

## At Last, This Classical Pianist Gets the Spotlight She Deserves

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The solo recital is said to be the most intensely personal statement of a classical musician's artistry. But it is also a daredevil act requiring skill, stamina and vision. Alone onstage, the performer must engage the listener's interest for about 90 minutes of music-making.

Pianist Simone Dinnerstein, who has spent the past few years making recital debuts in the U.S. and Europe, likens the experience to a moment in "Man on Wire," a new documentary about the tightrope artist Philippe Petit. He is seen walking on a steel cable between two buildings against a backdrop of architecture and sky. "There's a similar element of bravura," she muses, "of showing 'Look what I can do.' But the main thing is that you're . . . trying to show the audience the [musical] architecture and the sky."

SIMONE DINNERSTEIN

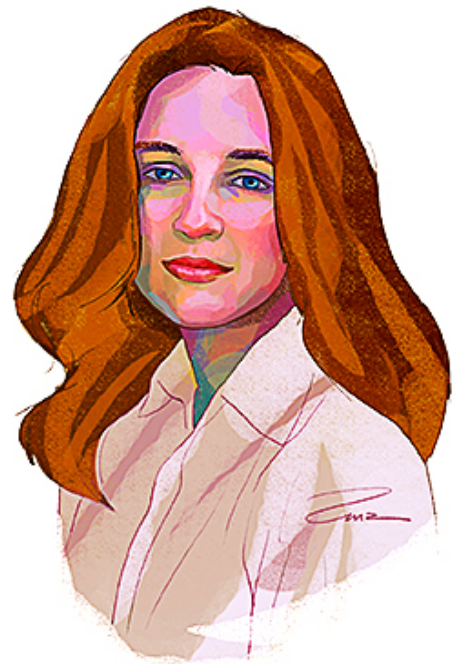


**Le Poisson Rouge**  
*Thursday*

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The 35-year-old Brooklyn native came to international attention last year with her album of Bach's monumental "Goldberg Variations" for Telarc. Particularly impressive were Ms. Dinnerstein's deeply expressive phrasing; beautifully balanced, contrapuntal lines (two or more independent melodic parts, played simultaneously); and evenly articulated trills -- though her fluid, Romantically inclined, interpretive sensibility was not to all tastes. (Her opening Aria is one of the slowest on record.) The disc made the "Best Classical CD" lists of *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* and was in the top 10 of *Billboard's* Classical Chart in the U.S. for 25 weeks.

Its success was all the more remarkable because Ms. Dinnerstein was barely known at the time. But the pianist has an intrepid spirit. In 2004, after years of playing gigs across the U.S. in small concert venues, community centers and a medium-security men's prison, she raised \$15,000 to self-produce the "Goldbergs" disc in the hopes of attracting a record label. In tandem with her subsequent rental of tiny Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie, she gained a prestigious agent as well. Her second Telarc disc, "The Berlin Concert" (a live recording of her recital debut last fall at that city's Philharmonie), is being released today.



Zina Saunders

Simone Dinnerstein

For her Ravinia Festival debut yesterday, Ms. Dinnerstein coupled the "Goldbergs" with George Crumb's "Eine Kleine Mitternachtmusik," nine modernist variations on the Thelonious Monk jazz standard "Round Midnight." Normally, the "Goldbergs" are considered so demanding and exalted that they are performed alone.

The pianist gamely agreed to add the Crumb to her originally scheduled program after the festival's president, Welz Kauffman, read about her performance of excerpts from both works last June at Le Poisson Rouge, a club on Bleecker Street that presents indie rock, folk songs, electronic music and classical works. Ms. Dinnerstein's only condition was that the festival provide different pianos for each piece. The Crumb requires the performer to reach into the instrument's innards and periodically pluck, strum or press the piano strings. "I didn't want all the 'in the piano' playing to affect the tuning for the Bach," she said in an email.

An affable brunette with soulful blue eyes, Ms. Dinnerstein returns to Le Poisson Rouge this Thursday to perform two selections from "The Berlin Concert." She chose the works on her new disc to show the influence of Bach (represented here by one of his paeans to Baroque dance, the French Suite No. 5 in G Major) on composers as disparate as Beethoven and Philip Lasser, a faculty member at The Juilliard School.

Yet "The Berlin Concert" also reveals the pianist's continuing predilection for the theme-and-variations form, whereby composers take a simple compositional element and transform it imaginatively. "There's something about it that's very basic, almost archetypal, to the way we listen to music," says the pianist, who lives with her husband and 6-year-old son in a brownstone in Brooklyn. "I'm fascinated by how composers approach them in different ways."

Mr. Lasser's "Twelve Variations on a Chorale by J.S. Bach" refashions a harmonic nugget from one of Bach's penitential chorales, "Take From Us, Lord, Thou Faithful God," in stylistic guises evoking 19th-century Romanticism, French Impressionism, American theater music and jazz. The final movement of Beethoven's transcendent Sonata No. 32 in C Minor (Opus 111) is a series of variations on a 16-bar theme presented in its stately opening. The famous syncopated rhythms and proto-boogie-woogie bass of the third variation sound remarkably contemporary. "People who aren't familiar with the late sonatas can't believe it's by Beethoven," says Ms. Dinnerstein. And in the work as a whole, the last sonata he wrote, Beethoven utilizes the entire range of the piano. "In the treble, there are some parts that are twinkly and distant," she observes, "and he uses the whole bass to create this very rich sound, like waves. He often has both hands at either end of the keyboard."

Young Simone requested piano lessons at the age of 5 after hearing the instrument played at ballet class. She began those studies two years later and is a graduate of the Manhattan School of Music's precollege program and The Juilliard School. But she dropped out of the latter for three years to study in London with piano pedagogue Maria Curcio, pupil of revered Beethoven interpreter Artur Schnabel and teacher of superstars Mitsuko Uchido and Radu Lupu.

"Maria's sound is very transparent compared to the thicker sound of the Russian school of piano playing, which uses more arm weight," says Ms. Dinnerstein. "She completely redid the way I played the piano -- how I held my hands, how I thought about my body while playing."

It was a painful transition. "Studying with Maria was like enlisting in the Marines," says the pianist. "I had lessons twice a week, two hours long, and I had to bring new music each time. I was practicing seven hours a day and rarely getting any praise from her." Once, Ms. Dinnerstein began to cry during a lesson. In a disdainful voice, Ms. Curcio reportedly asked, "Do you have a cold?" Now transparency of sound is one of the hallmarks of Ms. Dinnerstein's performances.

The years ahead include a number of first appearances with major orchestras for Ms. Dinnerstein. But recitals will probably remain the core of her career for the foreseeable future. This winter brings her debut at the Kennedy Center and a return engagement at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Next spring, she returns to Wigmore Hall in London; an important debut at the Vienna Konzerthaus is scheduled for next

fall. "I view a recital as being this prolonged state of heightened awareness and focus . . .," she says. "I feel more alive than I do in normal life."

*Ms. Jepson writes about classical music for the Journal.*