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The first thing one noticed when entering Carnegie Hall Wednesday night for the piano recital by Hélène Grimaud was where the piano was.

Instead of its usual spot near the front of the stage, the instrument was positioned well upstage, toward the back wall. Was this, one wondered, a way of helping the French pianist feel alone with her thoughts, instead of scrutinized by a capacity crowd in a famous hall?

A more likely answer emerged as the opening bars of Beethoven's Sonata in E major, Op. 109, pealed from the instrument, and it had less to do with psychology than with acoustics. "Resonances" was the title of one of the pianist's albums, and on this night she had apparently found the sweet spot where her uncommonly sonorous playing would have the maximum effect in the hall.

Certainly that resonance helped hold together the disparate elements of the sonata's fantastic first movement. Even while making the Vivace extra lively and the Adagio extra leisurely, Grimaud preserved the emotional push-pull that flowed through Beethoven's wayward inspiration.

In contrast, she took a little off the composer's marking *Prestissimo* for the second movement, knowing that fast, impetuous music sounds fastest when played strictly in time, not helter-skelter. And she downright luxuriated in the finale's *Andante* theme, taking the repeats even more slowly and softly, as if reluctant to part with the lovely tune. Getting down to business in the variations, she brought out the "Goldberg" connection in a scintillating presto, swimming canons, and a hearty fugato before wafting up and away in heavenly trills—missing no opportunity to build up resonances with the pedal and the Carnegie sound.

Brahms's Three Intermezzos, Op. 117, are poems of tender feeling with undercurrents of regret or anxiety. Their keyboard layout and sonority are instantly recognizable as Brahms, especially in Grimaud's gorgeous voicing of melody, chords, and bass octaves.

No. 1 in E-flat major began as a sweet lullaby, but darker thoughts intruded. No. 2 in B-flat minor reversed that scheme, with a drooping theme over falling arpeggios and a ray of warm sun trying to break through in the middle. No. 3 muttered darkly, actually smiled in the middle section with chiming high octaves, and reluctantly returned to a muscular version of its dark theme. Grimaud's voicing, particularly the ring of her octaves, produced a rich Brahmsian resonance without muddiness.

Brahms's Fantasies, Op. 116, is actually another collection of intermezzos leavened with the fiery pieces the composer called *Capriccios*. Grimaud took the latter pieces fast, building up enormous resonances, especially in the hammering octaves of the opening *Capriccio* in D minor.

The intermezzos in this group, though often animated by swaying dance rhythms, were harmonically elusive enough to inspire Arnold Schoenberg to write his landmark essay "Brahms the Progressive," arguing that the German master was no conservative fuddy-duddy but a prophet of atonality. On Wednesday, Grimaud explored these pieces with exceptional sensitivity and flexible tempos, following every turn in the harmonic road.

"Let Busoni be Busoni" might have been the motto of Grimaud's performance of the Chaconne from Bach's Violin Partita in D minor, BWV 1004, as arranged by the late-Romantic composer and pianist Ferruccio Busoni. While today's listeners may hear the famous violin Chaconne as a miracle of expression using just a box, four strings and a bow, Busoni heard a mighty Romantic piece straining to get out, and he "liberated" it with all the piano theatrics he could muster.

On Wednesday, Grimaud was fully with Busoni's program, reveling in the lightning scales, sweeping arpeggios, piled-high counterpoints and especially the massive build-up of resonance, making her nine-foot-long concert grand sound more like half a mile. The natural, uninterrupted flow of the performance through the 32 variations, from legato chords to airy toccata to exuberant octaves, swept the listener along all the way to the deep, fortissimo final chord.

At the end, the audience was instantly on its feet, and Grimaud responded with three encores: a simple rendition of Valentin Silvestrov's gently tuneful *Bagatelle II*, and, for the many fans of her Rachmaninoff, lush and shapely accounts of two of that composer's *Etudes-tableaux*, in C major and in C minor ("Grave").

Carnegie Hall presents cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason and pianist Isata Kanneh-Mason performing works by Mendelssohn, Fauré, Natalie Klouda and Poulenc, 2 p.m. Sunday. carnegiehall.org (<http://carnegiehall.org/>)



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