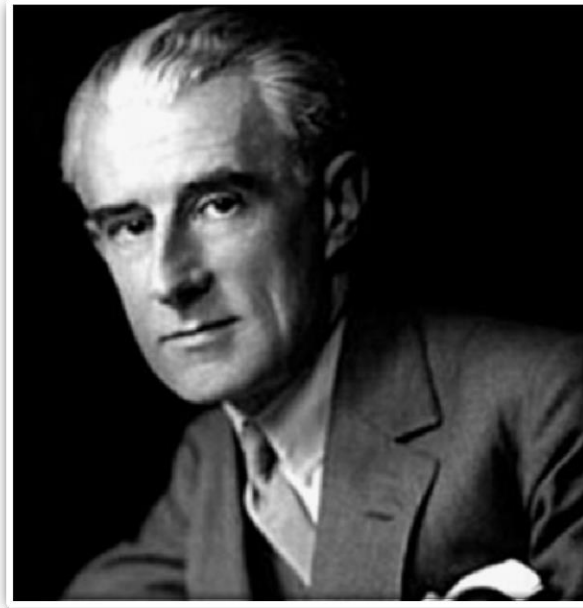


Ravel Gaspard de la Nuit

Comparative Survey: October, 2012
(Updated: October, 2013)
103 versions compared



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Commentary

I always assume that piano enthusiasts reading these surveys have a fair (if not expert) knowledge of the music under discussion. If this is not the case, and more background information is required, just go to Wikipedia for a quick fix. I do like Hewitt's translations of the poems better than what Wikipedia offers (read the liner notes for her Hyperion recording), but let's not get caught up on all that. I don't want to spend time duplicating material that most readers here will already know. What I want to focus on are the issues I look for in a fine performance, and to provide my own somewhat reluctant appreciation of *Gaspard*.

Like many longtime piano enthusiasts I've heard dozens of live performances of *Gaspard* and have amassed dozens of recordings. Without doubt the finest live performance I ever heard was by John Ogdon in one of his 'on' moments towards the end. *Scarbo* wasn't as bone-crunching as Pogorelich, but Ogdon had him beat in *Ondine* and *Gibet*. I still remember the sound of those gossamer pianissimos in *Ondine*, the haunting and desolate melody of *Gibet*, and those purring low B-flats that seemed to crawl creepily along the floor of the concert hall. But even so, as good as that was, *Gaspard* was still not among my most favored works.

I recognize that *Gaspard* is probably one of the ten most important piano compositions written during the twentieth century, but I wouldn't go so far as to say it is the single most important work, as a few writers have. I would be hard pressed to name a single work that defines the twentieth century, but the era of Impressionism doesn't represent to me the defining aspects of unshackled tonality, two horrific wars, the threat of nuclear destruction, and rampant schisms which tore apart any sense of mainstream cultural unity. When I think of the twentieth century the defining piano works would be more along the lines of the Bartok Second Concerto, Prokofiev's Wartime Sonatas, Messiaen's *Vingt Regards*, or Ligeti's Etudes. Now, in terms of benchmark works of the Impressionistic era—that time that straddles the Romantic era and the modern era—then we may consider *Gaspard* one of the top contenders.

Like many, I heard of its legendary status as a young teenager and bought my first recording just to see what one of the most difficult piano pieces ever written sounded like. And every time some contestant would play this at a competition there was always a bristle of excitement among the pianistic cognoscenti, sometimes even wringing of the hands in barely-contained anticipation. I never got that excited.

In talking with non-pianist music lovers, *Gaspard* does not stand out as more favored or with the perception of being musically superior to *Miroirs*, or Debussy's *Images*, just to mention two works that I generally prefer for musical reasons. But as a test of pianistic skill, *Gaspard* is one of the most fearsome challenges ever written. The trouble is, many attempt it who should have known better than to try. This is a piece which really requires a thoroughbred virtuoso technique. The good news is that a new recording of *Gaspard* finally eliminated the last vestiges of my resistance and made it come to life for me as it never had before. That was the catalyst for doing a *Gaspard* survey before doing the *Miroirs* or Debussy Preludes.

Yet, as excited as I was to immerse myself in this newfound interest in *Gaspard*, I made the mistake of reading topical threads on the two primary piano forums which left me temporarily flummoxed as to how to proceed. I generally avoid those forums because the bickering and pissing matches between pianists always leaves me feeling depressed. I really don't want to be associated with that kind of discourse, which is why I've never felt the desire to join in the fray. In this case, after reading

pages of commentary, I realized that virtually all of the 'hot button' issues that got pianists riled up were topics that didn't even show up on my radar. And even now, I consider them quite peripheral to the more substantial issues. Conversely, all of the performance aspects that I was making note of as I wrapped up my extensive survey were issues that didn't warrant a single comment by anybody on the threads. Was I that far out in left-field? Had my decades of luke-warm reception to *Gaspard* made me miss the whole attraction that it has for pianists?

So I read Penguin and Gramophone Guides again, and some of the general 'building a library' books, and felt right at home with what they were talking about. In short, this work, more than most, seems to have created a real dichotomy of opinions, with pianists on one side, and music lovers on the other.

Before we get to specific performance issues, a brief note about tone quality and its importance in conveying sensuality in Impressionistic music. In reading all the commentaries, only one person made any reference to tone quality or sound environment, and frankly, for me, this is one of the most critical considerations for creating an evocative and immersive performance realization. This is one reason why I can't get excited about old, pre-stereo recording with lots of noisy background hash. But even among modern recordings, oftentimes the microphone placement is not optimal, or the piano is mediocre (lacking color or dimensionality), or the venue is not ideal.

This will be the topic of a separate essay (forthcoming) which will explore in depth the nature of tonal quality and the gestalt of acoustic perception. In the essay, **How We Perceive Music**, I talked about how different listeners are either highly attuned to timbre and acoustical interface, or rather indifferent, each according to their own psychological disposition. However, I always maintain that a commercial recording or a concert presented in a major international venue, should aspire to the highest levels of refinement. Even if 90% of the listeners truly can't appreciate the difference between an inexpensive Korean-made baby grand and a finely-prepped Steinway concert grand, isn't the music worth providing the best possible conditions to satisfy the most keenly perceptive minority?

I see so many YouTube postings of students hammering away at out-of-tune upright pianos, and yet people post positive or even ecstatic comments (perhaps friends or relatives). Many listeners hear a flurry of notes and see fingers flying, and they are impressed by the rudimentary skill level required. But that is hardly representing the music with artistic probity or any sense of aesthetic presentation. So you can wiggle your fingers back and forth across the black and white keys, that's the extent of what I hear. I'm assuming any readers here are much more critical than that, and are anxious to explore and extrapolate further meaning and enrichment from the highest levels of artistic endeavor. So then, here are a few things I listen for that all greatly enhance the ability of the music to transport the listener to higher levels.

Probably the biggest determination of the end result is the type of venue. A mediocre piano can still make magic if the acoustics are sympathetic, but even the finest instrument will be severely handicapped if the acoustics are not right for the type of music being performed. The type of acoustic in the recorded venue will greatly impact the musical impression the listener has. Many otherwise competent performances were not enjoyable because the recording venue was too dry (impossible to create an evocative sound-scape) or too reverberant (too obfuscatory and reducing of dimensionality to a single blurry plane). For example, Vinnitskaya sounded wonderfully evocative in her live performance at the Queen Elisabeth Competition (available as a three CD set from the official website), but the later commercial recording made in Berlin's Christus Kirche, while hardly sub-standard, just doesn't allow for the tones to spread out and the melody to float above the

accompanying figurations. Remember, a dry acoustic only allows for on and off of the sound envelope, whereas a sympathetic acoustic will provide enriching near-field reflections, and also a tapering tail which fades into the void. These three layers of sound create a more complex soundfield which provides the pianist a greater palette of interactive articulation and dynamic shading. Probably the best overall sound for clarity, dynamics, and dimensionality is the fine effort from the Decca team for Benjamin Grosvenor's recording.

The next biggest issue is the quality of the piano itself. Like I said, many listeners can hear a street musician playing on a Casio portable keyboard and find some degree of interest just watching the musician's fingers course to and fro. But there is a reason why we hear a fine Steinway on Carnegie hall, and not a Casio keyboard. It has to do with complexity and layers of sound, and with the finest instruments, an added sense of dimensionality. I'll be exploring this issue in great length in my forthcoming book about pianos. I've spent much time discussing with actual piano craftsmen (designers and builders) exactly what issues affect the sound that we hear as the end result. I talk a lot about dimensionality, which is the sense of the piano producing a front-back sound-field (mostly bass from the far end of the soundboard, and mostly treble from the more directional upper notes), or if sitting in the audience, then left-to-right image, and most elusive of all, the vertical propagation derived mostly from the singing melodic range.

Although I heard many explanations as to why some pianos have this and others don't, prominent piano designer, Stephen Paulello, seemed convinced that the amount of elasticity of the soundboard in its middle sweet zone (what the German designers call *beschwingen*), the degree to which it swings up and down in greater proportion to the stiffer areas of the soundboard near the case and rim, is what creates the effect of melodic projection coming up and out of the box. When I say Pogorelich has the ability to float the melody above the accompaniment, I'm not talking about projecting the melodic line at a louder dynamic level than the accompaniment, I'm saying that he has tapped into the piano's ability to create dimensional differentiation so that the two textures appear to be coming from two different sound origins.

Of course, this discussion is highly simplistic, because besides layered acoustics and dimensional piano projection there is also the issue of harmonic color (which harmonics are prominent or recessed), ratio of attack versus sustain, dynamic balance (the bass, tenor, alto and soprano do not all offer the same consistent dynamic range), and many other factors. And all that before we get to what the pianist contributes to the equation. Suffice to say, even the greatest artists—Michelangeli, Horowitz, Richter—have provided ample evidence of how bad they can sound when put before a poor instrument. Virtuosity may be evident on any kind of piano, but artistic expression, nuance, and aesthetic sense require the finest conditions.

I hope nobody is asking in their minds why any of this is important, because that is tantamount to saying that the actual physical sounds we hear have no value in the listening experience. Would the image of *Scarbo* be as immersive, that is, take a hold of all our active senses, in an old black and white film, or in modern 3-D THX surround sound? Is a photo copy of a Rembrandt as compelling to contemplate as the real painting hanging in ideal light in a museum? I always say that whatever the tools required to make the music more vivid, more immersive, more capable of transporting beyond the minimal level of hearing just black and white keys, are matters that should warrant attention from music lovers. Otherwise, let's put the kid with the Casio keyboard on stage.

Now then, onward to the specific issues that I look for in a fine performance, presented below in snapshot impressions of each movement.

Ondine, The Water Nymph

This piece is about the dream-like siren-song of the water-nymph sweetly enticing a mortal she would have as a lover. Ravel's brilliant upward and downward arpeggiations represent sprays of water from the water sprites. *Ondine* is often performed as a stand-alone piece, much as is *Un barque sur l'océan* or *Alborada* from *Miroirs*. Back in my youth I played *Un barque*, preferring it over *Ondine*, but after doing this survey and hearing how magical *Ondine* can be when done right, I have had to change my opinion.



There has been some discussion about the best manner of portraying *Ondine's* watery effects, specifically the matter of textural articulation and whether the pianist favors a more etched and pointillistic presentation of the right hand figurations, or whether a more subdued, water-color image is favored. Personally, I would want at least two recordings in my library, choosing the best of these two quite different approaches. But if I had to pick one, I'd go for the smoother, less etched conception, because to my mind this most closely approximates the amorphous, liquid state of the water nymph. For smoothness, none is rendered more effectively than Angela Hewitt. It is really quite a feat to sound so relaxed and effortless, so smooth and limpid in tone without the blurring effects of over-pedaling. Of the renderings favoring a more etched texture, it is critical that irregularities in the articulation are avoided, or else there can be a stuttering effect. Berezovsky achieves a wonderful incandescent flickering. Not water-like, but if one didn't know the specific associative imagery that Ravel had in mind, this is compelling both pianistically and musically.

Lazar Berman played only *Ondine* from *Gaspard*, and he took the liberty of reconfiguring some of the textures, for example, replacing the unusual rhythmic patterns with a steady quasi-tremolo effect. That doesn't really bother me given that the overall musical sensitivity and communicativeness of the poetic idea is of such high order. Obviously, I'd prefer to hear it the way Ravel wrote it, especially when pianists like Hewitt demonstrate how effective it can be. But in listening to over a hundred performances in this survey, I almost wished some of the less capable pianists had simplified the textures rather than sacrifice the musical story line. Berman, master technician that he was, obviously didn't need to simplify the textures if he was going after a more relaxed tempo, but at 5:30 his tempo was faster than the norm. Only Giesecking played faster and without altering the textures, but his rendering has other problems stemming from the nervous, high-strung conception (which is quite contrary to the idea of the poem, and not to my liking).

The next issue in *Ondine* is the degree of separation between the right-hand figurations and the left-hand melody. With Argerich there is a sense of mono-dynamic stasis, an effect made even more apparent by Tiempo (mentored by Argerich and clearly using the same conceptual mold) who creates an evocative sense of the water nymph hiding within the watery textures. The greater ambient atmosphere of Henry Wood Hall (London) helps Tiempo pull this off better than a closer

studio acoustic would. In both cases, Argerich and Tiempo, the water nymph emerges more clearly from the water spray in the climactic moments. The other approach is to have a traditional dynamic separation of melody and accompaniment. Pogorelich does this better than anybody, because it's not merely a dynamic separation but also a spatial separation as the melodic projection seems to float above the murmuring accompaniment. Others have tried this approach and used the same slower tempo model of Pogorelich but you really have to have a piano with superior mid-range sustain and know how to use it. Probably the best compromise between the two approaches is Grosvenor, or, if you don't mind a truly Lento tempo, Sermet. The thing is, it is imperative that the melodic projection not be forced in any way.

Besides the relative degree of dynamic separation, there is also the issue of melodic contour (the rising and falling of the line), natural breathing points, and subtle use of rubato. In this regard none have achieved quite the magical poignancy of Arrau in his live Lugano concert of 1963. Too bad he never made a commercial recording of this, but his managers were pressing for more 'meat and potatoes' Germanic repertoire. In any case, no other version in the survey captures quite the magical dream-like state that Arrau conveys. Even though I'm not a fan of historical recordings, and prefer a more vivid and realistic (modern) recording sound, I returned to this recording several times during the survey, because there is something about it that is almost addictive. His *Gibet* and *Scarbo* are good but not quite at the same magical level.

After building sonority and ascending upward toward the culminant moment (the climax on page 11 of the Durand edition) I'm surprised by how many pianists fumble and falter at this crucial psychological point. Giesecking immediately dissipates all the sonority, almost as if to say 'gottcha with the sucker punch!' A few pianists drop the sustain pedal and render the passage dry and brittle. Maybe that's their take on what droplets of water or a fine spray would be like, but to me it sounds like shattering shards of glass. At the actual peak of the phrase the hands go in different directions towards the two extremes of the keyboard, and many pianists seem to blindly grope for the low B in the bass and end up getting A's or C's or muddy clusters. I say it is more effective to take a moment for agogic stress and make sure the notes are centered for a firm anchoring sonority.

A relatively minor issue concerns the *tres lent* declamatory melody toward the end and whether the pianist sustains the sonority throughout or clears the pedal. Ravel's own pedal indications are inconsistent so that can hardly be considered here. Personally, I believe a sustained and somewhat 'smeared' sound is more in keeping with the poem, where the water nymph's tears run down the pane of glass on the window. Another solution would be to use the sostenuto pedal on the D minor chord and then use the regular pedal to clear the amount of sustain as desired. I've heard it all three ways and it can be convincing in all three.

- Fastest: 4:50 (Giesecking '37)
- Slowest: 8:02 (Sermet)
- Favorites (in order): Grosvenor, Arrau '63, Pogorelich, Hewitt, Sermet.
- Alternative Perspective: Berman '56 (Berezovsky)
- Off the deep end: Tzimon Barto

Le Gibet, The Hangman's Gallows

I know pianists all talk about *Ondine* and especially *Scarbo*, but *Le Gibet* is my favorite of the three. I love the hollow and forlorn sound of the open fifth harmonies in the mid-bass, the ghostly ninth and tenth chords in the upper treble, the deep tolling bells on the low B-flat. The range of timings is quite extreme, from 4:48 to 9:55 (average about six minutes) and I've heard good renderings faster or slower than average. Korevar does pretty well considering the brisk 4:48, while Tiempo at 4:55 sounds perfunctory (I also hate his bubble pop ending). At the other extreme, Ponthus at 9:55 is simply not convincing (and none of the critics reviewing this recordings even mention this). If one is going for a slow conception, one obviously needs a piano with exceptional sustain, and many just play on mediocre pianos that cannot fill in the space.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the piece "Le Gibet" by Maurice Ravel. The first system is marked "Très lent" (Very slow) and includes the instruction "Sans presser ni ralentir jusqu'à la fin" (Without rushing or slowing down until the end). It features a piano dynamic of "pp" (pianissimo) and a "Sourdine" (mute) for the entire piece. The second system includes the instruction "un peu marqué" (a little marked) and a dynamic of "p expressif" (piano, expressive). The notation consists of two staves, treble and bass clef, with various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and ornaments.

Pedaling, balance of voicing, keeping the ostinatos consistent, these are the primary elements of a successful rendering. I also look for layers and dimensionality, and for this one requires a piano with good internal resonance, and the skill to differentiate the multiple textures on two or three spatial planes. For this, I find Gavrilov's first studio recording for EMI (not the later re-make for DG) exceptional. Recordings that are flat and dimensionless are not interesting to me. I also want harmonic color, not flat, opaque greyness. I want deep resonance on the low notes, and harmonic richness in the mid-bass chords. Thibaudet and Pogorelich both have well-balanced and superbly-voiced *Gibet's* but both are compromised by pianos (or recordings) with thin mid-bass sound. Hewitt has a nice, rich sound. Pogorelich's willful distortions (the huge *sforzando* in the middle of a *ppp* section) are too disruptive to ignore. The same idea is echoed in Sudbin's new recording.

- Fastest: Korevar (4:48)
- Slowest: Ponthus (9:55)
- Favorites (in order): Gavrilov (EMI), Grosvenor, Hewitt, Vinnitskaya.
- Alternative Perspective: Pogorelich, Sudbin

Scarbo, Goblin of the Night

This is what the pianist in the crowd wait with bated breath to hear. In a survey of some hundred recordings there were only eight which managed to raise my blood pressure. Not exactly good odds, considering all the hype. But two of those eight were so exciting that I now feel like I can relate to the pianists who are mesmerized with the sheer technical brilliance required to pull this off. Let's talk about the most common points of discussion among pianists, and then to the points that I consider important.



First, the issue of whether the cascading chords leading to the two climaxes should have any kind of *allargando* at the top. Some of the opinions are fairly adamant in advocating one approach over the other. Personally, I don't care, although all things being equal I'd say no slowing down because Ravel didn't give directions to slow down. What is more important is how effective the climax is, whether the effect gives goose bumps, or just a shrug of the shoulders. One of the most effective I've heard, was by Yevgeny Sudbin who dispatched the cascading chords *molto rapido* (no slowing down, even a slight increase in speed), but then distorts the rhythm on the two big chordal gestures. Yes, Ravel writes '*un peu retenu*' (a bit slower) but Sudbin broadens substantially and does not play the rhythms accurately relative to each other, but it does convey a sense that we've arrived at the true climax. I've always felt that other than punch a hole in the keyboard, the only way to give a sense of greater impact is to either clip the phrasing or use heavy agogics. None are heavier with the agogics than Sudbin, and that proves in the end to be more effective than sheer muscle power (i.e. Toradze or Gavrilov). Whether Ravel would approve, who knows.

The real quandary is that pianists must either hold back to *mezzo forte* everything that precedes the two chordal blasts (so they stand out) or else contort the rhythm for greater impact. Hewitt would aver for holding back, and that has its advantages in other ways, but not for the goosebump effect. The opposite of Sudbin is Gieseeking who ignores the '*un peu retenu*' and plays at full speed with the leaps, wrong notes be damned. I wouldn't mind the wrong notes of the '37 version (his 1954 version doesn't have any), or the frantic, manic scramble to grab all those notes in tempo if there was a musical pay-off which conveyed more climactic power or more frightful imagery, but neither is the case. Just another reason why I'm not a fan of the Gieseeking recordings of *Gaspard*. Many of Gieseeking's other recordings have and will feature among my top picks, and all told I believe Americans undervalue his stature as one of the finest pianists of the century, but I find more to admire in his Debussy than I do in his Ravel.

Corollary to speed, is the dynamic level of the cascading chords. In an otherwise lackluster performance (compared to the top super-virtuoso renderings) I like how Yukie Nagai takes a fraction

of a second to solidly anchor the bass tone then start from *mezzo-piano* and builds as ferociously as her strength allows. That's the way I'd want to play them.

Another common talking point is silence. Some listeners actually argue about whether so-and-so cheated the three bars of rests by an eighth. I agree that jumping the gun is not always the smartest choice, but more important to me is how the phrase stops and resumes before and after the period of silence. Does the music just stop with and resume as if somebody hit the pause button, or does the pianist taper off the first part and ramp back up on the return, or perhaps the pianist rushes to the point of the first rest and stops abruptly letting our momentum carry us through the full duration of the rest as if leaping from one side of the room to the other (as in the poem). I think it is perilous to make absolute proclamations one way or the other without looking at the entire context, or even the general feeling of the entire movement.

Those are some of the most common talking points among pianists. Now for a look at the performance elements that I have taken note of. The first concerns whether the opening repeated notes (all 112 of them) should be dry and un-pedaled or sustained with pedal. I believe in a concert hall acoustic either way can be effective, but in a dry studio environment un-pedaled is just too abrasive. Ravel did indicate that he wanted pedal used. Psychologically both are very different. The staccato version is more present and threatening, like squeaky floorboards and gnomish fingernails clattering against the walls. The blurred version is more ambiguous and suggestive of an ominous unknown, like 'what lurks in those dark corners?' The real problem with staccato repeated notes is that unless the acoustics are just right it often ends up sounding like piano notes. Pedaling the notes gives a less individualized, more evocative impression.

The next item is the rapid tremolos in the treble in measures 23-29 which start *pianissimo*, build to *fortissimo* and then drawn back down. Given that it is such a long tremolo, with the sole interest being a dynamic curve, any unevenness in the *crescendo* or *decrescendo* irritates me. Some pianists sit at the *pianissimo* level too long then burst forth to the *fortissimo* at the last second and then don't have enough time to draw back down very much. I like a smoothly tapered arch. Of course, slow tremolos are the worst because then we hear piano notes instead of the tremulous shivering intensity of the effect. I don't mind allowing the pedal to hold the lingering resonance of those shimmering harmonics into the next two measures of rests (rests do not always mean 'silence', merely inactivity). But I've heard pianists who cut off the tremolo abruptly, and that can have a spine-tingling effect if done right (but it's risky in a dry acoustic because it can then sound merely perfunctory, like punching a time clock).

One could argue over relatively minor details such as the most commonly missed motivic iterations (page 31 of the Durand edition, right hand after peak in treble) or the tendency of many pianists to slow down on the difficult double note alternations (also page 31), but these details don't make or break a performance (they're an added bonus if everything else is done right). What I find to be a bigger issue concerns the blunting or rounding or approximating of what should be sharp and incisive rhythmic figures. This is the primary reason, really the singular reason, why I've never been excited about *Scarbo* until I heard a few standout performances in this survey. Most pianists (but not all!) do fairly well on the single note iteration of the five note thematic idea. But things get more difficult when there's a whole concatenation of chords that must be dispatched with blazing fists of fury (page 33!). Very few pianists render these thematic iterations with the same razor sharp alacrity of the single notes. For me, crisp and in tempo is exciting; dulled and rounded is just a pianist struggling to play some awkward notes. This is a make-or-break issue for me, and all my top recommendations have the adrenalin or micro burst of energy (or whatever is required) to make

these figures incisive and rhythmically propulsive. Some major virtuoso pianists failed to deliver, and I'm talking big name players like Hamelin, Lisitsa, Michelangeli. The two best, by far, were Grosvenor and Sermet. Grosvenor has the more cultured and unforced tonal quality, and most refined sense of balance. Sermet, on the other hand, more idiosyncratic, more phantasmagorical, and with such bursts of virtuosity that I felt like I could relate to those Italian villagers when they first heard Paganini play ('He must be in league with the Devil!'). The playing to me was so incredulous that it seems beyond the level of normal human reflexes. Others who played with crisp rhythms were: Berezovsky, Chen, Sudbin, and Tiempo. Argerich was 'on' sometimes, other times not.

I've listed below my favorites for *Scarbo*, but there were a few others that I liked enough to go back and listen again. Foremost would be Sergio Fiorentino's very exciting 1987 live concert (which ties with Gieseke for fastest performance), Berezovsky (exciting but also rather dry and hectoring in some places), Sa Chen starting with a beautiful *Ondine* that reminded me of Arrau, and a progressively more and more exciting *Scarbo* (though with some quirky inflections at the climaxes). Also noteworthy for other reasons would be Inon Barnatan who gives us a very lightweight, scampering *Scarbo*, with lots of delicate, top-of-the-keys playing, and his aesthetic opposite, Miheala Ursuleasa, who gives us a rugged and almost Prokofiev-like rendering. It's a sad loss to all piano enthusiasts that she died in 2012 at only age 33 (cerebral aneurism).

None of the French pianists made it anywhere near the top rank in my survey: Bavouzet, Beroff, Casadesus, Collard, Entremont, Francois, Perlemuter, Queffelec, Rogé, Tharaud, Thibaudet, Thoillier. Aimard was interesting enough (and with good sound) to go back to again, but still not a top contender. More to my liking is French-Lebanese pianist Abdel Rahman El Bacha whom I'll talk about in a bit. I suppose I shouldn't just let my statement about French pianists stand without some pre-emptive defense. First off, just because a composer gives a flattering reference to a pianist or student that shows interest in their music doesn't really mean anything. Yes, I'm serious: not a thing.

Without devolving here into a topic worthy of a whole separate essay, I'll just make a few quick points. Look at how many pianists and organists Messiaen and Loriod mentored, all with substantially different interpretive perspectives. In the end, whoever is the better musician has the better performance, even if somebody else took nature walks with the composer and talked about his mystic beliefs amongst all the chattering birdcalls. Look at all the Liszt students, and all very different conceptions of major works. Look at how many different piano brands Liszt endorsed (nearly two dozen) all for the simple reason that you don't accept the use of somebody's instrument for free without writing a gracious thank you note.

Secondly, I've worked with composers who have very limited understanding of sonority and color at the keyboard, whose own playing is, shall we say, rather unimaginative. Look at Stravinsky and Copland and Britten who all conducted their own works, and all of whom have been bested by other conductors. The reason is that they were not trained conductors, they were to put it politely, amateurs. They simply lacked the technical training to translate whatever was in their heads to compelling performance from the musicians. Composers, unless qualified pianist-composers, or organist-composers, or whatever, are hardly capable of putting forth a so-called reference rendering of their own creations. And we know for a fact that Ravel was somewhat of a bumbling pianist. It's a real accomplishment that his creative imagination was so supreme that he could intuit such pianistic creations, but then again, maybe that's also the reason why many of his passages are so fiendishly difficult. If Ravel was impressed with Casadesus' insipid playing, that doesn't mean a thing to me; he hadn't yet heard Grosvenor!

- Fastest: tie between Giesecking '37 (7:59) and Fiorentino (7:59)
- Slowest: Achúcarro (10:29)
- Favorites (in order): Grosvenor, Sermet, Tiempo, Gavrilov (EMI), Sudbin
- Alternative Perspective: Ursuleasa
- Off the deep end: Tzimon Barto

Do We Need More Gaspards?

I could live happily ever after with the Grosvenor and Sermet recordings. Then there are the unique and compelling insights of Pogorelich, Tiempo, Hewitt, Gavrilov, or the 'alternative perspective' of Ursuleasa. That's enough to satisfy every mood from more ruminative to metabolism-boosting excitement. Probably a good 85 of the versions I surveyed I will probably never listen to again. Why would I? Nevertheless, I do have a wish list for three more recordings, none which is likely to dethrone the top two, but worthy enough for an occasional play, and certainly more deserving of attention than 85% of the also-rans I had to endure. Here they are:

Arrau. Zenpf Labs re-performance of the historic 1963 recital in glorious modern sound. I talked highly of his *Ondine*, and the *Scarbo* was actually very good. *Le Gibet* would doubtless come to life (but not enough to re-animate the corpse!) with more dimensional sound. Probably not enough demand to make this an economically feasible proposal, but hey, I'd buy a copy!

Lisitsa. I believe she has more potential than what we hear on the *Pink and Black* DVD. First off she is playing better now with her more balletic fluid-motion technique (perhaps even more limpid in tone than Grosvenor). Second, make the recording on anything but that old wheezy Bose 275. Third, use the Decca team in a fine concert acoustic. Henry Wood Hall, properly-prepped Bose 280 or the Finkenstein Steinway... could be magic.

Abdal El Bacha. I've always found him to be an extremely engaging artist, even when he was a very young artist of 19 playing as a Queen Elisabeth competition winner. He is a very intensely focused pianist, similar in disposition to Demidenko, another pianist who hasn't become a 'public darling' but whose musical artistry is of the highest order. His intensity of purpose, which draws the viewer into a likewise hypnotic state of concentration, has not diminished in the slightest over the years. Unfortunately, none of his few recordings have captured this communicative connection. Yes, yes, I know, the Forlane CDs have won the 5-tuning forks award from Diapason, and other high praise from the French press. But those recordings only convey the technical precision of the artist, somehow the soul is missing. With El Bacha I think it is equally important to see him as to hear him. For that reason I'd like to have at least one DVD production with high quality sound of his artistry while he still has the energy to tackle virtuoso works such as *Gaspard*. Put him in a good concert hall, give him the new Bechstein D-282 which he seems to have a special affinity toward (and makes sound better than just about anybody else) and get the tapes rolling.

Discography

Achúcarro, Joaquín. Ensayo
Ader, Alice. Fuga Libera
Aimard, Pierre-Laurent. Warner
Anderson, Andrea. Klavier
Argerich, Martha. DG
Argerich, Martha (live). EMI
Arrau, Claudio (1963). Ermitage
Ashkenazy, Vladimir (1968). Decca
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Babayan, Sergei. Connoisseur Society
Bachauer, Gina. Mercury
Barnatan, Inon. Avie
Barto, Tzimon. Ondine
Batagov, Anton. Arbiter
Bavouzet, Jean-Efflam. MDG
Berezovsky, Boris. Teldec
Beroff, Michel. YouTube
Browning, John. RCA
Cahill, Sarah. New Albion
Casadesu, Robert. Sony
Chen, Sa. Harmonia Mundi
Choi, Winston. Albany
Cole, Naida. DG
Collard, Jean-Philippe. EMI
Crossley, Paul. CRD
Damgaard, John. Classico
DeLarrocha, Alicia. YouTube
Deschamps, Romain. Audite
Doyen, Jean. Accord
El Bacha, Abdel Rahman. Forlane
Enders, Michael. Oehms
Entremont, Philippe. Sony
Fevrier, Jacques. Accord
Fiorentino, Sergio. Fabula Classica
Francesch, Homero. Tudor
Francois, Samson. EMI
Gavrilov, Andrei (1985). EMI
Gavrilov, Andrei (199). DG
Gavrilov, Andrei (live). YouTube
Giesecking, Walter (1937)
Giesecking, Walter (1954). EMI
Grosvenor, Benjamin. Decca
Gulda, Friedrich. Audite
Haas, Monique. Erato
Haas, Werner. Philips
Hamelin, Marc-Andre (2011). YouTube
Helffer, Claude. Harmonia Mundi
Hewitt, Angela. Hyperion
Himy, Eric. Ivory Classics
Holtmann, Heidrun. Musicaphon
Huang, Miao. Genuin
Jens, Elvekjaer. Classico
Johannesen, Grant
Kempff, Freddy. BIS
Korevaar, David. MSR
Körmendi, Klára. Naxos
Kraivev, Vladimir. Chant du Monde
Lifschitz, Konstantin. Denon
Lisitsa, Valentina. YouTube
Lonquich, Alexander. ECM
Lortie, Louis. Chandos
Michelangeli, AB (1959 London).
Michelangeli, AB (1960 Prague).
Michelangeli, AB (1973 Tokyo).
Michelangeli, AB (1987 Vatican).
Mogulevsky (1972). Melodiya
Mogulevsky (1992). Pavane
Moser, Benjamin. Oehms
Muraro, Roger. Accord
Nagai, Yukie. BIS
Nielsen, Vladimir. Northern Flowers
Nissman, Barbara. PRS
Nojima, Minoru. Reference Recordings
Osborne, Steven. Hyperion
Ousset, Cecile. Berlin Classics
Panizza, Alexander. Tradition
Perlemuter, Vlado. Vox
Perlemuter, Vlado. Nimbus
Pizarro, Artur. Linn
Ponthus, Marc. Neuma
Pogrelich, Ivo. DG
Queffelec, Anne. Virgin
Raim, Cynthia. Connoisseur Society
Ránki, Dezső. Hungaraton
Rogé, Pascal. Decca
Saarinen, Gloria. Doremi
Schuch, Herbert. Oehms
Sermet, Huseyin. Naïve
Simon, Abbey. Vox
Stott, Kathryn. Conifer
Struhal, Gerda. Gramola
Sudbin, Yevgeny. BIS
Tao, Conrad. EMI
Tharaud, Alexandre. Harmonia Mundi
Thibaudet, Jean-Yves. Decca
Thiollier, Francois-Joël. Naxos
Thompson, Gordon Fergus. ASV
Tiempo, Sergio. EMI
Toradze, Alexander. EMI
Ursuleasa, Mihaela. Berlin Classics
Vinnitskaya, Anna (live). Q.E.C.
Vinnitskaya, Anna. Naïve
Vonsattel, Gilles. Honens

Ondine Only

Ardanaz, Felix. Verso
Berman, Lazar (1956). EGI
Brovkina, Jana. Infinity/Sony
Rosenberger, Carol. Delos
Sgouros, Dmitri. SoundClick

Recommendations

Piano Enthusiast Reference Recording



Benjamin Grosvenor. Decca

This is the one performance which finally absolved all reservations I've had about whether Gaspard's fiendish difficulties could ever be mastered and put to the service of musical expression. Grosvenor gives us an incredible fluttering shimmer in Ondine, his melodic projection a nice 'compromise' between the more overt projection of Pogorelich and the more subsumed texture of Argerich. Nobody comes close to him on the right-hand double-note passages leading to the climax which ripple in a fluid give and take like the water-nymph's silk gown floating in the water. I might have liked Gibet a bit slower, but this is nicely shaped and layered, and convincing in its evocative trance. Scarbo is full of jaw-dropping virtuosity on every page, yet none of this is ever self-serving in the slightest, for the musical characterization is always front and center. The propulsive drive of Scarbo never abates even in the face of the most arduous chordal

concatenations. As more than just an added bonus Decca gives us one of the finest piano recordings I've heard in some time, a perfect balance of evocative atmosphere and textural clarity. The Chopin Scherzi are similarly stunning, while the Liszt might do with a little more Weltschmerz. But that's a mere quibble in an otherwise perfect program. This gets my vote for record of the Year!

Honor Roll of Noteworthy Performances



Claudio Arrau. Ermitage

Philips had their 100 Greatest Pianists of the Twentieth Century series, and if ever there was a series for the top 100 greatest piano recordings, Arrau's Ondine here would have to be among them. It is pure magic. No other pianist has created quite the evocative and magical dream-like state that Arrau achieves. His Scarbo is also one of the top 10 in the survey; remember, this is not the old man of the 80's who favored slower than usual tempos, here he is fleet and nimble and, believe or not, quite exciting. On page 36, for example, where others dawdle and daydream, Arrau seethes with bristling excitement. The cascading chords have great clarity and rhythmic precision. Of course, the sound is rather mediocre even for historical standards, as the recording is based off of Italian radio broadcast tapes from 1963, but among all the

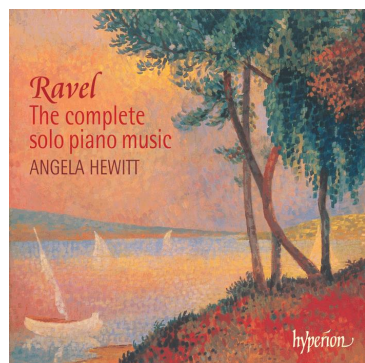
historical documents in the survey, this is the one that rewards highly with a little tolerance for the sound. Try to track down the now out-of-production Ermitage pressing, which sometimes shows up used on Amazon. Or check for postings on YouTube.



Andrei Gavrilov. EMI

This is the one recording to put on when you want to just soak up glorious piano sound. No other recording in the survey had this level of dimensionality and layers of sound. Of course, Gavrilov tosses off the knuckle-busting passages like child's play, but what I appreciate here, as a critic who finds Gavrilov sometimes bludgeoning and lacking in subtlety, is that we get the full range of dynamics from the most ethereal, hovering pianissimo to the biggest fortissimo chords that seem like they should have punched a hole in the keyboard. Each piece, with their widely and wildly divergent

moods, is given the appropriate characterization to fully immerse you in the experience. *Le Gibet*, in particular, is absolutely masterful, vivid and gravid with meaning. This is reason enough that I'll be playing this recording again and again; proof that the fire-breathing virtuoso can tap into his inner Zen-zone and suspend time as the corpse swings gently and eerily on the horizon.



Angela Hewitt. Hyperion

Although Hewitt does nothing that would be considered willful or indulgent, in some regards, one could almost consider this as an 'alternative' interpretive perspective. That's because we've become so used to the distortions of performance traditions that we no longer really see what is written in the score. Far be it from mere pedantry that Hewitt carefully observes dynamic levels, for the reading is actually one of the most colorful and sensitively nuanced in the survey. Even though we know Ravel personally favored more chiseled clarity in his choice of pianos, at some remove from Hewitt's sumptuous and round Hamburg Steinway, what she gets perfect is the sense of the true Impressionistic, suggestive and evocative sensuality. Her *Ondine* and *Gibet* are top notch, without any reservation. Her *Scarbo* is a little less ferocious than the best, it's more about the play on the ominous and unknown 'what's going to happen' mood than of the actual Goblin jumping out and yelling Boo! There's enough to enjoy in her storytelling through the prism of Ravel's actual indications that I consider this an indispensable 'keeper' in my collection. The recorded sound is near ideal, close and warm, never clattery. The piano itself is fulsome and colorful (I'm envious).



Ivo Pogorelich. Deutsche Grammophon

Pogorelich's *Ondine* is one of the great ones, distinctively rendered with a clearly delineated melody that floats in a different space than the subdued accompaniment. His somewhat slower pacing allows him to finely hone each phrase and anchor harmonic foundations more carefully than a more frantic pace would allow. This sometimes gives the impression of solidity, more along the lines of a smoothly polished marble sculpture like Neptune's Chariot, but there is always that beguiling tender siren-song in the background that is unmistakably *Ondine*. In *Gibet* the pacing is unerring, but the recording balance and piano voicing both favor a somewhat thin and reticent disposition of the open-fifth harmony in the mid-bass. And then there's the willful distortions with the big pounded low octaves right in the middle of the pianissimo section. Some listeners say it gives them a chill, I merely find it disruptive, and it's not how Ravel wrote it. But there is an undeniable sense of ghostly desolation. *Scarbo* also employs some theatrical tricks, such as the dry, rasping un-pedaled repeated notes at the beginning. Most listeners respond very favorably to the entire performance, I respond mostly to the *Ondine*. The Prokofiev is also distinctive, but I personally never like the shift of moods from Ravel to Prokofiev. This wasn't my favorite in the survey, but every collector should at least hear it once and decide for themselves.



Hüseyin Sermet. Naïve

An absolutely indispensable recording for every piano enthusiast's library. If Grosvenor hadn't come along, this would have been my clear choice for Reference Recording. Between them Grosvenor and Sermet really tower over every other version I heard. The good news is that they are both quite different, so you will really want to have both. The bad news is that this recording is inexplicably out of production, and the CD is now available only from scalpers selling at inflated prices (supply and demand, I guess). *Ondine* and *Scarbo* (but not *Gibet*) are available as digital downloads. I've never seen a posting on YouTube, but you never know. One way or the other, do make an effort to hear this remarkable performance, he is really quite the story-teller!

With the exceptionally slow tempo of *Ondine* (at 8:02 a true *Lento*) the first few measures didn't convince me (because of my expectations) but very soon after I was utterly drawn into this hypnotic vision. There is an admittedly Romantic-era inflection which brought to mind Ravel's original conception of writing a romantic style work in keeping with the time period of Bertrand's poems. The *tres lent* 'teardrops' line was the most poignant rendering I've ever heard. *Scarbo* is spooky from the start, and the bristling pyro-technics snap and snarl in a most frightful manner. Sermet plays these knuckle-busters with more clarity and rhythmic propulsion than anybody but Grosvenor. Whereas Grosvenor favors micro-bursts of energy, seeming to toss off difficulties as if he is having fun, Sermet is much more intense and gives reign to longer arching lines driven with manic adrenalin. With Sermet we hunker down under our covers in that dark bedroom, fearful of each more monstrous shadow cast by the gremlin. In listening to Sermet I had the somewhat unsettling feeling of how people felt when they first heard Paganini (the artist who sold himself to the Devil). Not for the faint hearted!



Sergio Tiempo. EMI

Similar in concept to Argerich (his mentor) Tiempo actually has more fiery panache in *Scarbo*, and the advantage of better acoustics of Henry Wood Hall in London for the recording. Like Argerich, his *Ondine* is presented in a state of mono-dynamic stasis where there is minimal differentiation between melody and rippling right-hand figurations. It's as if the melody hides within the watery texture and only gradually emerges from the play of the water spray in climactic moments. *Gibet* is the weak link here, at under five minutes it is just too fast and dispatched with indifferent inflection (except for the startlingly disruptive *sforzandos*) and given a perfunctory bubble-pop ending. But that will hardly deter fans who will just love his scintillating and sinister *Scarbo*. There are three mis-readings of notes, but most listeners will likely not even notice. The *Mussorgsky Pictures* is given a vivid and compelling performance, especially the high-flying *Baba Yaga*. Despite my complaints, there is a truly distinctive voice here (not merely a mimic of Argerich) and plenty to admire and enjoy with many repeated listenings.



Mihaela Ursuleasa. Berlin Classics

Mixed recital programs for home listening (as opposed to attending a recital) are often a mixed bag of inappropriately juxtaposed moods (hence my complaints about the Pogorelich disc). Despite the varied program here, the overall arch is completely compelling from beginning to end, with all the rueful melancholy of late Brahms to rhythmically propulsive Ginastera to sparkling pyro-technics of the Constantinescu Toccata. As for Ravel, the *Ondine* starts us out in a sleepy, Morpheus-guided tour of the water-nymph's dream-time seduction. Along with Hewitt, these are some of the smoothest right-hand figurations you'll ever hear. *Le Gibet* goes beyond the normal postcard panorama of the corpse swinging in the horizon, to a deeper psyche and brooding rumination on failed humanity. *Scarbo* is given a more modernist Prokofiev-like inflection, which suitable segues into the *Ginastera*. With the inward-searching lull of *Gibet* as a perfect set-up, Ursuleasa unleashes a startling dynamic outburst at the beginning of *Scarbo* that nearly had me jumping out of my seat! Besides the deeply-probing artistry here, it helps that Berlin Classics, as with the recent Brahms disc by Ragna Schirmer, has again provided such wonderfully realistic piano sound, and with such a superbly voiced piano! I was completely won over by the entire experience; without doubt one of the top three piano releases of the year, and a fitting tribute for us to remember the artistry of this young artist taken too early (age 33) by cerebral aneurism.