

Saint - Saëns

Piano Concertos
No. 2 in G minor, Op. 22
No. 4 in C minor, Op. 44

Idil Biret
The Philharmonia
Orchestra (London)
James Loughran



Idil Biret and James Loughran during the recording with the Philharmonia Orchestra

Idil Biret's first concerto recording

Idil Biret did not make concerto recordings in studio until the age of forty-seven. The reasons were that the costs were prohibitive and in the 1960s when Biret came to the recording scene, the major labels had already taken control of the music industry. EMI and Decca in London, DG in Hamburg, Phillips in Eindhoven, RCA and Columbia in New York controlled everything and dictated the terms. Only artists under contract with them became 'stars' and could earn money sufficient to afford recordings with established orchestras (by then mostly the artists paid recording costs, not the labels). Those who were not so fortunate had to be content recording solo works for small independent labels that had limited distribution and hardly any publicity. So, by 1988 while she had made twenty two recordings released on LP and CD all were solo piano and none with an orchestra. She had to wait until the financial resources could be found to make an orchestral recording possible and, equally importantly, a record label with a strong distribution network to release it. Providentially, both materialised within one year.

In 1988 Idil Biret was approached by ambassador Rahmi Gümrukçuoğlu in London with an invitation to give a concert on the occasion of the forthcoming Ottoman Empire exhibition there. Idil could choose the hall, the orchestra, the conductor and the concerto. This was a great opportunity, also to make a recording. She chose the newly opened Barbican Hall, Philharmonia Orchestra - the legendary ensemble established during the post war recording boom by Walter Legge of EMI - and James Loughran who had conducted the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester for many years. The work selected was the 2nd Piano Concerto of Saint-Saëns. Then, financing support came from the Turkish Culture Ministry for the recording. The 4th

concerto of Saint-Saëns was chosen to be coupled with the 2nd. The venue was St Barnabas Church with the greatly respected pair Mark Brown and Tony Faulkner in charge of the recording. Thus, on 23rd April 1988, the day after the concert, Idil Biret made her first orchestral recording – the two concertos on this LP. *

There was then the issue of finding the record label to distribute the recording. Vox label in New York had shown interest but went out of business soon afterwards. So, when things looked rather bad, miraculously Klaus Heymann, the founder of the newly established Naxos label, turned up in Brussels, met Idil in June 1989 and asked her if she would record the complete piano works of Chopin for them. Idil said yes and her now legendary cooperation with Naxos started. When Klaus Heymann learned that Idil had recorded two concertos with the Philharmonia Orchestra recently and had the rights to the recordings, he proposed to release them under license. So, the Saint-Saëns concertos became her first Naxos CD to be followed by nearly fifty more in quick succession that sold 2 million copies by 2004 and were among the many works accessible to Biret's 2.6 million monthly listeners on Spotify in December 2024.

* Recordings with orchestras followed and from then until 2019 more than sixty piano concerto performances of Biret were recorded in studio or concert. Together with other concert recordings recovered from past years, Biret's legacy now totals over seventy piano concertos of twenty-five composers from Bach to Schönberg, recorded between 1954 and 2019.



Idil Biret given the plaque commemorating the sale of her 2 million Naxos CDs (Germany 2004)

"Idil Biret, a Paris-trained pianist and former Cortot pupil who made a deserved reputation as long ago as the 1950s, brings a sense of drama to these two Saint-Saëns concertos and has the technique to meet the challenges to a soloist's dexterity... There is much to enjoy in the 2nd Concerto and in the somewhat longer 4th Concerto. These are assured performances with firm orchestral support from James Loughran and the Philharmonia, and are well recorded."

C. Headington GRAMOPHONE (UK) 1990

"On this occasion Idil Biret has the benefit of decent sound...The scherzo (2nd Concerto) is played with delicacy and character. The accompaniment by the Philharmonia Orchestra under James Loughran is very good and the recording is very good indeed. There is much to enjoy here."

PENGUIN GUIDE (UK) 1992

"This disc gives us the second and fourth Saint-Saëns piano concertos... Biret and Loughran find just the right fluff and force for these pieces. Those melodies which can sound too pop, too trite? Well they sparkle here. One can hardly own more involved, stylish, wide awake readings...To tell the truth, I'm getting a minor case of musical heebie-jeebies when it comes to this artist. Is there any music which Idil Biret cannot master at a high musical level? Or for which she fails to make a vigorous, fair case? Once the entrancing spell of a particular reading on a specific disc fades slowly away, in retrospect I am gripped by a surprise uncanny sense that maybe she is really a super-human woman from another planet - far, far, far, far beyond our galaxy. One surely winces with the barest touch of fear, acknowledging her nearly preternatural musical gifts across such widely ranging composers."

Dan Fee at Berkeley AMAZON (USA) 2009

"Dear Ms Biret, I would like to thank you for your truly beautiful recordings of Saint-Saëns's 2nd and 4th Piano Concertos. I have listened to them for many years and never tired of them. My wife Pitta of 44 years now has Huntingtons disease and when things get too much for me, while she sleeps in the early morning, I sit in my lounge and your recordings give me peace and hope and strength to carry on. I guess it's a combination of Saint-Saëns's wonderful musical talent and your breath-taking and sensitive playing. Thank you again so much."

Leon Joffe (South Africa) 2013

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS (1835-1921)

Saint-Saëns enjoyed a long and prolific career as a composer. As a younger man he was a leading supporter of newer tendencies in French music: in old age his opposition to Debussy, whom he outlived by three years, earned him a deserved reputation as an enemy of what was seen as progress. An admirer of Mozart, he was known to some as the French Mendelssohn, and his music always possessed the clarity of form and texture common to these earlier composers, elements that influenced his friend and pupil Fauré and, vicariously, Fauré's own pupil Ravel. Gounod referred to him as the French Beethoven, and these flattering comparisons are evidence of the esteem in which he was held. Saint-Saëns entered the Paris Conservatoire in 1848 and met with considerable encouragement from Berlioz, among others who were impressed by his gifts as a composer and as a pianist. The second of his five piano concertos was written in the space of seventeen days in 1868 at the request of Anton Rubinstein, with Saint-Saëns as soloist. Liszt gave his gracious approval and encouragement. The concerto opens with a cadenza over a long, sustained note, followed by a first expressive theme, succeeded in turn by a second subject, again entrusted first to the soloist. The second movement is introduced by the timpani and relies on two contrasting themes of markedly different character, the first very much in the spirit of a scherzo, and the second of overtly popular character. In the last movement Saint-Saëns displays his command of brilliant piano-writing, ending the concerto with considerable panache. The fourth concerto was written in 1875. It prompted Gounod's flattering comparison of its composer to Beethoven. Less conventional than its predecessor in form, the work is in two movements divided into sections. The first of these offers a theme shared by soloist and orchestra and duly developed, before the appearance of a second section, an *Andante* in A flat. The second movement starts with a scherzo, thematically connected with the first movement, which later makes an open appearance, as does a lyrical episode from the second section of the first movement. A cadenza leads without a break into a transformed version of the first movement *Andante* theme in a finale that includes further reference to earlier ideas, giving the whole work a thematic unity not found in the other piano concertos of Saint-Saëns.

Keith Anderson

Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 22

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|------------------------|-------|
| i. Andante sostenuto | 12:28 |
| ii. Allegro scherzando | 6:06 |
| iii. Presto | 7:14 |

Concerto No. 4 in C minor, Op. 44

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|------------------------------------|-------|
| i. Allegro moderato-Andante | 14:49 |
| ii. Allegro vivace-Andante-Allegro | 14:46 |

Recorded at the St. Barnabas Church, London on 23 April 1988 Producer: Mark Brown • Engineer: Tony Faulkner • Remastering: Ozan Sarier Graphic design: Özcan Göksan • Graphic adaptation: Ali Ergün • Photo of Biret and Loughran: Sefik B. Yüksel

**THIS LP IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORIES OF PITTA JOFFE THE
DEAR WIFE OF LEON IN PRETORIA, SOUTH AFRICA
AND AMBASSADOR RAHMI GÜMRÜKÇÜOĞLU**



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