s a warm, friendly environment and families come along with kids and grandparents.’

‘Brooklyn is a middle-class, affluent area, yet I’m surprised by how few people here regularly attend classical concerts. What concerns me is that as

musicians we’re not only losing the kids, but we’re also losing their parents. Yet they are happy to come to concerts in local schools that are comparatively casual.’

The concerts’ effect lasts, she adds. ‘I’ve noticed that when I’m picking up my son, a lot of the kids come up to me: they know who I am, they want to talk about the concerts and they remember music they heard last year. What I want is for concerts to be normal experiences: you go to a concert as a meaningful part of life, just as you’d go to a movie or a play. And if the children are excited about it, that’s wonderful.’

Plenty more wonderful things lie ahead in 2011: a visit to the UK for a concert in Harrogate in March; another recording, matching Bach with Schubert; a venture beyond classical repertoire with the singer-songwriter Tift Merritt; and a go at the Ravel Piano Concerto in G major, ‘which I’ve always wanted to play’. And the *Goldberg Variations*? It seems likely that Dinnerstein, high priestess or not, will be dining out on those for many years. ■