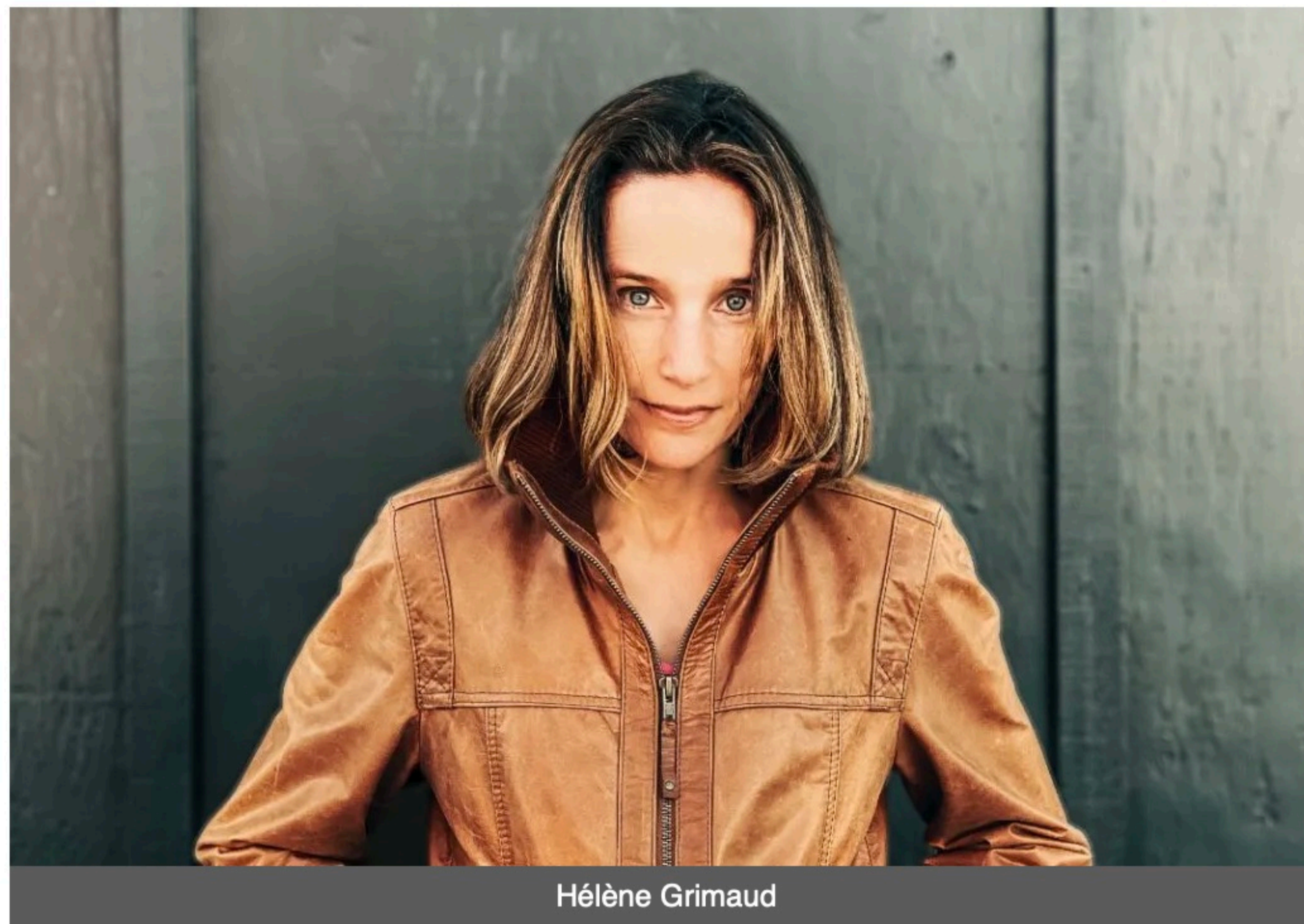


Hélène Grimaud's delicious Mozart a highlight in Philadelphia

By [Linda Holt](#), 11 December 2023

French pianist [Hélène Grimaud](#) returned to the stage at the Kimmel Center this weekend to join Yannick Nézet-Séguin and the Philadelphia Orchestra in a delicious performance of Mozart's *Piano Concerto no. 20 in D minor*, K466. These artists have remarkable chemistry, Nézet-Séguin looking on in wonder at Grimaud's flawless solo passages, Grimaud glancing at the conductor with a smile that was almost a wink. It didn't hurt that they gave off a radiance of their own, Yannick in benign biker leather and Grimaud dazzling in golden sequined pants and a sparkling black jacket.



Hélène Grimaud

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The D minor concerto is one of a pair that Mozart wrote near the end of his brief life which is underpinned by visions of foreboding and dashes of delight. Grimaud's was not a performance for early music or original instrument specialists. Rather, it was a potently dramatic exploration of a Mozart we seldom hear, oscillating between furrowed brow – almost Beethovenian ardor – and snippets of star-crossed joy. Nézet-Séguin seemed to have a spiritual connection with his orchestra throughout the three movements, at time sharing smiles or responding with a nod of surprise as these musical weavers spun their rich web of sound. Grimaud's playing was perfectly in sync with the musicians, precise attacks followed by long narratives of lyrical storytelling, with such freedom you would think she was improvising the entire score.

The only weak spot was the rip-roaring velocity of the final movement. Too fast, Philadelphians! This movement reels with dramatic tension, pocketed with nooks and crannies where orchestral soloists need to breathe. For an encore, Grimaud played Rachmaninov's *Études-tableau in C minor*, Op.33 no.3, full of dark, smoky flavors and tantalizing introspection.

This was followed by the world premiere of Esteban Benzecry's *MUYUY, The circle of life* (a Philadelphia Orchestra commission), and the *Symphony no. 4 in D minor* by Florence Price, a work Nézet-Séguin has championed and recorded.

A French citizen with a South American heritage, Benzecry's creation is a sprawling masterpiece, drawing on 91 musicians including a bevy of novel percussion instruments during the course of a 12-minute tone portrait of the cycle of human life. What a torrent of sound, an unleashing of vivid imagination! Right from the get-go, Benzecry overwhelmed the ears with abrasive discords and screeching crescendos, unafraid to confront the listener with life as painful as it is sweet. On the plus side, there were many fine solo phrases including by guest principal trumpet, William Gerlach. On the negative side, much of the work was too loud, frankly, and I hope future performances take into consideration the many listeners who suffer from tinnitus, migraines and similar afflictions.

Florence Price's Fourth Symphony is a jewel, part of the long-ignored Black composer's musical legacy. Many of her works are still being restored, suggesting we may not know how large an orchestra she intended. I would have preferred a medium-sized ensemble, showcasing the brilliance and clarity of the composer's unique compositional style.

★★★★☆ [2](#)

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Reviewed at Kimmel Center: Verizon Hall, Philadelphia on 10 December 2023

PROGRAMME

Mozart, Piano Concerto no. 20 in D minor, K466

[Rachmaninov](#), Études-tableau in C minor, Op.33 no.3

Benzecry, MUYUY, The circle of life (world premiere)

Price, Symphony no. 4 in D minor

PERFORMERS

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, *Conductor*

Hélène Grimaud, *Piano*

The Philadelphia Orchestra