

Tribune de Genève

Ivan Ilić, the pianist who wanted to be elsewhere

The American musician took part in an unclassifiable homage to Morton Feldman produced by the HEAD – Geneva University of Arts & Design. A portrait.



Ivan Ilić was born and took his first musical steps in Palo Alto, in California. He studied at Berkeley, and then Paris. Photo © Pierre Abensur

It's an object in which refinement triumphs, where white and emptiness rule with an accepted stubbornness. "There's a clear and sought-after resonance with Morton Feldman's aesthetic," notes pianist Ivan Ilić. And it's true that when turning the pages of what could, from a distance, seem like a catalogue of contemporary art, one discovers, in the little impressionistic touches, chosen fragments of the life of one of the 20th century's greatest composers. Some of his black-

and-white photographs are echoed by his always pithy writings, excerpts of his scores and two discs. One includes videos by HEAD – Geneva’s students, all imbued with the American musician’s spirit. The other is an audio recording of one of the composer’s late works: *Palais de Mari* (1986), which is also striking for its starkness.

Far from the beaten track

And it is here, in this final contribution to a composite project with an inviting title (*Detours Which Have To Be Investigated*), that we hear Ivan Ilić play. Born in Palo Alto, California, living in France for the past thirteen years, the musician found in this project a path – a different path, it’s tempting to say – to reject easy classifications and a firmly traced traditional career.

In the lounge of a plush hotel in Geneva, the 36-year-old pianist recalls, with poise, what is, for him, an interrogative necessity: “Fairly quickly, when I’d finished my studies at the University of California Berkeley and was starting a solo career, I understood that I couldn’t stay all day in front of a piano to practice a repertoire frozen in the past. I needed to satisfy my curiosity.” After ten years of private lessons in Palo Alto, a city that “musically was something of a desert” Ivan Ilić received a great shock at Berkeley. “I studied the piano there, as well as musicology, composition and conducting. But most of all, I was exposed to unrelated fields like philosophy, mathematics, political science and anthropology.”

A noble homage

This extended horizon left him with a taste for escape, both literal and figurative. So, brandishing a first diploma, the young man left for Paris to perfect his talent and launch his career. He arrived at the age of 22, and recalls from this era “the countless musicians I met whose level of playing was incredibly impressive”. He decided not to leave the Old Continent, but rather to take France as a base for his second life as a musician. Ivan Ilić then recorded standard repertoire (Bach, Haydn, Beethoven...), and undertook extensive research into little-known scores. One day, he decided to record Leopold Godowsky’s 22 Chopin Studies for the left hand alone. “I found, in those gruelling and poetic pieces, a way to differentiate myself, to step outside of the established heritage,” the pianist notes.

Much later, there was the Feldman lightning bolt, “a composer who was often disdained and misunderstood by the establishment, a bit like Erik Satie in his time. From the start, I liked his intuitive approach to composition. Unlike his contemporaries, he never tried to justify his musical choices and notes with concepts.” This love left deep traces in the unclassifiable object produced by the HEAD – Geneva. Under Ivan Ilić’s fingers, Feldman is resurrected, both moving and ethereal, in a noble homage which must be recognized.

Detours Which Have to Be Investigated, with, in particular, Ivan Ilić, piano.

A witness to the HEAD – Geneva's brilliance

Disciplines crossing paths and nourishing one another in a stimulating game of mirrors: the **Detours Which Have to be Investigated** project perpetuates one of the HEAD – Geneva's cherished traditions, that of knocking down barriers between disciplines. This adventure, which melds music, video art and graphic arts, was born in the mind of French artist Benoît Maire: "For two years, he gave master-classes to the students here," recalls Jean-Pierre Greff, the school's director. "Over the course of this experience he put together a project centered on Morton Feldman, also inviting Ivan Ilić, who had previously collaborated with the artist." Presented by this pair, the original materials – the American composer's writings and music – captured the students' interest.

In Jean-Pierre Greff's eyes, the result was worthy of particular attention. "Considering the final product, I told myself that we had to make it exist elsewhere, by publishing it." With 600 copies printed, this homage to Feldman will seize the attention of fans, but will also burnish the visibility of the institution that brought it about. Jean-Pierre Greff notes that "We distributed it to some 300 institutions, museums, schools and art centres".

Rocco Zacheo, 16 December 2014
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