

Preview: Simone Dinnerstein, Wigmore Hall, London

'Variations' that are still evolving

By Michael Church

Published: 17 October 2007

Simone Dinnerstein's new Telarc CD of Bach's Goldberg Variations won't please everybody, and doesn't entirely please me. Although she creates some lovely effects, the tempos at which she takes the first few variations seem perversely slow.

"That's OK," Dinnerstein says, gaily. "If everybody loves you, there must be something wrong. It takes all sorts to make a world."

But her interpretation is evolving all the time, she adds, and when she plays the Variations at the Wigmore Hall next week, the speeds may be different.

After an unusually slow-burning start, this 35-year-old from Brooklyn is suddenly hitting it big, and when I ask her secret, she replies that it's mostly down to three intensive years in London with Maria Curcio, the formidable teacher whose pupils include a dizzy array of stars, including the great Martha Argerich. Having once had a lesson with Curcio at my own humble level, I can vouch for her infectious charisma.

"For Maria," says Dinnerstein, "the idea of separating your interpretation from your technique didn't exist. It was all one thing. And she reformed how I use my hands, to the point where, when my time as her pupil was over, they were capable of a much bigger stretch.

"Her central concept was that playing all started from your fingers, pulling the sound out of the piano, as opposed to pushing it into the piano. Many pianists in America use a lot of arm, but her emphasis was on the way your fingers touched the keys, even stroked them.

"She used to quote Rachmaninov's image of pianists as oil prospectors – searching in the keys for a very centred sound that you could pull out. That involved having extremely strong fingers, supported in turn by your wrists, then your arms, then your back. My hands changed shape with her."

Those hands will certainly be stretched next week.

23 October (020-7935 2141)