

Pianist Simone Dinnerstein is an ambassador for Bach

January 20, 2012

By Steve Paul

Simone Dinnerstein was on tour last fall when an idea struck. What if ... ?

On her mind was her son's grade school in Brooklyn, where the rising-star pianist already had introduced a series of community concerts featuring musician friends. In October, for example, she presented Zuill Bailey, who played selections from Bach's unaccompanied cello suites.

But a concert is one thing. A classroom happening is something else entirely, and Dinnerstein, who's playing a solo recital this week at Johnson County Community College, started emailing every New York cellist she knew.

As word got around, she wound up with 18 co-conspirators, and one November day, her son and his classmates were swarmed by Bach.

For most of the day, each and every classroom in the school of 1,500 students was treated to the sounds of Bach's cello music.

"Wherever you walked in the school that day," Dinnerstein said by phone recently, "you heard Bach coming from somewhere."

Chances are that the educationally enriching Bach invasion won't be a onetime occurrence. "I think it would be great to have invasions of all sorts," she said, "a Mozart invasion, a Beethoven invasion. The musicians really responded to this idea, and they were all excited about it. It had this feeling of missionary zeal."

All it takes is some organizing, some parental volunteer shuttling and, she added, "you need a school that is open to be invaded."

It was fitting that Dinnerstein started with Bach. She certainly has made her own burgeoning career by mastering, communicating and injecting her exploratory emotionalism into some of the 18th-century composer's greatest works.



Although Bach wrote keyboard works for the harpsichord, Simone Dinnerstein much prefers the expressiveness and dynamic range of the modern piano.

In concert

Pianist Simone Dinnerstein will play music by Bach, Brahms, Chopin, Schumann and contemporary composer Daniel Felsenfeld in a solo recital at 8 p.m. Jan. 28 in Yardley Hall at Johnson County Community College. Tickets are \$25-\$35 and are available by phone (913-469-4445) or online (jccc.edu/TheSeries).

Dinnerstein will conduct a master class for intermediate/advanced piano students on Wednesday. Call Angel Mercier for information: 913-469-8500, Ext. 4221.

First came her celebrated Carnegie Hall debut and self-financed recording, in 2007, of Bach's epic "Goldberg Variations." Next came a concert recording, made in Berlin, of Bach's French Suite No. 5 in G Major, plus contemporary composer Philip Lasser's "Twelve Variations on a Chorale by J.S. Bach." Dinnerstein's Bach juggernaut continued in 2011, when Sony released "Bach: A Strange Beauty," a collection of concertos and other works that went on to become the biggest selling classical CD of the year.

And later this month, on Jan. 31, will come another outstanding disc, "Something Almost Being Said," which sandwiches two Bach partitas around Schubert's Four Impromptu, Opus 90.

Why Bach?

"I think that Bach has really everything in his music that you could ever want from art," Dinnerstein said. "There are so many different sides to his writing. There are parts that are extremely melancholy or very introspective and there are works that are extremely joyful or effervescent. There are pieces that are small and short, and works that are incredibly long. There is so much to discover in his music."

Often the discovery occurs as Dinnerstein puts Bach up against the music of other composers. In her newest recording, for example, the Schubert seems to launch effortlessly from the endpoint of Bach's Partita No. 2 in C Minor, aided by the fact that the first Schubert impromptu, composed a century after the Bach, is in the same key.

The Schubert offers a show-stopping, haunting lyricism between the darkness and the light of the two Bach pieces.

For her record's title, Dinnerstein borrowed a phrase from the English poet Philip Larkin: "The trees are coming into leaf/ Like something almost being said."

"I was trying to find a title that would describe the impact that this music makes," she said. "I think that all of the works on the CD are very intimate, and it seems like they are reaching for words or are about to break into words. And you almost know what they are saying. You almost could describe it. But they remain in the world of music."

This is Dinnerstein's third area concert in the last three years. She played Bach in a Folly Theater recital for the Friends of Chamber Music in 2009 and a Mozart concerto with the Kansas City Symphony in 2010.

At Yardley Hall she'll play the two Bach partitas (though not the Schubert) from "Something Almost Being Said" on a program of varied moods and impulses.

First she'll wrap a Chopin nocturne and a Brahms intermezzo around a new work, written for her by Daniel Felsenfeld, that's based on "Suzanne," a folkie classic by Leonard Cohen.

The "Cohen Variations" "really turned out beautifully," Dinnerstein said. "They are really interesting played between Chopin and Brahms. These are three introverted pieces of music that are different from each other."

Yet they also go together in surprising, evolutionary ways, Dinnerstein said: The Chopin is of its time but somehow looks ahead to pop music. Felsenfeld's piece interweaves a modern classical idiom into a

contemporary tune while its romanticism leads into the Brahms, and the whole thing ends up sounding something like jazz.

“It’s fascinating to play them all together,” she said.

The Bach second partita, which will follow, “sounds like a response to what just happened.”

Also on the bill will be Schumann’s “Kinderszenen,” which she described as a collection of short musical poems, followed by Bach’s Partita No. 1, beginning with a kind of mirror image to the Schumann.

Dinnerstein brings a haunting, magnetic touch to the keyboard. And her continued success on disc and as an educational ambassador for Bach and for concert music in general is compelling. She bridges old and new in astonishing ways and seems to embody what Philip Larkin concluded in that poem about trees:

“Last year is dead, they seem to say./ Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.”

<http://www.kansascity.com/2012/01/20/3382022/pianist-simone-dinnerstein-is.html>