

# The Times-Picayune

## Pianist Simone Dinnerstein brings her chart-topping style to Tulane

By Chris Waddington

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*The Times-Picayune Archive*  
*Simone Dinnerstein performs during her piano solo concert at in 2003.*

J. S. Bach has been changing the lives of musicians for three centuries, but how many can claim the Hollywood-style, rags-to-riches transformation experienced by pianist Simone Dinnerstein? The 38-year-old Brooklyn mom was a virtual unknown in 2007 when her self-financed recording of Bach's "Goldberg Variations" rocketed to the top of Billboard's classical charts, earning "best-of-the year" notices from the New York Times, the New Yorker magazine, the Los Angeles Times and other bellwether publications.

Dinnerstein will make her New Orleans debut on April 4, in a concert presented by Tulane University and the New Orleans Friends of Music.

Like many overnight sensations, Dinnerstein has honed her craft for decades. She studied at New York's prestigious Julliard School and worked with important mentors such as pianist Peter Serkin. When she finally got broad attention, however, she eschewed the chill, tidy, by-the-book virtuosity fostered in today's conservatories. In fact, Dinnerstein's fully formed, emotionally potent piano style had critics comparing her to keyboard divas of past generations — Dame Myra Hess, Wanda Landowska and other interpreters whose strong personalities still come through today on LP and 78 recordings.

"I'm a contemporary artist, but I love the recordings of Hess, Schnabel, Cortot and other older artists," Dinnerstein said. "They had a sound and touch I admire, and though they had the utmost respect for the score, they were never afraid to make individual statements."

Dinnerstein takes note of the historical research that has come to light in recent decades, and insists that it's only one factor in a process of shaping her interpretations.

“At every moment during a performance, you are making aesthetic choices. If there was one, perfectly correct way to play a piece of music, there wouldn’t be much point to playing anymore,” Dinnerstein said. “We wouldn’t need all these different pianists trying to make sense of scores and manuscripts.”

Dinnerstein’s distinctive approach comes through on her much-acclaimed 2010 recording, “Bach: A Strange Beauty.” In New Orleans, she will play selections from that Sony Classical release, and will round out her program with a pair of romantic, 19th century compositions by Robert Schumann and Franz Schubert.

“Classical musicians generally agree not to add or change notes on a score, but beyond that, the scores aren’t all that specific,” Dinnerstein said. “What does it mean when the dynamic marks tell you to play a crescendo? To me, this is an instruction to play with greater intensity. But that doesn’t have to mean louder. I might play that passage more and more softly. It’s a matter of finding what makes sense to me, what sounds right in the moment and fits with the broader architecture of a piece.”

Such talk has led to some academic finger-wagging about Dinnerstein’s approach, but the pianist has an extra musical model to help with such criticism: her father. Simon Dinnerstein is a noted realist painter, one who came up in the heyday of abstract and conceptual art in the 1970s.

“The kind of work my father made wasn’t in vogue, especially at the start, but he had this obsession with people and still-lives and he had to stay true to himself.” she said. “He showed me what artistic integrity is about — and inspired me with his creativity. For any artist it’s easy to succumb to trends, to alter your work to please an imaginary public. But in the end, your work will be useless if you haven’t listened to your inner voice.”

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