

Pianist Idil Biret reflects on a lifetime of performing Ravel, from Paris Conservatoire studies in the 1960s, in international concerts, until her last performance of *Gaspard de la Nuit* in 2017 in Chicago.

I prepared this note on Ravel, selecting from Idil's many writings on the subject.

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## **My 60-Year Journey with Ravel and *Gaspard de la Nuit***

**by Idil Biret**

Ravel's music has been part of my world since my early years. I encountered *Gaspard de la nuit*<sup>1</sup> before entering the Paris Conservatoire. I remember hearing “*Ondine*” at a concert, or more likely at one of Marguerite Long's masterclasses, without being absorbed by its delicate harmonies.

“*Ondine*” and “*Scarbo*” had fearful reputations and were considered among the most difficult pieces of the piano repertory. I was intrigued by the challenge *Gaspard de la nuit* represented and looked forward to tackling its complexities. In 1951, at age ten, I was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire, entered the piano class of Jean Doyen and later the chamber music class of Jacques Février—both close associates of Ravel and who learned his works under his guidance.<sup>2</sup>

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 strict about rhythmic accuracy, *Scarbo*, right pedaling, and accentuation. As I had worked seriously and attentively on this piece, the performance went well.

After my studies at the Conservatoire ended, at age sixteen, I started intensive work to build my future concert repertory. One of the first pieces I took up was *Gaspard de la nuit*, so I added “*Ondine*” and “*Le gibet*” to “*Scarbo*.” In those days, I tended to exaggerate the contrasts by trying to achieve frightening effects on the keyboard. This, as I later understood, was misconceived and far from Ravel's refined treatment of Aloysius Bertrand's poems.

To group *Ondine*'s ostinato<sup>3</sup> figures, present throughout the piece, is a challenge. I spent long hours practicing to master their regularity without interference from wrong accents. Once, during a vacation at the seaside, an idea occurred to me—“Why not practice *Ondine* mentally while swimming?”

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaspard de la nuit* (subtitled *Trois poèmes pour piano d'après Aloysius Bertrand*) is a suite of piano pieces by Maurice Ravel, written in 1908. It has three movements, each based on a Bertrand poem: *Ondine*, *Le Gibet*, and *Scarbo*.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> *Ostinato*: a continually repeated musical phrase or rhythm.

This unorthodox practice style worked. The floating sensation experienced on the waves while playing Ondine in my mind made me aware of the right weight necessary to display on the keyboard and realize the intemporality of the ostinato figures. “Le gîbet” is a vision of a crepuscular landscape seen from a distance with oppressive indifference, as it sounds in Ravel's own recording. “Le gîbet” establishes the balance between the seduction of Ondine's scintillating piano writing and Scarbo's evil virtuosity.

With passing years, Gaspard de la nuit became a part of me. Initially, my conception of this work drew inspiration from German fantastic romanticism. This changed as I tried to find the form of classicism inherent in Ravel's music by following the composer's indications of nuances, accents, pedaling, avoiding facile effects. In time, the true magic of these masterpieces became increasingly evident and more perceptible. This experience proved to me that less is better than excess.

I began 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 came numerous recordings—Le Tombeau de Couperin and Gaspard de la nuit were recorded in Paris in 1965. For some reason, they were not released on LP then and waited more than fifty years for CD release.<sup>4</sup>

I recorded Gaspard de la nuit again in New York in 1975, coupled with an early piece Sérénade grotesque for the Ertegün brothers' Atlantic/Finnadar classical label, established by İlhan Mimaroglu, who produced this recording and wrote excellent music notes. Later, in 1984, came another opportunity to record Ravel when George H. de Mendelssohn, a fourth-generation descendant of the composer, asked me to record Gaspard de la nuit and Miroirs; with La Valse, recorded in 1987 in Stuttgart, Germany, this became my first CD release. The recordings I made during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s may illustrate my ongoing quest to discover Ravel's solo piano music.

An invaluable opportunity arose to perform the concertos under 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 educator Prof. İhsan Dogramaci. As with all 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 with the Orchestre Suisse Romande conducted by Fabio Luisi in 1998, another

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<sup>4</sup> These works were recorded in 1965 for Vega (later DECCA). But, due to certain shortcomings it was decided that the LP should not be released. The original acetate LP masters of these remained in the archive for nearly half a century. When these were discovered and listened to it was noted that they 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, because the *Le Tombeau* was my only recording of this work, it was decided to release this piece first 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 INDEPENDENT (UK)** “The distinguished Turkish pianist İdil Biret performs music by Ravel with breathless excitement.” **FANFARE (USA)** “This is a treasurable document of a superb pianist at the peak of her powers.” **AMERICAN RECORD GUIDE** “This is a memorable collection of Ravel piano music...performances that will bring you back many times.” **INTERNATIONAL PIANO** “In this release of music by Ravel you can sense İdil Biret’s pedigree in every bar. A superb release.”

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.

Ravel had a sophisticated mind. He preferred living in small spaces, dividing the rooms in his Monfort l'Amaury house near Paris into two. Instead of four regular-sized rooms, he chose several tiny but independent rooms. His house resembles a cat's dwelling, with corners upon corners where one can curl up and hide in secret cupboards. I am constantly fascinated by the depth of Ravel's originality and breadth of imagination in Sérénade grotesque, Ma mère l'Oye, L'enfant et les sortilèges, and Gaspard de la nuit. In some ways, Ravel's writing resembles Liszt's but contains astonishing pianistic innovations. For example, I think of the use and descent in seconds in Scarbo or the extraordinary Concerto for the Left Hand. I feel close to Ravel also because of his genuine modesty, apparent in his correspondence.

**Edited from the writings of Idil Biret by Şefik Büyükyüksel**