

MAURICE RAVEL

150th Anniversary

Piano concertos in G Major and D Major
Gaspard de la nuit • Sérénade grotesque
Le Tombeau de Couperin • La Valse
Une barque sur l’océan (Miroirs)

Idil Biret

Bilkent Symphony Orchestra

Jean Fournet

Ravel’s music

by Idil Biret

Ravel’s music has been part of my world from the very early years. I was very young when I came across *Gaspard de la nuit* for the first time. This was before entering the Paris Conservatoire. I remember having heard *Ondine* at a concert, or, more probably, at one of Marguerite Long’s masterclasses, without really being taken by its delicate harmonies. *Ondine* and *Scarbo* had fearful reputations. They were considered among the most difficult pieces of the piano repertory. I was therefore intrigued by the challenge the interpretation of *Gaspard de la nuit* represented and looked forward to grow up and be able to tackle its complexities. In 1951, at the age of ten, I was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire, entered the piano class of Jean Doyen and later the chamber music class of Jacques Février who were both close associates of Ravel and had learned his works under his guidance. (1) A year later, for one of the yearly concerts given by his students, Jean Doyen asked me to learn *Scarbo* to perform on this occasion. I was happy to have been chosen for this demanding task and started practicing *Scarbo* under the watchful control of my teachers who were very strict about rhythmic accuracy, nuancing, right pedaling and accentuation. As I had worked very seriously and attentively on this piece, the performance went well.



Jacques Février, Idil Biret, Olivier Messiaen, Lélia Gousseau
at the Messiaen Competition jury, Royan, France 1967

After my studies at the Conservatoire were over, at the age of sixteen, I started intensive work to build my future concert repertory. One of the first pieces I took up was *Gaspard de la nuit* and I added *Ondine* and *Le gibet* to *Scarbo*. In those days I was inclined to exaggerate the contrasts by trying to achieve all sorts of frightening effects on the keyboard. This, as I later understood, was totally misconceived and a far cry from Ravel’s refined treatment of Aloysius Bertrand’s poems. To group *Ondine*’s ostinato like figures which are present all along the piece, represent quite a challenge. I had to spend long hours of practice to master their regularity without the interference of any sort of wrong accents. Once, during vacations that I always spent at seaside locations, an idea crossed my mind – ‘Why not practice mentally *Ondine* while swimming?’. This unorthodox practice style worked. The floating sensation experienced while playing *Ondine* in my mind on the waves in the water made me aware of the right weight necessary to display on the keyboard and realise the intemporality of the ostinato like figures. *Le gibet* is a vision of a crepuscular landscape seen from a distance with oppressive indifference as it sounds in Ravel’s own recording of the piece. *Le gibet* establishes the balance between the seduction of *Ondine*’s scintillating piano writing and *Scarbo*’s evil virtuosity.

With the passing years, *Gaspard de la nuit* became a part of myself. At the beginning the conception I had of this work was more inspired by German fantastic romanticism. This changed as I tried later on to find a certain form of classicism inherent in Ravel’s music by following as closely as possible the composer’s indications of nuances, accents, pedaling etc., and by also avoiding facile effects. In due course the true magic of these masterpieces became more evident and perceptible to my mind. The proof is that less is better than too much. I started including Ravel’s works in my concerts, with a first public performance of *Gaspard de la nuit* in Paris in April 1957 and continued with performances of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, *Miroirs*, *La Valse*, *Sérénade grotesque* and the two piano concertos. Then, there were the many recordings - *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and *Gaspard de la nuit* were recorded in Paris in 1965. But, for some reason they were not released on LP then and had to wait for more than fifty years. (2) I recorded *Gaspard de la nuit* again in New York in 1976 coupled with an early piece *Sérénade grotesque* for the Ertegün brothers’ Atlantic/Finnadar classical label (3) established by Ilhan Mimaroglu who was also the producer of this recording and wrote an excellent music note for these pieces. Later, in 1984 came another opportunity to record Ravel when Goerge H. de Mendelssohn, a fourth generation descendant of the composer, asked me to record *Gaspard de la nuit* and *Miroirs*; with *La Valse*, later in 1987 (all recorded in Stuttgart, Germany), this became my first CD. The recordings I made during the three decades from the 1960s to the 1980s may give an idea about my unfinished quest to discover Ravel’s solo piano music.



Biret’s LP with *Gaspard de la nuit*

Then came an invaluable opportunity to perform the concertos under the baton of the great Jean Fournet who had conducted the Lamoureux orchestra in Paris in 1954 for the recordings of these concertos by my teacher Jean Doyen. I played the *Concerto in D major* (for left hand) in 1996 and the *Concerto in G major* in 1998 with the Bilkent Orchestra in Ankara established by the visionary educator Prof. Ihsan Dogramaci. As with all the concerts at the Bilkent University concert hall, the performances conducted by Jean Fournet were recorded and later released by IBA. I performed the *Concerto in G major* also with the Orchestre Suisse Romande conducted by Fabio Luisi in 1998 which was another memorable event. My final performance of Ravel in concert was in Chicago in May 2017 where I played *Gaspard de la nuit* exactly sixty years after my first performance of this work. Ravel had a sophisticated mind. He liked living in small spaces. He divided the rooms in his house in Monfort l’Amaury near Paris into two. Instead of four rooms of regular size he preferred to have several tiny but independent rooms. His house is like the house of a cat, with its corners and more corners. You can curl up and hide in secret cupboards. I am constantly fascinated by the depth of Ravel’s originality and by his imagination. I think of *Sérénade grotesque*, *Ma mère l’Oye*, *L’enfant et les sortilèges*, *Gaspard de la nuit*. In some ways Ravel’s writing is very like Liszt’s, but full of astonishing pianistic innovations. For example, I am thinking of the use and descent in seconds in *Scarbo* or of the extraordinary *Concerto for the Left Hand*. I feel close to Ravel also because of his real modesty which is apparent in his correspondence.

(1) In 1937 Ravel chose Jacques Février to play his concerto for the left hand, originally composed for Paul Wittgenstein. Février then played this concerto all over the world and recorded it together with the complete solo piano works of Ravel. Jean Doyen, who had made the first complete recording of *Gaspard de la nuit*, performed both piano concertos as well as all the solo piano works of Ravel and also recorded them in the 1950s.



Ravel recordings of Biret’s teachers

(2) These works were recorded in 1965 for Vega (later DECCA). But, at the time it was decided that the LP should not be released. The original acetate masters remained in the archive for nearly half a century. When they were discovered it was noted that the recordings were of high artistic quality. But, there was a deterioration of sound and, more importantly, a wobble in some parts of the disc. Following lengthy restoration work, it was decided to release *Le Tombeau de Couperin* in the IBA box set Twentieth Century Piano Edition in 2015 and later, in 2020, together with *Miroirs* and *La Valse* on a single CD. This CD of analog recordings from the 1960s and 1980s attracted much attention and critical praise in the press: “The distinguished Turkish pianist Idil Biret performs music by Ravel with breathless excitement.” **THE INDEPENDENT (UK)** “This is a treasurable document of a superb pianist at the peak of her powers.” **FANFARE (USA)** “This is a memorable collection of Ravel piano music...performances that will bring you back many times.” **AMERICAN RECORD GUIDE** “In this recording of music by Ravel you can sense Idil Biret’s pedigree in every bar. A superb release.” **INTERNATIONAL PIANO (UK)**

(3) Some excellent reviews appeared in the press upon release of this LP: “*Gaspard de la nuit*, one of the great landmarks of early 20th Century music, is wonderfully revealed in Idil Biret’s visionary performance.” **STEREO REVIEW (USA) 1977** “There is no question whatever that Biret’s reading of the Ravel *Gaspard de la nuit* takes its place among the most delicately wrought Ravel interpretations by any of the many great pianists renowned for their performances of French piano music.” **SOHO WEEKLY NEWS (USA) 1977**

Compiled from the writings of Idil Biret

LP 1

Concerto in G	23:54
Concerto in D (Left hand)	18:46
La Valse	13:36
Une barque sur l’océan (Miroirs)	6:16

LP 2

Gaspard de la nuit	23:27
Sérénade grotesque	3:14
Le Tombeau de Couperin	25:38

THIS LP IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF PROF. ERSIN ONAY, THE DEAN OF THE MUSIC FACULTY OF BILKENT UNIVERSITY WHO ORGANISED THE RAVEL CONCERTOS PERFORMANCES OF IDIL BIRET WITH MAESTRO JEAN FOURNET IN THE 1990s

Recorded: *Gaspard de la nuit* and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* in Paris 1965 • *Sérénade grotesque* in New York 1976 Producer: Ilhan Mimaroglu • *Une barque sur l’océan* and *La Valse* in Stuttgart 1984, 1987 Producer: Heinz Jansen • Two piano concertos at Bilkent Concert Hall in 1996 (D Major), 1998 (G Major) Producer: Engin Aksan Mastering: Ozan Sarier • Graphic design: Özcan Göksan • Graphic adaptation: Ali Ergün • Cover photo: Idil Biret at Montmartre, Paris by Sefik B. Yüksel



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