

BR Klassik Review of “The Transcendentalist”

The Transcendentalist

The pianist Ivan Ilić was born in Belgrade, grew up in the US, and now lives in Paris. He has already released Debussy’s 24 Préludes and Godowsky’s Chopin Studies on CD, which is a challenge for pianists, because the pieces have to be played exclusively with the left hand. The videos of his interpretations that Ilić has posted on the web have caused a sensation.

Ivan Ilić’s new CD is called **The Transcendentalist**. When you push “play”, it’s as if a breath of wind brushes the piano keys. With this CD the mechanical processes are quickly forgotten. Are those really hammers that strike strings? You hear delicate tone clouds that float by, form figures, and dissolve again. For his new CD Ivan Ilić chose a few preludes and other piano miniatures from Alexander Scriabin, besides “Dream” and “In a Landscape”, two delicate, poetic compositions from the avant-gardist John Cage.

Sound Philosophy

The young American composer Scott Wollschleger is represented with a piece and for the grand finale of the CD program, Ivan Ilić presents the over twenty-minute long “Palais de Mari” by Morton Feldman. “For me sound is the most important thing. I feel like I am secondary to it. I listen to my sounds and do what they tell me.” Morton Feldman once explained his philosophy in this way. That a piece from this master of quiet tones appears at the end of this CD is only logical. After his virtuoso Godowsky project it was clear to Ivan Ilić: the next CD should not be about speed, technique and virtuosity. Feldman brings about a feeling of time and space in his music, to the benefit of a sound sphere that knows no boundaries – an effect that is a common thread throughout the concept of Ivan Ilić’s CD. There are no exclamation points or even periods. You don’t notice the transitions between pieces at all, even though very diverse composers from very different generations wrote the music. And, astonishingly, at the end you have the feeling that the one hour plus CD was only half as long, although objectively so little happens on the piano keys.

Virtuosity of the Mind

“The Transcendentalist”, the title of Ivan Ilić’s new CD, is based on an American philosophical movement from the 19th century. Thinkers like Henry David Thoreau or Ralph Waldo Emerson developed a countermovement to materialism, and let themselves be inspired by romantic ideas, by German idealism and by Buddhism. There are of course connections to the composers on this CD, with Scriabin, the mystic, and Cage, the Buddhist. Concerning their works, which Ilić presents on his CD, a hint is given by CD producer Eric Fraad, that here virtuosity is a question of the mind and of independence, not of technical finesse. The same can be said of Ivan Ilić, a sound philosopher on the piano. After the final note of “The Transcendentalist” has faded, you actually feel: enlightened. The CD comes with an extensive booklet, which includes a text that introduces the philosophy of transcendentalism, and details about the works and composers.

– Ben Alber, 18 June 2014

<http://www.br.de/radio/br-klassik/sendungen/leporello/cd-tipp-ivan-ilic-the-transcendentalist100.html>