

Music

A Pianist Harmonizes With Wolves



Susan B. Markisz for The New York Times

Hélène Grimaud and residents of the Wolf Conservation Center, in South Salem, N.Y., which she helped found. She divides her time between the center and her classical music career.

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By JAMES R. OESTREICH
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Correction Appended

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Call of the Wild

WHEN the French pianist Hélène Grimaud was living in Tallahassee, Fla., in 1991, she took a friend's dog for a late-night walk that ended up changing her life. She saw a neighborhood loner and his animal approaching in silhouette. The creature walked in a way she had never seen — tense and furtive — and caused her dog to disappear into the brush for 45 minutes.

It was her first encounter with a wolf (part she-wolf and part dog, she now says, “probably not a real wolf”), and the chemistry was immediate.

“She came up to my left hand and sniffed it,” Ms. Grimaud writes in her memoir “Wild Harmonies: A Life of Music and Wolves.” “I

merely stretched out my fingers and, all by herself, she slid her head and then her shoulders under my palm. I felt a shooting spark, a shock, which ran through my entire body. The single point of contact radiated throughout my arm and chest, and filled me with gentleness, ... a most compelling gentleness, which awakened in me a mysterious singing, the call of an unknown, primeval force.”

“I had fallen in love with this she-wolf,” she writes later.

For centuries if not millennia, as Ms. Grimaud establishes in her book, wolves have been subjects of vilification and myth, to say nothing of attempts at eradication. But she does not see them as villains. She sees them not only as essential “biodiversity engineers” in preserving balances among animal and plant species but also as endlessly fascinating creatures who have much to teach humans. And she is on a mission to change their image.

In 1999, along with J. Henry Fair, a photographer who was then her companion, Ms. Grimaud opened the Wolf Conservation Center, an educational facility in South Salem, N.Y. On 29 acres, the

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center currently is home to 17 wolves. Four socialized “ambassador wolves” are on view to the public; the other 13 are shielded from human contact, so that they can ultimately be returned to the wild, as a couple and their pups were in July.

“We started building the facility in ’97,” she said, “opened in ’99, and the place is doing really well. We started with 500 visitors in the first two years, and now we’re at 20,000 a year.”

Three of the ambassador wolves can be seen in a striking photograph on the dust jacket of “Wild Harmonies,” which shows them greeting Ms. Grimaud after a long trip, one nuzzling each of her ears; the other, her chin. It was a spontaneous moment, she said, not something that could be staged.

Her advocacy work has aroused a certain skepticism in the classical music world. Some have suggested that she’s in it as much for her own image as for the wolves’. But surely there are easier — and safer — ways to gain publicity. With her well-defined features and dreamily expressive blue eyes, for example, Ms. Grimaud could easily have followed the glamour route of the violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter and others. Instead, she tends to play down her looks, at least onstage. At a recent [Carnegie Hall](#) concert with the NHK Symphony Orchestra of Tokyo, she appeared in an understated black pantsuit and a severe hairstyle.

Far from promoting her pianistic career, she says, her preoccupation with wolves has to a considerable extent hampered it. “Only in the last three years was I able to start really focusing on my music completely,” she said, “because before that, the wolf center took so much time and energy.”

She has more than made up for lost time and has by now performed in most major halls around the world, with most major orchestras and conductors and with some of the finest chamber musicians, including the violinist Gidon Kremer.

But she suffered another setback late last year when she contracted pneumonia caused by *Mycoplasma pneumoniae*, which led to chronic fatigue syndrome and an infection that traveled from the lungs to the heart. She lost consciousness regularly, she said, and was unable to leave Europe. She got a clean bill of health only in July.

The memoir, meanwhile, had appeared in France (“Variations Sauvages”) in 2003 and quickly become a best seller. The name “Variations” probably fits it better than “Harmonies,” for it consists of short segments in almost kaleidoscopic profusion, often alternating emotionally superheated

autobiographical material with sober discussions of wolf lore. Ms. Grimaud presents herself as compulsive and an outsider — in her family, in the music world, in society — uncomfortable in her own skin. When, for example, she discovered the area where she would establish the wolf center, she writes, “it was Elsewhere, that Elsewhere I had always hoped for.” (A second book, “Leçons Particulières,” appeared in France last year.)

So what is the connection between classical music and wolves? On a personal level for Ms. Grimaud, they both offered salvation.

“Music converted me,” she writes. “It saved me.”

And of Alawa, the she-wolf: “She, too, saved my life.”

When she conceived the goal of a wolf center, it liberated her as a pianist, no longer a slave to the instrument, she writes. “I had become a wild woman.”

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Correction: Nov. 19, 2006

An article on Nov. 5 about the French pianist Hélène Grimaud misstated the illness last year that she said led to her chronic fatigue syndrome. It was pneumonia caused by Mycoplasma pneumoniae, not microplasmic pneumonia.

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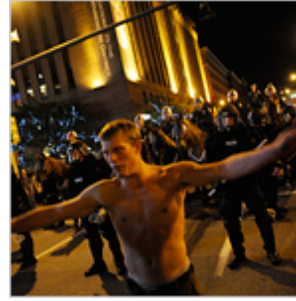
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