

Godowsky 22 Chopin Studies

Ivan Ilić

1 CD • 71 min • 2009, 2010

The virtuosi specializing in finger dexterity are confronted with a real challenge. Unlike Paul Wittgenstein, who lost his right arm in World War I and commissioned works for the left hand from prominent composers, technical issues were at the forefront for Leopold Godowsky, half a generation earlier. Was it possible to give the impression of listening to full piano sounds, using only five fingers? Godowsky, who amazed his contemporaries - both colleagues as well as competitors - with his piano prowess, wrote numerous compositions for the left hand. Of his most important collection of works, the 53 Studies on Chopin's Etudes (from the compositional viewpoint analogous to Liszt's Paraphrases, i.e. Godowsky needed the stimulus of foreign originals), 22 are composed for the left hand alone. These nearly two dozen pieces are performed by **Ivan Ilić** on his new CD, although following a individualistic sequence he has chosen himself.

Ivan Ilić, a Serbian native who grew up in California and later moved to Paris, does not wish his interpretation to rest only on technical aspects. He is a thoughtful interpreter, something that is detected when reading his liner notes. He describes the career of Leopold Godowsky, the child prodigy from Vilnius (part of the Russian Empire at that time, 1870) that took him to the European capital cities -especially Paris - where Camille Saint-Saëns became his chief mentor and even intended to adopt him, and finally led him to the New World. But above all, Ilić outlines his own approach to Godowsky's work: how he felt almost as a novice again at the start, how he gradually became aware of the richness of this music and how he finally identified himself with it in an almost unconditional manner.

Can all of this be sensed in his playing? To a considerable extent: yes. In particular, Godowsky's efforts to achieve something akin to "ingenious commentary on Chopin's originals" (Ilić) are clearly noticeable. In other words, Ivan Ilić largely succeeds in making all that is tricky and sophisticated in Godowsky's Studies appear to be natural. Everything seems to be absolutely simple, and this is, of course, the most effective of tricks. Even more: Ilić is able to capture and give shape to the poetry of this music -composed by Chopin and preserved by Godowsky - over long periods (the effort required is very rarely felt). It is intended to be, despite all its outward brilliance, more than just an implicit bluff. The virtuoso attitude, although it is present, remains always imperceptible, but at the same time it is brought to our ears to be relished as something romantically precious.

Mario Gerteis (10 May 2012)

Artistic quality: 8/10 

Sound quality: 9/10 

Overall impression: 9/10 

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