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The American pianist of Serbian descent **Ivan Ilić** is a key soloist for the French record label **Paraty**. Here he plays *22 Chopin Studies* by Leopold Godowsky. It is his second album published by Paraty (following *24 Debussy Preludes* in 2008) and, like its predecessor, it shows total engagement on the part of the performer. The importance and impact of this new album are even greater, as the performer takes up a repertoire that is a bold choice right from the start, created by a highly unusual, emotionally troubled composer.

Leopold Godowsky was admired by Arthur Rubinstein (it would have taken him “500 years to master Godowsky’s technique”), and by Rachmaninoff, Busoni and other dazzling pianists (and composers). Godowsky is well deserving of this passionate tribute. His “Studies” remain a challenge that very few of pianists today tackle successfully. They are among the most technically demanding works of the repertoire.

An exploit of the hands, a spiritual challenge

Following Marc-André Hamelin and Boris Berezovsky, **Ivan Ilić** has an exemplary technique, reinforced by his particular attentiveness to Godowsky’s expressive intentions. In this case the extreme difficulty is linked to the fact that all 22 Studies are to be performed only with the left hand. For a contemporary pianist who could have chosen among the rich repertoire for solo piano, the choice to restrict one’s self to one hand is particularly disconcerting.

But in addition to his expert technique, Ivan Ilić succeeds in transforming the necessary acrobatics to open jubilation and poetic tenderness, or as he says himself, “aesthetic ecstasy” (an observation which is just as true physically as intellectually). The goal is not only to overcome obstacles that may seem, at first, impossible (i.e. how does one express the breath and the polyphonic complexity using only one hand?), but to access another pianistic dimension. This gives Godowsky’s *22 Chopin Studies* their authenticity; they are powerful, creative reinterpretations of the original text.

Transcriptions, Exacerbations... Recreation

Leopold Godowsky is a mastermind musician: he is experimental, outrageous, and an exceptionally gifted visionary. His greatest legacy is his set of 53 *Chopin Studies*, musically baffling works, recreations that develop, comment on, and deepen our understanding of Chopin. His recreations create a living, dynamic dialog with Chopin’s technique, as well as Chopin’s aesthetic and intimate universe.

It is an analytical game, a labyrinth where Godowsky, in numbering his Studies, does not respect the original order. He breaks with the original order to recompose the rhythm and sequence of the works, the unfolding of the entire pianistic edifice.

Ivan Ilić, our dazzled, passionate guide, uncovers the freedom of Godowsky’s choice, as he confronted the Chopinian mountain. The result is a tribute characterized not by paralysis but by boldness. As an interpreter, the American pianist knows how to convey the ebullient fantasy and limitless invention. He carries Godowsky’s message forward to the present day.

Pushing technical, musical, aesthetic and, perhaps, spiritual limits to new heights, his elegant approach shows the richness which contemporary pianists can mine from the work of the Polish pianist/composer.

The album liner notes, written by the pianist, are erudite, yet clear and accessible. The booklet is a valuable complementary document for an interpretative approach that merits expansive commentary.

- Carl Fisher