

Review of “22 Chopin Studies” by Leopold Godowsky
by [OPUS KLASSIEK](#), published on 25 February 2013

Leopold Godowsky (Zaslai, Litouwen 1870 - New York 1938) was sailing with the tide around 1900: the artistic and culturally rich turn of the century was a golden age for pianists. They were given plenty of opportunities to expose their pianistic and composing virtuosity (if they didn't demand the opportunities outright), both on concert stages as well as in the many music salons of the wealthy. Think about such giants as Anton Rubinstein, Jan Paderewski, Josef Hoffmann, Theodor Leschetizky, Vladimir Horowitz, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Ferruccio Busoni and Ignaz Friedman. The era of that other great piano virtuoso, Franz Liszt, was actually not even properly past. Liszt, after all, only returned from his last, very successful, but long and exhausting concert tour in the summer of 1886. The tour, through England and France, most likely did him in. (He died shortly afterwards, on the 31st of July 1886, at the age of seventy-four).



Leopold Godowsky

Godowsky's contemporaries called him the 'Buddha' of the piano, and he left a legacy of more than four hundred compositions, which make it crystal-clear that he knew the piano inside and out. Even more impressive, he shows in his compositions that as far as the technique of playing he had more mastery than his great contemporary Rachmaninoff, which clearly means something! It was by the way the very same Rachmaninoff who saw in Godowsky the only musician that made a lasting contribution to the development of the piano. Godowsky, not only a very gifted pianist but also a well respected teacher of music, used his knowledge of the instrument and his experience optimally in his compositions, whether they were newly conceived pieces (such as a large-scale piano sonata) or transcriptions. The old tradition of both musician *and* composer was the most normal thing in the world to Godowsky, something that is a rarity these days.

It is evident that Godowsky's *Chopin Studies* are exactly that which the title promises,

studies for the (definitely extremely advanced) student of the piano, just like the masterful, but definitely no less challenging *Études* by Chopin (opus 10 and opus 25), the more transcendental sound-complexes by Liszt and - to highlight those too - the *Études Symphoniques* by Schumann and the *Études-Tableaux* by Rachmaninoff. The piano virtuosos were then and now able to raise their spirits, including pure musical enjoyment.



Pianist Ivan Ilić

The impetus for Godowsky's *Chopin Studies* for the left hand was deeply tragic. During his stay in Chicago (he taught at the conservatory) Godowsky was so impressed with the 1893 World Exhibition that he encouraged his brother in law to spend some of his honeymoon there. And so the newlywed couple undertook the trip from New York to Chicago, but they never arrived: both were killed in a large train accident. Godowsky nearly lost his wits after receiving this terrible news. He not only felt enormous sadness, but he felt himself partly responsible for their death into his deepest fiber. After all, he was the one who had strongly encouraged them to make the trip to Chicago.

To take his mind off of things he decided to take up the hardest études by Chopin again, and to re-evaluate his fingerings. This yielded some unexpected results; he came up with an ingenious new fingering, but decided to finalize it for the left hand alone. This caused him to discover, much to his surprise, that the left hand has at least as much potential for virtuosity as the right one, and in some ways significantly more.



Frédéric Chopin's left hand:

In the following two decades Godowsky published fifty-three studies, twenty-two of which were just for the left hand. They have proven to be valuable not only to pianists primarily focused on external virtuosity: besides the extremely demanding technique, the lustrous musicality is of great significance. That this always challenging link between external technique and inner musicality leads to the greatest results in the hands of the pianistic top elite was proven amply by Marc-André Hamelin and Boris Berezovsky ([click for review](#)): Hamelin with all fifty-three *Chopin Studies* on the Hyperion label and Berezovsky with eight *Studies* on the Warner label. To these we can now add the American pianist **Ivan Ilić**.

Indeed, in several études Ilić even surpasses the eminent Hamelin in terms of ingenuity and creativity (three lovely examples are: no. 6 in C#, minor no. 13 in E flat minor and no. 21 in A major). Ilić spent quite some time studying these pieces, replacing 'old' solutions with new ones. He moved steadily strengthened the links between Godowsky's studies and Chopin until they fit like a glove; all the while managing to keep routine – that pianist's pitfall – at bay. The many details in this highly accurate performance bear witness to this: minute shadings of color create a great impact, dynamic gradations underscore a certain passage in a masterful way. Phrases are stretched ever so slightly, subtly shifting the balance or highlighting a rhythmic pattern by means of which the missing right hand is evoked. This happens in Godowsky's works, which are sometimes (even) more refined than those of the other two masters in this area: Ravel and Prokofiev.

In the CD-booklet Ilić shows himself to be an erudite 'champion' of these *Chopin Studies*:

I realized that the disparaging commentary leveled at the *Studies* is due to an inability to hear the very subtlety that, ultimately, makes them worthwhile. It is one thing to dislike them, another to flippantly dismiss them as badly written or shallow, which is fatuous. It is easy to be condescending towards artists who take the works of others as a point of departure. But make no mistake: Godowsky was no cover band.

Perhaps these studies should be seen as Godowsky's creative commentary on Chopin's ingenious original text. Godowsky's aim was not to replace Chopin's work in any way, but to generate further understanding of it by adding building blocks to Chopin's extremely solid foundation. This principle was made explicit by Godowsky, both in his correspondence and in his introduction to the score. Ilić has taken these words to heart, and has given a practical expression of them in his rendering of these twenty-two *Chopin Studies*. This makes it a tribute not only to Godowsky, but to Chopin and to the piano. The recording is wonderfully transparent and sonorous, the extensive documentation beautifully arranged.

Art van der Wal, February 2013
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