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Simone Dinnerstein

Classical pianist storming the pop charts





The long game

As a child, Simone Dinnerstein was deemed too small for the piano and given a recorder instead. But she persevered with her first love, with good results. Earlier this year two of her CDs hit the number one and number two spots on the Amazon American pop charts after an appearance on the CBS morning show. **Rick Jones** meets her

When the American pianist Simone Dinnerstein was a baby, she posed naked on her mother's lap like the Madonna and Child for a painting by her father, the artist Simon Dinnerstein, which now, as the Fulbright Triptych, is hailed as a masterpiece in the visual art world. As both pianist and painter become better known not just within their respective fields, so the significance of the triptych increases.

Dinnerstein The Younger, born 1972, acknowledges the importance of the painting in her life and includes a miniature copy of the 14ft-wide oil-on-wood work in the sleeve note of her latest Sony CD *A Strange Beauty*. In a medieval triptych, it was customary to place the mother and baby in the central section with saints and angels filling the hinged wings. Here, however, Simone and her mother are depicted in the left panel, the painter in self-portrait in the right, while the middle is taken up by a still life of an engraver's tools and a quiet street scene from a north German suburb through a pair of window frames. Dinnerstein the Elder, born 1943, had gone to Bremen to study printing and engraving on a Fulbright scholarship, but had instead devoted his three years to the creation of the triptych, which was not what he was supposed to be doing.

is pretty meditative and internal and I think that's how I am too as a person and musician. I think about music in a similar way. I think about it communicating something underneath the music.'

As if to prove Dinnerstein's point, the light in the record company's interview room, programmed to turn off if it detects no one, turns off, and we have to wave our arms to revive it. It thinks Dinnerstein is too calm. She speaks in measured New York tones, without gestures, but with much thought. The words 'I think' preface most of her sentences. Her 2005 recording of the *Goldberg Variations*, a debut disc which alerted the world to a new and unusual talent, is similarly meditative and intense. She peels off the layers softly and slowly, revealing secrets with each new variation and deferring the excitement of a fortissimo touch until it is a natural expression of the awesome truths she has unearthed.

She learnt the piece only in 2001 having acquired the music much earlier. 'I bought the score when I was 13 with no intention of learning it. I just wanted to own a copy. I had heard [Glenn] Gould's second recording of it and it was just the most amazing thing I had ever heard. I became completely obsessed

*"Every decision I make reflects who I am.
You can't get away from who you are"*

'It's kind of ironic that the tools of the trade he'd been sent to Germany to pursue became the central part of the triptych,' says Dinnerstein when we meet in London, between her appearances in Harrogate and Berlin. Even viewing the painting in miniature, one senses the reverence for the abandoned skill. The table is an altar. There is a serene stillness in the composition. Though of different generations, painter and pianist are equals now as artists and I am interested to know what sensibilities they share.

'I think my father has a particular way of thinking about the world and of channelling those thoughts into his work. He's interested in people's inner lives. When he does a drawing or painting of someone, I think that's what he's trying to get at. Most of his work

with it and wanted to possess it.'

The *Goldberg Variations* were both the first (1955) and last (1982) of Gould's celebrated recordings. The fire and eagerness of the earlier version are replaced by thoughtful contemplation and bold resignation in the later. He died, aged 50, shortly after and many listeners hear premonitions of death in it. 'I think it was really the aria that turned me on,' says Dinnerstein, 'and I think I went from loving Liszt and the romantic composers overnight to becoming a teenager, when I had this conflict between wanting to be expressive and emotional but at the same time not wanting to show what I felt and being very covered. I think that that particular recording and that music has those two elements in it and that's what drew me in.'





Dinnerstein's earlier predilection for Liszt and co resulted from attendance at a ballet class whose accompanist played Chopin and she felt an affinity for the effusions and pianism of the romantics. She begged for piano lessons but a composer friend thought her too small and suggested the recorder instead. She progressed rapidly and was rewarded with the keyboard teacher she sought. At age nine, her talent without being prodigious was more than the neighbourhood coach could handle and she switched to the Manhattan School of Music under Solomon Mikowsky.

At the same time, Dinnerstein started at St Anne's High School, a private Brooklyn institution which has proved effective at nurturing actors, musicians and other 'interesting people'. Dinnerstein felt at home there when in primary and middle school she had felt something of an outsider with her musical gifts. 'It was a really great school. The students and teachers were proud of it and for the first time I had that feeling of support from a community.'

It occurs to me that Dinnerstein might have channelled her artistic talent into music as a contrary desire to be different in a family of visual artists (her uncle is a painter), but she demurs. My parents were very encouraging.

It wasn't seen as an act of rebellion.' I wonder about her being named after her father, but she denies this is the case. She was in fact named after two German women, Simone and Andrea (the latter is her middle name). 'It's not a Jewish tradition to name someone after a living relative,' she tells me. 'It's considered bad luck. I don't know how it's possible, but for some reason they didn't see the connection.'

The daughter could not have been more dutiful. She accompanied her father to galleries and copied pictures as she had been taught. She developed a love of Raphael. She posed for the portraitist and acquired a capacity for motionless concentration even at a young age. Her mother read to her while she sat or stood and once claimed to have got through 50 books during the creation of a single painting.

'My father works slowly,' says Dinnerstein, 'and it takes him quite a few months to do one drawing. I also take a long time to work on something. I like to perform the same repertoire for a long time, for a year or more, and I find it grows and changes and my feelings about it alter.'

It occurs to me that the meditative quality in her music and her father's paintings derives from their function as artist and model. 'I

think it's a very interesting relationship,' she says, 'and more so now that I am older. I am aware of him trying to capture something about me. I think, when he's painting somebody, he's on the one hand trying to see who that person is and on the other he's also painting himself and everything he sees, he chooses to see and it reflects him. I think the same is true of an interpreter. If I'm playing a piece of music, I'm looking at the score, and I'm trying to understand it and every decision I make reflects who I am. You can't get away from who you are.'

Although Dinnerstein was to resume sitting for her father later in life, at the age of 15 her career as artist's model came to a natural conclusion. 'For the next 15 years he painted nothing but nudes. That's why I stopped. He drew my friends, but not me.'

After high school, Dinnerstein came to London for a summer and took a course of private lessons with the extraordinary piano teacher Maria Curcio who died aged 90 in 2009. An Italian Jew, she had been brutalised during the war by the Nazis, had recovered, settled in London and taught Martha Argerich, Mitsuko Uchida, Radu Lupu and Barry Douglas in a dingy basement flat in Willesden. 'I completely fell in love with her and moved to London for three years,' says Dinnerstein. 'I was always an anglophile and this was a really important time for me. Maria completely re-did my playing and changed my approach.'

In London, Dinnerstein met her husband Jeremy Greensmith, who worked for the Arts Council. They returned to the States where he became a teacher and they had a son, Adrian, in 2002. Dinnerstein learnt the *Goldbergs* during her pregnancy. The CD she produced, which took the classical world by storm, was self-financed. The refreshing part of Dinnerstein's story is that she has made her career the hard way. She was no hot-house prodigy, promoted and steered by overbearing agents and record producers. I ask her how parenthood affected her.

'It made me more responsible for myself as a person,' she says. 'I felt like I had to take ownership of my ideas. I had to know what I wanted and make sure I was that person. I had to be braver about my artistic choices and care less about what teachers thought.' I ask her whether motherhood hadn't impinged on her career. 'On the contrary,' she says, 'everything took off after I had Adrian.' Now it is she on whose lap the baby sits, the Madonna with Child. **CM**



Meditative: Simone Dinnerstein