

ON MUSIC

The Dinnerstein Variations

By Dawn Chan
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Photograph by Lisa Marie Mazzucco.

Earlier this month, pianist Simone Dinnerstein celebrated her latest album, *Bach, A Strange Beauty*, with a six-hour-long release party in her parents' Park Slope brownstone. She set her iPod to shuffle, and at the end of the evening, as the final few guests made their way out the door, her own recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* came on. "I hadn't listened to it in years," she said, "I hadn't even realized how much I had changed."

The *Goldberg Variations* marked a turning point in Dinnerstein's life story, the classical-music world's rags-to-riches tale that's by now familiar to many fans. Less than a decade ago, with her chances at a high-octane concert career looking dim, she had started to settle into a life in Brooklyn, a career of smaller-scale concerts, teaching, and performances in nursing homes and prisons. The discovery that she was pregnant with her son inspired Dinnerstein to work privately on the *Variations* as a way to mark his arrival. She went on to raise money from friends and family and recorded the piece herself, a decision that took some guts, given the many canonical recordings of Bach's epic work out there (joined now by a pretty hilarious rendition of the aria by Stephen Dorff in Sofia Coppola's *Somewhere*).

Improbably, Dinnerstein's performance became the top-selling classical album of 2007, at one point even reaching number four on Amazon's record sales for all genres. Her success is particularly startling when you consider the number of household-name classical pianists who either won a major competition or

grew up in the spotlight as child prodigies. But Dinnerstein's playing is one of a kind. The intense conviction she communicates is so arresting that, for me, hearing her rendition of a piece makes it impossible to imagine it performed any other way. (Classical musicians often refer to the importance of playing "with conviction"; or as my pianist friend's formidable Russian teacher would often say, "My dear, you must be convicted of every note.")

Obviously, not everyone loves Dinnerstein's playing, and some fault her Bach for being stylistically incorrect. "I guess I don't think about appropriateness of style," she says. "Maybe there's some kind of chip missing in my brain about this, because I just never have been able to understand these problems that people have with interpretation."

Even as her touring career grows more hectic, Dinnerstein continues to organize neighborhood concerts at Brooklyn's P.S. 321 and the Lower East Side's P.S. 142. Proceeds benefit the school's students. The *New York Post* said of her series, "Brooklyn has its own certifiable mini-Carnegie Hall"; as it turns out, Brooklyn's version of Carnegie Hall has wooden fold-out seats and glass vitrines showcasing garbage converted into art projects, as well as Martin Luther King quotes in the form of fabric banners. It's also not uncommon for concert-goers to be accidentally smacked several times in the face by the sleeve of a fluorescent "i-Grow" jacket (as I was). The most recent concert in the series featured harpist Bridget Kibbey and drew a full house, with nearly two kids for every adult. Simone had come fully prepared for her K-5 demographic. When introducing the program, she invited anyone who couldn't sit still to leave the room, "but only during the breaks." Paper and markers awaited in the lobby.

The liner notes for her latest album (which hit stores last week) include a reproduction of a triptych by Simone's father, the painter Simon Dinnerstein. It's clear that she grew up influenced by visual art: Even as her lyrical playing style most often seems to model the voice, its pacing and breaths, she seems nearly as frequently to relish subverting it, whether with a series of abrupt color changes or with a long phrase that gains in power where a voice would taper out. In those moments, her decisions start to resemble painting as much as singing.

"As a child," she says, "when I played for my father, he would say 'I don't hear the line.' And he isn't a musician, but he'd always be right."

Meanwhile, Dinnerstein's son, whose limbic system apparently developed to the sounds of the *Goldberg Variations*, now studies acoustic guitar. "I think we both felt it would be better if he did a different instrument," she says. "He's been able to teach me about it, which is a nice thing for him to have that power—to own the music." Dinnerstein herself has been listening to singer-songwriter Tift Merritt (with whom she collaborates), as well as Nick Drake, Leonard Cohen, and the Avett brothers.

When it comes to making connections across genres and disciplines, she's clearly game. The title of her latest album, *Bach: A Strange Beauty*, is from Francis Bacon: "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in proportion." And then, after recently reading Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, she arrived at the theory that McEwan wrote his book in the form of the *Goldberg Variations*. "I was, like, counting the sections," she says. "There are the episodes, and there's a kind of peak, and then there's a return to the opening scene. Before the book starts, there's a quote, and at the end there's a poem. It feels to me like having the aria on either side." She laughs: "My friend thinks I should write to McEwan about this."

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