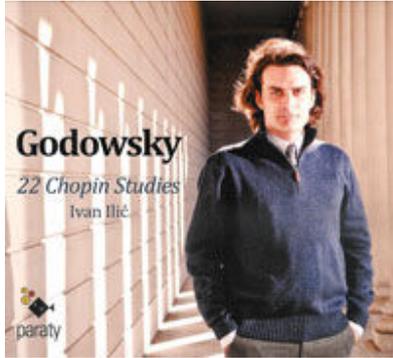


Meeting the left hand with Ivan Ilić¹

A topical look at **Ivan Ilić** (born 14th August 1978) leads us to zoom in on his left hand. But a look to the past allows us to step back and discover the sharp intelligence of a pianist able to question everything about himself, for the sake of enriching his experience.



He has just released an album of *22 Chopin Studies for the Left Hand* on the French label Paraty (distributed by Codaex). These *Studies* are among the fifty or so pieces that the famous Polish virtuoso **Leopold Godowsky** (1870-1938) created from the basic material of Chopin's *Etudes* for the sake of technical and structural investigations. The present disc is without a doubt the best access point currently available to these pianistic challenges (just imagine: recreate the sound of Chopin's *Etudes* with a single hand, and the less well-trained of the two, at that!).

Many years ago, the indefatigable pioneer **Geoffrey Douglas Madge** recorded the complete set of Godowsky's *Chopin Studies* (for one and two hands). But comparing the timings is enough to provide a first basis for criticism: the Australian often takes twice the time to play all the notes (!), whereas Ivan Ilić succeeds in getting as close as possible to the tempi required for interpreting the "real" Chopin *Etudes*. A live recording captured **Boris Berezovsky**'s attempt at three of the *Studies for the Left Hand* in a Chopin/Godowsky album (Warner, 2005). During the concert, the Russian whisked over the surface at breakneck speed, like a comet's tail scattering its virtuosic dust-cloud. But would this approach hold up to an investigation of the entire cycle?

Ivan Ilić, by contrast, wanted not only to question the foundations of his technique (he discusses this below), but also to restore the architectural clarity of the music. The difficulty, according to him, lies in the art of layering separate elements of Chopinian composition with one hand: the fingerings, the balance of weight and the phrasing.

"Plunging into Godowsky, it initially seemed that covering the complete repertoire, with its extremely homogeneous approach, could not necessarily be justified by the music itself. The few pianists who dared to confront it always played it a certain way, and the commentary about the works always repeated the same arguments. But living with the music over a long period of time, I discovered that multiple approaches are possible."

The desire to experiment with the works was the pianist's motivation at the outset; there was no 'complete cycle' planned in the beginning. Thus Ivan Ilić was preserved from the potentially destructive forced labour that would have been required to learn many of them at once. Instead, he gave himself the necessary time for a progressive assimilation of the considerable physical demands:

"When I intensified my efforts and began work on all 22 left-hand Studies, I began to exercise every day, to take walks out in the open. I also became more conscious of the food I was eating; in many ways, I improved my lifestyle. This allowed me to be more perceptive about my body in a way that I would have neglected before. It also helped me manage the tremendous physical stress. My physical approach to the piano bloomed in a way that's very difficult to bring about. I gained endurance, obviously, but also access to an interior world that I was searching for anyway but had no idea how to reach. Even today, when performing the Studies in concert, I discover details that allow me to progress in my work."

¹ The interview was conducted by French musicologist **Sylviane Falcinelli** in Tours on 10 March 2012.

Working thus implies a need to redefine how the body's muscular system interacts, and even where the effort begins; thus it's important to rethink the foundations so as to not unbalance the skeletal system:

"The solution is to use the ear to work out how to get the entire body involved. Some pianists say that the legs play the most important role. By experimenting I came to realise that even more than the legs, the lower back is the focal point for the effort. One has to start from very low, from as far as possible from the fingers; that's how you start to achieve velocity. This work has reminded me of pedagogical concepts I heard during my studies (in particular during lessons with Robert Helps) but that one can't assimilate without having experimented extensively on one's own."

Ivan Ilić plans to perform the 22 *Chopin Studies* in a single concert in London, a challenge he wants to confront...but that he wouldn't advise one attempt too often! In the meantime, as part of the Codaex concert series in Paris, he performed on the Goethe Institute's Blüthner piano on the 3rd of March 2012. The programme included 8 *Chopin Studies* and two other left-hand pieces by Godowsky: the *Meditation* and the *Prelude* from the 1930 *Prelude and Fugue*. The programme opened with a transcription of the Bach *Chaconne* that Brahms made as a study for the same 'sinister' hand. Speaking easily between the works, Ilić created a friendly atmosphere between himself and a curiosity-loving public that enjoyed the opportunity to study his technique from so close. But he admits preferring that the audience listen to the music itself, rather than being gob-smacked by the sight of the athletic performance.

Ivan Ilić's upcoming concerts reassure us: he hasn't lost the use of his right hand, and will soon be back before us with programmes confirming his physical integrity.

For further reading, it is well worth discovering the following **articles** written by Ivan Ilić:

<http://communities.washingtontimes.com/neighborhood/ivan-ilic-notes/2012/jan/18/pianist-and-composer-leopold-godowsky-reborn-21st-/>

<http://communities.washingtontimes.com/neighborhood/ivan-ilic-notes/2012/feb/13/leopold-godowsky-pianist-and-composer-reborn-21st-/>

<http://communities.washingtontimes.com/neighborhood/ivan-ilic-notes/2011/dec/4/poise-and-perseverance-story-one-armed-pianist/>

He also has several **videos** available online:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FTJYISvn4>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ML05gLjR_sY

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7lsDbuy-MU>



A structural understanding of musical phenomena

Ivan Ilić, a Serb educated in the United States, must be the only concert pianist currently on stage who holds a degree in mathematics from the University of California, Berkeley. This suggests a taste for understanding the laws of science, and this has had a positive influence on his discography. Listening to two of his albums produced by **Paraty**, one notices the extreme homogeneity and rich substance of the recorded sound. This is no accident. It is explained by the presence, on both discs, of **Judith Carpentier-Dupont**, a sound engineer and producer who has long term relationships with a few select artists, rather than with a record label.

Ilić: “I wanted to know everything about recording techniques, about the links between acoustics and the microphone’s pickup, and I started to ask her questions. That’s when I understood that a fruitful collaboration was growing between us. The same intellectual curiosity that pushed me towards mathematics leads me to want to understand the technical side of acoustics.”

The intellectual distancing that this scientific spirit favours does not, however, annihilate receptivity to the intuitive liberties inherent in an artistic path. Though very keen on musical analysis and observing the physical processes involved in technical mastery of the piano, the musician is open to everything that can

enrich his evolution when faced with the same pages of music again and again over the course of his life. He knows that assimilating these pieces, even those most familiar to him, is a perpetual work in progress. Certainly, he is aware that he has already forged his own specific manner of playing, but nothing would be worse, in his eyes, than to predict that he will play these pieces again in the future with the same conceptual underpinnings:

“I am not one of those musicians who believe that every work has an absolute version one has to aim for all one’s life. I’m something of a ‘[dualist](#)’, but not to that extent! I believe in a pluralistic approach. If in ten years I still think exactly the same way as today, that would be a very bad sign! I was flabbergasted, during a British tour., by an anecdote about a very famous artist who gave exactly the same programme he had given ten years before in the same concert hall. That’s a worrying sign of a lack of evolution!”

Ivan Ilić speaks in impeccable French that he developed over the course of his studies in France, where he studied with masters such as **Christian Ivaldi** and **François-René Duchâble**. Remaining faithful to France despite the incessant travelling required by a very international career, but determined to escape Parisian turmoil, he has found a haven in Bordeaux, where he can take in the healthy air of the Atlantic and shelter the two pianos put at his disposal by patrons: a 1930 Pleyel grand and a Gaveau from the same era.

He made his recording of Debussy in 2006 and 2007, before he had access to the French pianos on which he works today. Though built after Debussy’s death, such pianos still perpetuate the type of sound that Debussy sought, particularly the Pleyels and Bechsteins of his time.

“In Paris, I had an atelier at the Cité des Arts, where the piano tuner (Hugues Gavrel) taught me the rudiments of his trade. Thanks to him, I was able to visit a restoration workshop specialising in German pianos from the start of the 20th century, particularly the famous Bechsteins that Debussy loved so much. This experience influenced the way I hear Debussy, and naturally has had an effect on my playing. If I were to re-record Debussy today, all that I’ve learnt from working on the Pleyel would bring in yet more colours, an increased search for transparency in the sound. In 2006, I wanted to record muscular Debussy! It’s difficult to engage the listener’s emotion if one starts from a distancing process: in Romantic Austro-German music, for instance, a deep sound is the one that will most touch the listener (Brahms is the most obvious example)”.

In fact, a blooming, bronze-tinted sound characterises his Debussy, which may disconcert listeners attached to the “impressionistic” shades normally associated with this composer.

“It was quite a deliberate decision: since I’ve lived in France and have immersed myself in the musical aesthetics of this country, I’ve realised how much Debussy is part of a tradition that links him to German music. I don’t consider him a separate world. In the U.S., for instance, we’re taught to play him in a way that disconnects him from a German-type structure, a point of view I find extremely dangerous as it makes him lose his architectural integrity.

“The same phenomenon happens when players interpret Prokofiev or Shostakovich as “Russian music” rather than simply as “music”: the result is superficial. That’s exactly what I wanted to avoid with Debussy: I wanted a Debussy who might be muscular, but above all, assertive. With respect to this aspect I felt “re-educated” in France. Because Debussy had a deeply structured way of composing, that I learned about in France.

“There is a certain conception of French aesthetics that I wanted to react against: a tendency to focus on a succession of moments placed side-by-side rather than on continuity. And I wanted to find a unity, not

just within each piece, but also on the scale of each of the two books of Préludes. I found a personal way of playing Debussy – but to my mind it was obvious – and I tried not to be limited by traditional aesthetic options that especially induce a lack of rhythm, or presuppositions referred to as “impressionistic”, a word Debussy loathed. Admittedly, one doesn’t make a recording to correct an aesthetic, but I did a great deal of work on the text, without listening to any other recorded versions, and I think I found a way to recreate a coherent Debussy-ian world, even if it is different than those to which we are accustomed.”

Debussy’s scores show constantly changing juxtapositions of dynamics that are extremely difficult to manage properly – micro-climates, in a way. Listening to Ivan Ilić’s disc, one could regret the lack of an intermediate step in the gradation of these nuances, as well as the ability to create the far-away aspects of the frames his virile touch creates. Without losing the rich metallic sound he aimed for, we can wager that in returning to the cycle in a few years he will have broadened his palette in this direction. He is to be congratulated, however, on the renewal of poetic perspective that he brings about with the order – thoroughly thought-out but radically different from the norm – in which he presents the *24 Preludes*.

The accumulation of technical and musical experiences Ivan Ilić has cultivated recently has concentrated on a period from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th. He plans to continue to explore the diversity of aesthetics that flourished in those few decades.

“I want to use what I’ve learned to continue on this path: once one has begun to search for the necessary depth of sonority required for, say, Brahms, it is a pity to interrupt oneself to return to the sound required for Haydn, though the latter left us wonderful pieces for the piano.”

But from these experiences come a renewed sensitivity to contemporary music. Ilić is fascinated by sound effects like the superimposition of resonances and harmonics that result from prolonged pedalling in very slow pieces, and in this vein he is studying the music of Morton Feldman, whom he thinks has not yet found enough champions.

“But this requires one to be extremely demanding on the acoustic and the resonance of the piano. I wonder how recordings could possibly capture the subtlety of all this, and the thought that a recording of such pieces could be listened to on any setup, including a computer, is a reservation that has tempered my enthusiasm somewhat.”

Highly attuned to the aesthetic openness of the United States, he commissioned piano pieces from six composers residing in the U.S. – including **Keeril Makan** and **Dmitri Tymoczko** – adding *“I made the decision to solicit six of the most different composers imaginable.”* He admits he finds the individual expression of each composer more important than a preference for an aesthetic school. He admits that there are composers today working in completely outmoded styles, *“but if the result is beautiful music, it would be a mistake to ignore them”*. Welcoming the right to juxtapose very diverse musical thoughts, he appreciates the exploration of a sound world inspired by the acoustical properties of sound; there are vibrations or resonances present around us that one cannot ignore. Yet the young pianist finds himself happier in his exchanges with visual artists. His own preoccupations as a “sculptor of sounds” make it easier for him to relate to them than to other musicians, where unconscious rivalries often spoil communication.

What musical future for Serbia?

Ivan Ilić regularly returns to Serbia (his parents live in San Francisco and Serbia), where he notices a comforting thirst for culture. Love of opera remains strong in Belgrade, and singers still fervently practice work as a company, and music-lovers jostle for tickets. *“Radio shows still present music at a level of*

erudition that has been lost on Western stations.” On the other hand, there seems to be little sign of a truly creative national tradition among composers, but it’s possible that with their ears more open to international productions, young Serbian composers may find more support. Ivan Ilić points to the narrative dimension that characterises his people’s cultural values, which has found an outlet in cinema, *“a more contemporary medium”*, where the taste for eccentricity one can find in the national temperament is happily wed to the art of telling stories with modern techniques – Emir Kusturica is a prime example.

Ivan Ilić knows that he can be resented by his compatriots as the archetypal favoured artist, constantly travelling in Western countries, something that economic conditions make very difficult for local artists. Still, he says, *“I’m much better accepted now in Serbia. A touch of eccentricity is always accepted there, but it mustn’t come across as purely external: the roots remain and must provide a foundation for this originality”*. He is conscious that the artistic spirit touched with Americanism that he brought to their country created some distrust on the Serbians’ part in the past, but today, the mood is towards openness, and he can hope to develop projects that will build bridges between our Western artistic practices and the cultural ferment that is still so lively in Slavic countries.

Sylviane Falcinelli

Interview conducted on 10 March 2012

Translated by Jonathon A Macfarlane