

Summary One (from [rev.com](https://www.rev.com)) : This podcast episode provides a detailed overview of the extensive discography of Turkish pianist Idil Biret. The host, Jed Distler, highlights some of Biret's best recordings across a wide range of composers, including:

- Beethoven's "Pathétique" and "Hammerklavier" sonatas from her Finnadar label release
- Biret's performance of Berlioz's "Symphonie fantastique" in Liszt's piano transcription
- Biret's interpretations of Boulez's Three Piano Sonatas
- Her complete Brahms piano works cycle, particularly the Third Piano Sonata
- The Brahms Piano Concerto No. 1 and Schumann works
- Biret's recordings of Rachmaninoff's piano concertos
- Biret's interpretations of Liszt's études and transcriptions
- A 1976 direct-to-disc recital featuring works by Chopin, Scriabin, and Prokofiev
- A 1999 live Chopin recital in Ankara, Turkey

The host provides insightful commentary on the qualities and merits of these recordings, making a compelling case for listeners to explore Biret's vast and diverse discography.

Jed Distler:

Idil Biret's Essential Recordings: A Piano Maven's Guide to the Turkish Virtuoso's Best Work

A curated exploration of Turkish pianist Idil Biret's finest recordings, highlighting standout performances across classical composers from Beethoven to Rachmaninoff.

Welcome. This is Jed Distler, and this is The Piano Maven, your friendly podcast guide to piano recordings.

A listener suggested I devote an episode to the extensive box set released a few years ago containing Idil Biret's recordings. While not entirely comprehensive—many recordings have been released since—I can't think of another pianist who has recorded so prolifically, except perhaps Vladimir Ashkenazy, especially counting his work as a conductor.

This Idil Biret box set was a limited edition of 130 CDs and 4 DVDs. Rather than briefly commenting on each recording, I thought it would be more useful for collectors and piano enthusiasts if I compiled a list of some of Biret's best recordings—those that provide a well-rounded view of her discography and that I have greatly enjoyed.

Let's begin with Beethoven. I've previously discussed Biret's Finnadar label release containing Beethoven's *Pathétique* and *Hammerklavier* sonatas. These are strong, vividly detailed, and interestingly characterized readings with more vibrancy and shape than her remakes for the complete Beethoven cycle on her own label. This original Finnadar release is available on Biret's own label distributed by Naxos.

Although Biret's complete Chopin cycle is somewhat uneven—I gave it a favorable review years ago, but not all performances have held up equally well—she delivers a scintillating and stylish performance of the rarely heard *Krakowiak* for piano and orchestra, one of the work's finest recordings.

Biret made the world premiere recording of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* in Franz Liszt's solo piano transcription in the late 1970s for Finnadar. This colorful, virtuosic performance fully captures the music's quirkiness. Her premiere recording is more incisive and energetic than her Naxos remake, though the latter is still very good. The first version is definitely the one to get.

One of Biret's best recordings features Pierre Boulez's three piano sonatas on Naxos from the mid-1990s. Her command of the notes and feeling for long lines and narrative sweep are impressive. She understands what to convey in this music, making a convincing case for the young Boulez's strict total serial twelve-tone language.

Biret's cycle of Brahms's complete piano works is likely her most consistently satisfying cycle devoted to one composer. If I had to select just one recording from it, it would be Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5. Her interpretation resembles that of her teacher and mentor, Wilhelm

Kempff, with clipped and angular passage work, strong attention to bass lines, and discreet pedaling. Like Kempff, she feels the second movement *Andante espressivo* as two beats to the bar rather than a heavier four. Some might find her risqué and sometimes unyielding approach less tender or expressive compared to slower performances like Claudio Arrau's.

Biret's first recording of Brahms's *Paganini Variations* from the early 1960s showcases unabashed virtuosity. Though the dynamic range is limited (mostly mezzo forte to forte) and somewhat mechanical, the typewriter-like precision is enjoyable. Her recording of Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 1, completely overlooked, is one of the best in the catalog. As I wrote for ClassicsToday.com: "If you're looking for a Brahms D minor concerto, consider this one. It's played with distinction, forethought, care, and real individuality. The tumultuous first movement is sculpted with broad rhetorical brushstrokes, yet never sags under its weight. Credit conductor Antoni Wit, who clarifies the composer's difficult-to-balance orchestration. Biret channels her considerable technique toward musical ends, admirably integrating the first movement's taxing chains of trills, descending octave thunderbolts, and upward scale passages into the orchestral fabric."

The coupled Schumann Introduction and Concert Allegro features soaring piano writing. Among Biret's recordings of Schumann's piano music, I appreciate her sensitive and poetic readings of the *Untere Blätter* Op. 99. The somewhat dry recording quality enhances the intimate aura of these performances.

Biret's cycle of Rachmaninoff's four concertos with Antoni Wit is worth exploring, especially the first and fourth concertos. They play the first concerto to the hilt, reveling in its virtuosity and emotional generosity. In the fourth concerto, the opening repeated brass and woodwind chords are clear and beautifully balanced. Biret scampers through the final movement with playfulness rivaling Earl Wild's.

For Franz Liszt, I would choose the second volume in her cycle devoted to his works. This contains the first versions of the twelve études that would become the *Transcendental Études*—superb performances of these youthful efforts. Also included are wonderful interpretations of the Three Concert Études (*Il lamento*, *La leggerezza*, and *Un sospiro*) and the Two Concert Études (*Waldesrauschen* and *Gnomonreigen*), with *Waldesrauschen* being especially beautiful.

A disc of Wilhelm Kempff's original transcriptions and compositions on the Marco Polo label showcases Biret's dedication to her teacher. Though Kempff's music is somewhat lightweight and old-fashioned, it is sincere and beautifully crafted, played with obvious love and devotion.

In the late 1970s, some audiophile labels experimented with direct-to-disc technology, bypassing analog tape machines and feeding recorded signals directly to disc-cutting lathes. This required recording an entire LP side in one continuous take, with no splicing or editing possible. Biret's 1976 Finnadar release was the first direct-to-disc recording by a classical solo pianist. With apparent nerves of steel, she delivers top-form performances including two Chopin Mazurkas (A minor Op. 17 No. 4 and B major Op. 56 No. 1)—freer and more imaginative than her later Naxos recordings.

This disc also includes Scriabin's Tenth Sonata, not as explosive as Horowitz's interpretation but rich in tonal colors and subtle dynamic variations. Her Prokofiev Second Sonata displays great virtuosity, especially in the outer movements. The CD edition adds a compelling performance of the Seventh Sonata, impressive despite the absence of editing.

Another noteworthy concerto disc originally on the Alpha label pairs Franck's *Symphonic Variations* with Massenet's Piano Concerto. Though not tightly constructed, Massenet's youthful work offers great melodies and Biret provides real sparkle. The second part of the Franck features spirited fingerwork.

A fascinating recent disc contains three different recorded versions of Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* by Biret—from 1965 (recorded for Vega but unreleased until she discovered an acetate LP master in her archive), 1974, and 1984. Having three different interpretations of this work on one disc is rare and valuable.

My final selection is a four-disc collection of works by ten Turkish composers, featuring solo piano pieces and concertos from both studio recordings and archival tapes. Given Biret's Turkish roots and lifelong advocacy for her country's music, this collection provides unique access to many otherwise unavailable pieces. All of Biret's Naxos-distributed recordings are accessible on major streaming platforms.

I also recommend a live all-Chopin concert from Ankara, Turkey (October 1, 1999), available on Archive.org. This recital begins with a terrific reading of Chopin's *Rondo à la mazur* Op. 5, followed by a spirited if somewhat challenged Sonata No. 3 in B minor. It includes impetuous renditions of the second and third Impromptus and flexible, poetic readings of the Mazurkas in C-sharp minor (Op. 50 No. 3) and A-flat major (Op. 59 No. 2)—more imaginative than her studio recordings. The concert concludes with an excitingly fast *Tarantelle* in A-flat Op. 43. This live performance captures a fire often missing from Biret's studio Chopin recordings.

These recommendations provide a starting point for exploring Biret's massive discography. She was one of the most industrious and musically eclectic pianists of her generation, greatly respected by her colleagues. This is Jed Distler, and you've been listening to The Piano Maven.