

Idil Biret and Pierre Boulez: A Remarkable Musical Partnership

Turkish pianist Idil Biret revolutionized Boulez's piano sonatas, earning critical acclaim and selling 30,000 recordings despite industry resistance

By Sefik Büyükyüksel

This being the centennial of the famous French composer and conductor Pierre Boulez, it seemed appropriate to look back and remember Idil Biret's recordings and performances of his three piano sonatas.

In the early 1970s, a remarkable collaboration began in New York with the composer İlhan Mimaroglu, then a producer at Atlantic Records. In quick succession, she recorded Boulez's 2nd Sonata, Webern's Variations, Berg's Sonata, Stravinsky's Petrouchka Suite, Ravel's Gaspard de la Nuit, Boucourechliev's Archipel IV, and Session by Mimaroglu (a work for piano and electronic music), as well as works by Scriabin (Sonata No. 10 and Preludes Op. 74), Miaskovsky (Sonatas 2, 3), and Prokofiev (Sonatas 2, 7), all of which were released in the US on the Finnadar label, a subsidiary of Atlantic Records. Among these, the one to receive most attention became the 2nd Boulez Sonata, also because Boulez was the music director of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra at the time. Glowing critiques appeared in the US press, and Stereo Review magazine made the LP a Best Record of the Month in its December 1973 issue with the review below:

"Idil Biret is equal to the challenge (of Boulez's 2nd Sonata). She does not merely sustain the thirty-minute length—enormously ambitious for music that cannot fall back on the familiar landmarks of tonality—but inflects and shapes it in a remarkable way. The drama here... is the dialogue between a thought process and its corporeal realization, between the musical idea itself and its expression as sound-color of an almost improvisatory nature. Miss Biret catches all this, and she does so beautifully. A sensitive performance of the by-now classic Webern Variations completes an impressive American recording debut."

Idil describes how the decision to record the Boulez 2nd Sonata was made: "Claude Samuel gave me the idea of playing the Boulez sonatas. Claude was the producer of my Vega LP records in Paris and a close friend of Boulez. Some years later, he collected the many interviews he made with Boulez in a book. 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, which I played from the score. Pierre Boulez, who came to the concert, congratulated me afterward and said, '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 can we express its true character; if it is right to act without fear of the long jumps (there), these sonatas also require the same approach and fearless performances,' I added. After the concert in France, I offered to record three of Boulez's sonatas to İlhan Mimaroglu in New York (Boulez was the conductor of the NY Philharmonic at the time). He agreed immediately. However, only the 2nd Sonata was recorded and released by Finnadar, a subsidiary of Atlantic Records, the same year (1973)."

About the Boulez 2nd Sonata, which Idil Biret played in recitals in London, New York, Los Angeles, and other cities, The New Yorker magazine critic wrote in February 1982:

"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."

After her concert, The Los Angeles Herald Examiner introduced Idil's performance to their readers with the title, "Biret is equal to the challenge of Boulez."

In a rare interview he gave in 2001, İlhan Mimaroglu described his goal for founding Finnadar Records, for which he had produced the Boulez 2nd Sonata recording of Biret:

"It was in the early seventies that I started Finnadar Records with an LP of my electronic music and continued throughout the years, primarily with recordings of contemporary compositions, with a view to also offer to the public performers who should be better known, among them Turkish pianists Idil Biret and Meral Güneyman."

In the 1980s, Idil Biret stopped playing/recording contemporary music and devoted herself to the performance of classical and romantic repertory. She recorded and performed in concerts all the Beethoven symphonies in the piano transcriptions, the complete piano works of Chopin, and then Brahms and Rachmaninoff. But, after long deliberation, she agreed to record for Naxos the three piano sonatas of Pierre Boulez in the studios of Radio France in Paris for the 70th anniversary of the composer in 1995. This project, which was the idea of the then Naxos distributor in France, Yves Riesel, was taken up with great reluctance by Klaus Heymann, the founder of Naxos, who was quite skeptical about it and thought initially that the CD would be a flop. Later, he 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 France, Naxos introduced the disc with a provocative announcement with an advertisement that said: "Si vous détestez sa musique, vous saurez dire pourquoi / If you hate his music, you will know how to say why." The result, with a budget price, was sales in the tens of thousands.

In her book of memoirs, when asked by the author Dominique Xardel about these recordings, Idil replied saying, "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!" (From the book *Une Pianiste Turque en France* by Dominique Xardel - Buchet/Chastel, Paris 2006). She adds, "Years later I learned that Pierre Boulez had told my friend pianist Marie-Françoise Bucquet, 'The best performances of these sonatas are those of Idil.'"

While Boulez said these laudatory words about Idil's recording of the sonatas to a close friend, he never said anything publicly about her recording of his three sonatas. One wonders why. The answer is that by the 1990s Boulez was distant from his days as a composer; he had become a conductor of world fame with an exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon. The then-budget label Naxos, for which Idil had made the Boulez Sonatas recordings, was the arch-enemy of DG for breaking its monopoly on prices and had put Idil on a blacklist to stop her concert activity in Germany and elsewhere. So, even a famous person like Boulez could not speak his mind freely under these circumstances, even though the piano sonatas he had composed long ago had finally reached tens of thousands of music lovers for the first time through the excellent performances of Idil Biret. Such is the environment of the world of music, totally commercialized by the major labels.

At a time when selling three thousand copies of any classical recording is considered a success, selling thirty thousand copies of a Boulez recording in six months was quite remarkable. In France, the CD was awarded a Golden Diapason of the Year award by the Diapason Magazine and selected as one of the best recordings of the year by *Le Monde* newspaper in 1995. There were also laudatory reviews from the press in the UK, USA, Australia, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland. Some of these were as follows:

"Thanks to Idil Biret, these works find their place in the history of the sonata next to the ultimate pages of Beethoven." — Pierre Gervasoni, DIAPASON (France) - The 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." —P. Szersnovicz, LE MONDE (France) – A best recording of the Year 1995

"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!" —Interview with Klaus Heymann, LE FIGARO (France) 11.6.2012

"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 rhythmical freshness is combined with a great accumulated experience in an extraordinary manner." —R. Schulz, 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." —Lehman, 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." —A.W., 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." —D. Robellaz, 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 her 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." —G. Chamorro, RITMO (Spain) 2011

1995 was a very special year 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 given to her in France for the Boulez recordings, she received the Grand Prix du Disque Frederic Chopin prize in Warsaw, given in Poland once every five years. Such a feat does not exist in the annals of classical music. There were laudatory words everywhere for each of these in the media. But no one put the two prizes together and wondered how a woman from a country without a classical music tradition could do what none had been able to do before and applaud her for this. Such is the world of music.