

Simone Dinnerstein rekindles the magic of Bach's Goldberg Variations

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By John Terauds



The *Goldberg Variations* by J.S. Bach are like Aladdin's Lamp. Rub them the right way, and magic happens.

Glenn Gould conjured the genie in 1955 when he recorded the Goldbergs for his first album. It transformed him from Canadian curiosity into international icon.

Fifty years later, New York City pianist Simone Dinnerstein had the same fantastic luck. Her 2005 recording of the Goldbergs (released in 2007) sold thousands of copies in its first week alone, and opened the doors of the world's most prestigious concert halls.

Dinnerstein is in Toronto on Dec. 12 to share her beguiling take on the Bach masterpiece at Koerner Hall.

During a long and thoughtful Skype interview, the 30-something pianist reveals that Gould's recording of the *Goldberg Variations* from 1981, the year before he died, changed her life.

Dinnerstein was 13 when a friend put the disc on for her. "I remember where I was standing and thinking I've never heard anything like this in my life, and it's the most incredible thing ever," the pianist says. "I

became completely entranced, obsessed with the piece, especially that recording.”

The teen dashed out to get the sheet music for the opening aria and its 30 variations.

“I just wanted to have it. I didn’t dare work on it. I just thought it would be nice to have this piece,” Dinnerstein confesses. “I don’t think I’ve ever bought a piece of music that I had no intention of learning, so this was a very unusual thing for me to have done.”

Although she’d been taking piano lessons since age 7, Dinnerstein couldn’t get comfortable with the music of Bach. “I never felt as though it was something that I owned. I felt as if this was a poor substitute for listening to Glenn Gould.”

Her breakthrough came in the mid-1990s at New York City’s prestigious Juilliard School, while studying with pianist Peter Serkin.

“He really opened up my imagination and had me think about music in quite a different way, to be more creative and take some risks,” Dinnerstein remembers.

“It was like putting together this great puzzle. And, in the process, I discovered my own voice not only in Bach, but as a musician,” the pianist explains. “It was this really huge journey that I took with this piece, and I think it really opened my playing for other composers as well.”

By 2002, Dinnerstein was a professional pianist, working for the Piatigorsky Foundation, which is dedicated to bringing top-quality concerts to smaller communities. Her son Adrian was a year old. She felt like she finally had a good grasp of the variations.

The pianist wanted to record them, but neither she nor her schoolteacher husband could afford that kind of project. So she canvassed friends and acquaintances until she had scraped together enough to record the piece at the Academy of Arts & Letters in Manhattan in 2005. Her producer assembled the Aria and the first five variations onto a demo disc.

“Suddenly, people who had never wanted to talk to me before wanted to meet up and talk to me and it became clear that they wanted to come and hear the piece live,” she recalls. “Then another small miracle happened. A man in Israel heard a bit on the Internet.”

He donated Dinnerstein’s rental fee for a recital at Carnegie Hall that fall. “It was crazy,” the pianist says. “It was packed and there were a lot of people from the music world there. The *New York Times* came.”

The full recording was released on the Telarc label in 2007, the album shot to the No. 1 spot on the *Billboard* classical chart in its first week, and Dinnerstein has been touring the world ever since.

She plays a variety of music, but the Goldbergs have remained a staple of her concerts. Over the past two weeks alone, she has performed the Bach piece at recitals in California, Colorado, Arkansas, Michigan and Philadelphia.

Just as Gould’s interpretation of the Goldbergs changed over the years, Dinnerstein’s relationship with the music as also evolved. She tells of walking into her 9-year-old son’s room a couple months ago, and hearing the *Goldberg Variations* on his radio.

“He said, as he always does, ‘Mommy, this is you.’ I said, ‘No, that’s not me.’ I listened for a bit and thought, is that me? Then we got to one particular variation when I knew it was me . . . It was a strange, uncanny experience for me, because I guess I don’t really play it like I did — or I don’t think of it that

way; maybe it comes out that way.”

Dinnerstein’s success has allowed her to buy her first adult piano. Until a couple of weeks ago, she was borrowing practice time on friends’ pianos.

While recording an all-Bach disc, due out next month from Sony Classical, Dinnerstein became smitten with the German-made Steinway concert grand she was playing on.

“I could do things with it, and sounds came out of it, that I didn’t think were possible. I didn’t think it was me, really,” she says. “At the end of the recording session, I found out that the instrument was for sale.”

The usual retail price for a piano like that — before shipping costs — is around \$150,000 (U.S.). Dinnerstein took the plunge by taking out an extra mortgage on the family home.

“I’ll be playing it for the next 30 years,” she laughs of what her son calls “the Steinosaurus.”

Much of what we’re going to hear will continue to be by J.S. Bach.

“Bach’s music contains every emotion and thought and sense of beauty that we have,” says Dinnerstein in her quietly assured way. “If I can compare it to an artist who I think is like this, I would compare it to van Eyck, the Renaissance painter, where you look at it and you think, nothing can be better than this. Everything that you need is right there.”

Simone Dinnerstein performs at Koerner Hall, 273 Bloor St. W. on Dec. 12 at 3 p.m. Tickets: \$20-\$55 at 416-408-0208 or www.rcmusic.ca

THE GOLDBERG STORY

Like any ambitious, hard-working artist, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) couldn’t pass up any opportunity to promote himself among potential aristocratic patrons. In 1741, after publishing the final installment of a series of keyboard finger exercises that showcased his inventiveness, Bach presented the freshly-printed sheet music to the Russian ambassador to the Saxon court in Dresden, Germany. The title page of these exercises says they are “for connoisseurs, for the refreshment of their spirits.”

According to legend, Count Keyserlinck asked a young protégé, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, to play them on the harpsichord late at night as a cure for insomnia.

Dozens of musicians have recorded the Goldbergs on harpsichord, piano and in arrangements for other instruments. The Glenn Gould and Simone Dinnerstein recordings are among the most distinctive.