

Music, maths and meaning

The Serbian-American pianist Ivan Ilić has a restless, inquiring intellect whose 'heretical' approach has led him to champion some unusual repertoire, writes *Robert Turnbull*

THE INTENSITY OF THE COMPETITION AMONG professional pianists as well as a call for more adventurous programming has resulted in many branching out into 'unorthodox' territory. Yet few have the wherewithal to bring it off. Without an intellectual commitment to this music, persuading audiences to drop their decades-old diet of Bach, Beethoven and Liszt can be problematic.

Ivan Ilić may not have the big guns of the music industry behind him, or even an agent tethered to a telephone, yet the Serbian-American, based in Bordeaux, has successfully 'packaged' his wide variety of skills, discoveries and personal enthusiasms to command considerable respect among his peers, as well as serve as a role model for the young generation.

Not content with playing his carefully chosen repertory, Ilić doesn't seem to be content with it, as well as talk at length, making him equally at home in the recording studio, as a radio presenter, interviewer or interviewee. Unfailingly polite and articulate, his views are nonetheless uncompromising, taking aim, for instance, at pianists who spend their youth 'practising the same pieces for 11 hours a day', and who are therefore 'missing out on the broader education needed to give music meaning'.

Born in California, Ilić spent his formative years in Belgrade before returning to the States at the onset of the Balkan war to study at both the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and Berkeley University, where he gained a degree in mathematics. As a young Serb, his compatriot Ivo Pogorelič provided early inspiration. He later became fascinated with pianists like Richter, Clara Haskil and Dinu Lipatti.

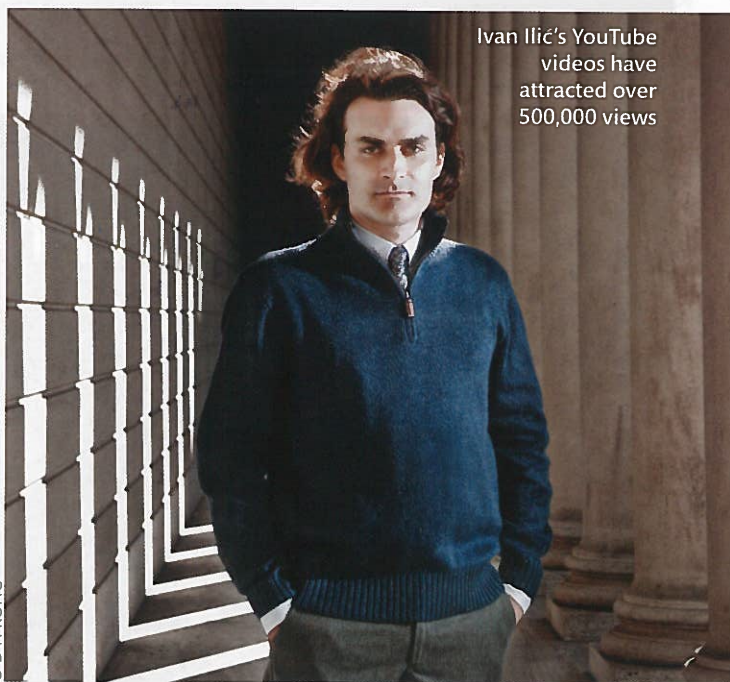
Entry to the Paris Conservatoire was a kind of wake-up call. 'It was very competitive, in a jealous and unhealthy way,' says Ilić. 'The approach to the repertory was absurdly narrow, with everyone playing the same pieces, the apex of which was Ravel.' Ilić was fortunate enough to be introduced to François-René Duchâble, a pianist who embodied the antithesis of traditional concertising and who respected Ilić's 'heretical' ideas and choices.

THE COMPOSERS ILIĆ HAS 'ADOPTED' REFLECT A restless, inquiring mind. He recently immortalised the music of Morton Feldman in his CD *The Transcendentalist* for Heresy Records. Before that, Ilić aimed to 'do for Debussy what Gould did for Bach'. His 2008 recording of the *Préludes* on the French record label Paraty sensationally rearranged the order of the pieces, restoring their rhythmic underpinning and avoiding sloppy 'impressionist' clichés in phrasing and (over)pedalling.

More recently Ilić decided he wanted to redress the imbalance

between the left and right hands in piano-playing, a feature common to most Romantic music. His recordings of Godowsky's barely known left-hand 'studies' on Chopin's *Études* became the *Daily Telegraph's* 'Classical CD of the Week', and won numerous plaudits and prizes. It also helped to attract 500,000 viewers on YouTube in the space of a few months, making Ilić an online star.

For Ilić these were major discoveries. 'No-one really considered these pieces as an "opus" in themselves, worthy of performance; and they were intimidated by the technical difficulty,' he explains. 'It's true that they are challenging but they are far more than simply faithful arrangements of what we already know. Godowski made a number of changes which makes many of them unique.'



Ivan Ilić's YouTube videos have attracted over 500,000 views

Ilić has a handful of pupils. This month he opens *Le Festival En Blanc et Noir* on 25 July alongside one of his star students, Paul Salinier. The Festival was created in 2011 to showcase young pianistic talent in the idyllic village of Lagrasse in the Corbières. Ilić plays a selection of *Preludes* by another of his favourite composers, Alexander Scriabin, while Salinier tackles Debussy and Albéniz. They will team up as a duo for Schubert's *Overture in F minor* and Debussy's rarely-heard *Divertissement*. ♪

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