

Boston Symphony Orchestra

Idil Biret describes the events of that afternoon in her book of memoirs:

“The concert on 22 November 1963 was to take place on a Friday afternoon at 2.00 pm. Two days before the concert I had rehearsed at Erich Leinsdorf’s house. He had surprised me by sitting at the second piano and playing the part of the orchestra, which he did admirably. During the orchestra rehearsal the members of the Boston Symphony had played and sung ‘Happy Birthday to You’; I was born on November 21 and turned twenty-two on that day.

"When I arrived in the wings of the concert hall on that Friday afternoon I had a strange feeling, something impalpable was in the air. I was to perform after the intermission, so I sat quietly in my room. The concert had not started yet when the door opened and Erich Leinsdorf appeared. He was very pale. He seemed somewhat reassured when he saw me and said, 'Ah, there you are, good' and left immediately. I did not understand what was going on. A little later, Anne, Erich Leinsdorf's secretary, came to keep me company. I liked her because she was young, smiling and friendly. But on that day even Anne was not her usual self. She seemed about to cry, sad and didn't know quite what to do. Only when my father came for me at the beginning of the intermission and told me that President Kennedy had been assassinated and that no one knew whether or not the concert would continue that I understood the reason for the unusual atmosphere. After the tragic death of President Kennedy was announced to the audience, Mr. Henry B. Cabot, the president of the Board of Trustees of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, got up on the stage and said:

Ladies and Gentlemen, these ladies and gentlemen of the orchestra who sit behind me, they came to me during the intermission and said that some of them felt that we should not continue with the concert. I told them that I felt that we should continue and I told them that the day my father died I came to a symphony concert for consolation. I believe you will receive it yourself

"And so we played Rachmaninoff's Third Concerto for a Boston audience that was in shock. Some of the cellos came in too early before I started the cadenza which constitutes the passage between the second and third movement. It was probably due to emotion. We should remember that the Kennedy family was from Boston. The world situation was very precarious just then; the death of a popular young president weakened America. You can feel the heavy atmosphere in the recording that was made during that concert."*

* *Life and Music* - Idil Biret / Chestnut Hill Press USA 2026

In his article on 23 November in *The Christian Science Monitor* titled **Marcia Funebre - Idil Biret's debut**, Harold Rogers wrote "A great healing



Idil Biret and Erich Leinsdorf at the end of the concert

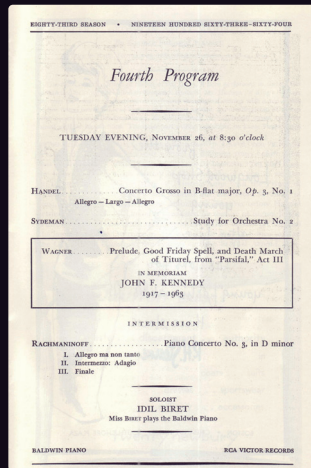
took place as Miss Biret lifted our hearts above the mists; clouds parted; great shafts of light poured through as she evoked the passion and ardor of Rachmaninoff's sweeping themes..." The work here, the 3rd Piano Concerto of Rachmaninoff, is a piece full of sadness and mourning so suitable to the tragic moments in the immediate aftermath of President Kennedy's death. It was providential that this work was on the program as only six weeks ago it was not. Idil had initially proposed the following works: Bartok *Concertos No. 1* and *No. 2*, Rachmaninoff *Concerto No. 3* and *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. But, the word came that she would be asked to play the Busoni *Piano Concerto*. A rarely played most difficult and long work requiring a large orchestra and chorus. Idil says that Nadia Boulanger also did not like this proposal as she found the concerto extremely difficult and dry. Later, with the arrival of Erich Leinsdorf at the helm of the orchestra in 1963, Idil was told that she would be asked to play four concertos of short and medium lengths in seven concerts in different combinations: Stravinsky *Capriccio*, Vincent d'Indy *Symphony on a French Mountain Air*, Strauss *Burlesque* and Rachmaninoff *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. She was willing to accept this when suddenly, just before the contract time word came that she would play only two concertos Stravinsky *Capriccio* and Vincent d'Indy *Symphony on a French Mountain Air*. Idil was very unhappy and through her agent in Paris she sent word that neither work was really a concerto that could show her artistry as a pianist and suggested replacing Vincent d'Indy with *Paganini Rhapsody* of Rachmaninoff. The word came back from BSO that they had to remove that Rachmaninoff work due to a program conflict with that of the Boston Pops Orchestra. Under time pressure Idil signed the contract with the two proposed works.

Then, something miraculous happened. In London, two days after she had performed Rachmaninoff's 3rd Concerto with the London Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Pierre Monteux, Biret received a telegram from her agent in Paris on 8 October asking whether Idil would accept to play the same concerto at the Boston concert. There is no doubt that the news of the concert in London with Pierre Monteux, who had accompanied Rachmaninoff himself in this concerto with the Boston Symphony in 1919, had made Leinsdorf decide on the change of program. Overjoyed Idil sent her confirmation.



The telegram announcing the program change

Idil wrote in her Memoir, “Nadia Boulanger also thought that Rachmaninoff 3rd Concerto was a good choice as it was a brilliant work and I had just played it”. Thus became the sad, mournful Rachmaninoff concerto the work to be played at the 22 November concert. The concert was repeated on 26 November, this time in memory of John F. Kennedy with Idil Biret again as soloist.



26 November concert program
John F. Kennedy “In Memoriam”

THE BROADCAST and AFTERMATH

The concert was broadcast live on radio from Boston Symphony Hall. All those who tuned in that day heard the announcement of the President's death and subsequently the performance of the concerto. The electrified atmosphere in the hall can be felt in the recording.

Many years later, in 2020 Idil Biret received a message from the Library of Congress:

From: O'Dell, Cary

Sent: Tuesday, April 7, 2020 7:09 PM

Subject: From the Library of Congress

Dear Ms. Biret:

Greetings from the Library of Congress. As you might have heard, the recording of the Boston Symphony Orchestra on the day of the Kennedy Assassination was added to the Library's National Recording Registry. I'm currently working on, for the Library, a short article about that remarkable day and remarkable recording and I'm wondering if you might be available to speak to me briefly about your experiences that day? Please let me know.

Thank you.

Cary O'Dell

National Recording Registry, Library of Congress

19053 Mt. Pony Road, Culpeper VA 22701

Note: The National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress is a list of sound recordings deemed “culturally, historically or aesthetically significant” for the US. These recordings are works of enduring importance to American culture and, hence, in need of permanent preservation. Idil Biret’s performance of Rachmaninoff’s 3rd Piano Concerto on 22 November 1963 is thus preserved by the Library of Congress and is now part of American history.

Side A (19:04)

Announcement of the death of John F. Kennedy	00:42
Eroica Symphony <i>Marcia Funebre</i> - Beginning	00:35
Speech by the President of the trustees of BSO	02:01
Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30	
i. Allegro molto tanto *	15:46

Side B (24:11)

ii. Intermezzo: Adagio	09:18
iii. Finale: Alla breve	12:11
Concluding announcement	02:52

* On the score of the concerto the tempo indication is *Allegro ma non tanto* (fast but not much). But, on the score he used conducting the concerto with Rachmaninoff as soloist in 1913 Wilhelm Mengelberg deleted ‘*ma non*’ and inserted ‘*molto*’ (much). Idil Biret remembers that when she played this work with Pierre Monteux he said to her, “I conducted this concerto with Rachmaninoff at the piano. It is a virtuosic work. Play it as fast as you want and I will follow”. The *Allegro ‘molto’* indication on Mengelberg’s score confirms the words of Monteux. Biret’s performance with BSO is very fast as she followed the suggestion of Monteux.



Mengelberg score copy

Master prepared by Mark Obert-Thorn from the New York re-broadcast
of the concert on 23 November 1963 • Photos: İdil Biret, Erich Leinsdorf
and BSO at concert • Concept and notes: Sefik B. Yüksel • Remastering:
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