

Chamberfest: Pianist Simone Dinnerstein learns how to handle stardom

By Steven Mazey
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American pianist Simone Dinnerstein suddenly became a star in her 30s after her private recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations became a bestseller.

SIMONE DINNERSTEIN IN RECITAL

When and where: 7 p.m., Friday July 29, Dominion-Chalmers Church

Tickets: Included in Chamber Music Festival pass. For those without passes, tickets are \$35.

Meet Simone Dinnerstein: In a free event, Dinnerstein will give a casual talk and will answer questions about her career and musical interests Saturday, July 30 at 11 a.m. at University of Ottawa Freiman Hall

Information: www.chamberfest.com; 613-234-6306

OTTAWA — She struggled for years to attract some attention, and then, in her mid-30s, American pianist Simone Dinnerstein suddenly found it — big time.

When Dinnerstein, who studied in London and at the Juilliard School in New York, was trying to get her career going in her 20s, she found herself up against the challenges faced by talented young pianists around the world — struggling to land a break and an entry into the music world.

She had few concert engagements, no manager and not much likelihood, it seemed, of the kind of concert life she had dreamed of since she was a girl, though she did find a lot of reward in working with a foundation that sends musicians into small towns and non-traditional venues that don't usually receive live music.

Then came Bach's Goldberg Variations, and Dinnerstein suddenly had it all, thanks to a recording she made out of love for the music.

Dinnerstein scraped together several thousand dollars to finance her own recording of the Variations, performing music she had long loved and playing it the way she wanted to play it, without worrying about a commercial record producer telling her what to do. She's described her work on the recording and those pieces as a spiritual journey. Something obviously clicked. An impressed Philadelphia Inquirer music critic who heard it brought the tape to the attention of the Telarc label, which released it in 2007 to enthusiastic reviews and chart-topping success.

The recording made a lot of 10-best lists at the end of the year, including those of the New Yorker and the Los Angeles Times. Critics said Dinnerstein's highly distinctive approach to Bach was that of a pianist rather than a harpsichordist, and, in the words of one critic, makes "use of a level of coloration beyond the palette Bach knew."

"This kind of highly expressive interpretation may not be to everyone's taste," wrote a Toronto critic when Dinnerstein performed the pieces there, "but it packed so much power and conviction that it was impossible to ignore."

With great reviews, and praise for subsequent discs, Dinnerstein has found herself one of classical music's hottest stars, with offers from around the world, a recording contract with Sony Classical, representation from a high-profile talent agency and media profiles spreading the word about the pianist who succeeded, not through winning a splashy competition, but by doing things her way.

Dinnerstein, 38, made her Ottawa debut in January, performing a Bach concerto with the NAC Orchestra in a well-received concert. She returns to town for a recital Friday, performing pieces by Bach, Schubert and Schumann at Dominion-Chalmers Church as part of the Ottawa Chamber Music Festival.

It's been a heady few years, and Dinnerstein says that while the attention and the new international career have been gratifying, it also meant a steep learning curve in figuring out how much she could comfortably take on in a season. She lives in Brooklyn, is married and has a 10-year-old son, and she doesn't like to be away from her family for long.

"It's been a huge adjustment, and at the beginning I was trying to find my way in terms of how much I could handle but I have an excellent manager and we've worked together to figure out what works for me," Dinnerstein said in a telephone interview from home last week.

"The main thing is that I need to control the amount of repertoire I play; I'm not a person who can handle too many different things at once. The other thing is being able to have enough time with my family. I'm not wanting to have an enormous number of concerts; I'd rather have fewer concerts and play in places where I'm not having a crazy travel schedule. But I feel that this past year I had a grip on everything, and next season is the most sensible-looking season I've had. Things are headed in a good direction."

If it's been an adjustment, Dinnerstein says she's not complaining. She knows there are hundreds of talented pianists who spent years at conservatories and are still trying to get the kind of break Dinnerstein received.

"There's a huge element of luck involved as to why it happens for one person and not another," she acknowledges. "The challenges are that I feel I never really get a chance to stop, and I haven't had a vacation in over a year. But I'm playing great music in great concert halls. I also meet so many interesting people I would not have met otherwise."

Though she enjoys orchestral performances, Dinnerstein says she prefers solo recitals, which let her put together a concert of pieces she loves.

"Recitals are my favourite form of communicating music. Of course there are wonderful experiences you can have playing concertos, but it's not as deep an experience. With a concerto you have one or two rehearsals with an orchestra you may not have met before or a conductor you may not know. I've not reached the point yet where I'm returning again and again and working with someone I've worked with before, which would probably be a different thing.

"But with a recital program, it's generally music that I've lived with for a long time. It's a chance to not only make a statement about a specific piece of music. The combination of music you're putting together is creating a general feeling and a shape that you're controlling. It's the most control you can have in communicating a point of view about music in general."

Dinnerstein's Ottawa recital will include Bach's Partita No. 2 in C minor (a piece she is about to record), arrangements of three Bach chorales (included on her acclaimed debut disc for Sony, *Bach: A Strange Beauty*), Schumann's *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 12 and Schubert's *Four Impromptus*, D. 889. She says the three composers work well together.

"I've always felt drawn to Schumann, and I think he was influenced by Bach because he has so much counterpoint in his writing and poetry too, and such a strange irregularity. There are the complete mood swings, but he also experiments with strange phrasing, odd rhythms. Those kinds of irregularities occur in Bach as well. "With Schubert, I feel his music is always song. It's always about singing, always about saying something, and I also feel that in Bach. Almost all of his works feel sung to me."

The morning after her Ottawa recital, on July 30 at 11 a.m. at the University of Ottawa's Freiman Hall, Dinnerstein will talk about music and her career in one of the festival's occasional "Meet the Artist" chats with musicians. The event is free and does not require a festival pass.

Dinnerstein says she enjoys the chance to meet music lovers. Community outreach work has been a big part of her life. For several years, she has worked with the Piatigorsky Foundation, which brings musicians to small towns and venues that don't often hear live music. Recently, Dinnerstein created a fundraising concert series for the Brooklyn elementary school where her husband teaches and her son goes to school. She hosts the weekend concerts and many of her colleagues have donated performances to raise money for the school.

"I'm excited because I think it addresses a few issues, including building an audience. My idea was that if there were a concert within the community that is already a place where the community goes, it might seem more welcoming than going to hear a concert at Carnegie Hall, and we'd get them hooked on music again.

“The concerts have been packed, they’re from (age) six to 96, and it’s people not just from the school but from outside the neighbourhood. We’ve raised over \$20,000, which is really helpful because there have been a lot of budget cuts.”

Dinnerstein says the school is in an affluent Brooklyn neighbourhood, but she has also had success with a similar series she started in a school in a struggling community on Manhattan’s Lower East Side.

“It’s more challenging to raise an audience in that neighbourhood, but people from the school did come, and it raised enough money to restore the school’s band program last year, which was great. “

As nice as it is to be enjoying success in the music world, Dinnerstein says, “It’s also good for musicians to do this kind of thing, and to give something back. That’s important.”

<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/entertainment/Chamberfest+Pianist+Simone+Dinnerstein+learns+handle+stardom/5167243/story.html>