

THE TRANSCENDENTALIST

Article and interview by Agnès Jourdain



After a recording of Debussy's 24 Preludes, then another of Leopold Godowsky's 22 Chopin Studies for the left hand, both released by Paraty in 2008 and 2012 respectively, one might expect that the title of pianist Ivan Ilić's new album announces a pianobleu.com recording of Liszt's Transcendental Etudes. Liszt is a composer

who llić. asked about his favourite composers in 2008, referred to in the following way: "Debussy and Liszt have helped me become more free..." And yet, this is not at all the case: his current programme brings together a Russian composer and three Americans, all from the 20th and 21st centuries. This can be explained by the fact that for the past two years, Ivan Ilić has done in-depth research about American composer Morton Feldman, one of whose pieces, over 20 minutes long, concludes this disc.



In collaboration with the *Haute École d'art et de design de Genève* (HEAD), Ivan Ilić is currently preparing an art book in tribute to the composer. Ilić currently wishes to emphasise qualities other than those of speed and technique. His desire is to explore a complex and considered pianistic, auditory and affective world. A recent interview that he was kind enough to grant us on the occasion of this new album's release (below) reveals how much this recording led him to ask himself numerous questions, as much about himself as about music itself, after choosing to record Feldman's "Palais de Mari" and finding himself confronted with the difficulty of choosing works to juxtapose against it.

This album also distinguishes itself from its predecessors by a cover illustration that is equally carefully considered, in tandem with Eric Fraad, founder of the Heresy label. Thus the cover is an "homage" to Salvador Dalí's 1931 painting "Partial Hallucination: Six Apparitions of Lenin on a Piano", intended to create a mysterious and transcendental scene that would support the album's music and overall concept. The album's title is framed like the title sequence of a film from the 1930s and the pianist – Ivan Ilić – seems to be attending the showing of a film in which he plays the lead role. The title "The Transcendentalist" evokes the artist himself. It's also the title of an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the source of one of the most notable American movements, Transcendentalism. "In two manifestos by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature in 1836 and The Transcendentalist in 1842, he laid out the philosophy and tenets of transcendental thought. In reductive terms, the movement was founded as a reaction to and against rationalism and materialism and was influenced by oriental religions, German idealism and Romanticism. Its members embraced spirituality, idealism, inspiration, intuition and the worship of beauty and nature as guiding principles."

In the new conversation that can be found below, the pianist states that the album bears a message, one that is well summed up in a quote from John Cage: "I would like us to think, as one can in Zen Buddhism, that, 'I am here, right where I need to be'..."

Beyond the fact that the music of this album is tightly linked to these themes, as are the various composers themselves, Ivan Ilić suggests that if one were to draw a genealogical tree of the solo piano repertoire, these composers would all be found on the lower reaches of Frederic Chopin's branch. More specifically, he says, "Chopin was perhaps the most



idiomatic composer for the piano, but his music epitomizes an affect that many 20th century composers rejected outright. It is therefore all the more surprising that one of the most distinctive composers of the early 20th century, Alexander Scriabin, took Chopin's writing as a point of departure."

The music of this "composite" program offers a unique atmosphere, a very gentle one filled with slow melodies that stretch out, and sometimes repeat themselves, in a halo of sound. You will be able to hear Alexander Scriabin's "Guirlandes" at the bottom of this page, composed exactly a century ago in 1914, and watch several videos of the pianist, all testimonies that will allow you to appreciate the album's atmosphere... a very peaceful atmosphere, therefore, where listeners also feel very comfortable, where they need to be: listening to this album, appreciating how it cools the sometimes overheated summertime brains – and not necessarily because of the sun… Don't hesitate to purchase this album to fully appreciate these 20th- and 21st-century works throughout the whole summer. They will offer you lovely moments of peace and meditation, spiced with the pleasure of discovery!

INTERVIEW

Agnès Jourdain – Eric Fraad, producer of the Heresy label, explains that for this project you "wanted to focus on qualities other than speed, virtuosity and technique [and] explore a pianistic, sonic and affective world that is intricate and reflective." On your previous recording, Leopold Godowsky's Etudes for the left hand displayed the opposite qualities and had, you said, "given you a feeling of ecstasy". Why this choice? Did you sense this same ecstasy nonetheless?

Ivan Ilić – It took me an enormous amount of time to prepare and also to "digest" the Godowsky album. I'm not speaking only of the music itself and the time it took to learn it, but also the extraordinary reaction of the public, which went well beyond my initial expectations. The few people I discussed the Godowsky project with before embarking on it did everything they could to dissuade me from going ahead, including the people closest to me. Despite this very strong opposition, I completed the project; fortunately, I have a streak of stubbornness about certain things. The experience taught me that you have to trust yourself when choosing projects. In fact I would go even further: opposition from those around you



can be a good sign. It means you're taking risks. In music, this is essential.

In May 2012, I started to feel that my love story with Godowsky was slowly coming to an end, that it was time to move on. All musicians are familiar with this feeling. One day before an important concert, I was looking for a piece in which one could clearly hear the piano's harmonics, because the venue had a very unusual acoustic. What was needed was a piece with very long notes and the right balance between the low and high registers, so as to bring out the piano's aural afterglows. I happened upon Morton Feldman's *Last Pieces* (1959), which are fascinating because the notes are specified but not their respective lengths. It was a real shock. I quickly realised that Feldman's works would be an important step in my musical development. And that after Romantic music, it was time to delve back into experimental music.

Godowsky's works for the left hand, which are spectacular, are ultimately very accessible, because anyone can be fascinated by the almost athletic aspect of their performance. With Feldman, I knew it was going to be much more difficult to bring the project to a large audience, and that made me frightened. But I like being scared. It's a good sign, it indicates a bold choice and risk-taking, as I mentioned earlier.

To answer the final part of your question, the ecstatic aspect of performing Godowsky has no counterpart in this repertoire. On the other hand, the commonality is the supreme concentration that both require, although for different reasons. In the Godowsky *Chopin Studies*, a lapse of concentration can make you "fall off the horse". In a concert setting, that can be catastrophic, obviously. With Feldman – as with the Wollschleger, the two Cage pieces and Scriabin's miniatures, one has to be "inside" them and fully present in terms of cerebral engagement. Otherwise, the pieces fall completely flat. The interpreter's intentions are magnified ten times in this repertoire, and that aspect is something I'm seeking to cultivate: to feel comfortable and allow things to flourish in the present moment.

Despite this relative lack of technical difficulty, did you spend as much time preparing the scores for this album? Did you hesitate at some stage over the choice of certain works, knowing that from the start that you and producer Eric Fraad had decided to record some of Morton Feldman's music, a composer about whom you're preparing an art book?



That's a very interesting juxtaposition of questions, and very pertinent. Certainly, learning these pieces was not at all comparable to the effort required for Godowsky *Chopin Studies*. On the other hand, the work I did on *myself* was just as great, in fact I even went further. Once I'd decided to record Feldman's "Palais de Mari", I faced the difficulty of choosing pieces to link to it. Doing an all-Feldman album has been done many times.

We no longer need to "document" his works the way we did twenty years ago. So, what to do? I found the answer by working "on myself". Before choosing the other composers, I asked myself some fundamental questions, like: Who am I? What are my musical qualities? What do I want to do? Why would I do that? When it comes down to it, what do I have to say? In particular, what do I want to say with this album? What can this recording offer that doesn't already exist? Where are we, today, in the history of recording, and of the piano? What could identify this album as a work from today, in 2014, and not from five, ten, twenty years ago? I read a lot, wrote a lot, and talked a lot with non-musicians, which allowed me to get essential distance.

Once I'd chosen the album's musical climate, I added the two Cage pieces because they complement the Feldman marvellously and because I was disappointed with the other recorded versions. To my mind, what one sees in the score hadn't been done on a recording yet, and I was curious to see whether I could manage it, particularly with "Dream", but also with "In a Landscape". I took months to find a contemporary work to link with all that, namely Scott Wollschleger's piece. "Music Without Metaphor" (2013) is exactly what I was looking for, and I'm proud of the performance.

The idea of adding the Scriabin miniatures came later, and it worried Eric Fraad, the founder of Heresy Records, who wasn't sure that it was a good idea. But I was confident because of Scriabin's influence on Feldman, which Feldman alludes to in his writings – it also brings a certain balance in terms of texture, tempo and contrast, without disturbing the whole. These days many pianists juxtapose Baroque and Modern music, particularly on CDs; it's become a cliché. Personally I wanted to avoid any frivolity in my choice of pieces. I needed to find a marriage that would be both more original and yet historically justifiable.



You explain that "Chopin was perhaps the most idiomatic composer for the piano, but his music epitomizes an affect that many 20th century composers rejected outright. It is therefore all the more surprising that one of the most distinctive composers of the early 20th century, Alexander Scriabin, took Chopin's writing as a point of departure." Why exactly do you find surprising about that?

When you listen to certain works by Alexander Scriabin, for example the opus 73 "Guirlandes" which is on this album, it's hard to imagine that his first works, like the Preludes from opus 11, 15 and 16 were so close to Chopin. Scriabin's musical evolution was very surprising and, in particular, it took place over a short period of time (about twenty years). I find the idea that one can evolve that much, that quickly, absolutely enthralling.

Radical aesthetic shifts in an artist's life are one of my favourite subjects, for me it's among the richest questions. I'm thinking of the changes that Morton Feldman and his painter friend Philip Guston went through; they also lived through this sort of thing. It's the topic of an art book I've prepared with the HEAD (*la Haute école d'art et de design*) in Geneva, which will be released in October 2014 with a CD and a DVD. The goal isn't to explain, but rather to evoke, observe and meditate on this question.

Where would you place Liszt or Schumann, his contemporaries, on that musical-genealogical tree?

Liszt and Schumann are on different branches. Chopin is really a very special branch, like those branches that plough back into the earth and change their function, becoming roots in their own right. For me, if I may say so, Chopin is the one who "invented" the piano. The concept of the piano, its sonority – when I think of the typical affect of the piano, Chopin incarnates it better than anyone else. The piano as we conceive of it today is unthinkable without Chopin. One could say the same of Debussy, of course, but Debussy owes a considerable debt to Chopin (I'm certainly not the first to say so!).

That isn't to say that I prefer Chopin – far from it. I find Schumann much richer, much more complex; the same goes for Liszt, even if I find that Schumann is by far the most interesting of the three, at least when it comes to solo piano works, my primary interest. But Chopin's influence on the piano repertoire is omnipresent, and overwhelming.



You're working on an art book in homage to Feldman, and you explain the influence of Satie on the music of John Cage, who was Feldman's friend and mentor, and it's true that "Palais de Mari" may even bring "Vexations" to mind... Why didn't you include Satie as well?

Satie is over-performed and over-recorded. You hear his music everywhere, in films, in advertising... Satie's music is like a Coca-Cola can: it's a symbol overloaded with connotations and associations, it has become unbearable. For me, Satie is impossible in 2014, especially on a recording. When I hear his music, I keep expecting a voiceover to pop up to sell me life insurance or low-fat yoghurt. There are his lesser-known pieces, but I don't share Feldman's enthusiasm for them. Further, historical or documentary justifications aren't a good enough pretext to include a composer on an album: you need to love the music, too.

Satie is a victim of his own success; his name has become like a brand or trademark. Any listener who's not necessarily a great musical connoisseur would have gotten stuck on Satie's name if his music had been on this album, and therefore those same listeners would not have discovered the other composers. For Scriabin, the paradox is just the opposite: Scriabin is known among musicians, but I'm dumbfounded by how little he's known among the general public. He's often played but rarely recorded, and the complete recordings of Scriabin's music are either fairly low quality or not widely available.

This is quite a conceptual album, given that as well as linking a philosophical movement with the music, you've chosen for the cover image a transposition of Dali's "Partial Hallucination: Six Apparitions on Lenin on a Piano", whose dream-like scene and haunting surreal effect are generally interpreted as an allegory on the decline of Western capitalist society, or as a hymn to a shining communist ideology. But the painting also has a spiritual effect and its symbols seem open to numerous interpretations, as Eric Fraad explains, noting that "Emerson's portrait replaces Lenin's just as transcendentalism replaces communism. The six images of Emerson in a glowing light reinforce the idea of transcendence and illumination. The glowing lights emanate from the keyboard because this is where the transcendental forces arise from. The cherries represent the fructifying power of nature, a central theme in Emerson's writing, and the ripe, seductive power of sensual life and its temptations, which all artists must



grapple with. The ants symbolize death and decay, which recordings such as this attempt to transcend."... Essentially, a recording that announces itself as bearer of a message that's as much musical as philosophical, if not political. This is, after all, the case of a great deal of music, but it seems to be rarer coming from performers. Why did you make this choice?

What is the performer's role? What are the limits of this role? Who decides these limits? Is someone who is curious, or who aspires to be open-minded, obligated to voluntarily limit their curiosity so as to better satisfy the expectations of a pre-established role? Or do they have the right to undermine the pre-existing template and adapt it to their personality, and even express a critical perspective of the role?

These are questions I ask myself every day. Why? Because lately, I find it harder and harder to accept the idea that being a musician means that I can only express a tiny little bit of who I am, and that I must hide the rest deep down so that I can better conform to the expectations of others.

For example: during the past few years I've made several friends who are visual artists. Thanks to them, I've cultivated a completely different visual perspective which has greatly enriched my life. What is visual is inherently linked to semiotics, the study of signs, and therefore also the study of perception. Personally, I find that fascinating, the idea that we can study not just the artistic "object", which is "over there", but to question our perception of the object which is, in the end, a part of the object. Cognitive science and Gestalt psychology are tools that can make an enormous contribution to the act of seeing. This can influence the way we listen, too, for musicians, *if* we're interested and if we try to draw a metaphorical conclusion, even in a clumsy and uncertain way.

So, let's posit that I'm a musician, that I'm interested in these things, and that I'm confronted with the release of my new album. Every album has a cover; the cover is the first image and it has a considerable influence on the perception of the music that will be heard later. Am I supposed to pretend not to notice that a cover with my portrait isn't banal? And that the other cliché, a reproduction of a painting from the composer's era, is truly loaded with meaning?

We're extremely conservative in classical music; it's not a secret, and this lack of openness has become a veritable pathology. To survive in this



world, psychologically, either you have to voluntarily blind yourself (in order to ignore the omnipresent contradictions) or try to innovate. When we try to innovate, sometimes we make mistakes. So be it. On the other hand, it's a lot less boring, and we may start finding more satisfying answers to the questions that can haunt you late at night (if you're lucky enough to doubt).

To get back to more concrete things, associating myself with Eric Fraad and Heresy Records was a way of accepting my own personality's complexity. You speak of a "concept" album, and I completely accept that characterization. In 2014, it's not enough for a recording to simply "document" something, we have to provide meaning, to contextualise, and draw a link between the music and the world of today. More explicitly, this album does indeed carry a message, one ably summed-up in a quote from John Cage: "I would like us to think, as one can in Zen Buddhism, that, 'I am here, right where I need to be'…"

I read that quote for the first time in February 2014, after *The Transcendentalist* was already done, but I recognized that it was exactly what I was trying to communicate with the album. Everything can be explained by that statement. Thanks to this experience, thanks to my intensive reflection on alternative forms, and the successful completion of this project, I found confirmation that I will be able to enrich myself all my life, both within and beyond music, that there will be a place for all the richness and complexity I feel like putting into my work, and that I'll also have a public there, listening.

Translation by J. A. Macfarlane, June 2014

