

## Pianist did latest work fast, but with feeling

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By David Menconi

It's not unusual for bands to slave away for months, years or even (in the case of Guns N' Roses) decades in the studio to make an album.

But classical pianist Simone Dinnerstein's new album, "Something Almost Being Said" (out Jan. 31 on Sony Classical), is pretty much the opposite of that. It's just Dinnerstein's elegant, stately piano on 16 tracks of Bach and Schubert compositions - which she recorded in a four-day marathon, followed by a week of post-production editing and tinkering.

"It was on a pretty insane schedule," Dinnerstein says from her home in Brooklyn. "The producer and I had never done it this way before, recording and then going right into editing immediately afterward. Usually we like to record and have it sit a little bit, come back to editing with some perspective. I didn't think I'd enjoy the process this way, but I did. It was interesting during editing because I could remember playing certain takes. Usually I don't remember by the time we get to that."

Dinnerstein, who will show off "Something Almost Being Said" with a Duke Performances show tonight in Durham, has been a major classical presence since her 2007 breakthrough rendition of Bach's "Goldberg Variations." She took a route more common for underground rock bands than classical musicians, financing the recording herself. The album drew major kudos and established Dinnerstein as one of contemporary music's finest interpreters of the Bach canon.

That continued with last year's "Bach: A Strange Beauty," and the new "Something Almost Being Said" (a title taken from the late Englishman Philip Larkin's 1967 poem "The Trees"). The new album is a series of keyboard ruminations as evocative as they are subdued, putting one in mind of a stroll through the woods on a sunny fall day.

Like a lot of musicians, Dinnerstein is her own harshest critic and brushes aside most of the praise that has come her way. But there is one track on "Something Almost Being Said" that pleases her, the album-closing "Gigue" (the last movement of Bach's Partita No. 1, which will be on tonight's program at Duke). "I had a really specific vision of how I wanted to play that and what came out was completely how I heard it in my head," she says. "Usually I feel like recordings get most but not all of what I wanted. That particular track, though, was all of it. There's a certain line running through it, a sound and flexibility to how I played it that was exactly what I wanted to do."

This summer will find Dinnerstein stretching out in another direction, recording an album with Triangle expatriate Tift Merritt. Dinnerstein and the country-rock singer/songwriter met when Merritt interviewed her for a magazine and her radio show, and they played a well-received collaborative show last year at Duke.

That show featured selections of songs by Allen Toussaint, Johnny Nash, Cat Stevens and others; an opera aria, Purcell's "Dido's Lament"; and a classical piece that Merritt says she "turned into a cowboy song."

"I don't know if either of us knew what a collaboration would look like, just that we wanted to be honest and have enough trust to venture into each other's world," Merritt says in a separate conversation. "It's very hard to explain what we do together. I think we have a lot of respect for each other and enjoy exploring music together. It's unexpected and very genuine."

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