

# Pianist and wolf advocate H el ene Grimaud chases ‘a sense of inevitability’

For her two recitals in Boston and Groton, she’s taking a back-to-basics approach with what some call the three B’s of classical music: Bach, Beethoven, Brahms.

By [A.Z. Madonna](#) Globe Staff, Updated January 17, 2024, 9:00 a.m.



Pianist H el ene Grimaud. MAT HENNEK

Given pianist H el ene Grimaud’s body of work, some might expect her upcoming Boston recital debut to include some sort of theatrical concept, or at least some unusual repertoire. Within the past decade, the France-born pianist has played concerts from the middle of a reflecting pool; released several albums, most with a unified theme such as water or memory; and become one of the most high-profile champions of the music of Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov.

But for her two recitals in Boston and Groton (Jan. 20 and 21), she’s taking a back-to-basics approach with what some call the three B’s of classical music: Bach, Beethoven, Brahms. More specifically, “it’s pieces that I’ve been living with for a long time, which I played early on and then let rest for a decade, two decades, three decades,” she said in a phone interview from California.

Beyond that, she said, “I think it’s a very spiritual program, which doesn’t make any pretenses. There’s nothing obvious about it, and it’s actually quite intimate.”

Grimaud doesn’t claim any particular religious beliefs, but the way she makes music and the way she talks about it both hint at a certain openness to faith in something larger. “I was always intrigued by the unseen, and the inexplicable,” she said.

Whatever she performs, she’s not shy about putting her own stamp on the piece. Her phrasing is elastic, her accents and dynamics sometimes unorthodox, and she knows which changes are the right ones to make when she feels “a sense of inevitability,” she said. “You could do it differently, but you really can’t. In that moment, that is the only option.”

Last year, Grimaud collaborated with the Los Angeles-based chamber ensemble wild Up in a program that juxtaposed Mozart with Silvestrov. The match was suggested to wild Up founder and conductor Christopher Rountree by Boston Symphony Orchestra

president and CEO Chad Smith, who was then president of the LA Philharmonic.

“There’s a certain kind of monastic seriousness about the way she plays the instrument,” Rountree said in a phone interview. “It’s rare that we spend four rehearsals on a piano concerto, but there was something about her presence and her focus. She’s someone that imbues a room with a very purposeful energy.”

She has also brought that energy to the “only thing” she claims has ever distracted her from her music career: wolf conservation. In 1999, she founded the [Wolf Conservation Center](#) in South Salem, N.Y., which participates in the federal species population recovery programs for the endangered Mexican gray wolf and red wolf. Now, 25 years on, she’s thrilled that it’s “grown to the point where it can do more and more significant work while staying true to its original mission.”

The first beneficiaries of anything the center does are always the wolves themselves, Grimaud said, but it’s also been a “beautiful human adventure,” she added, to see people “bringing their expertise into such a project, for no other reason than the cause. That’s really an inspiration.”

Whether it’s making music or working with wolves, she said, “nothing else exists” while she’s in the thick of it. When a concert is truly special, she said, it isn’t because she has “dominated the material” enough to control it. Being well prepared allows her to be more expressively free, “but that extra layer, the one that makes all the difference, it doesn’t come from you. It’s like a visitation that takes place, and there is no recipe for when and how that happens.”

In that way, it’s similar to her experiences of synesthesia, as she’s described them. [Synesthesia](#) is a neurological condition in which distinct sensory wires get crossed in the brain; some synesthetes might taste flavors when they read certain words, or see shapes whenever they smell certain aromas. Since childhood, music has caused

Grimaud to see colors, she said.

“It was one of the preludes from the ‘Well-Tempered Clavier’, from Bach. And it was in F-sharp major and I started to see this vivid stain of this orange-red shade, which didn’t really correspond to a real-life color. And it started to float in front of me,” she said.

Music doesn’t always cause her to see a “Fantasia”-esque light show, she clarified. “Later on, I realized it seems to show up when I’m in an altered sense of perception, which takes place when you’re already fully engaged.” What’s more, she doesn’t play with “any more ease or inspiration” if her synesthesia is triggered versus if it isn’t, she said. “It sounds like a superpower, but it isn’t.”

What makes the difference is being able to go “in the tunnel” before a performance, where everything that isn’t energy directed toward the concert falls away. “I like that place, because it’s a place of retreat,” she said. “It’s like a ritual.” It can be harder when she’s traveling on the same day as a performance, but if she’s already in the same city, it’s “a very natural process,” she said. “You wake up in the morning, and the temperature of the air is already different.”

## **HÉLÈNE GRIMAUD**

Presented by Celebrity Series of Boston. At NEC’s Jordan Hall, Jan. 20, 8 p.m. ; Groton Music Center, Groton, Jan. 21, 3 p.m.. 617-482-6661, [www.celebrityseries.org](http://www.celebrityseries.org)

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