



# The life of music and wolves

As a child, Hélène Grimaud often heard a family of words she called the ‘uns’. She was declared to be ‘uncontrollable’. People also described her as ‘unmanageable’, ‘unsatisfied’, ‘undisciplined’, and ‘unpredictable’.

She was often an enigma even to her parents. It was decided she had too much energy, and judo, tennis, and ballet were the **prescription**. While the first two were tolerable to the tomboy Hélène, ballet – no way; the costume reminded her of the dolls she’d been given, and had smashed against her bedroom wall.

At school in Aix-en-Provence she had no playmates, and spent break times hiding behind the coats in the corridor. Her teacher expressed concern when an instruction to draw chickens on a farm resulted in Hélène’s scrawled picture of wire mesh. Something did indeed seem caged inside her, yearning to be free – but what?



Hélène began to self-harm, discovering that acute physical pain gave her the intense sense of existence that she longed for. She also spent hours folding and refolding her clothes, and rearranged everything in her room endlessly. Psychologists would call this obsessive-compulsive disorder; Hélène now sees it simply as her desperate search for equilibrium.

## Salvation in music

Finally, when she was seven, the energy trapped inside her found its outlet. Wondering if his daughter suffered from an excess of mental rather than physical energy, Hélène's father suggested music lessons. As Hélène listened to her teacher playing the piano, she felt something **stir** deep inside her: 'I had the physical sensation of an opening, the impression that a path opened in front of me, as if a door had opened in the wall ...'

When she started the piano, her intensity found its home. 'The tactile pleasure of playing, of seeking inside myself the emotion that I never, ever, in any way had been able to express or bring to a peak, this delicious pleasure completely satisfied me.' Hélène recognizes just how important music was for her: 'It saved me.'

## A rising star

She completed an eight-year piano curriculum in four years, and was accepted by the Paris Conservatory at 13, the youngest student by far. However, she eventually became bored with the piano studies she was given to play, and with the **impetuosity** of youth, returned to Aix to perform her first piano concerto in public: 'I had the feeling that I was finally living, living in broad daylight, publicly – the thing I had been silently waiting for all my life.' Her talent was recognized, and she recorded Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto no. 2 when she was 15. She returned to the Conservatory, but left early, wanting to find her own style of playing, despite warnings that she wouldn't make it in the classical world without her professors' support.



## Life in America

She had great success and there were more recordings, and yet she began to feel again that nagging sense of something missing in her life, and **retreated** into herself once more.

When she received an invitation to play in the US, she jumped at it. She loved the experience and wanted to play more concerts there. Not speaking English was a problem, though, so she spent days watching rented videos in English, from war films and historical epics to love stories and westerns, living on sandwiches. Six months later, she was able to hold all the conversations necessary to organize and perform a US tour.

She felt at home with Americans – no one found her strange – and accepted an invitation to go and live in Tallahassee, Florida. Even though it wasn't her ideal city, she felt destiny had drawn her there, and that something important awaited her. At night, she walked her friend's dog in the rural outskirts of the city. Neighbours warned her that it was risky, especially in the area where a Vietnam veteran lived alone, a man they considered to be crazy and dangerous.

## A fateful encounter

This only made H el ene curious. Out walking the dog at 2 a.m., she saw something that sent a shiver down her spine. It was the silhouette of a dog, yet it was unlike any dog she'd ever seen.

When its owner appeared, he explained that it was in fact a she-wolf. This was Dennis, the Vietnam veteran, who turned out to be a classical music lover. They talked about music, but Dennis fell silent when the she-wolf approached H el ene, who remained still as the wolf slipped its head under her palm. H el ene felt a spark radiate through her, the call of an unknown, primeval force, and then the wolf lay down, and offered H el ene its belly. Dennis explained his stunned silence: 'It's incredible for a wolf to do that, it's a sign of recognition and trust, even a sign of submission. Wolves have a real phobia of humans. They never lay themselves open like that if they don't feel safe. Even with me, she's never acted like that.'



## Twin passions

Hélène had found her other passion and vocation. She began to learn everything she could about wolves, and decided to create a centre for the study and rehabilitation of this much misunderstood animal, with which she felt a strong **kinship**. For three years, she lived in the cheapest rooms she could find in the poorest areas of New York, content to rent whatever piano she could find for a couple of hours' practice, so she could save the money from her concerts to pay for her dream of protecting wolves. And so the Wolf Conservation Center was founded in 1999, in New York State, with Hélène playing a key role in its operation.

It continues with its educational mission today, though Hélène herself has since returned to her full-time profession as one of the world's top concert pianists. She describes the howling of wolves as a form of music, a social glue for the wolf pack, which 'sends a lot of positive interactive feeling flying around.' Her own performances clearly have a similar effect in the concert halls of the world.

