



The Oil in the Sound

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Simone Dinnerstein's debut album, her rendition of Bach's Goldberg Variations, had barely even been released when it hit the top spot in America's classical-music charts. The amazing thing was: the pianist refused to participate in the market's normal mechanisms. Now her second album is set to appear.

Music, like everything else, is a commodity, even if music lovers are particularly sensitive whenever they are reminded of that fact. No one has a problem any longer with buying or selling something concrete and useful, be it a loaf of bread, a bookshelf or an XXL painting by Daniel Richter. Still, the notion persists that someone who trades in vibrations in the air and human emotions can hardly be taken seriously.

The collisions on the classical-music market between use and exchange value would seem to confirm this. Young talents are run through the treadmill to boost sale figures, and old masters debauched by the unscrupulous or simply clueless. Thus it was both a shock and a revelation, when in 2007 a pianist burst on the scene who explicitly rejected the rules of the market. Simone Dinnerstein was too old to be making her debut, when she brought out her first record, a performance of Bach's Goldberg Variations. For years, she had neither taken part in competitions nor performed publicly because the criteria normally applied to both and the extraneous influence that would have entailed made her feel uneasy. Instead she jumped off the marathon carousel of classical mastery to give birth to a child and start a family. Dinnerstein herself arranged for the production of her Bach recordings, collecting donations from friends and finding a sponsor to rent a small space in New York's Carnegie Hall. Success came overnight.

The day it appeared, Dinnerstein's debut album shot to the top of Billboard's classical chart. Suddenly, she was swamped by requests for performances, interviews and portraits. The *Washington Post* called her a "phenomenon." But her story was nothing more than another variation on the great American dream. She had gone from nowhere to the very summit by dint of her own hard work. This story is not usually connected with Bach or, indeed, music. But in Dinnerstein's case, it was.

Dinnerstein has a piano style all her own. It's more contemplative and deep, as even initial skeptics among the critics soon admitted. That impression was reinforced by the live concerts she gave in the US, England and Germany. The unique quality of her playing is perhaps best described with the words "clarity" and "heat." An almost laconic directness in tone is combined with a highly expressive emotional diction.

Why did she choose for her first test the Goldberg Variations, a work full of riddles that is already occupied by a series of definitive, charismatic interpretations by artists ranging from Wanda Landowska to Glenn Gould? She wasn't trying to compete with the legends of classical piano, she says today. "I know I could say something with the Variations that was important to me and could be of interest to others. Before I turned 30, I didn't think I was ready. I didn't even know who I was."

Anyone who meets Dinnerstein in private immediately notices what a serious person she is. She speaks slowly, but her mind is quick. What she says is astonishingly elegant and full of carefully worked-out ideas. Talking

with her about music is like playing chess with a close friend. Each side tries to stay one move ahead of the other. It's a lot of fun. When Dinnerstein senses an advantage, she can't help but laugh. Every new idea expands the realm of possibilities.

In January, Dinnerstein is releasing her first CD for Sony. It, too, features an all-Bach program, recorded with members of the Berlin Staatskapelle, under Dinnerstein's own direction. We talk about that recording at the dining room table of a friend in Berlin in whose apartment she gives private concerts, as she often does in New York. Our conversation turns to the complex relationship between listening and submission, and how people of small stature can train their hands to be big. We discuss the interplay of light and shadow in the work of the Dutch masters and why it is that Schubert's music always contains the concrete sound of this concert piano or that singer, while Bach's exists almost independently of any one instrument: polyvalent, transferable, pure and abstract. Simone Dinnerstein reveals how every individual note can gain its own center. It's a matter of the most taxing, arduous sort of training combined with a bit of magic. She learned this trick at the age of 18 as a private pupil of Maria Curcio, a disciple of Artur Schnabel. She told Dinnerstein that according to Rachmaninov, the key to finding the right tone was like drilling for oil. "You search, so to speak, for the oil in the sound, and when you find it, you have to extract it from the piano." Up until then, she says, she had tried to do the opposite. "I could only push the tone into the piano, which I think is a very American way of playing."

That prompted Dinnerstein to re-learn her instrument from scratch, as though she were once again a seven-year-old girl. And if we take account of that fact and tally her age subjectively, we can conclude that not only is Simone Dinnerstein an heir to Schnabel and a product of the Russian school. She's also one of the youngest debutantes of all time.