

# Each to Chaconne: To the ‘Three Bs,’ Pianist H el ene Grimaud Makes a Case for Adding a Fourth: Busoni

Her energetic performance calls to mind the heroic days of late 19th- and early 20th-century recitals.



H el ene Grimaud at Carnegie Hall, December 11, 2024. Jennifer Taylor



**JOHN BENNETT**  
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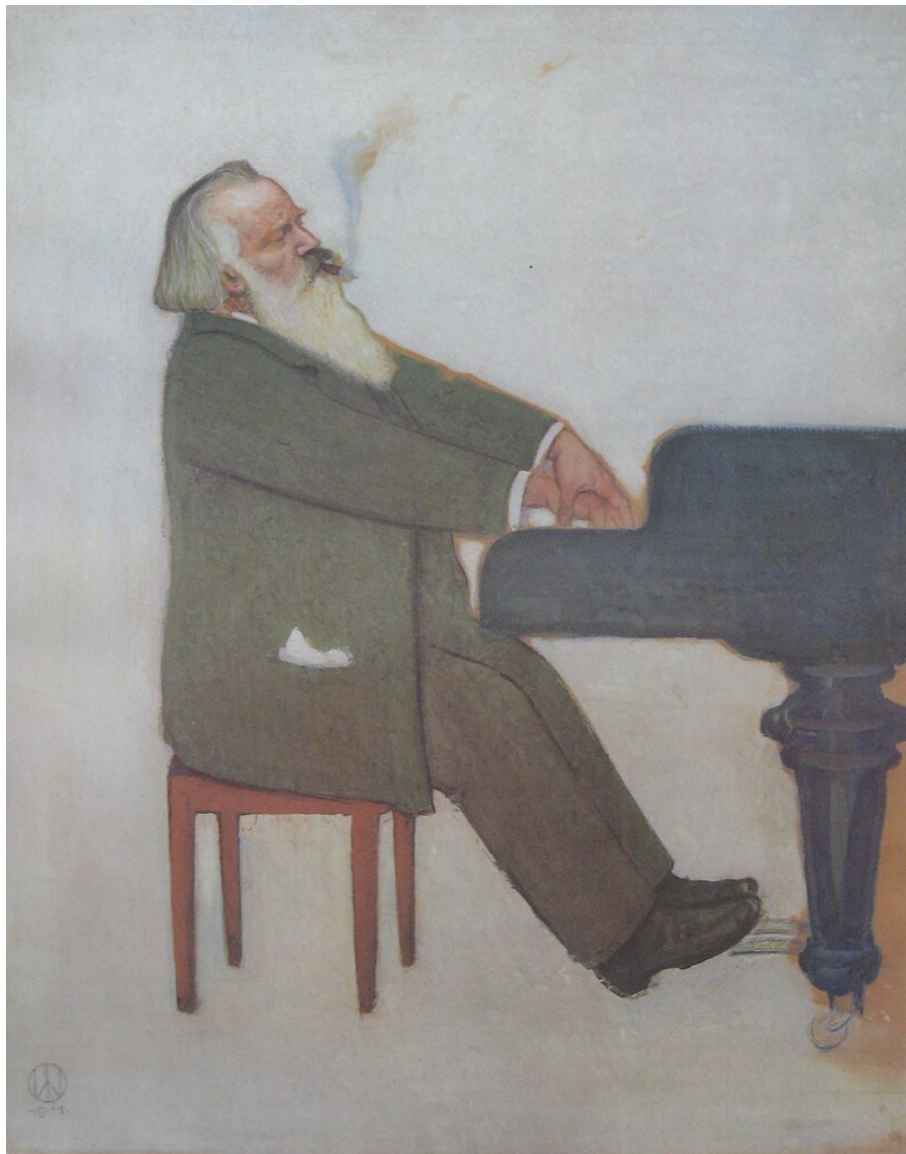
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To the “Three Bs” of the classical pantheon — Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms — pianist H el ene Grimaud makes a strong case for the addition of a fourth: The composer, pianist, and conductor Ferruccio Dante Michelangiolo Benvenuto Busoni.

That, at least, is one takeaway from Ms. Grimaud’s Wednesday evening Carnegie Hall recital, which featured a rousing performance of the Italian composer’s arrangement of J.S. Bach’s “Chaconne in D Minor.”

Ms. Grimaud had the good sense to save the Chaconne for the conclusion of her program. For starters she played one of the great late piano sonatas of Beethoven, the Opus 109, famous for its lengthy third movement.

“Songlike, with the greatest inwardness of feeling,” were the composer’s instructions for that movement, and throughout the sonata Ms. Grimaud struck a fine balance between its introspective and monumental qualities.



Willy von Beckerath: 'Brahms at the Piano,' 1896. Via Wikimedia Commons

Speaking of monuments, it was unfair, if superficially perceptive, when Tchaikovsky groused of Johannes Brahms’s music that it was “pedestal upon pedestal with no statue in sight.” This is meant as no slight to Brahms, whose

autumnal Intermezzos, Opus 117, offered in Ms. Grimaud's rendering a reminder of why Thomas Mann called him a composer of "somber riches and dark abundance."

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The Russian composer's quip, though, did come to mind in some of the less compelling stretches of Brahms's *Fantasies*, Opus 116, composed the same year. Even so, the work's jauntier moments evoked the composer's youthful days in Hamburg, where legend has it that he played the piano in saloons, or even lower establishments, to make ends meet.

Brahms's own appraisal of Bach's *Chaconne* for solo violin was that "on one stave, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings." It led the typically-reserved Brahms to rhapsodize that "if I imagined that I could have created, even conceived the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind."

That didn't prevent Brahms from arranging the *Chaconne* for piano — in a relatively subdued version for the left hand. Busoni, though, was a Late-Romantic maximalist who dabbled with modern innovations like atonalism. It's no wonder, then, that he was undeterred by the expressiveness of Bach's original instrumentation and dared to improve the work, expanding its scope in his [arrangement](#) for piano.

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Composer Ferruccio Busoni in 1913. Via Wikimedia Commons

Ms. Grimaud's energetic performance of the Chaconne called to mind the heroic days of late 19th- and early 20th-century piano recitals, when maestros were celebrities whose tours spanned the globe as readily as they spanned the octaves. Ignacy Paderewski's star power burned brightly enough to extend to politics, leading him to serve as Poland's prime minister after World War I.

Busoni's arrangement of the Chaconne is the kind of piece with which these maestros used to rouse audiences — even in the farthest reaches of the balcony. “With its octave doublings, transpositions, and occasional newly composed lines,” critic Harry Haskell writes, it is “almost as much Busoni's work as it is Bach's.”

At classical music performances there tends to be a direct relationship between an audience's boredom level and the frequency of sneezes, coughs, catarrh, and other such bronchial disturbances.

Such was the intensity of Ms. Grimaud's Chaconne on Wednesday that these disruptions were confined to such snuffles as were inaudible. Or, it could be that any outbursts were swallowed up in her thunderous sonorities. For that, it would seem, we have Busoni as much to thank as we do Bach.