



## **SFist Interviews: Pianist Simone Dinnerstein**



*Pianist Simone Dinnerstein, picture by Lisa-Marie Mazzucco.*

### **Cedric Westphal April 23, 2010**

Pianist Simone Dinnerstein is, if you will, the anti-Lang-Lang. When at age five, he was giving his first public recitals, she would not approach the piano for another couple years. When he fast became a global celebrity, she toiled in relative obscurity for a while, paying her dues in smaller concert halls. Yet, both of them will play around civic center within this week: Lang-Lang just performed his concerto for iPad this past Monday at Davies Symphony hall, and Simone will

return for a piano recital at Herbst Theater on Saturday at 8pm. She also rejoined Lang-Lang at the Sony label (her first release with Sony is an all-Bach recording due this fall), even though we can't confirm she received the same \$3 million he did.

What happened? She just recorded in her thirties a self-produced interpretation of Bach's Goldberg Variations (it's not her playing, but that's the music you've heard when Hannibal Lecter brutally murders two police officers), which got so celebrated it ended up distributed by the Telarc label and recommended by, among others, New-Yorker music critic and McArthur genius Alex Ross. That propelled her in the stratosphere. In a freaky confluence, Alex Ross will be reading from his book *The Rest Is Noise* tomorrow on the same stage, but at 10am, with pianist Ethan Iverson from the jazz trio the Bad Plus providing the musical illustration.

Simone kindly took our phone call to describe her meteoric rise to the forefront of the classical scene, her recital program and the delivery of her son.

**You will play a very eclectic program: Aaron Copland's Piano Variations; Anton Webern's Variations for Piano, Op. 27; Franz Schubert's Four Impromptus, Op. 90; Philip Lasser's Twelve Variations on a Bach Chorale, "Nimm von uns, Herr, du Treuer Gott;" and Bach's French Suite No. 5 in G Major.**

*Simone:* I like programs that mix up chronologies and make you think about each piece of music in a different kind of way based on the music that surrounds it. Everything on that program is based on small form that create a larger whole. Either in the sense of being a set of variations, or a set of short impromptus, or a suite of dances. All have multiple small parts. And I like that kind of musical structure.

It's a combination of being very concise, and having a very clear thoughts that is conveyed very quickly combined with having to think about a bigger structure that combines those small parts. Since I was a child, I liked small things; I like short stories. I think that short stories are more interesting to read than novels; I think that miniatures in music, small character pieces, are more effective than Mahler symphonies for me. I'm just more drawn to that.

Composers are challenged by having to do something that is very short. My favorite Schumann pieces are his miniatures, he has a perfect ability to say what he means in that format. But when you hear the Schubert impromptus, you can play them individually. They work perfectly if you play one, you don't have to play all four. But when you play the four of them together, it plays as a sonata, as if they were meant to be played together.

**Can you tell us a bit more about the piece in your program by a living composer, Philip Lasser?**

This is a very beautiful set of variations on a Bach choral. He is a NY-based composer, but he also has a French background. I think that is present in his writing. It does sound strangely as a combination of American and French. You hear elements of American sound in it, even jazz, and parts of it that sound like French Impressionism. I think his music is very unusual, he has a sense of writing for the piano, in terms of the colors of the piano and it fits very well under the hand. It sounds modern, and it definitely sounds like he has his own unique voice, but it also sounds like

he's aware of the western classical tradition in his music. He is not writing in the style of an old composer, neither is he writing in the style of a contemporary composer.

**In an interview with Anne Midgette, you said: "I do have a particular way of playing, and if you don't like it, you don't like it." In your words, what is particular about it?**

*Simone:* I think that I have certain things that are important to me, certain musical values. I find important to have a sense of breath in the music, and to feel flexible. And I don't feel to play something in a particular way because there is a tradition of playing it that way. When I'm working on a piece of music, I look at the score and try to understand what are the important aspects of the composition, and that informs how I interpret the music. It informs it much more than knowing the tradition of playing at a particular tempo, or that it was stylistically appropriate not to use the pedaling. I think more about what I see in the music itself.

I'm not thinking of how people are going to react to how I'm playing. I'm just playing it how I mean to play it. Sometime people really don't like it because that's not how they're used to hearing it. And some people really like it because they think it makes sense. There is a kind of tradition, a style of playing Bach, you keep a very constant pulse that is unwavering, that is motoric. That's a way that many people, especially pianists, are taught to play Bach. They play very evenly, very motoricly. I don't find that interesting. When I look at the music, I don't see that the music bears any relationship to playing like that. So that's not how I play it. Some people might say: that's not how to play Bach. I would just say I don't find it interesting to play Bach motoricly.

**You also said in that interview: "with all my idolization of Glenn Gould, it turned out I didn't play it like him at all." Did you lose some of that idolization? Was Gould wrong?**

I don't think there's an absolute way of playing, that's one of the most extraordinary things about Bach. Bach's music can bear many many interpretations which are all interesting. With Gould's playing, the mistake is to try to imitate his playing; and a whole generation of pianists have tried. His playing is very very lyrical, but in a different kind of way that you would think of being lyrical. He used a kind of detached articulation, but he varies that articulation and shaped it into something lyrical. My playing is lyrical, but I don't use that kind of a touch, that more detached touch. I tend to play much more legato, I try to sound more like a human voice or like a string instrument.

I think that Gould was a real inspiration to me, just by the fact that he had a real vision of the music, that he totally believe them and that's exactly how he played it. That's a tremendously difficult thing to do, to have so much imagination and the conviction to follow through your imagination; that you would play something that might not be accepted by people. That has been very inspiring to me in terms of trying to listening to my inner voice and what the music spoke to me.

**At thirty, did you feel that you had missed your chance at a performing career?**

*Simone:* I did not think that I was going to have the career that I have now. I knew that I was going to be a musician, and I was going to perform, but I was playing a lot of concerts in smaller

venues, not big concert halls. I was getting ready to accept the fact that my career was going to be more low-key. And I think there were times when it was a bit hard that people would not understand how I was playing. But when I recorded the Goldberg Variations, it was not a breakthrough into what people responded to my playing, but it was actually a breakthrough in how I played, it was a turning point in my ability to realize on the piano the ideas that I had in my head.

**Your career took off after the birth of your son; were you concerned you would be too busy with a young child?**

*Simone:* I think things never happen the way you expect them to happen. From when I was very young, I started thinking how on earth was I going to have a family and have a career? It was always in my mind. I assumed that once I had a child, it would really slow me down. In fact, it's when I had a child that my career took off. I talked to a lot of different women in different professions, and the exact same thing happened to them. Perhaps once you have a child, you become much more focused and do better work. Or else people have children when they are more mature and would work harder anyway. There is something going on there, and I'd like to hear the reasoning.

**You practiced the Goldberg Variations while you were pregnant. In the movies, Hannibal Lecter listens to the Goldberg Variations before killing. Are you trying to raise a psychopath?**

*Simone:* It's funny that you mention that, because actually when I was in the hospital, when I went into labor to have my son, I wound up having an emergency C-section, I was very nervous about that, it was very stressful. So I brought the recording of Rosalyn Tureck into the operating room, and my son was born to this recording. But my husband said that midway through the whole procedure, it was scary being in there, he suddenly flashed back on that scene in the Silence of the Lambs, and he thought, what are we doing playing that music during the delivery of our son!