

# Hélène Grimaud

**Start time:** 7.30pm

**Approximate end time:** 9.30pm, including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

## Programme

**Ludwig van Beethoven** Piano Sonata No 30 in E major

1. Vivace, ma non troppo – Adagio espressivo – Tempo 1

2. Prestissimo

3. Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung (Song-like and with the most ardent feeling)

**Johannes Brahms** Three Intermezzi, Op 117

No 1 in E flat major

No 2 in B flat minor

No 3 in C sharp minor

**Johannes Brahms** Seven Fantasias, Op 116

No 1 Capriccio in D minor

No 2 Intermezzo in A minor

No 3 Capriccio in G minor

No 4 Intermezzo in E major

No 5 Intermezzo in E minor

No 6 Intermezzo in E major

No 7 Capriccio in D minor

**Johann Sebastian Bach/Ferruccio Busoni** Chaconne

**Hélène Grimaud presents a typically individual programme, exploring music by three titans of the keyboard – Beethoven, Brahms and Busoni.**

Much of Hélène Grimaud's recital tonight is devoted to composers' late music; she opens with Beethoven's 30th Sonata, in E major, Op 109. This is the first of his final triptych, which – as was very much the norm by this point in his output – offers a study in contrasts both from piece to piece and within each sonata. Strikingly, this 1820 work follows the mighty *Hammerklavier* Sonata and couldn't be more different in mood and scale.

It begins nonchalantly, with an understated theme that sounds almost improvised, weightless. But if we know anything about late Beethoven, it's to expect the unexpected, and this motif is soon interrupted by a slower, passionate outburst and a switch to the minor. From the juxtaposition of these contrasting ideas Beethoven builds an entire movement, albeit a compact one.

The next movement follows without a break, but any idea of continuity is immediately scotched with a *Prestissimo* that may be miniscule in length but is a veritable firecracker, hovering between fury and fear, its jagged rhythmic contrasts unsettling the ear.

One of the many innovations we find among Beethoven's symphonies, string quartets and sonatas is the way that the traditionally lightweight finale inherited from Haydn becomes musically more substantial. That of his 30th Sonata is a case in point, with a sequence of six wide-ranging variations on a theme that echoes the unassuming quality of the opening of the piece. Unassuming it may be, but the idea proves ripe for the composer's imaginative flair and we journey from a yearning first variation, via the second and third, which increasingly break free of the theme itself, to a lilting fourth and a highly contrapuntal fifth. As we reach the final variation, two late-Beethoven traits make their mark: the way he gives the illusion of a speeding-up through the use of increasingly smaller note values, and a liking for enveloping the music in ecstatic, almost otherworldly-sounding trills. Finally, we hear one last utterance of the theme, unadorned, all the more moving for its simplicity.

Brahms was a pianist before he was a composer: it was at the keyboard that he made his most personal statements, not only in barnstorming, epic works such as the two piano concertos, the sonatas and virtuoso variation sets but also in the late sequence of masterpieces grouped together as Opp 116–19.

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Linking all these works, of which we hear the 10 pieces that make up Opp 116 and 117, is a sense that they need no audience – in fact the very notion seems almost crass for such private musings. Within them we find Brahms exploring the piano's sonorities and contrapuntal possibilities, allied to a range of colour, tone and mood that at times seem to turn the instrument into a veritable orchestra, at others suggesting the lucidity of the most delicate chamber music.

He completed these pieces during the summers of 1892 and 1893, which he spent holidaying in the Austrian Alps, at the spa town of Bad Ischl. Clara Schumann was a particular fan, seemingly understanding them rather more readily than she had some of her own husband's creations. The three Intermezzi of Op 117 are lullabies in all but name; the last is particularly affecting, the murmuring main theme rendered sombre by its deep register, contrast arriving with an inner section that teases the ear with Brahms's favourite syncopations.

In the seven pieces of Op 116, a sequence of capriccios and intermezzi, we're reminded of Brahms the virtuoso in the four capriccios, which range from the tumult of the first and third to a churning, striving final one; the intermezzi offer contrast, the first of them (No 2) quietly resigned, with a confiding inner section, while No 6 is tellingly plaintive. Brahms's lyrical gifts are at their most heightened in No 4, forming the heart of the set, literally and metaphorically.

Brahms had, for his time, an unfashionable interest in music of earlier eras, which led to such works as his *Handel Variations* and the remarkable arrangement (for piano left hand) he made for Clara Schumann of Bach's solo violin Chaconne. That was in 1877; some 16 years later it piqued the attention of the great Italian pianist-composer Ferruccio Busoni.

The form of a chaconne, which in its earliest incarnation was a lascivious Spanish dance, had by the time of JS Bach become cemented as a set of variations on a short harmonic sequence. Bach loved setting himself formal challenges and the Chaconne that closes his Second Violin Partita – and lasts virtually as long as all the preceding movements combined – is understandably famous. In it, he presents a chordal theme (already a tricky manoeuvre on the violin), and proceeds to produce a sequence of 62 brief variations. That, however, gives little idea of the riches within it. Add Busoni to the mix and what's striking is the way he remains structurally very faithful to the original, yet embraces the possibilities of the piano, filling out the writing to create a luxuriant richness, and introducing tempo changes and phrasing that bring it into the late 19th century. In so doing he endowed the piano with one of the greatest of all transcriptions.

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## Performers

**Hélène Grimaud** piano

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