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CAN SIMONE DINNERSTEIN DO IT AGAIN?

The chart-topping pianist trades
'difficult second album' insights
with country star **Tift Merritt**

OVER 160
REVIEWS
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tenor reveals the inside
story of his riveting
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of Vaughan Williams's Tallis Fantasia

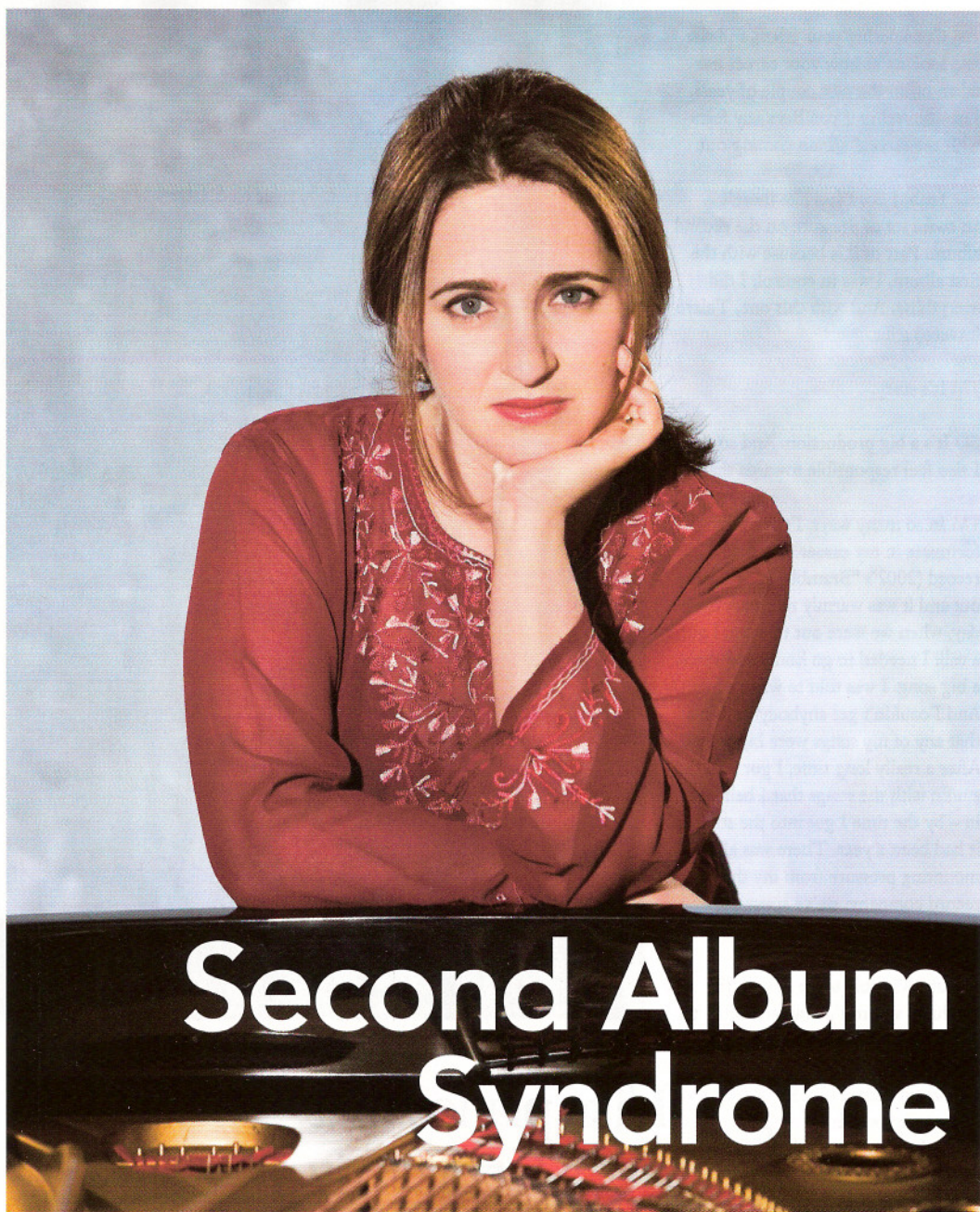
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Second Album Syndrome

It's not easy following a debut best-seller, Simone Dinnerstein tells fellow performer **Tift Merritt**



Merritt: from mic to mag

Tift Merritt, 33, the American alternative-country singer-songwriter knows how Simone Dinnerstein is feeling. Her debut album "Bramble Rose" was listed by *Time* as one of the top 10 CDs of the year. Then she had to face those Second Album Syndrome worries with "Tambourine", though it went on to garner public acclaim. **Simone Dinnerstein**, 35, hit the headlines last year when, a virtual unknown just months before, her widely acclaimed Bach *Goldberg Variations* disc entered the Classical Billboard charts at No 1. With the music world's eyes and ears focusing on whether

she can emulate that success with her follow-up album, "The Berlin Concert", how does the Brooklyn-based artist respond to that pressure?

As Merritt interviewed Dinnerstein and they shared their experiences, they immediately hit it off. Both are passionate about music, are around the same age, given to genuine self-reflection, and share a common friendship and fandom with the starry country singer and songwriter Lucinda Williams. By the end of the evening, they were already chatting about the possibility of a musical collaboration. *Americana Bach*, anyone?

TM Considering your talent and rise, and looking at how your career has taken off in the past couple of years, I'm wondering if you have any fears with the second album coming out.

SD Yeah, I do. I feel like there's an awful lot of pressure on the second album. Part of it is because with the first album, I was in control; I did everything. And with this one, Telarc invested a lot.

TM It's scary.

SD It's a big production. And so I also feel responsible towards them.

TM In so many ways, I've been so fortunate in my career. My first record [2002's "Bramble Rose"] came out and it was warmly received. One day, when we were out touring, I got a call: I needed to go home and write a big song. I was told to write a hit. And I couldn't get anybody to think that any of my songs were big songs. After a really long time, I got into the studio with the songs that I believed in – by the time I got into the studio, it had been a year. There was all this mounting pressure from my then record company: we've spent the money on you, tick-tock. And they never liked my band.

But I was able to go in with this producer whom I'd always wanted to work with, George Drakoulias, and we made my dream record [2005's "Tambourine"]. I couldn't sleep for three days. I tried to exercise myself to sleep, and I couldn't do it. I lost my voice in the process of recording. But was on many levels a dream come true, and I was willing to sweat and cry and bleed to do it. And it was nominated for a Grammy. But then I was dropped by my label because "Tambourine" didn't sell enough copies.

SD Oh my God. Even though it was nominated for a Grammy?

TM [nods] But it was all for the best. I always think that someone should cross-reference that story because I'm not bitter. Looking back on just all



I like pianos that have a lot of clarity, that can really sing



the amount of stress that I felt, though – I play so many shows, and I could go from here to the stage and really be fine. But the record is such a big thing, and you don't get a lot of practice.

SD Well, this new release of mine is a live recording, and so that was the most high-pressure concert I'd ever had, and it was really scary. I was playing in Berlin, in this amazing concert hall [the Berlin Philharmonie], and my manager, who is German, had told me that Berlin audiences were really tough, that they would boo you if they didn't like you. I also proposed the idea of this recording to Telarc, and I'm the one who's been saying it'll be great...

TM "It's going to be great! Don't

worry! Don't worry!" [laughs] There's a fear that comes with driving.

SD And even with this one, it's somewhat unusual in that it's a mixed solo programme [Bach, Beethoven and Philip Lasser]. More often these days, classical CDs tend to be a programme of one composer. So that's different. There's also a premiere recording of a new piece by Philip, who's a friend of mine whom I think is fantastic. So I'm really anxious on his behalf, because I want everyone to love this piece. I was also very stressed because I didn't know what piano I was going to have for the recital, and that's a really integral thing for me. I'm really fussy about the pianos I play.

TM What it is that you are looking for in an instrument?

SD I like pianos that have a lot of clarity to them and that can really

Dinnerstein seeks to challenge, not just entertain, her audience



sing, and also where the action is ultra-responsive. I don't want to work to get a response. Another thing about that concert is that the hall has a very interesting shape. It's not a theatre in the round, but the performer is kind of in the middle, with part of the audience going around the piano, and I'd never played in a place where I'd see the audience. I was obsessing over that, that there would be people right there whom I would see while I was playing. Who knows what they'll be doing and how they would be responding? The funny thing was that after the concert, I had absolutely no recollection of anyone sitting in front of me. I realised that most of the time when I play, I play with my eyes closed, so it didn't really matter that anyone was right there! [laughs uproariously]

TM So did you make the recording all in one concert?

SD They also recorded my rehearsals, which was actually a great thing. My producer, Adam Abeshouse, is just amazing, and was very clever about that in particular, because by the time of the concert I felt very free. I felt that I had everything covered, that I had the whole recording all ready and then I could just play the concert. But when we listened back to all of the recordings, the concert sounds completely different than the rehearsal. It was so weird, and I was so much happier with the concert recording.

TM How did you choose the music?

SD One of the things about a recital programme is what the repertoire selections say about the person playing. For you, of course, it's about what you write. For me, it's about what reflects my interests. I like to play programmes that have a kind of architecture to them, and that have some kind of unifying theme. I don't usually play programmes that are about entertaining the audience; I do things that are pretty demanding.

So for this concert, I thought it would be interesting to combine German and American music, since I'm an American playing in Germany. We couldn't include the full recital on the recording, but I started the concert with Copland's Piano Variations, and then the Webern Variations. So that was more of the German-American dialogue as well. I also like to mix things up chronologically, to play for example something written in 2001 before something that was written between 1821 and 1822.

I also wanted to have the feeling of Bach going through the whole concert. So I start with a really uplifting piece of Bach, the French Suite No 5 in G major, BWV816, which is so joyous. And then I played the new piece by Philip Lasser, the Variations on a Bach Chorale, which is really dark and based on a sad Bach chorale, "Nimm von uns, Herr, du treuer Gott". I think that Philip has a really unique voice today; it's tonal and beautiful music, and it has a distinctive harmonic language. It combines a kind of French, impressionistic sensibility with a very American, open sound. The Beethoven sonata I played, Op 111,



'I have some core belief in myself' – Dinnerstein on overcoming her self-doubt

is very contemporary-sounding. The second movement is a chorale and variations, and even though it's Beethoven's own chorale, it really sounds like Bach. And the other movement has a lot of contrapuntal writing that sounds very much like Bach.

TM Between your story and your playing, you strike me as someone who is very brave. Where do you get your courage?

SD I don't know, really. I normally feel extremely vulnerable.

TM Well, you can't have courage without fear.

SD I'm also very sensitive and easily cry at anything. But when it comes right down to it, I think I'm very tough underneath it all. However, there are lots of things that push my buttons and make me upset. I think

that somehow or other I have some core belief in myself, which I've only realised about myself the past few years. I think I've probably had it the whole time, but I didn't realise it. I don't know where that comes from. I certainly have a lot of self-doubt.

TM But sometimes that's a very important ingredient in being an artist. You have to hold yourself accountable on some level for your work.

SD I don't ever want to get dogmatic about anything; I think it's important to question yourself all the time. At the same time, if you don't believe in yourself, there's really no point in doing it. I mean, why subject a whole audience to what you're doing otherwise? ☹

■ Dinnerstein's "The Berlin Concert" on Telarc will be reviewed in the next issue