

## Classical pianist Simone Dinnerstein connects with new fans

By Lindsay Christians

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*Simone Dinnerstein shook up the classical scene in 2007 with an inventive album of Bach's "Goldberg Variations." She released her first formal orchestral recording, "Strange Beauty," in January; she will appear with the Madison Symphony Orchestra on Feb. 18-20. LISA-MARIE MAZZUCCO*

Pianist Simone Dinnerstein, a 28-year-old Bach specialist and self-made success, is attracting new listeners to classical music with her expressive takes on the standard repertoire.

Her latest album, "Strange Beauty," has found widespread popular appeal, debuting in the top spot on the Billboard classical charts and cracking Billboard's Top 200 general chart, almost unheard of for a classical musician.

On Amazon.com, Dinnerstein currently holds the top two spots on the list of bestselling classical albums. She's also listed twice on that site's top 100 music sellers in all categories, joining The Black Keys, Bruno Mars, Taylor Swift and Pink.

"It seems pretty clear by the figures of who's buying the CDs that there are a lot of new listeners," Dinnerstein said of "Strange Beauty." "I don't really know what is happening or why ... people, when they are talking to me, are feeling a connection on a very personal level to what I'm doing."

Dinnerstein will perform with the Madison Symphony Orchestra Friday through Sunday, Feb. 18-20, playing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5, known as the "Emperor" concerto.

"It happens to be one of my favorite concertos," Dinnerstein said. "I was thinking about how different it is than the other repertoire I've been playing ... most of the music I've been playing recently has been pretty

dark, tragic or has painful side to it. There really is almost no pain at all in this piece, and it's been really refreshing working on it."

Dinnerstein is best known for what the New York Times called an "idiosyncratic" take on Bach's "Goldberg Variations" on a 2007 album she funded herself. "Strange Beauty," her first orchestral disc, is all Bach music and was released in January.

The title "Strange Beauty" comes from a quote from Francis Bacon, a humanist philosopher, who said "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion."

"That made me think about Bach's music, because though his music is obviously very concerned with symmetry and form and mathematical patterns, he's constantly breaking those patterns," Dinnerstein said. "Changing the rhythm, changing the voicing ... I think it's those moments when he moves away from the perfection that makes his music so deep and so beautiful."

Dinnerstein played in Madison at the Wisconsin Union Theater in December 2009 in a solo recital of variations (including Anton Webern's Variations for Piano, op. 27, Aaron Copland's Piano Variations and a suite by Bach).

Reviewing for 77 Square, Jessica Courtier praised Dinnerstein's technique. Courtier wrote that Dinnerstein's playing "challenged an aesthetic paradigm, and in asking audiences to think in new ways, she also asks us to feel in new ways. Both of those are good reasons to listen to music."

"When I'm studying (Bach's) music I feel like I see lots of points of departure, and I think that's where the expression lies for me," Dinnerstein said. "If his music is played in a kind of regular way it can be kind of static ... I think it has lots of breathing and strange irregularities, but it's all very subtle."

Dinnerstein has been touring with alternative country singer-songwriter Tift Merritt, performing art songs and pop songs — "Schubert to Leonard Cohen," she said — as well as new work written for them.

"I've had to improvise for the first time," Dinnerstein said. "It's not only that it's fun, it's really thought-provoking. It's one of the most creative things I've ever done."

Dinnerstein will tour with clarinetist Richard Stoltzman this spring, and she's preparing for her next recording, of Schubert and Bach pieces. She also has expanded Neighborhood Classics, a program she launched in Brooklyn in which classical performers, including Dinnerstein, give recitals to benefit a school.

"That's part of what being an artist is ... about communication and connecting to people," said Dinnerstein. "When I have a response like that to a recording or a book or something — I hear something that really goes to the heart of me, then I feel somehow a connection to the person who played it."

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