

# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## Two rising stars light up the National Symphony Orchestra

Conductor Roderick Cox and pianist Hélène Grimaud take on a high-energy program of Salonen, Ravel and Prokofiev

By [Michael Andor Brodeur](#)

Classical music critic

Yesterday at 2:55 p.m. EDT



**Listen to article** 6 min

A heavy dousing of rain kept a share of the seats empty at the Kennedy Center on Thursday night, with at least one critic considering filing a scathing jeremiad against his own worthless umbrella. But despite the low clouds and ongoing power-showers, a couple of stars still managed to shine.

One of these was Roderick Cox, a young firebrand conductor who, since winning the prestigious Sir Georg Solti Conducting Award in 2018, has been lighting up podiums around the world. The filmmaker Diane Moore recently released “Conducting Life,” a short documentary charting seven years of the Georgia-born, Berlin-based conductor’s insistently upward trajectory. His turn in front of the National Symphony Orchestra was one of the most exciting drop-ins from a guest conductor I’ve experienced yet.

The other star was the French pianist Hélène Grimaud, whose appearance for the evening’s centerpiece — Ravel’s reliably rapturous Piano Concerto in G — gave an astonishing show of her proficiency and poetic sensibilities. Her most recent recording, “The Messenger” (with Camerata Salzburg), is a pairing of pieces by Mozart and the contemporary Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov that offers a similar display of Grimaud’s sensitivity not just as a player, but also as a listener.

Thursday’s program bookended the Ravel concerto with “Helix,” an accurately titled 2005 piece by the Finnish composer and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen, and Sergei Prokofiev’s homage to “the free and happy man,” his Symphony No. 5 in B-flat of 1944. (In addition to a repeat of this program at the Kennedy Center on Saturday, Cox will lead the NSO in the Prokofiev at the Anthem on Friday night.)

Way back in 2008, Salonen made the mistake of saying something quotable: “My focus moved from an ideological principle to a pleasure principle,” he told the L.A. Times in reference to his 1997 piece “L.A. Variations.” Since then, the quote has followed him around like a kite.

Salonen, who in 2020 became the 12th music director of the San Francisco Symphony, certainly composes works suffused with bittersweet pleasures. Am I going to mention Sibelius? Of course I am. Salonen has an admittedly Sibelian (?) sense of how to create weather within his music — a haze of barely there strings, gales of brass, gracefully diffused light. But I wouldn’t say “Helix” is concerned with pleasure — its rewards come from its precise precarity. It’s not a work for those with a fear of heights.

Cox flicked “Helix” on like a light switch and threw his arms into its continuous ascent. As it stayed true to its name, rising in a tightening coil like the funnel of a tornado, a cloud of chromatic dust rising in its wake, I recall feeling around in my bag for my inhaler. A piccolo and a cello traced a line like a bead of sweat. The pulse of the music routinely skipped beats. We weren’t halfway through its 10 minutes before I was overcome by the feeling I get on the escalators at Dupont Circle: an inverted momentum that sucks you forward as you stay still.

Its vertiginous rise climbed to a summit of chimes and came to a crashing halt in Cox’s sure hand.

Any pleasure principles remaining after the cyclone of the Salonen were happily taken up by Grimaud, who, once situated at the Steinway they rolled out, threw herself into revealing Ravel’s intentionally entertaining concerto. Completed in 1931 — a process both interrupted and influenced by Ravel’s “Concerto for the Left Hand” for Paul Wittgenstein — the G Major is a feat on several fronts.

It demands an almost impossible effortlessness on the part of its soloist, who must navigate all manner of pianistic brinkmanship and textural effects (like the thin scrim of high notes at its outset), but also extreme delicacy and patience (its adagio assai is anchored by a solo as long and light as a cirrus cloud).

And from its conductor, it demands not just mastery of Ravel’s own skillful orchestration, which often seems to rise from the body of the piano, but also the composer’s savvy interlocking of vernaculars. Cox did a fabulous job of realizing Ravel’s incorporation of jazz like the innovation it was. Its iconic five-note figure prefigures decades of American experimentation with our own music — it doesn’t just sound like “An American in Paris,” it sounds American, in Paris. (When George Gershwin asked, as was his habit, Ravel for composition lessons, Ravel made the mistake of saying something quotable: “Why should you be a second-rate Ravel when you can be a first-rate Gershwin?”)

Cox coaxed a marvelous stereo glow from the strings throughout, and Grimaud moved freely between hard-hammered accents and exquisitely limned lightness. Her finesse through the expansive solo that opens the slow second movement sustained its melodic body while reveling in what felt like endless space. (There’s more than a little Satie at work here, too.)

Gorgeous flute and oboe work threaded the movement together. And while Cox and Grimaud were in sync for most of the movement, their dynamics diverged toward the adagio's end — both landing at slightly different angles. They did seem to patch things up for the most part in the presto: Grimaud racing beneath gleaming arcs of clarinet and between busy bassoons and diving brass, and Cox running a visibly tighter ship toward the sharp stop of the finale.

The high point of Cox's night was its closer. First performed in Moscow by the State Symphonic Orchestra of the U.S.S.R. in 1945, Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony is one of the most thematically rich symphonies of the past century. Its melodies bear the same peculiar shapes of those that lend his ballets such beguiling lines, here worked into an architecture that — like the Salonen — seems to ceaselessly climb and fall at once.

Thus, the triumphant guts of this symphony, especially in its first movement, feel beset by a cramp of angst, which makes its relentless reaching for higher ground only more impactful. Cox brought this out with a deft balance of the darkening harmonies across the brass (no mean feat in this hall!), letting them churn and crash like restless waters against a cliff wall.

The second movement, a galloping scherzo in triple time, was brimming with character, and benefited greatly from Cox's locomotive approach. Its bustle of puffing trumpets and pizzicato strings were cut by entrancing interjections of oboe. In an echo of the Salonen, the movement quickened and tightened into a racing reverie that burst like a firework.

It was in the third and fourth movements that Cox and the NSO found a powerful symbiosis. Pining piccolos, flutes and strings were strung through the third with the tension of the suspension bridge. Cox made an expansive landscape, rich with color and depth — a special shout-out to Stephen Dumaine, whose steady tuba was the glue.

The fourth, with its tenderly rendered restatement of the opening themes through a choir of cellos, opened into a scintillating finale. Cox brought it to a crest with hopeful strings, leaping piccolos and optimistic blasts from across the back of the orchestra. To Prokofiev, it was the sound of the human spirit, but in Cox's hands it sounded like his own story: Taking what he already had and imagining himself anew.

*Roderick Cox leads the NSO in Prokofiev's Fifth at [the Anthem](#) on April 8; "Hélène Grimaud Plays Ravel" repeats April 9 at the Kennedy Center. [kennedy-center.org](https://www.kennedy-center.org).*