

In January 2014 **Melissa Lesnie** of [Limelight Magazine](#) in Australia interviewed Ivan for an article about **Paul Wittgenstein** and left-hand repertoire. The subsequent article was published in the March 2014 issue of Limelight and can be seen [here](#). Additional bonus material from the interview is shared below.



Melissa Lesnie: *You have dedicated concert programs and albums to music composed for Paul Wittgenstein; what fascinates you about the left hand?*



Ivan Ilić: The left hand is the underdog in piano playing; it is considered the weak, less agile hand. I've always been interested in repertoire that turns the tables and gives the left hand a leading role. From a musical perspective, a strong bass adds richness: specifically, it increases the spectra of harmonics, which is what makes one timbre more beautiful than another. So the key to a beautiful sound is a rich, deep bass. But considering how important it is, we pianists don't spend that much time developing our left hand — not just technique, but the quality of the sound.

Melissa Lesnie: *How did you come to this repertoire?*

Ivan Ilić: As a teenager I used to listen to Nathan Milstein's recording of JS Bach's solo Sonatas and Partitas for violin over and over again. I discovered Brahms's arrangement of the Chaconne for the left hand, which is very close to the original, and learned that. My teacher said it was foolish to practice it, and that I should wait for an injury as an excuse to play it. That struck me as silly, so I continued to work on it in secret. To this day, I include it in concert programs, and audiences love it. I'm glad I didn't listen to my teacher!

Melissa Lesnie: *Have you ever had an injury that prevented you from playing with your right hand?*

Ivan Ilić: When I was preparing my entrance exam to the Paris conservatory, I was practicing on a horrible upright all day long, and I developed terrible pain in my forearm. Luckily it didn't last long. But by that point I had already played the Ravel Concerto for the Left Hand with orchestra (so clearly my obsession with left-hand repertoire predated any injury). It was that early exposure that led to left-hand music remaining such an important part of my musical life.

Melissa Lesnie: *Why do you think Wittgenstein decided to persevere as a pianist after he lost his right arm?*

Ivan Ilić: There were two main reasons. Firstly, Wittgenstein wanted to make his mark in music history. He came from an extraordinarily ambitious and wealthy family, and when he was wounded at 27 his entire life was invested in music. So he must have felt that music must remain his field, despite the enormous setback.

Also, he must have been aware of Leopold Godowsky's left-hand repertoire, which was causing a sensation in Europe. Godowsky, who had transcribed [22 of Chopin's 27 Etudes for the left hand alone](#) a decade before Paul's injury was director of the piano department at the most important conservatory in Vienna, where Paul grew up.

When Paul was in a Russian military hospital, he asked for access to a piano, and tried to work out a left-hand arrangement of Chopin's *Revolutionary Etude*. I posit that he never would have tried this if he hadn't already heard of Godowsky's version. So he knew that left-hand repertoire was possible. The courageous part of his plan was to make a career of it.

Melissa Lesnie: *What sense of Paul Wittgenstein's personality do you get from his responses to the works he commissioned? Why do you think so many collaborations with composers ended in conflict?*

Ivan Ilić: I think Paul wanted to be the centre of attention. He wanted to be hailed as a great virtuoso, of the same stature as the great composers he commissioned. He was uncomfortable with the hierarchy of the composer-performer relationship: he wanted to have a greater role in the process. He paid fortunes for the pieces, and I think he felt that in return he should have complete control. There was a class element as well: he was from a family of active music patrons, so he wanted to have the right to veto and give his say. Essentially, he paid for and delegated the creation of his musical legacy.

Ironically, because he picked the most prestigious composers, these were a group of tremendously opinionated musicians, who had fully forged styles (Prokofiev, Ravel and Hindemith in particular). So it was somewhat naïve of him to expect them to change their music for him and tailor it to his Romantic, even reactionary sensibility. But ultimately, it was the right move to pick such important composers, because the work will live on.

Paul seems to have been quite insecure as well. Some of the composers (Prokofiev and Ravel) made disparaging remarks about his musical abilities behind his back, and he must have sensed their scorn.

Melissa Lesnie: *What do you make of his falling out with Ravel over changing material?*

Ivan Ilić: I understand Paul's frustration with the concerto, which is not as flashy and spectacular as the two handed concerto that Ravel wrote for Marguerite Long, at the same time. However, most of Ravel's works are masterpieces, and the left-hand concerto is no exception, so I can see why Ravel would have been so upset.

I've seen archival footage of Wittgenstein practicing the Ravel concerto with a few of his own additions, and they are indeed in poor taste. But if Ravel had given Paul more pianistic meat to chew on, perhaps he wouldn't have felt the need to spruce things up himself? All things considered though, I have to side with Ravel.

Melissa Lesnie: *Of all the works arranged or commissioned by Wittgenstein, which is your favourite, and why?*

Ivan Ilić: I love Prokofiev's Concerto No 4 B-flat Major; it's such an underrated score. Playing the first and fourth movements is electrifying. And the middle movements are reminiscent of his Prokofiev's best ballet music. When Paul received the score, he wrote back saying that he didn't understand the music and wouldn't play it. (He probably would have butchered it anyway.)

There are also two beautiful piano and orchestra scores by Austrian composer Franz Schmidt. They were later championed in two-hand arrangements by one of Paul's Viennese rivals, Friedrich Wührer, when Paul left for America. One of the distinct joys of my left hand research was discovering Wührer's recordings of Schubert, [now available on YouTube](#). If he was Paul's rival, the competition was stiff!

Melissa Lesnie: *What are the most challenging technical aspects of playing works for left hand?*

Ivan Ilić: Where to begin? The left hand is so much more awkward than you might imagine. You don't realise that playing with both hands masks the deficiencies of each hand, you play with one hand. Initially, it's like being naked in cold rain.

With the concertos, particularly Ravel's, you have to move the entire body on the piano bench to be able to reach the different extreme registers of the keyboard, so there is an athletic element to it.

In the Godowsky Etudes, there are no breaks in the music, which means no rest and no musical 'breathing'; that makes things absolutely exhausting, both physically and in terms of concentration. The pedaling also becomes much more sophisticated in order to hold longer washes of sound, while evacuating resonance with the light flutter pedals. It's like playing a different instrument.

Melissa Lesnie: *Does your left hand have to be significantly better developed than the average concert pianist's? How did you train and strengthen it?*

Ivan Ilić: Absolutely! From experience, I believe that the most effective way is to take some time and *only* play left-hand music. Recent findings in neuroscience support this claim: it's like a blind person who becomes extraordinarily sensitive to sound and smell. When you don't use part of your faculties, say your right hand, your brain slowly redistributes the use of the neurons for other things. So if you concentrate only on left hand playing you progress much faster than if you try to divide your time between one-hand and two-hand playing.

Further, when playing left hand repertoire it is important to exercise, to keep your body symmetrical from a muscular perspective, because otherwise things can become tremendously imbalanced. And most importantly, it takes superhuman determination because you spend 10 times as long to learn even a 3-minute piece, at least at first. But because of that, the satisfaction is that much greater. There's a reason why the Godowsky Etudes are known as the 'Mount Everest of the piano repertoire'. I can confirm that they are horrifically difficult to play up to speed.

Melissa Lesnie: *Do you think Paul Wittgenstein was up to scratch?*

Ivan Ilić: I have neither seen nor heard evidence that Paul was a first-rate performer. His recordings are sloppy, and [his book of exercises and transcriptions for the left hand](#) is unremarkable; I would trade 4 pages of Godowsky for the whole book, and it would be an unfair trade. But thanks to him, there is this tremendous, quirky repertoire that otherwise would not exist.