

# The Washington Post

## Dinnerstein keys classics — and wordless Cohen

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By Katherine Boyle

It is a bold statement, albeit one without words, to remove the lyrics from a Leonard Cohen standard. But Daniel Felsenfeld's "The Cohen Variations" wouldn't offend the poet; there's something downright lyrical about how the variations happened. Two friends — living in Park Slope, Brooklyn, of course — set out to reinterpret Cohen's popular cover "Suzanne," mainly because the pianist and composer realized that they shared a favorite song.



(Lisa-Marie Mazzucco/Lisa-Marie Mazzucco) - Pianist  
Simone Dinnerstein.

That pianist, Simone Dinnerstein, 39, is a glowing, already-risen star in classical music, performing a program of Brahms, Schumann, Bach and Chopin on Jan. 29 at the Strathmore. Sony releases her next album, "Something Almost Being Said: Music of Bach and Schubert," this week, combining Bach's Partitas Nos. 1 and 2 and Schubert's Four Impromptus, Op. 90.

She's a performer known for her thoughtful reinterpretation of classical and romantic heroes, not for her love of beatnik lyricists. Which is why her performance of "The Cohen Variations" might surprise audiences at her upcoming concert: She's not saving the piece for an encore. She's playing Felsenfeld between Chopin and Brahms.

The collaboration between Dinnerstein and Felsenfeld, 41, began with a quaint meeting in the neighborhood. His then-publicist was in the same mom's group with Dinnerstein, and he was a fan of this "hometown, local hero," so he asked for an introduction. One night over dinner, she asked her pal to write a solo arrangement of her favorite song, a song she stumbled upon four years ago. "She said, 'I really want to do an arrangement of this Leonard

Cohen song as an encore,' and I said, 'Sure, I'll arrange it,'" Felsenfeld recalls. "But as we started talking about it, it evolved into a different concept."

Dinnerstein says: "He said he could write a set of variations for me on the piece, and I'm so pleased with how it turned out. Danny followed the simplicity of the song. It's contemplative. It never gets too elaborate. The repetition reflects the mood of the song."

## **Late bloomer**

It's these attributes — simplicity, subtlety, thoughtfulness — that made critics take note of the pianist. In 2005, her sold-out debut performance at Weill Recital Hall earned her the sort of rare praise that launches careers. The New York Times music critic Allan Kozinn called the performance “thoughtfully conceived, thoroughly modern.” The Washington Post’s Anne Midgette called her rise from obscurity “a Cinderella story,” one in which she “made her career by breaking every rule in the book.”

Dinnerstein took up the piano relatively late at 7, and dropped out of Juilliard before returning to complete her studies under Peter Serkin. She went on to fail on the festival circuit. She had few bookings in her 20s, normally the death knell of a concert career. “I was sort of a late bloomer,” Dinnerstein says. “I didn’t really grow into my playing until I hit my 30s.”

While pregnant with her son, Adrian, in 2002, she set out to learn Bach’s “Goldberg Variations,” an artistic choice that set her apart from pianists who balk at reinterpreting Glenn Gould’s signature recording. Her performances caught the ears of the concert world. Dinnerstein cemented her prominence on the classical charts in 2007, when she debuted with her self-funded recording of the work. The album not only won her mass critical acclaim, but also debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard classical charts.

Yet she doesn’t view herself as bold or contrarian. “I just do what feels natural,” she says.

“She’s very careful,” Felsenfeld said. “She’s not devoid of passion or cold, but she thinks a lot about what she’s doing — everything she does.”

Others have described her careful nature as deeply intuitive. In the case of her first album, she didn’t know what she would do with her recording, it just “felt like it was going to be an important move.”

The same can be said for “The Cohen Variations.” The piece isolates the attributes that make Dinnerstein a force in classical music: her originality, subtlety and ability to experiment without causing critics to classify her in one of those contemptuous C-word categories — contemporary or crossover never enter the mix. She may dabble in other worlds, but she is strictly a classical phenom.

“For me, it’s natural to see the connection between Bach and Leonard Cohen,” she says. “They’re really talking about the same thing. There’s interest now in crossing the art forms, and different periods of time in music and pieces don’t have to be performed chronologically. It’s a very post-modern way of thinking about art.”

Felsenfeld set out to compose for the strengths of his pianist, staying true to both her understated style and the moody character sketch that Cohen created in the original song.

“I didn’t want to do a piano lounge iteration of ‘Suzanne,’” Felsenfeld said. “This was very much written for Simone’s elegant playing. But one of the deals I cut with myself, since it wasn’t going to include lyrics, was to stay true to the emotional content.”

## **Artistic nuance**

The daughter of painter Simon Dinnerstein, other artistic mediums have always added nuance to her artistic outlook. She professes a deep fascination with color, particularly neutral hues. In a sense, this fascination with “the quieter range of color” comes through in her interpretations of the classics. In “The Cohen Variations,” she plays a soft palette.

“I’m interested in contemporary music and I feel that it’s important to play music by living composers,” she says. “But I’m not the forefront of any music scene. . . . There’s not very much contemporary music that I feel an emotional response to and would like to play.”

Splicing contemporary pieces with classical staples at a solo concert in Washington isn’t a standard choice for classical artists, yet it is the sort of thoughtfulness that defines Dinnerstein’s narrative. At Strathmore, she’ll perform “The Cohen Variations” between Chopin’s Nocturne in D-flat Major and Brahms’ Intermezzo in A Major.

“I’ve never begun a program with three quiet pieces before” she says. “I don’t play them with any pause between them. They’re all intimate and yet they’re different from each other. . . . The whole program has been constructed to have a certain feeling and shape.”

Along with seamlessly juxtaposing the contemporary with Brahms and Bach, audiences may be surprised by Dinnerstein’s sensitivity to mood. She’ll play a soundtrack of Cohen, Tift Merritt and Bob Dylan as the audience trickles into the hall. She notes that “mood music” is a staple of rock and pop concerts, a feature she embraced when collaborating with Merritt at Duke University last year.

“There’s something theatrical about a concert, and the artist needs to set the stage,” she says. “Other art forms have this down — in theater, in rock concerts, ambiance is really important. It’s something that hasn’t entered classical fully.”

But perhaps, with her thoughtful, measured approach, she’s pushing her genre just slightly.

**Simone Dinnerstein, Piano**

presented by the Washington Performing Arts Society. 7 p.m. Sunday. The Music Center at Strathmore, 5301 Tuckerman Lane, North Bethesda. \$23-\$85. Visit [www.wpas.org](http://www.wpas.org).

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