

# Hélène Grimaud enthralls in unforgettable recital of Beethoven, Brahms, and Busoni

[Mark Gresham](#) January 31, 2024

*French pianist Hélène Grimaud. (2023, helenegrimaude.com)*

## CONCERT REVIEW:

**Hélène Grimaud**

**January 27, 2024**

Spivey Hall, Clayton State University

Morrow, GA – USA

Hélène Grimaud, piano.

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN: *Piano Sonata No. 30 in E major, Op. 109*

Johannes BRAHMS: *Three Intermezzi, Op. 117*

Johannes BRAHMS: *Seven Fantasien, Op. 116*

J.S. BACH/ trans. Ferruccio BUSONI: "Chaconne" from *Violin Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004*

**Mark Gresham** | 30 JAN 2024

One of the hallmarks of **Spivey Hall's** programming is the series of superlative pianists it attracts for solo recitals. This past Saturday, gathered listeners were treated to the much-anticipated performance by French pianist **Hélène Grimaud**, who regaled the audience with music of Beethoven, Brahms, and Busoni.

Grimaud opened the program with one of Beethoven's distinctive late piano works, the *Piano Sonata No. 30 in E major, Op. 109*, noted for its intimate character, compactness, and use of polyphonic variation, including fugal elements.

Like his final *Piano Sonata No. 32, Op. 111*, Beethoven's Op. 109 defies textbook notions of "sonata" and centers its focus on the third "theme-and-variations" movement.

The first movement opens "Vivace" with a passage that seems to musically emulate the grammatical construct of apposition between intervals in the right and left hand, followed by a free and expressive "Adagio" passage. These "A" and "B" type sections alternate throughout the first movement, which segues into the even shorter parallel minor "Prestissimo" second movement, achieved simply by holding down the piano's sustain pedal between them (as indicated in the published score).

Who better to follow Beethoven than Johannes Brahms? Here Grimaud presented amiable performances of a pair of consecutive opus sets, first *Three Intermezzi, Op. 117* before intermission, then his *Seven Fantasien, Op. 116* after the break. Together, these two sets marked the end of Brahms' 13-year break from composing solo piano pieces. Grimaud approached them with a less dark and moody manner than commonplace, tempering their Germanic character with what felt like some reflective French insight.

But at the end of the Op. 116 came an amazing thing: Grimaud only took only a moment of breath at the end of the *Fantasien's* final *Capriccio in D minor* before launching into Busoni's transcription of Bach's *Chaconne in D minor*, as if it were yet another piece in the Brahms set. The heightened musical impact of doing so was tremendous and thoroughly exciting — a brilliant, musically unforgettable choice by Grimaud.

The rest of the *Chaconne* lived up to the promise of that opening moment. It's a signature work for Grimaud (and my own favorite of Busoni's transcriptions for piano). New York Times critic Anthony described Grimaud's performance of the *Chaconne* in 2006 as "iron fists in velvet

gloves," but in the intervening years, her interpretation has further evolved (as well it should with any pianist) to an even more mature and compelling concert apex.

In this concert especially, what Busoni posits about Bach's music reflects the beginning of the concert with *Beethoven's Op. 109* Sonata and the influence of Bach's *Fugue in E major* (from *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II*) upon it. The musical evolution of the program comes full circle, powerfully unifying it beyond a simple inclusion of the "Four Bs."

Grimaud returned to the stage for two encores: Rachmaninoff's *Etude Tableau, Op. 33 No. 2* and the *Bagatelle, Op. 1 No. 3* by Ukrainian composer **Valentyn Silverstrov**. Notably, this is the second time this particular *Bagatelle* has been performed at Spivey Hall by an esteemed pianist. Almost exactly one year ago, Norwegian-born Leif Ove Andsnes performed it as part of his January 2023 recital. No wonder the attention: now 84 years old, Silverstrov, Ukraine's best-known living composer fled to Berlin, Germany, in February 2022 as a refugee from the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine and has become a prominent musical spokesman for his country. The pairing of these works as encores also reminds us of Rachmaninoff's flight from the Russian Revolution when he and his family left Russia permanently, settling in New York in 1918 and eventually becoming an American citizen.

From programming to execution and her generous after-concert greeting of fans, Grimaud made her afternoon Spivey Hall recital truly unforgettable. ■

## EXTERNAL LINKS:

- Hélène Grimaud: [helenegrimaud.com](https://helenegrimaud.com)
- Spivey Hall: [spiveyhall.org](https://spiveyhall.org)

About the author:

[Mark Gresham](#) is publisher and principal writer of EarRelevant. he began writing as a music journalist over 30 years ago, but has been a composer of music much longer than that. He was the winner of an ASCAP/Deems Taylor Award for music journalism in 2003.

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