

PIERRE BOULEZ

100th 1925-2025

Piano Sonata No. 2

Alban Berg
Sonata Op. 1

Anton Webern
Variations Op. 27

Idil Biret

Pierre Boulez on the 2nd Piano Sonata: “*I tried to destroy the first-movement sonata form by the use of trope, and repetitive scherzo form by the use of variation form, and finally, in the, fourth movement, to demolish fugal and canonic form. Perhaps I am using too many negative terms, but the Second Sonata does have this explosive, disintegrating and dispersive character, and spite of its own very restricting form the destruction of all these classical moulds was quite deliberate.*” **Conversations with Ernst Eulenburg, London 1976**

With Pierre Boulez’s 2nd Piano Sonata Idil Biret not only makes her American recording debut, but also presents the first U.S. recording of this important contemporary work... Composed in 1948, this sonata occupies a position that exerted a causative influence upon Boulez’s subsequent music. Its experimental and ground-breaking nature may be better understood if one regards it as having grown out of a response to Webern’s Variations (1936), the companion piece on this album. The rigid, geometric patterns of Webern’s work, the classical purity of its encompassing organization, seems to have served as a base of departure for Boulez’s broadened structures that are equally rigid but incomparably more complex. It is this very complexity that conceals the strict framework of the entire composition and projects it as the product of an ardent improvisatory impetus. It demands from its interpreter a similar approach, along with technical prowess and intellectual control of the highest order. It was only a matter of course that this work, together with influences emanating from other sources (chiefly John Cage), should lead the path not only to open-form and aleatory compositions, including Boulez’s own 3rd Piano Sonata, but also, through its new pianistic language, urge the development of a whole new generation of virtuosos pianists... **Ilhan Mimaroglu 1973**

In the early 1970s Idil Biret began a collaboration in New York with the composer Ilhan Mimaroglu, then a producer of the Atlantic Records. In quick succession she recorded the works of Boulez, Webern, Berg, Stravinsky, Ravel, Boucourechliev, Prokofiev, Scriabin and other composers of the 20th Century all of which were released on Finnadar label, a subsidiary of Atlantic Records. The first LP contained the 2nd Sonata of Boulez. Glowing critiques of this recording came from the US press and Stereo Review magazine chose the LP as Best Record of the Month in its December 1973 issue.

Biret describes in her book of memoirs why she recorded the Boulez 2nd Sonata: “In France, Claude Samuel gave me the idea of playing the Boulez sonatas. Claude, was the producer of my Vega records in Paris and a close friend of Boulez. At that time, I had not yet learned all the three sonatas. So, I agreed to play the 2nd Sonata at the La Rochelle Festival, organized by Claude Samuel, in 1973. The French radio broadcast this concert where I played from the score. Pierre Boulez came to the concert and congratulated me afterwards saying, ‘You played fearlessly’. I replied that in my opinion these works should be played fearlessly. ‘Only when you play fearlessly does the character of the work come out. Playing every note carefully could lead to misunderstandings. It could almost be thought of as a ballet then. Just as only if we play Beethoven’s Hammerklavier sonata fearlessly we can express its true character without fear of the long jumps there, these sonatas also require the same approach and fearless performances’, I added. Afterwards, I proposed to record the Boulez sonatas to Ilhan Mimaroglu in New York. He agreed and the 2nd Sonata was recorded and released by Finnadar the same year”.

Idil Biret played the 2nd Sonata in recitals in London, New York, Los Angeles and other cities. The New Yorker Magazine critic wrote: “*I slipped out (of the hall) and down Broadway to the Merkin Concert hall, where the Turkish pianist Idil Biret was giving a rare performance of Pierre Boulez’s Second Piano Sonata. Miss Biret’s way with the piece was astonishing. She slammed into the keyboard and attacked the music tempestuously. She played from memory and drove the music with an unrelenting virtuosity. All the gestures of the work – the stark contrasts of register and volume, the angular structure of the phrases, the sharp delineation of the part-writing were there in outline...This was a gripping, impressive account of a commanding score.*” **The New Yorker, February 1982**

Los Angeles Herald Examiner introduced Biret’s performance to their readers with the title, “*Biret is equal to the challenge of Boulez...she brought out all of its explosive force*”.

After an interval of over twenty years, Biret returned to Boulez and, in one week during February 1995, she recorded for Naxos all his three piano sonatas at the Radio France studios in Paris. This project was the idea of the then Naxos distributor in France, Yves Riesel, and was taken up with great reluctance by Klaus Heymann, the founder of Naxos, who was quite skeptical and thought initially that the CD would be a flop. Later, Heymann said, “*Idil Biret’s rendition of the Boulez sonatas is an extraordinary achievement and has given a huge prestige to Naxos – her recording of the three sonatas sold thirty-thousand copies the first year*”. In her book of memoirs Idil wrote, “In December 1994 I was asked to record the three sonatas of Boulez the following February. Up to that time I had played only the *Second Sonata* in concerts which I had also recorded in the United States. Therefore, I would have now to learn the first and the third sonatas. I had to work enormously for several weeks but it was worth it. The *Second Sonata*, which I had often played in concerts is a work that requires plenty of boldness and showiness; you can’t worry about the risks involved. To play it with caution cannot do justice to this sonata which is among the important works composed for the piano where virtuosity is dominant. I do believe that, ideally, to give free expression to the element of spontaneity these sonatas must be played by heart. What a luxury it would be if we could choose the path we want when playing the *Third Sonata* just by relying on our memory!” (*Une Pianiste Turc en France* - Buchet/Chastel, France 2006).

At a time when selling three thousand copies of any classical recording was considered a success, selling thirty thousand copies of a Boulez Sonatas CD was quite remarkable. In France, the recording was awarded Golden Diapason of the Year by the Diapason magazine and selected as one of the best recordings of the year by Le Monde newspaper. There were laudatory reviews from the press all over the world. 1995 was very special in the career of Idil Biret. That year she won prizes in two diametrically opposed ends of the piano literature. In addition to the Golden Diapason of the year prize in France for the three Boulez sonatas, she received the Grand Prix du Disque Frederic Chopin prize, given once every five years in Poland, for her recordings of the complete piano works of Chopin.

Some of the press reviews of the Boulez recordings:

Thanks to Idil Biret these works find their place in the history of the sonata form next to the ultimate pages of Beethoven.

DIAPASON (France) - Golden Diapason of the Year award 1995



Applause to Naxos for having Idil Biret record the three Piano Sonatas of Boulez. A sensational disc.

TELERAMA (France) 1995

Energetic, virtuoso playing faithful to the spirit of the Sonatas. Idil Biret dominates the differences showing a good instrumental sense and a delicate structural intelligence. She creates rarely encountered powerful poetic moments.

LE MONDE (France) - A best recording of the Year 1995

Idil Biret is fully recognized as an outstanding interpreter of modern music. Her exemplary work on the piano compositions of Boulez is also widely known. On this CD sovereignty and youthful rhythmic freshness is combined with a great accumulated experience in an extraordinary manner.

NEUE MUSIKZEITUNG (Germany) 1995

It is hard to imagine a much more recommendable version than this one. Idil Biret is a formidable and adventurous virtuoso temperamentally drawn to very demanding music.

AMERICAN RECORD GUIDE (USA) 1995

It sometimes seems as if Pierre Boulez has spent a lifetime paying the penalty for having found composition so easy as a young man...Such thoughts are inspired by Idil Biret’s absorbing new disc. In the First Sonata the young composer’s impatience and arrogance is palpable in Biret’s steely touch. The Second Sonata is no less confidently done. Biret’s musical persuasiveness and the up to date sound earn this issue a strong recommendation.

GRAMOPHONE (U.K.) 1995

Student of Boulanger, Cortot and Kempff, Idil Biret delivers a totally successful thoughtful interpretation, dazzling and poetic from beginning to end.

TRIBUNE DE GENEVE (Switzerland) 1995

Biret presents these works from a logical discourse, attempting to calm the savage modernity they carry within. I would say his Sonata No. 1 is superior to Aimard’s, while No. 2, at least, has as much to say as the young Pollini’s. The Third, Boulezian music of the future, open like a flower to the taste of its pollinator; confirms Biret’s mastery.

RITMO (Spain) 2011

“In 1995 Idil Biret recorded the sonatas of Boulez. For me it was clear that we would have a flop”, said Klaus Heymann. “We were doing it for the image of our label. The publicity slogan was directly provocative: ‘If you think that you do not like this music you will now know why’. The result: 40.000 CDs sold !”

LE FIGARO (France) Interview with Klaus Heymann 11.6.2012



Pierre BOULEZ (1925-2016)

Piano Sonata No. 2	27:57
i. Extrêmement rapide	5:27
ii. Lent	10:13
iii. Modéré, presque vif	2:16
iv. Très librement	10:01

Anton WEBERN (1883-1945)

Variations Op. 27	7:49
i. Sehr mässig	2:27
ii. Sehr schnell	0:39
iii. Ruhig fliessend	4:43

Alban BERG (1885-1935)

Piano Sonata Op. 1	16:59
i. Mässig bewegt	16:59

Original LPs no: SR9004 and SR9008 Finnadar/Atlantic. First released 1973 (Boulez, Webern), 1975 (Berg) USA. Recorded: 1972 (Boulez, Webern), 1974 (Berg). Producer: Ilhan Mimaroglu with Arif Mardin’s assistance. Recording engineers: Robert Warner, Sami Uçkan (Boulez, Webern), Sami Uçkan (Berg). Mastering: George Piros. Original LP cover art: “Black and White” by Ahmet Gürsoy; Cover design: Helen Pienek • This compilation and mastering: Ozan Sarier • Cover concept and notes: Sefik B. Yüksel • Graphic design: Özcan Göksan • Graphic adaptation: Ali Ergün • Photo on cover page: Idil Biret during the recording of the Boulez 2nd Sonata by Sami Uçkan NY 1972



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