

Hélène Grimaud shines with Brahms, Beethoven, Bach Program

[February 19, 2024](#) [Jeremy Gee](#) [Classical](#), [Music](#)

I recently watched a youth orchestra recital by a particularly talented group of young musicians.

While the players were all technically proficient – notes in the right place, bows moving in unison – only one of the players exhibited the kind of musicality one sees in truly great musicians. That violinist – okay, it was my ten-year-old niece – played intuitively, evincing a connection to the music and an understanding of what Vivaldi was trying to communicate.

This was on my mind as I attended pianist Hélène Grimaud recital this past Sunday at Koerner Hall. Grimaud is a capital-M Musician, one who, by connecting with the music, connects the audience to the music as well. Grimaud – despite her fabulously sparkling outfit, surely one of the best to grace a Toronto stage this year – is not a flashy player. She simply sits, plays exquisitely, and then stands up and walks away. Judging by her performance, I wouldn't ask for anything more.



"Wildlife conservationist, human rights activist, writer, performer."

That's how pianist Hélène Grimaud is described in the programme notes, and it's an apt description for a musician who has taken a decidedly unusual path to excellence. Grimaud debuted spectacularly, winning accolades in her native France as a young, virtuoso pianist in the mid-1990s. Then, following a chance encounter with a wolf (in northern Florida, of all places), Grimaud set her sights on wildlife conservation, rejigging her touring schedule to focus on setting up a wildlife habitat, which she did, in 1999, with the [Wolf Conservation Center](#) in rural New York state.

For the past twenty-five years, Grimaud has split her time between the Center and a fairly demanding touring schedule. One gets the feeling that, if she didn't love performance so much, she'd probably have "retired" to full-time conservation long ago. There's a wonderful Deutsche Welle mini documentary on YouTube about her, it's [well worth a watch](#).

Grimaud's Koerner recital was a prime example of why we should be grateful Grimaud still spares some time for us lowly humans. The program opened with Beethoven's lyrical Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major, op. 109, which begins with a strikingly beautiful first movement that combines bold vivace with a lovely, expressive, and unusual adagio. To my ears, the rest of the Sonata can't hold up to that opening movement, but at Grimaud's fingertips, it's all rather lovely.

The bulk of the program was taken up with a selection of recital-ready pieces from Brahms, including seven Intermezzi and three Capricci. These pieces were... interesting, though to my less-trained ear I had a hard time differentiating one from the other. I found the three Intermezzi for Piano, op. 117, more compelling than the seven "fantasies" that came after, and which began to blend together.

The afternoon performance closed out with an unusual arrangement of a single movement from Bach's Partita No. 2 for Violin in D Minor. The arrangement by early 20th century composer Ferruccio Busoni has its critics – it certainly contains a lot more flourishes on keyboard than in the original

violin version – but I for one thoroughly enjoyed Grimaud’s rendition, easily the “showiest” of a decidedly non-showy performer.

For more on the RCM/Koerner Hall 2024 season, click [here](#).

For more on the Wolf Conservation Centre of South Salem, New York, click [here](#).