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Pianist Simone Dinnerstein brings her brand of Bach to Seattle

By Michael Upchurch
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Pianist Simone Dinnerstein, the daughter of painter Simon Dinnerstein, traveled an unusual route to a music career.

Bach is a world — and pianist Simone Dinnerstein is one of its most celebrated and, to a few cranky listeners, controversial inhabitants at the moment.

On Wednesday, she comes to Seattle to play solo-piano selections from her new CD, "Bach: A Strange Beauty," giving local music lovers a chance to hear what the fuss is all about. And Dinnerstein definitely merits a fuss.

Her self-produced 2007 CD of Bach's "Goldberg Variations" was picked up by the Telarc label and wound up topping the Billboard classical-music charts. Her 2008 live-CD follow-up, "The Berlin Concert" (with works by Bach, Beethoven and Philip Lasser), also hit No. 1.

In the quieter moments on her recordings, she doesn't so much play as insinuate the notes, eliciting a plush and dusky timbre from the piano, especially in its lower registers. On fast movements, she brilliantly flies and flutters along the keyboard, leaving sharp, racing filigree patterns in her wake.
In a film clip on her website, she says of her approach to the keyboard, "What I like is a sound that is incredibly clear, and where I can play as quietly as I want to play and as quickly as I want to play without any resistance from the instrument. I like it to be like you could *breathe* on the piano and it would just play."

The controversy stems from whether her interpretations of Bach are period-authentic. Listen to her, though, and the supple flow-and-ebb of her touch draws out moods and vagaries of such lissome, limber clarity that they surely can't be "wrong." There's a delectable sense, throughout, of a pianist's mind at play with a composer's mind at play.

For someone who brings such a distinctive touch to what she's doing, Dinnerstein came to the concert circuit a little bit late and in a roundabout way. She didn't start piano lessons until she was 7.

Auditions were difficult for her, and after she graduated in 1996 from Juilliard (she studied with Peter Serkin), the concert-pianist career she hoped for didn't pan out. Instead, she spent her 20s and early 30s playing gigs at nursing homes, community centers and even prisons. These were arranged through the Piatigorsky Foundation, for which she performed up to 30 concerts a year.

"I got to see a lot of America that I wouldn't have seen if I hadn't done this," she said in a phone interview last month. "It was my introduction to being on the road, and I learned a lot about talking about music. That's an important skill to learn which is really not taught in conservatories."

She found she liked playing in "an intimate venue for people who don't normally go to concerts." It made her know "in a very immediate way," she says, why she was a musician.

Those venues also included public schools, and in 2009, she started a program, Neighborhood Classics, at the Brooklyn school that her son attends and where her husband teaches. Recently she expanded it to a school on New York's Lower East Side. She doesn't perform at every concert, but organizes and hosts them all, interviewing the artists, who donate their time, before they play.

Since her "overnight" success in 2007, she's had to cut back on her Piatigorsky engagements. But her Neighborhood Classics involvement continues apace.

Dinnerstein is philosophical about the winding route she took to success: "I've just taken a longer time to mature as an artist and grow into my playing."

Along with Bach's English Suite No. 3 in G minor and three Bach chorales transcribed for piano, her program includes Schumann's Fantasiestucke, Op. 12, and Schubert's four Impromptus, D899, Op. 90. Dinnerstein's next CD will be of solo piano works by Bach and Schubert, so the Impromptus should be of particular interest.

"They're spectacular pieces," she says, "and when you play them together as a set, they really feel like a much larger work." Dinnerstein is especially drawn to the way they're "constantly changing color and mood."

When she played them at the Kennedy Center two years ago, The Washington Post's reviewer praised her "superhuman control over the shadows, shades and whispers" of the pieces.

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