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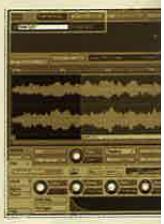

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Onstage with John Mayer keyboardist Andy Burton.

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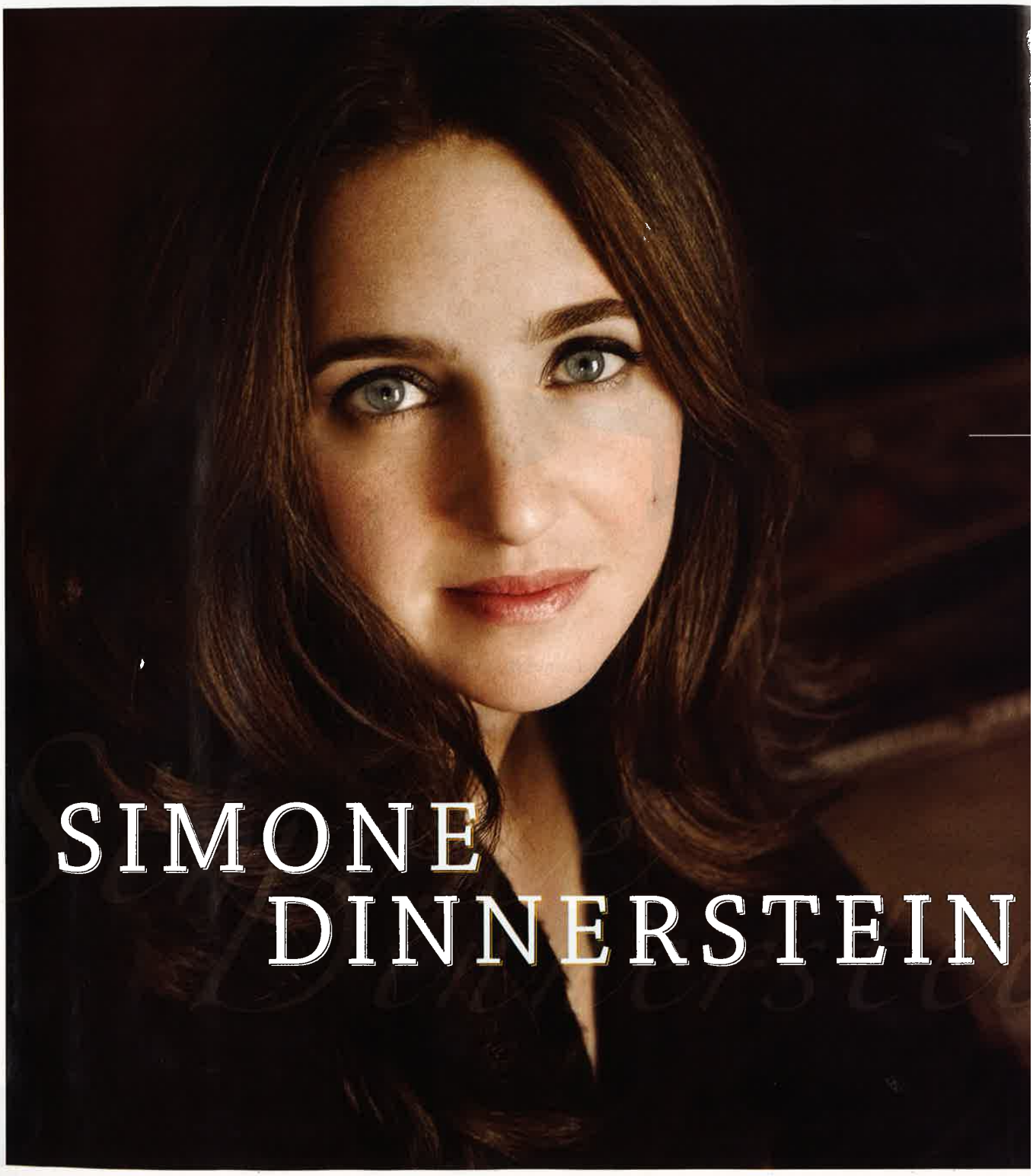

SIMONE DINNERSTEIN

BACH'S ARDENT ADVOCATE ON THE POWER OF *Simplicity*

BY JENNIFER CARPENTER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISA MARIE MAZZUCCO

Since the critical and commercial acclaim of her self-funded 2007 recording of Bach's *The Goldberg Variations*, pianist Simone Dinnerstein has become nothing less than a rock star of Baroque and classical music. More importantly, she has made it her mission to evangelize and popularize not only Bach, but classical music in general, making it approachable and fun in a way that recalls the efforts of such giants as André Previn. Having just released her latest CD, which interprets Bach's Inventions and Sinfonias, she took time out to speak with us about the appeal of these supposedly entry-level pieces, the importance of music education, and how open ears are every bit as crucial as dexterous fingers.

What made you decide to record an album of Bach's Inventions and Sinfonias?
Well, I have in mind a multi-year project where I'll record all of Bach's keyboard works, so I thought it would be interesting to start with my first introduction to Bach. And for most pianists, the first Bach pieces that they ever played were the Inventions. So, as a kind of beginning of my own narrative of this journey, I start with the ones that he himself wrote as a guide to keyboard players.

I understand that the Inventions have a great deal of meaning for you personally.
Well, my earliest memories of Bach have to do with the Inventions and my own experience of playing them and wanting to play certain ones that were beyond my reach at that point. I remember being nine or ten years old, and friends of mine were able to play the *D* minor Invention, and it was too hard for me. I was really jealous! I think I learned so much, not only about how to play Bach but how to play any kind of music on the piano by studying the Inventions, because you're learning how to balance and manipulate two voices that are equally important. A lot of piano music isn't written that way. A lot of it places much more emphasis on the right hand having melodic dominance and the left hand being more of a harmonic support. Learning something where it's so clearly outlined that the two hands are equally important carries over to how you see *all* music. You start to see music as being made up of multiple lines and how to think about music as many voices, as opposed to one thick texture. The Sinfonias were pieces that I listened

to a lot as a teenager. I was really obsessed with Glenn Gould's recording of them, and I remember listening to them a lot with my husband (who at that time was my boyfriend), and I guess I have romantic associations with those pieces because I listened to them a lot when I first met him.

In your opinion, what is *inventive* about a Bach Invention?

Well, there are so many things that are inventive. I mean, in his preface to the works, he wrote about how this was a guide to keyboard players or, as he said—keyboard "lovers"—as to how to think about two- or three-voice counterpoint, and how to play *cantabile* in a "singing" way. The Inventions go through different keys so it's also exploring the color of each harmonic area. And Bach, being Bach, wrote these stunning pieces of music as practical teaching exercises. It's almost like all of his musical output has been concentrated into two or three voices. Each one is quite short but they have very different characters from one to another. Sometimes you'll have something that's almost a double aria from a cantata or you'll have something that sounds like a movement of a Brandenburg Concerto that has a kind of orchestral sound. I think there was a tremendous amount of imagination that went into writing these pieces.

Since Bach doesn't specify tempo in the pieces, how did you decide on the proper tempo for each one?

I think tempo is one of the exciting challenges about playing Bach because you can really go many different ways. Sometimes you have a particular type of dance in mind that would give you a sense of a tempo—a fast dance, a slow dance, a walking dance, that kind of thing—that gives you an indication as to what would feel natural in terms of playing. Also, I think his choice of the *pulse* of what kind of notes he's using—sixteenth-notes, eighth-notes, 6/8 time signature, and so on—those kinds of decisions also can give you a clue.

That said, I do think you can make the Inventions work at many different tempos, and that points out a really fun aspect of learning Bach: You can make an argument for many different ways of playing the same piece of music. Also, some of the decisions I made were based on the context of a particular piece being in the context of *all* of the Sinfonias and Inventions. I think if I just played one by itself it might make sense to play it in a certain way, but I wanted to make sure there was enough variety between them. Also, I was working with quite a temperamental piano. It's really one of my favorite pianos and I've used it for many recordings, but it's old. It's a 1903 Steinway and it seems to want to do things a certain way.

How does your interpretation of Bach differ from what Glenn Gould has done?

His recording of these pieces is actually one of my favorites of all of his work, but to be honest, I stopped listening to it once I started working on my own. I feel like the way he plays these pieces is extremely personal. The piano that he used was really a bit of a "honky-tonk" piano which had all of these problems, and that actually made that recording very authentic. Most people learn these pieces on their family's instrument, which is usually not concert-grade. So there's something very homey about Gould's recording, and I like the fact that the piano has imperfections. I wouldn't even want to compare myself to him because he's such a deity, but I don't think I think about the music in the same way when I'm playing it myself. I think about it as being much more legato. When I'm playing, I'm thinking a lot about breath and shape and contour. My articulation is just completely different than the choices that Gould made.

How have the recordings of the Inventions changed over time? How did you put your unique stamp on them in comparison to those trends?

It might be better to talk about general trends in Bach performance, not specific to the Inventions. Before Gould, there was a much more romantic approach. If you listen to Edwin Fischer or Myra Hess, when they played Bach on the piano, they were using all of the piano's abilities. In other words, they were using the pedal, they were using a range of dynamics, and it was much more about seeing Bach through the lens of their own period, pre-war and during the war, during which people were really into individuality.

Then, Glenn Gould had a unique vision of the music that was in sync with who he was. After him, I think there arose a generation, even two generations, who thought he represented how Bach should sound. But, of course, he *wasn't* the norm. So, now I think that playing Bach has become a little bit more uniform. People are much more leery of using any pedal when they play, for example.

I just saw András Schiff perform the Goldberg Variations when I was in Seattle, and he didn't use any pedal at all. He is now not using any pedal when he plays Bach. I think we've been very much dominated by the movement of historically authentic performance and thinking about how to make the piano sound like the harpsichord or the clavichord, and that's affected everything: tempo, articulation, tempo, and dynamics. I guess I don't really think of it that way when I'm playing. I feel that I'm playing it on a *piano* and that I should use the full range of the instrument because, to me, it only brings more out of Bach's music. It doesn't take away from the music—it just shows more layers of complexity.

What's your favorite Invention and why?

At the least of my favorites is the Invention in *B* flat major. There is such a beautiful feeling of openness and there's something about it that's almost yielding. I think that about other pieces he's written in the key of *B* flat; there's something about that key that he just felt was open, warm, and almost like a hug. My favorite Sinfonia is the one in *E* flat major, which is actually very unusual. In all of the other Sinfonias the three voices are very equal and they all trade off similar material, whereas in that one it's written differently, as the bass line is really like a *continuo* part. It's basically a two-part Invention plus *continuo*, so it's much more like a wind duet or a vocal duet. It's so beautiful.

Which edition of the Bach Inventions do you think is best for the aspiring pianist to start playing?

The one that I use now is the Bärenreiter edition, which I guess is one of the most recent and historically informed editions, and it's very nicely printed. But there is an edition for students that I had used in the past that serves as a guide to ornamentation, and provides other useful information. Now, when I'm learning a piece of music, I don't want to see all of that stuff. I want to be able to think more freely about it myself, but when you're a student, you really need help in knowing how to look at a piece of music. You're learning how to be a detective.

What do you think is the most important thing that a pianist can learn by mastering these Inventions?

Well, the most obvious thing is that your left hand is going to get an awful lot of attention. You're learning how to play complicated patterns and to play expressively with a left hand, and that's not usual. This is probably the first experience of having to do that as a pianist. And the other thing you're learning by doing this is to multi-task your hearing so that you can hear two voices simultaneously. That's actually the hardest thing. What's even harder than playing them at the same time is being able to *listen* and follow the two lines as they're going along. We're not used to that. There's really nothing in contemporary popular music that's like this; it's all dominated by one voice.

I was thinking about the music that my son has been listening to. He listens to hip-hop, and Jay-Z has done all of these different collaborations with artists, so you'll have something like Jay-Z and Justin Timberlake, but they don't ever sing at the same time. If they do, one is very

much subservient to the other, like a call-and-response. Most pop music is like that, so we're not used to thinking that there could be two voices that are equally important and that we actually have to pay attention to both at the same time. The biggest thing any student will gain from studying Bach's Inventions is that it will guide them into that type of listening.

Given this "multitimbral" nature of Bach, what are some good practice techniques for mastering it?

I've noticed for many students that they should practice hands separately. You need to know exactly what you're doing with each hand. I also think that with Bach, it can be really useful to sing one of the voices while playing the other one. It's hard to do and it might not be practical in some of the Inventions that are hopping around, but in some of the ones that are slower it could be possible. If one of my students had a certain part where they had an imitation [*i.e.*, a repeating musical phrase] taking place at different times, I'd have them play it as a unison just to hear and see that they're doing the same thing, just at different times. Obviously, the other thing is breaking it down so you're not taking on the whole piece all the time, but instead practicing and mastering one section of it before you move on to another.

What is the difference for you between performing the music live and a studio recording?

I think they're completely different experiences. I love the process of recording because it's very private and for me, it's not at all about playing to an audience. I'm just playing to an ideal that's in my head. My inner ear hears it and my outer ear tries to recreate that, and in a recording session I can keep on working on it until it comes out how I like it. My dad is an artist, and it's much more like what he does, where he'll spend a whole morning working on an image of an eye, shading it, and then he thinks he shaded it too much so he erases some of it, and he takes a walk and comes back and looks at it again with a fresh perspective. It's a process.

A live concert is completely different because it's happening in real time and there's an audience, which may or may not be affecting how I feel. Also, you're dealing with whatever piano is there in the concert hall. In recording sessions, I have a piano technician there for the entire time, so if there's a trill that isn't working well, and I realize it's because one of the hammers isn't moving rapidly enough, then I call him in and he fixes it. In a concert, there's nothing you can do—you just keep on going! Sometimes I've faced pianos that have such stiff actions that there's no way I can play at the tempo I want to. It just won't work on that instrument, so I have to alter how I'm playing it to make it work. Or I'm playing in an acoustical space that's very wet or very dry, which changes how you play. So there are a lot of external circumstances that interfere in a concert. But at the same time, there's something very special about it being live and being in the moment. There's really nothing else like it.

Why do you think Bach's Inventions are still performed? What makes them live on?

In terms of them being played and studied, I think that they're almost like a type of gospel for keyboard players. They show us how to play Bach, and they show us how to think about music in the way that fairy tales or myths show us how to think about narrative. We all grow up being told fairy tales, and those story lines tend to be repeated in novels. We see parallels in history and even in studying great literature, we always go back to those folk tales. I think there's a quality in the Inventions that is almost like that, in that it's showing us the *bones* of telling a musical story. This is what counterpoint is. Then we hear counterpoint in all other music afterwards because we heard it in Bach first.

***Keyboard* covers a lot of synthesizer music and gear, so we have to ask: Was Wendy Carlos' *Switched on Bach* ever an influence on you?**

I wouldn't call it an influence, though I did think it was pretty fantastic.

Have you ever used an electronic keyboard?

I'm just starting to explore digital keyboards. I'm not exploring the different sounds or effects, but I'm actually planning a project where I'm going to play the Inventions in public schools in New York and DC, and Yamaha is lending me one of their digital keyboards so that I can go from classroom to classroom with it. They're much more portable [than acoustic pianos]. I think that there have been so many advances in technology and they're really quite nice, actually. Yamaha also makes the Disklavier piano in many different sizes. You could even get a real concert grand that's a Disklavier. It's a regular piano; it's an acoustic instrument. But there's this technology wherein it records exactly how you play the keys and the pedals and it retains that information. So you could have a performance that you gave repeated, and you could see the keys moving, and they'll move exactly how you moved them. That's already amazing enough, but if you link to another Disklavier in the world, you could play in New York and the Disklavier in Australia will play exactly as you're playing. It's pretty incredible. It's amazing. So I'm going to be doing some concerts and master classes on the Disklavier that will then be "broadcast" all over the country via these instruments.

How can classical musicians attract a larger audience these days?

I think that we have a serious problem in the United States in that there's definitely a waning of interest in classical music. I think it's quite tied to the fact that people are not studying instruments. Part of what creates interest in music is actually *playing* music! When kids do study music in public schools, they're studying band and they're not playing classical—they're playing contemporary popular music. I find this challenge so overwhelming that I try to deal with it by just thinking about where I live and how I can reach out to that community.

I live in Park Slope in Brooklyn. My husband teaches at our local public elementary school, which also happens to be the school that I went to as a child, so I feel very connected to this community. I think that schools are more natural gathering places for communities than, say, religious institutions or community centers. A lot of things happen in the schools; you go there to vote, so it's a sort of hub. So, I created a concert series at our local school called Neighborhood Classics. What I do is I invite other musicians to give evening recitals, donating any profits from ticket sales to the school and the PTA. This series has become incredibly successful. Our neighborhood is one where most of the parents are my age and mostly professionals, but they wouldn't normally go to a classical music concert. It's noteworthy that this is the demographic that *used* to go to classical music concerts, but now they don't, for many different reasons. They need to pay for child care, there's no time to go from Brooklyn to Manhattan, and so on. But they can come to these concerts, and I've found that they're as much fun for the parents as they are for the kids.

I also organize concerts where musicians who would normally play at night will come and do a presentation for the kids during the day. And the children know me now; they know that my favorite composer is Bach. This is all a very long-winded way of saying that I wish this could happen all over the country, because I think that if I ever can do this—and I hope that I can—I'd like to start a nationwide program where a musician would adopt a local series and create a relationship with the community where the community then trusts that the musicians who come to perform are going to be great because they know that their resident musician is great. The goal is that kids get to know the musician and start going to concerts in first grade, so that by the time they're in fifth grade they've gone to quite a lot of concerts and have a feeling of identification with music and the people who play

it. I think that could be quite an interesting movement to start—kind of a revolution!

What was it like to perform at the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women?
That was one of the most memorable concerts I've ever given. It was extremely moving. I went in with a certain set of expectations and it turned out it was quite different than I thought it would be. I had performed in a men's prison several years before, and had kind of assumed that the men would be happy because, of course, some young woman is coming in to play for them. But with the women, I was worried that they would see me as being some kind of a threat or from a different world. You know, I think "woman to woman" can sometimes be so complicated, but they were so warm and welcoming. They were crying and telling me stories about their families and about their children who studied music. They also told me how *they* studied music, and I told them about my son and my family. They really listened to the music, and I could tell it really affected them. From that experience, I learned not to prejudge. It completely surprised me.

How did you market your crowd-funded *Goldberg Variations* CD so successfully, given such a tough market for classical music?
I think it was probably a combination of things. I think part of it is the actual sound of the music. I was true to how I felt the music to be and I think that people can hear that, so I think that might have stood out a bit. But also for my first CD, *The Goldberg Variations*, there were two press pieces that were extremely helpful: a feature in the *New York Times* and a feature on Slate.com, and they both came out the day the CD was released. I think they both had an enormous effect. The other thing that I think has built my career in the United States is radio. National Public Radio has been so good to me. I've done many interviews with them, and I've had a lot of people write me or come up to me after concerts telling me that they heard me first on the radio. They'll say that they either heard an interview, or that the station played something from my CD and that's how they got to know me.

With radio, it's important to be aware that your ability to talk about the music, how you play, and the ideas that you have are all aspects of being a musician that musicians aren't taught. When you're at conservatory or wherever you study music, you often think of it as solely honing your craft and becoming a better instrumentalist. But in fact, in order to function in the world, you have to be able to articulate with words why you play a certain way and to reach out to people. I think that the fact that I've been able to do that has really helped my career a lot, and that would be something that I would encourage young people to develop.

What was your inspiration for your album *Night* in collaboration with Tift Merritt? It stretched the boundaries of your classical field.
Tift and I had become friends. We met through an interview for *Gramophone* magazine, which had decided to do a feature about me when I came out with my second album on Telarc. They thought it would be interesting to have a musician from another genre interview me and they chose Tift. We had this really interesting conversation. I had listened to her recordings and she had listened to mine, she'd come to a concert, and we really hit it off and realized we had a lot in common as musicians and as people. So, we started going to each other's concerts and hanging out socially, and thought it would be really special if we could collaborate, but we didn't know what kind of shape that would take. It took a while for us to work it out, but a lot of it had to do with choosing the right songs and exploring how we could interpret them in a way that felt true to ourselves while exploring a different medium.

I understand that you actually opened up the piano and hammered on the strings on this album?
In one or two of the pieces I pluck the strings *à la* George Crumb. It created a sound similar to a dulcimer, which is much more from the tradition that Tift comes from. She's a singer-songwriter in the alternative-country genre, and [that sound] comes from the folk tradition—Appalachian folk music.

What are some newer works from living composers that you're going to be performing this season?
I just premiered this piano concerto that Philip Lasser wrote for me, called "The Circle and the Child." I first performed it in Atlanta and I'll be doing it a few more times, as well as recording it. I'm very excited about this work. It's a beautifully orchestrated piece. Philip wrote it *for* me and it really feels that way—he understood my sound and my sensibility. I'm also going to be playing a piece this year that Nico Muhly wrote for me. It was commissioned by the Terezin Foundation. I premiered it last year in Boston at Symphony Hall, but I'm taking it on the road with me this season in my recital program, so I'm excited to be doing that. Looking ahead next season, I'm going to be premiering a piano quintet written for the Chiara String Quartet and myself by Jefferson Friedman, which was commissioned by the Library of Congress, so we're going to be premiering it down there. I'm looking forward to that.

You said that instrumental training is as much about how to listen as how to play. Can you tell us about a time when you heard something in a piece that you hadn't heard before, that then changed the way you played it?
I had a particular experience when I was studying with Maria Curcio in London. I was playing Schumann's *Carnaval* and I had thought about it as being kind of traditionally romantic piano writing, and I was really focused on the melody and on bringing that out. I created a sort of hierarchy of lines that was guided by the melody. Maria played it for me and pointed out that there were quite a lot of different voices going on at the same time, and that the articulation was very different between them. I hadn't looked at it carefully enough. I hadn't looked and seen that actually there were *four* voices playing, not two. *Carnaval* is a piece that's about almost like a festival of many different characters. Sometimes there are a few in the same piece and they're all running around at the same time. I hadn't heard that until she played it for me and as she played it, which made me realize that I had to look a lot more closely at the score to try to hear every sound that was there on the page. I couldn't just gloss over some of it. Every note was important. It was a real turning point for me to hear her play that, because it made me look at *all* music differently afterwards.

What do you like to listen to that might surprise your fans?
One of the people I love very much is the songwriter Leonard Cohen. Not everyone knows who he is—maybe that's surprising.

If there's one thing you hope your listeners walk away with, what would it be?
When I think about children studying the Inventions, oftentimes children that I've spoken to—not the ones that I've taught—have thought that Bach was boring or mathematical or dry and were not at all inspired by his music. I think that these pieces are so beautiful and imaginative and personal and inspired. So first of all, I hope that children will listen and be excited by the music, and that that will make them want to play it. I think that's the best result of a recording: if somebody wants to then play the piece. Plus, these are pieces that people do play and can play, as opposed to recording a piece of music that's extremely complicated—like when I recorded Beethoven's Opus 111—not every single amateur pianist or student can sit down and play that. I think that the Inventions, on the other hand, successfully reach a much larger group of people because of their playability. I hope people will experience for themselves what incredible music Bach is. ♫