

# The Transformative Power of Musical Genius: A 50-Year Journey of Admiration and Inspiration

*A touching letter from a philosophy professor to pianist Idil Biret recalls how her extraordinary talent shaped his lifelong relationship with music.*

An extraordinary letter captures a profound moment of artistic admiration and its lasting impact across decades. Written in 2012, it reaches back more than fifty years to a chance encounter that left an indelible impression on the writer, French philosopher Guy Debrock.

The core of this letter centers on a transformative musical experience. The writer attended a concert in Brussels where, unexpectedly, a young Idil Biret performed Stravinsky's *Capriccio* as a last-minute replacement. What makes this moment significant is the seemingly impossible feat she accomplished—learning an extremely difficult Stravinsky piano piece in just two weeks, something even Nadia Boulanger had deemed "madness."

A single artistic performance can fundamentally alter someone's perception of what's possible in human achievement. M. Degrock describes being "dazzled" and witnessing "a phenomenon that I would have never thought possible." Such moments of witnessing extraordinary talent can become reference points in our lives, expanding our understanding of human potential.

The letter also reveals the courage that comes from genuine admiration. The writer describes himself as "extremely naive" for finding Biret's address and writing to express his admiration—yet this naivety led to an unexpected connection. Biret not only replied but invited him to her home in Paris, creating another treasured memory described as "a goddess had descended to earth." This speaks to the power of reaching out to those who inspire us, even across apparent social boundaries.

There's a bittersweet quality to the narrative as well. The writer had aspired to be a conductor, but life circumstances led him "to pursue a path other than music." Despite this divergence from his initial dreams, music remained "the driving force" of his life—suggesting that artistic inspiration persists even when career paths change.

The timing of this letter—written fifty years after the encounter—speaks to how certain artistic experiences continue to resonate throughout our lives. The writer felt compelled to express gratitude decades later, believing "we rarely have the opportunity to thank the people who have profoundly influenced us." This highlights how influential moments often go unacknowledged, and the importance of expressing gratitude, even belatedly.

Beyond the personal story, this letter offers insight into Idil Biret's remarkable career. As a Turkish pianist who gained prominence in France, her story represents cross-cultural artistic

achievement. The reference to her book and the white dress she wore shows she had become successful enough to have a biography published with photographs documenting her performances.

The warmth with which the writer recalls meeting Biret and her parents reveals something about her character beyond her musical talent—the "atmosphere of kindness" that accompanied her extraordinary abilities. This humanizes the artistic genius, showing how personal qualities can enhance the impact of artistic achievement.

This letter stands as a testament to the lasting power of artistic excellence, the unexpected connections that can arise from genuine admiration, and the importance of expressing gratitude to those who have shaped our understanding of what humans can achieve. It reminds us that brief encounters can reverberate through decades of our lives, and that acknowledging those influences—even years later—holds significant value for both the influenced and the influencer.

Here is the heartfelt letter:

Montpeyroux, March 5, 2012

Dear Madame Biret,

I am sending you this letter that I have wanted to write to you for a very long time. It is inspired by my conviction that we rarely have the opportunity to thank the people who have profoundly influenced us. And there are few people who have influenced me as much as you. And I want to tell you this. Allow me to explain a little.

We met more than fifty years ago. If I believed in chance, I would say that chance was the cause. In fact, our meeting was simply the result of a simple coincidence. Passing through Brussels, I took the opportunity to attend a concert at the Palais des Beaux-Arts. Before the concert, a gentleman came on stage to announce (if I remember correctly) that the pianist who was supposed to play Stravinsky's *Capriccio* was indisposed and would be replaced by a very young pianist who had learned the score in two weeks. I did not catch the name of the pianist.

I did not know the score of the work, but I knew that learning a Stravinsky piano score could not be done in two weeks. I was therefore very curious to see how the pianist would manage. You came on stage in a beautiful white dress, as depicted in the photo in Dominique Xardel's book *Idil Biret, a Turkish pianist in France*. I must confess, I was dazzled.

Then, you played this work with absolutely miraculous simplicity, as if you were improvising the music as you went along, and without any hesitation. I knew that I had witnessed a phenomenon that I would have never thought possible.

Since, at that time, encouraged by the good result in the competition for young orchestra conductors in Besançon, I was dreaming of a 'career' as a conductor, I immediately obtained the score of the work, the reading of which confirmed my impression that learning such a work

could not be done in two weeks. However, you'd done it. You had proven that Nadia Boulanger was wrong when she advised you against doing it, saying that it was madness.

I was very impressed.

I was also extremely naive. That's how I did the unimaginable. I don't remember exactly how I found your address, but I wrote you a letter to express my admiration. And, by the grace of another miracle, you very kindly replied, and you invited me to visit you in Paris. I couldn't believe my eyes, as if a goddess had descended to earth to see me. I am not very observant, and I could not reconstruct the image of the apartment where you lived with your parents not far from the Eiffel Tower, but I will never forget the atmosphere of kindness, that of your parents as well as yours. There was another guest, also a musician, whom I did not know, and whose name I have not retained.

Without going into details, circumstances encouraged me to pursue a path other than music, although it remained the driving force of my life. But after a fifteen-year stay in the United States, I returned to Europe, and more precisely to the Netherlands, where I was appointed professor of philosophy at the Faculty of Science at the University of Nijmegen, and it's there that, so to speak, I found you again on my path in a completely unexpected way. One day, my son (a good musician) had invited a friend with whom he liked to listen to music, and I was working in another corner of the house when my son came to see me to tell me that he had just listened to an extraordinary CD with Beethoven's Sixth Symphony in a version for piano. I asked him the name of the pianist. He pronounced your name and I felt like I was falling into the void. Since that day, I have not stopped looking for your recordings, and each time, I was overwhelmed by the transparency, the sublime simplicity of your piano playing, and, to say the least, the beauty of the music you create while playing.

It was only by reading the book that I discovered the extent of your talent. And I do not doubt for a moment that, in the years to come, when the jealousy of your contemporaries will have disappeared along with their existence, the immensity of your contribution to humanity will be rediscovered. Forgive me for speaking this way, but I do so because it is truly what I think.

Since my retirement, I devote a lot of time to music. I had already continued to do so, especially as an organist, first in the United States and Canada, and then in the Netherlands where I was the titular organist in the city of Arnhem. When I settled in France, I continued to play the organ in several churches. Thus, since the small historical organ (built by the famous Aristide Cavaillé-Coll) in Gignac (not far from Montpellier) was restored to its original condition (in 2010), I have become, in a way, its titular organist. Although it is modest, and the pedal board doesn't count for much, I often play works that can also be played on the piano. And so I have also returned somewhat to the piano. I am telling you all this to say that there is not a day that goes by without me thinking of you. I wonder how you would play the pages I am working on. And I always have before me the sonic image of your interpretations, which I regard as true creations, where everything has its place, where music flows as from a source, limpid and transparent. And I

thank you for having thus become, without your knowledge, a mysterious presence in my life. When listening to you, I often think of Socrates' words, who, through Plato's voice, teaches us that (I freely quote) the artist is the medium through which the divine message passes.

In this context, I often tell myself that you would be the ideal interpreter of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier. You have all the necessary virtues to do it: respect for the score without compromise, clarity of sound, the sense of musical discourse, and above all the creativity to make it a new work each time.

I know I risk that you may no longer remember my short visit to Paris. But I wanted, before it is too late for me, to tell you all the esteem I have for you. And I tell you this from the bottom of my heart.

Guy Debrock 1 Route de Lagamas F-34150 Montpeyroux (France)

*Translated by James Whipple Miller*