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Ivan Ilić, piano.

Interview about Morton Feldman, Erik Satie, Videos and Music...

Ivan Ilić, piano. Interview. Spiritual Morton Feldman, as allusive and infinite as a massive Mark Rothko painting...pianist Ivan Ilić explains his relationship to Feldman's music. The composer is at the centre of a new project, a collaboration with students at the HEAD – Geneva University of Art & Design, which fosters a dialogue between videos and music.



His concert, this coming 12 November 2014, is a new milestone in his fully engaged approach to contemporary music for the piano, also present in his last album, **The Transcendentalist**, which garnered a CLIC Award from Classiquenews (including works by Scriabin, Cage, Wollschleger, and Feldman).

Interview with the outstanding pianist Ivan Ilić.

You enjoy creating bridges between other disciplines and music. In this case, the addition of images and a video narrative renews the perception of the works you perform, but also the way in which one experiences the music within a concert setting. How does this approach enrich the understanding of Feldman's musical language, and "Palais de Mari" in particular?

For those of us whose ears are used to contemporary music, late Feldman is relatively accessible – much more so than the majority of pieces by Xenakis, Nono, Stockhausen or Boulez. Feldman's music is soft, slow, atmospheric, and melancholic. It is played using traditional instrumental techniques. However, this is still abstract music. For an everyday listener, the experience is far removed from listening to a Mozart Symphony. The problem is the same problem with all of contemporary music: we don't know "how" to listen to it.

As a result of my collaboration with students from the HEAD – Geneva of University of Art & Design, especially Ștefan Botez, I realized that Feldman's music blends extraordinarily well with visuals. The music immediately contributes a certain mood; by watching images or video at the same time the listener is carried along, and more likely to be deeply infused by the music. It's a mechanism that I don't fully understand, but the effectiveness of the approach is undeniable.

Perhaps paradoxically, I am still skeptical about multimedia performances. Often the idea is interesting but end result leaves me unsatisfied. That's where the idea came from to make videos to be watched beforehand: these little 'promo' videos are meant to familiarize the listener and make him or her want to hear the 'real' piece in a fitting setting, preferably in concert, or a recording using good headphones.

We explored two different strategies with the students: a documentary style video, with a pedagogical flavor, and a purely esthetic experiment which consists of making images that fit or complement the music, much like what one sees in pop music videos. In both cases, the visual experience does not replace the concert, but is rather complementary. Before a traditional concert, we try to prepare the spectator by using their sensitivity to visual cues and culture, which I think is generally much more highly developed and ubiquitous today than aural knowledge. And of course it's important to keep in mind that today most audience members will first experience new culture at home, in front of their computer, or their smartphones, by clicking on a link on Twitter or Facebook. It's the first point of access.

Video is a very effective format, even for abstract music; I've witnessed the proof many times. When I show a promo video with the beginning of Feldman's "Palais de Mari" to someone who has no experience with contemporary music, the same person has an easier time listening to and "following" the piece when listening to it afterwards, without the video.

To summarize, this kind of work is a tool meant to enrich the musical experience, but which remains distinct from the music, in the same way that a text about the music can improve your musical understanding, without ever actually changing the music itself. It's absolutely fascinating, at any rate.

How does this new collaboration with video artists in Geneva related to your own work on Feldman?

My own work hasn't changed much. You know, the daily work of a musician like me is rather modest and 'technical', in the end. We make a cocktail between the score, the instrument, and the acoustic, and we mix all of that with the performer (or, to be more accurate, with the performer's current psychological and physical disposition).

On the other hand, my understanding of the relationship between music and audiences has developed tremendously. These young artists represent an ideal potential audience for me: they are young, curious, and cultivated. Each of them has an artistic practice and a strong identity. Being confronted by these young people who are so sophisticated, but who often have little musical knowledge, is a little bit like if I were to present my work to the listeners of Radio France Culture or Radio France Inter [note: like BBC Radio 4 in the UK or NPR in America] rather than Radio France Musique, whose listeners are already knowledgeable classical music lovers. I realized during the process that *that* is the audience I would like to reach, because it's the one with whom I identify.

For several years now I have been more enriched by my exchanges with non-musicians rather than with musicians. One of the most important of these meetings was with Benoît Maire, a French conceptual artist who is my age. He's the one who invited me to the HEAD – Geneva. He gave me a wonderful gift.

What experience would you like to give your spectator and listener during the concert?

This concert links music by Erik Satie to works by John Cage and Morton Feldman. Satie's music is a surprising mixture of modernity and accessibility. The fact that that kind of mix is possible intrigues me a great deal; we tend to think that there is a dichotomy between modernity and accessibility in classical music, even if pop culture exploded that myth decades ago.

The works by Cage like "In a Landscape" and "Dream" date from 1948. Cage was 36 years old, my age, and he was obsessed by Satie. You can hear it. Feldman also created a music without drama, he was an exceptionally patient composer. For me, Feldman, more than anyone else, conjures the infinite; his music is the most spiritual music I know of.

To answer your question, listening to this music affords a unique opportunity for contemplation and introspection. It's as if you are in front of a massive Mark Rothko painting for an hour, in silence. To me contemplation is a noble and essential act. And I think that's the source of the power of this music.



At the MAMCO – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Geneva, the pianist Ivan Ilić will play works by Satie, Cage and Feldman, Wednesday 12 November 2014 at 18 :30...

Ivan Ilić, piano. Recital at the Mamco Geneva, Wednesday, 12 November 2014, 18:30.

Satie, Cage, Feldman...
Recital by pianist Ivan Ilić
Wednesday, 12 novembre 2014

Geneva, Mamco – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (Mamco)

Ground floor, 18:30, free admission

Programme :

John Cage (1912-1992)
In a Landscape (1948)

Erik Satie (1866-1925)
Gnossienne no 4
Gnossienne no 2
Gnossienne no 5
Gymnopédie no 3
Nocturne no 1
Sarabande no 1

Morton Feldman (1926-1987)
Palais de Mari (1986)

Illustration: Ivan Ilić at the piano © Ker Xavier

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