

CD GODOWSKY: 22 Chopin Studies

Ivan Ilić – piano, Paraty 2011.

The pianist and composer Leopold Godowsky (1870–1938), like Rachmaninoff, Horowitz, Hofmann, Paderewski and many others, represents the golden era of piano interpretation. His more than four hundred technically demanding compositions are proof of his pianistic ability. At an early age, he already gave concerts as a so-called “child prodigy”, first in Europe, and from 1884 in the USA. In Paris, he became a pupil and a favourite of Saint-Saëns. He successfully debuted in both Paris and London. In the 1890s, he returned to the USA, where he began to work on his *Studies on Chopin's études*. At first, he tried innovative fingerings while studying most technically difficult études, to make these compositions easier to play. He came up with an ingenious new fingering, which he attempted to apply to the left hand. To his surprise, the left hand version was in some ways more natural and more effective. While composing, Godowsky learned that the left hand is at least as capable of developing agility as the right hand, if not better.

The recording of the American pianist of Serbian origin **Ivan Ilić** delivers 22 Godowsky's études. Godowsky recast all 12 Chopin's études from Opus 10, and then only 10 études from Opus 25 (the études No. 7 and No. 11 were left out) for the left hand. The basic character of the individual études was maintained, but in some cases Godowsky changed Chopin's key – he changed C major to D-flat major, C minor to C-sharp minor, F minor to F-sharp minor, F major to G-flat major. It is altogether a case of a shift from the white keys to the black ones for better agility of the left hand fingers on the keyboard. As a result, there is often a significant alteration of the mood in comparison with Chopin's original *études*. Godowsky's 22 études mark an important milestone in the history of piano technique. The first ones of these were written 30 years before Maurice Ravel composed his Piano Concerto for the Left Hand in D major. The history of music composition for the left hand thus already begins before Ravel, who is often considered the pioneer of this tendency.

In the CD booklet, the pianist Ivan Ilić attractively describes his path towards Godowsky's études and their interpretation. He indicates that the study of the études presented mainly three great challenges: achievement of uninterrupted legato (which is desirable as much as it is achievable only with great difficulty), articulation of a polyphonic discourse of individual sounds, and nimbleness in overcoming great leaps in a dense, almost Brahmsian structure. In the course of the study, he got to know which new muscles engage to play with the left hand alone: the whole corporal posture had changed. The pianist admits that he spent more time with Godowsky's études than with any other compositions.

His interpretation is remarkable, although we do not always manage to restrain ourselves from comparison of the resulting musical impression with Chopin's original opuses. It is indeed necessary to free ourselves from this preconception. Godowsky's études are no poor infusion of Chopin – they are an original compositional cycle, a purposeful continuation of Chopin, whose interpretation is very demanding. Ilić has both études in G-flat major nicely exposed (Chopin's No. 5 of Op. 10 and No. 9 of Op. 25 – Godowsky maintains the G-flat major key in both études). The “Revolutionary” étude would perhaps deserve a better modelled melody.

The “arpeggio” étude in A major (Chopin’s E-flat major, No. 11, Op. 10) would also better emerge with emphasis on the melody in the upper line. In some cases, Godowsky’s étude for the left hand even surpasses Chopin’s artwork in virtuosity – for example, the étude in E-flat minor (Chopin’s No. 6 of Op. 10) or the “octave” one in B minor (Chopin’s No. 10 of Op. 25) – Ilić interprets these virtuosically and with more courageous dynamics.

Ilić’s recording from 2011 definitely deserves attention, and not only from the point of interpretation, but also because it again brings attention to Leopold Godowsky and his exceptional compositional message. Listeners are more likely to know more famous Godowsky pupils and interpreters who were influenced by him (for instance, Ravel or Prokofiev also wrote compositions for the left hand). Even though Leopold Godowsky will never be as famous and desired as Frédéric Chopin, we can hope that the reviewed recording will contribute to inclusion of Godowsky’s compositions to the programs of piano recitals. There are a number of undiscovered composers and we should therefore be grateful to interpreters such as Ivan Ilić who have the courage to study the compositions, present them at concerts and record them.

- Kateřina Hnáťová

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