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## Simone Dinnerstein

**Classical rebel Simone Dinnerstein brings her personal touch to Bach and concert programming.**

By Olivia Giovetti



**OLDE SCHOOL** Dinnerstein takes the piano from concert hall to classroom

On paper, pianist Simone Dinnerstein seems like the rebel of the classical world. Once a Juilliard dropout—she later returned to complete her degree—Dinnerstein was no teenage wunderkind conquering the world's stages before high school. Then in 2007, at 34, Dinnerstein made a disarming debut CD with Bach's *Goldberg Variations*: one of the most demanding pieces in the keyboard repertoire, and a work rendered all but untouchable by the legendary recordings of Glenn Gould. In person, Dinnerstein reveals herself to be the thinking person's pianist: an artist with both the sense and the sensibility to handle anything from Bach to Lasser with aplomb, and one with a distinct performance style as thrilling as that of her comrade-in-*Goldberg*.

More than a keen musician, however, Dinnerstein is a classical evangelist creating the next wave of listeners. Launched last year, her Neighborhood Concert Series at Park Slope's P.S. 321 (her alma mater, her son's school, and her mother's former and her husband's current employer) is flourishing, with a performance by the Chiara Quartet coming up on Thursday 4. "I feel myself uncomfortable with the formality of the concert hall," the pianist explains of the genesis of her series. "One of the things that makes a concert warmer is if you're playing for a community that already knows one another.... I thought if I was able to make it something sort of normal, part of the normal life of the school and community, then that would entice people to come."

Entice it did. The success of the program—in which musicians donate their time and all proceeds benefit the PTA, a model that Dinnerstein hopes to expand to other schools in the city—is already apparent.

“Last year I played, in one [321] concert, Philip Lasser’s *Variations*,” Dinnerstein says. “A week or two later, I played for my husband’s class at school and then they were asking me questions. One of the kids said, ‘Do you ever play new music?’ And another kid said, ‘Of course she plays new music! She just played Philip Lasser’s *Variations* at the concert the other day!’ ”

This is the beginning of what promises to be a defining year for Dinnerstein. Last month she signed to Sony Classical—a jump from the indie classical label Telarc, and an even further leap from raising money to produce her first disc. “I don’t think of myself as a blockbuster,” she says. “But I think that they understand that. And the thing that’s really interesting is how the president of Sony seems to just get who I am, and want to go with that.” Going with that means Dinnerstein’s first recording of Bach concertos will be released this fall. In the meantime, she appears in New York later this month with Kristian Järvi’s Absolute Ensemble at (Le) Poisson Rouge. Her schedule is also peppered with appearances around the U.S. and Europe.

Of course, with these more formal engagements, she still takes a bit of 321 with her. “I’ve thought a lot about occlumency when I’m playing,” she laughs, referring to J.K. Rowling. “Oftentimes I’ll feel doubt, or something will come into my head—a memory of screwing up—and it feels like there’s some kind of evil force...and I have to combat it. It’s exactly what she’s writing about.”

*The P.S. 321 Neighborhood Concert Series continues with Simone Dinnerstein and ACME on Thu 4.*