



Music must have both lightness and density Hélène Grimaud

When the classical pianist Hélène Grimaud came to Stockholm to perform with the Swedish Radio Symphony, we placed a pair of BeoLab 5 speakers in her hotel room. She had never heard the speakers before, and we suggested she should bring CDs with music she knew well, in order to be better able to evaluate their performance.

“I was unpacking, and really only had a few minutes before leaving for the first rehearsal. But I placed Brahms’s 2nd Piano Concerto in the player, and went on unpacking. And then, when the solo horn began its duet with Serkin’s piano, in the first movement, I simply had to stop and listen. The timbre of the sound was astonishing, so true. There was a sense of honest physicality to the sound, without exaggerations.”

Hélène Grimaud is in the top echelon of classical pianists. Since her debut in the late 80s, she has played with most of the world’s leading orchestras and conductors. She is now with Deutsche Grammophon, where she has produced two recordings that explore musical connections between composers and performers. Like most top musical artists, she finds most music systems lacking.

“I have often been asked by friends to come and listen to their high-end setups, and it’s difficult. I work inside the music, by the piano, often in the centre of a symphony orchestra. There I hear everything. And when I listen to recorded music, most of the time I hear how much is missing. True sound has an inner space, it’s hard to describe. Purity, clarity – and also lightness and density, all combined. This seems contradictory, but it isn’t ... music should both embrace you, that’s the lightness. And it should penetrate you. To do that the tone must have precise density.”



Grimaud is known to have such an acute sense of place when performing that she will adjust her playing to the acoustics of the moment. This also means that her playing is best when she is in an actual performance space, and not in a studio.

“Years ago, I had a terrible recording experience. I was doing Rachmaninov’s 2nd, in a studio, to microphones. And I had no return sound, nothing I could respond to, no colours to the sound. I would produce a tone, and it died immediately, like a lead balloon. They thought I could get it from headphones! I need a response from the place in which I play, it engages me, guides my playing. It is only then I can achieve the balance between control and freedom required to drive music to the heart.”



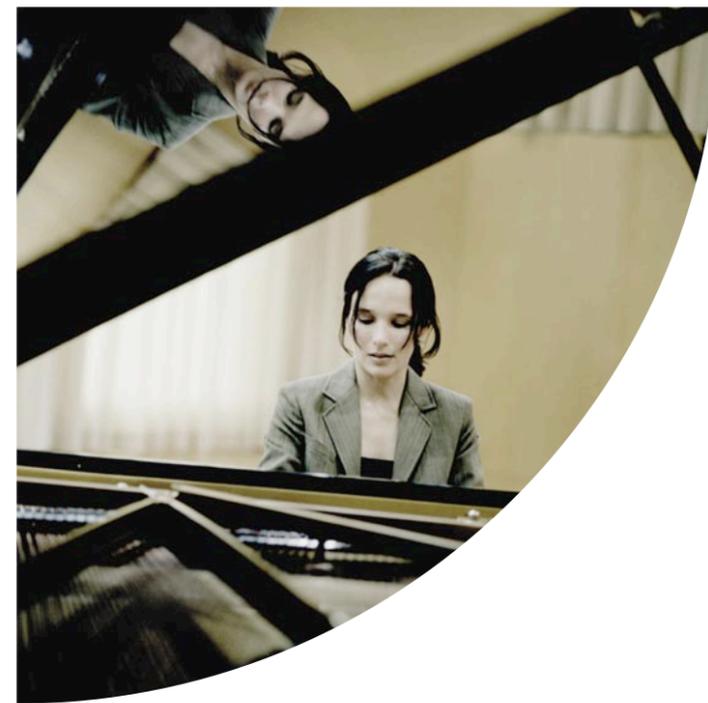
Her recent recordings have been created in the Siemens Villa, in Berlin. In a large hall designed for musical performance that has informed the playing of many artists. The acoustics there lend an immediacy to the sound that enhances her work.

“The Villa has acoustical identity and personality – it shapes your sound and you must respond to it. Unfortunately, when the music is later played on a music system, much of what makes up the full experience is lost. I saw a couple taking a picture of the moon one night, it was up in the sky. I had to laugh. I’m sure that when they looked at the photo, the moon was a tiny white dot against black. The mood that made them want the photo is harder to capture. This is what surprised me about the speakers. I actually became excited as I listened to them, had never thought it would be possible to get such a true sound outside a recital hall. The music physically touches you. Sound is immaterial, yet it can grip you with emotion. My first reaction was actually one of suspense.”



Last summer, Hélène Grimaud recorded a series of works by Bach, as well as variations on his themes by later composers, for another of her albums of musical exploration. She is giving new life to the well-known repertoire, by reminding listeners of the people and circumstances that gave birth to the music. Her latest album, Reflections, contains works by Robert & Clara Schumann and Brahms. The tragic life of Schumann greatly affected the younger Brahms, and one comes to realise what a powerful force Clara Schumann was in their relationship.

“Music can never wear out. The same piece interpreted by top performers will be different, sometimes to an extreme degree. What’s on paper is a starting point. Even the listener participates in reworking the music. Your mood will colour what you hear and feel, and the music will change your mood. I try to create a premonition in the listener of what the next sound is going to be, and then I play with that sound. It’s a premonition of where we are going, and it’s a wonderful thing to be able to control. This is how I can reach the emotions of the listener. You become involved in the tone, and then I can surprise you by where I take it.”



During her stay in Stockholm, Hélène Grimaud listened to a number of recordings she had brought along, using a BeoCenter 2 and a pair of BeoLab 5 loudspeakers. These speakers are specially designed to be able to recreate the original tone, as it was when it reached the microphones. The accurate density is achieved through room calibration, while the pure mid- and high frequencies are produced using the acoustic lenses. Together, these technologies are revolutionising sound reproduction.

“Usually, after I have finished a recording, I will remain in the studio for several days, to evaluate takes and make notes for the edits. With these speakers I can do this work in the comfort of my home, and still be confident I am hearing what I played.”