



Review: The Santa Barbara Symphony at the Granada Theatre

Pianist H el ene Grimaud Performed a 'Salute to Love' on February 15

By Joseph Miller

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Peter Vandenbelt

Nir Kabaretti and the Santa Barbara Symphony presented a Valentine's weekend concert that was, thankfully, not all light and kisses, but one that evoked heroic and tragic dimensions of the human heart. French piano superstar H el ene Grimaud was the main draw for the occasion, and gave an incandescent performance of Brahms's *Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor*. But the

orchestra-only second half was no pale stepsister, and featured love-inspired and truly substantial fare by Tchaikovsky, Elgar, and Ravel.

The sound was big on the emphatic opening measures of Brahms's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, where unison strings cry a hand-wringing question amidst thunderous tympani. Grimaud is a slight figure who carries surprising punch when the music calls for it. A deeply introspective artist, she was not, however, caught in her own world, but freely looked about the hall before making her entrance. And yet, once into the heart of the work, she seemed unreachable, her slender figure swaying like a Hasid at prayer during tacit passages. Having performed this concerto for decades, the work is clearly part of Grimaud's DNA, and her authority and mastery were loudly applauded.

Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture*, like its eponymous tragic inspiration, is no lovers' stroll, and felt Saturday as epic and involved, if half the length, as the nearly hour-long Brahms. With no hint of fatigue, Kabaretti and the orchestra were aflame through the intensely demanding rhythms, and the affecting bloom of the "love theme" in its evolving iterations. The evening's Hershey's Kiss was Sir Edward Elgar's *Salut d'Amour*, a short nod toward the lighter side of love, and one which can fall into schmaltz if languished over – happily avoided by Kabaretti. Finally, as if to say that love at its best beckons to ideal worlds, the scintillating grand harmonies Maurice Ravel's second suite from *Daphnis et Chloé* finished the evening.

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