

German critic **Rainer Aschemeier** of **THE LISTENER** interviews pianist **Ivan Ilić** about his new album, **THE TRANSCENDENTALIST**
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Rainer Aschemeier – So Mr. Ilić your new album is called **The Transcendentalist**, and you made another album a few years ago entitled Transcendental. So what is it that fascinates you about the idea of “transcendence”?

Ivan Ilić – That's a good question. There are different aspects to what is transcendental; I was looking at the roots of the words recently. The connotations are a little bit different in different languages. There's always the idea of going over something or going beyond. Also one of the things I like to do is think about the main connotation for a word, and then think about a criticism of that. For example with “transcendental”, in music in particular, the immediate connotation is virtuosity, and that is something that, as an instrumentalist, interests me.

But virtuosity generates a certain kind of emotion from the public, or from whoever is listening, which is excitement. And since I have been thinking about this idea of transcendental for a few years I have become more interested in the *opposite* idea of transcendental, which is, again, having access to something higher or beyond, but not necessarily as a result of effort or physical burden. More a result of having access to, let's say, enlightenment, which doesn't necessarily happen as the result of strenuous, eight-hour-per-day practice sessions. So this more spiritual aspect to Transcendentalism is something that has interested me a great deal in the last two years.

Luckily it also creates a balance for a musician, which is important. If you want to improve, you need a balanced diet. You want to have protein and vegetables. It's very easy to become good at one thing and then continue to do that for the rest of your career. It's also good for marketing purposes, everyone wants to know “what Ivan Ilić is good at” and they might think of technique or something. But it's much more interesting to work on opposite aspects of a question. There might be another aspect of Transcendentalism which I am not thinking about today and then I will explore in 5 years, but I think this kind of dichotomy in

between spiritual transcendence and virtuosic or physical transcendence is very interesting, and a rich metaphor.

Rainer Aschemeier – Of course when we talk about music, and especially piano music, everyone thinks of the *Transcendental Etudes* by Franz Liszt, and your former teacher François-René Duchâble made a famous recording of Liszt's études. Did he also introduce you to the topic of transcendence?

Ivan Ilić – Not really. Although he was very important from a technical perspective: just taking lessons with him and watching his approach. Actually one of the most interesting things about the way he approaches technique, because he has such an incredible technique, is that he approaches it like a karate sensei, like a Japanese martial artist.

In martial arts, which I did when I was younger, they always talk about the importance of mastering the basic movements. In other words if you are watching someone like François-René Duchâble, you watch him play, and you're impressed by how many notes he can play in a minute and all these very impressive long scales and arpeggios. And in fact the way you practice [that] is by doing very small modest things well. It's almost like woodwork, you know? Like very small details. So that was very important for me, watching him do that, and seeing that he had the modesty to work on very simple things and that was the way he, paradoxically, acquired this huge technique.

And this is actually an idea you could apply to the other definition of Transcendentalism, that is to say if you think about what Buddhists, for example, are interested in, it is staying in one place and breathing and observing the breath and being one with the world. This is a very simple and modest action. The first action is not contemplating the world in all its grandeur; it's just being there, by yourself, and listening and concentrating. So I think there is a metaphor between the two which is very interesting.

Rainer Aschemeier – I find it very interesting that you make up a link between piano music and martial arts, because I just met a pianist who said quite the same thing, Ottavia Macertini, an Italian pianist, and she does Japanese martial arts and she also said that it's really important, also for the mental aspect of piano playing, for her. So would you say it's important for a piano interpreter to find a thing beyond piano practicing? To find a thing to stimulate the thinking further of only music?

Ivan Ilić – Yes. Absolutely. I think it's very interesting. This touches upon a question that should be treated more widely, that is to say: there seems to be a

lot of evidence that music is not enough for a human being. There are many, many different stories and examples of high level virtuosi and musicians, not just pianists, but other people, other instrumentalists who seem to need to find fruit for their brain, because music does not... the practice, let's say, of playing a concerto or even writing music, doesn't use everything the human being has or the talents or different aspects of intelligence. So for me there is no question that the answer to that question is: yes.

In fact I have found that in my own experience I find much more interesting ideas *outside* the music that I then try to use by metaphor, within music. Both in practicing to prepare a piece and also philosophically, trying to understand certain things. Look at the books I am reading. For example recently, in addition to fiction, I have been reading Michel Foucault, I've been rereading John Berger who talks about aesthetics, and also Rudolph Arnheim the Gestalt theorist who moved to America from Germany. He talks about visual perception. And these are things that are much richer and can help a musician understand things on a deeper level than, let's say, reading a biography about a composer, or even musicology which has been fairly limited. In fact if you look at what the most advanced musicologists have been doing the last few years, it is often just applying critical theory from other fields.

Musicology is usually considered the avant-garde of thinking about music, but it's quite behind; I find that interesting. I know that there are musicians who just want to play music and pretend like nothing else exists. But the problem is that's not true. The way that we perceive music is strongly influenced by everything around it. The context, what we know about the person playing, what we know about the composer...these things are impossible to ignore. Even if you want to ignore them, it's impossible. Music is not a field in which we have blind taste tests, like we have with wine. You know, where you have the wine and you have to discern which region it's from, what grape varietal is this, how old is it? Who is the property? Who is making it?

These are the kinds of things we never do in music, which is interesting and revealing: we assume that we must have information, in advance, about the context. We know where a piece is from, we know who wrote it. I always find it interesting to go to a concert or sometimes play a concert where there is no program... it makes people very angry (*chuckles*). They want to know what they are listening to and it makes people very uncomfortable that they can listen to something without knowing what it is first. And I think that is very interesting. It says a lot about music, doesn't it?

Rainer Aschemeier – Well it does but it also says a lot about society and I've

often asked myself: where is the time for young pianists, which have to go from contest to contest etc, to think about anything else but technique, music and how to play in such a way that they could win a big contest?

Ivan Ilić – I agree. But I think that the reason why young pianists go to contests nowadays is because the great pianists of today like Radu Lupu, Martha Argerich, or Vladimir Ashkenazy did, all of these people. Whether you like them or not they are by far the most successful. And so the young pianists of today, someone who is 20 years old says, “Well if I want to be successful like Radu Lupu, I have to win a competition”. But the world is different than it was 50 years ago, there are much more competitions and they don’t mean as much. And they are *much* more difficult [to win].

I think many of the people I just mentioned, if they were in competitions today they wouldn't make it to the finals, because the standard is so much higher. So I think that maybe there will need to be people who make careers in different ways, they have to distinguish themselves in another way. And if that's true, if people distinguish themselves by their thinking, let's say, today, then the tradition will change and then students will say “I have to distinguish myself with my brain or something else so therefore I have to cultivate that”. So I think there will be a reaction against this competition tradition. And I think it is already happening.

Rainer Aschemeier – But doesn't society function a little bit differently? Because society tends to ask for a kind of proof, and I think that also links to your story with a program which isn't there and which makes people angry that they can't, let's say, testify to what they are hearing and they may be talking to other people during the intermission at the concert. Maybe some people know what they heard, other people don't. And it's a problem that classical music is an elite phenomenon, which you have to know, to be of a certain kind of social levels so to speak?

Ivan Ilić – Yes, this is a very interesting problem. I mean to address the idea of elitism I have a friend who works in business and he said that one of the great lessons he's learned is that if you want to learn about what a business is today you have to look at its roots. You have to look at how it started. In other words: if it started doing one thing in a garage, say, making computers. That is the legacy, the heritage. The cultural legacy. That legacy can still be found in today's version of the company, no matter what it's doing. It's a very interesting idea; I'm not sure it's true.

It is certain that classical music has a very specific cultural legacy. The reason

that these pieces were written: who paid for them to be written? In what context were they listened to? We can try to democratize classical music as much as we can in different ways, but there is this legacy, and that history is going to be very difficult to destroy, and I'm not sure that it *should* be destroyed. Music can be, luckily, appreciated on lots of different levels. For example there are books that have very difficult vocabulary and therefore most people wouldn't start reading them because they wouldn't understand; after one page they would give up. With music something similar exists, but the advantage of is if you take something like Mozart or Beethoven, there is a certain universal aspect to it. Even someone with no previous experience can enjoy it. So that is in music's favor.

Now, let's go back to this other thing you were talking about. The idea of having information in order to have access is true. But I think that today, we have so much information. Information is not lacking. Everyone in Europe, etc, has access to a phone, and on this phone they can find information, about anything, on Wikipedia, or other resources. So if you see a program and you don't know much about music, but you go to a concert and you see there is a piece by Szymanowski. You can go to Wikipedia and find all about Szymanowski but it doesn't actually make you understand it. It might make you feel more familiar, because you learn that he was Polish or who his friends were, that he was a pianist, etc. But it doesn't mean that you *understand* it better.

There is a very tricky and subtle distinction to be drawn between information and understanding. I posit that today we have a lot of information and we don't have a lot of understanding. That is my basic premise. So you mention these young instrumentalists; it's similar. We have a lot of technique but not a lot of understanding. The level of technical expertise today is very, very high, I mean there are young people who can play so many pieces that were considered unplayable a hundred years ago, and they can play them perfectly.

I went to a concert in London, the London Symphony Orchestra, a few years ago. They played *The Rite of Spring*, which was considered unplayable a hundred years ago. They played it like it was the easiest piece you could imagine. It sounded so strange because the oboist, the bassoon player, they have obviously practiced it since they were 12. I couldn't believe it, they were bored, almost, it was just too easy, it was like playing a scale for them. So what happens to a musical society where that is true? I don't know but it's almost becoming a problem that things are so easy.

Rainer Aschemeier – Let's make a break here and talk a little bit more about the new album, **The Transcendentalist**. You have combined music by Russian

composer and mystic Alexander Scriabin with works by America modernists like John Cage and Morton Feldman. So why Scriabin, and why in this context?

Ivan Ilić – There is a historical link; Morton Feldman's family were Jews who moved from the Ukraine to New York a generation or two before him. About the time Scriabin was alive. So maybe there is some kind of connection, that is closer to what one would think, when one thinks of America and Russia, which are considered to be polar opposites of the Cold War.

Beyond that, Feldman's first music teacher was a friend of Scriabin's family. She [Vera Maurina Press] knew both Alexander Scriabin and his wife. When Feldman took his first piano lessons he was studying Scriabin's works (he says so in his essays) and he talks about his first pieces being reminiscent of Scriabin. I thought that was intriguing. This is not a link which has been explored very much. I thought there was potential for something interesting. Now, of course it's not enough for the link to be historical like that, you actually have to *hear* it and I've found that when exploring Scriabin's music, not all of it, but certain works were reminiscent of Feldman's style: this slow and very pianistic style which is a bit like a distant memory of Chopin. Lots of pedal, very quiet, melancholic as well.

So that link is the musical subject of the album. Finding other pieces to go with it was very difficult. But I thought that it was interesting that Feldman developed his style late in his life, and yet he knew John Cage from 1950. Just before [their meeting] John Cage wrote these pieces that are very pianistic, and quiet, and simple, and I thought that was interesting. It was almost as if Feldman had heard these pieces and then 36 years later he wrote his own. So I think there is a link there.

And, finally: Scott Wollschleger. I wanted to know if there was anybody writing music that had a direct stylistic link to Feldman today, but that was somehow different, that was personal. That piece for me is the perfect piece for that. So that is the musical explanation.

Rainer Aschemeier – In our time, Scriabin's music is often judged with respect to the aspects of virtuosity and modernity. But for him music was more than that. It was part of something that he called the “Mysterium.” Is musicology too careless about Scriabin's music today, if we only concentrate on what is actually written in the score?

Ivan Ilić – Scriabin is a tricky subject. One of the reasons why he hasn't been treated with much respect is because he was such a strange man. Sometimes

being strange, or different, like Beethoven, can be an advantage because researchers like it. But Scriabin went so far: he wrote these strange poems; in one of the most famous ones he wrote something like “I am God”. He was completely obsessed with himself.

I don't want to go too deeply into an armchair Freudian analysis, but Scriabin came from a military family. However, he didn't go to military school. He stayed at home and was taken care of by his grandmother, his great-aunt and his mother. There were women everywhere, and they were telling him that he was a genius since his childhood. So he became obsessed with himself. Therefore I think it's difficult for musicologists, who tend to be rational, calm, cool people, to take him seriously. I think there is a cultural mismatch between who Scriabin was and the culture of the people studying him. They don't respect him, or they don't take him seriously.

I'm not sure if this is the case in German, but in English there is only one biography of Scriabin and it is from about 40 years ago. That is kind of shocking if you think about it. This is a major composer. There is this one Englishman who did a biography and there may be lots of mistakes in it, but we don't know because there is only one version.

Certainly this spiritual aspect is more important than virtuosity in Scriabin's music. When people hear Scriabin's music the first thing they hear is the emotion, and the flood of notes. It's not really clear where the piece is going; it may sound like an improvisation to people who aren't listening carefully.

Finally, there is an additional problem, which I find to be very interesting. Certain composers attract certain kind of instrumentalists. For example Rachmaninoff: he attracts pianists who love to play lots of notes. Sometimes the musicians are not very good musicians, and therefore they play the pieces badly; and everyone thinks that Rachmaninoff wrote horrible music. It's tricky. Whereas look at Beethoven or Haydn: usually the people who concentrate on that music are very serious people. They tend to be detail-oriented, they have a certain amount of reserve, and therefore that rubs off on the pieces.

Scriabin seems to suffer from a similar fate to Rachmaninoff: listen to recordings of the complete Scriabin piano music. Many of them are really bad. When I was researching some of the pieces for this recording, like Scriabin's *Rêverie*, for example, which has been recorded only once or twice, the recordings were really bad. So it may lead you to believe that the music is bad, too.

Rainer Aschemeier – Scriabin experienced a link between colors and notes

called synesthesia. That might have been another source of inspiration for him. I could imagine that someone who experiences this kind of phenomenon just feels differently about music. Perhaps synesthesia expands a person's perception above and beyond the normal way of hearing it, via let's say, harmonic theory?

Ivan Ilić – There have been studies of synesthesia. Often people who say they hear a specific color for each note change their mind about which colors they were hearing for a given note. I think that it's not a completely rational thing. In fact I think it's the opposite. It's an irrational response, but the irrational is part of art, in fact it's a very important part. People like Scriabin who accept the irrational side of things can, in some ways, go further. This is like Schumann, who was crazy. There are lots of examples of composers that had a delicate, shall we say, mental equilibrium, and Scriabin is definitely one of them, he is one of the best examples. But because of his mania, perhaps he was able to push his creativity further.

He is a very interesting person to study because he made progress so quickly in 20 years; he had a life similar to Schubert, in a way. He wrote so much music in so little time, but in addition to sharing certain characteristics of Schubert's personality type, Scriabin evolved whereas with Schubert certain aspects, like the language, aren't that much different from the early compositions to the last ones. Certainly nothing comparable to the way Scriabin evolved.

This is not something that is a part of who I am, personally. I don't consider myself an irrational person. However I do accept that there is a part of life that is irrational, and I've noticed there are people like Scriabin who have visions when they hear music. They hear colors, or they may have an idea for a piece that, for example, needs to be performed in the Himalayan mountains and will end the world... Perhaps this is evidence of a higher creativity, when musicians imagine such things?

Rainer Aschemeier – But the phenomenon of synesthesia is quite widespread. It's also appealing to a very broad range of characters. For example I once read about a musician that had to throw up literally because he read that in a article about someone who felt that a special piece of music to that person was linked to a color, like green for example, and that musician could not even bear that thought, because for him the music was associated with a completely *different* color. So it must be a strong feeling or very strong phenomenon, to those people?

Ivan Ilić – Yes, I'm sure that is true. But what I find interesting about it is exactly

what you just mentioned: different people have different associations and that proves that it is a very personal thing. I'm not sure what else I can say about that. It certainly is an interesting phenomenon.

But there is another thing that seems problematic: it's one thing for one note to be one color, but in music you almost never hear only one note. We always hear several notes, which means that you're listening to several colors...so how do you distinguish them? I would say that I have more understanding and empathy for someone who hears different *keys* in different colors. I've been working on transposing pieces, just as a discipline, it's very interesting work. And the colors *do* completely change, the effect between C major and B flat major, let's say, these are very small moves, but it's completely different. So there is something there. But I think we don't know exactly what it is yet.

Rainer Aschemeier – Let's move to another topic. In the past you have made a series of records that you have released on your own. Now you have released your new album on the "Heresy" label. What are the pros and cons of record companies in general?

Ivan Ilić – Very good question. Well the first advantage is very simple: when you are doing something with someone else there are several people working on something. So there is a group atmosphere and a group excitement about something. That is wonderful.

There is a much more practical advantage which is the reason why I have released the last three recordings with record labels, "official" ones. Unless you are apart of a network, unless your CD's can be ordered from stores and are distributed, then no one will talk about them. It would be very difficult for journalists to write about them or for people to buy them.

Until recently it was difficult to sell CD's unless they were distributed in traditional record stores. Now that is changing very quickly. Every year is a little bit different. I think there are a lot of people who make CD's and they only sell them online. I have recordings I have made since 2003 that have been available in the iTunes store and have been very successful, and they are still selling quite well. Every time I make a new CD I sell more of the old ones.

I am 35 years old today. I think someone who is 25 will have a completely different career, and someone who is 15, even more! These things will not exist by the time they are making their career. I think that is interesting; I kind of like it in a way. In the same way that YouTube has made things quite democratic, it's possible for me to want to listen to a piece of music and search for a name and

maybe the number one result might be someone really famous. The number three result might be someone who is just in their bedroom or in the conservatory with their phone. And if their version is better, I'll listen to it more than once and seek information about them. I think that is wonderful; I have discovered lots of young talented musicians that way.

In terms of recordings we're not there yet. We don't have a "YouTube" of musical recordings where everything is there and anyone can search for something within 2 minutes. But I think we need something like that in terms of filtering quality. There are still advantages to being with a record label today, but those advantages are slowly disappearing every year. That's not necessarily a bad thing. It could be very interesting, actually, because there is no more economy or there is less of an economy for recordings. There are less and less people working in that economy (*chuckles*).

What makes it more interesting, to me, I think, in this respect, is that *The Transcendentalist* is a cultural artifact of 2014. It's something that I would not have made in 2004 or in 1994, it is a reflection of the fact that the recording is becoming less of a commercial object, like, let's say, a vacuum cleaner. Something that you need, buy, and use. It is becoming more a work of art. In other words a recording used to be something that would document a piece. We would say "what does this piece sound like?" Well, here: I have a recording; we can hear what it sounds like. In 2014 that recording is becoming something else. It's becoming a beautiful object for which the utility is less important, as compared to the aesthetic emotion that it procures for the listener. That's very interesting to me.

Rainer Aschemeier – What is special about the Heresy label is that they are looking for a connection between the musical content and the graphical presentation, of the cover for example. Is that something that appealed to you from the beginning? Or did you have to adapt to that special world, to that special and sometimes provocative record label?

Ivan Ilić – Actually, at the beginning that was the only reason that I was very interested in Heresy. I saw the covers, and I met Heresy's director, Eric Fraad in Vienna last year. And I was immediately seized by interest in these crazy covers, and also by the fact that they communicated something. It's not just that they were attractive to the eye, or that they looked different. But there was a lot of care that went into them.

What I like about them is that they have lots of meaning, but the meaning is not dogmatic and doesn't try to make you believe something. In other words it's not

overbearing, it doesn't say, "This is Transcendentalism, which is about Emerson, which means we're going to put a picture of Emerson. We're going to put a painting at Emerson's house. We're going to put all his friends, we're going to show Concord, Massachusetts. We're going to use a typography that was used in 1842..." ...because that kind of thing, to me, is tyrannical and dictatorial. It makes me very uncomfortable.

So I like this idea of doing something which evokes, but is not necessarily ...not every single little detail is supposed to fit perfectly... Because there is so much of that, in art in general. People who want to show that...This is not science, we are not trying to prove that this is an experiment where everything can be proved and therefore it is true. This is something else.

Rainer Aschemeier – Um hm. So, I would think that you might be uncomfortable to answer my next question, which is about the cover artwork. (*chuckles*). The cherries, the Emerson heads on the piano, the giant ants on the score... What is it all about?

Ivan Ilić – It is important to remember this is a recreation of a painting by [Salvador] Dalí. The original painting had the right atmosphere for this CD. In other words, if you look at the original painting, it communicates something, which is a mood. And that mood is an appropriate mood for this music. If you were to think of an image that would make you want to take the CD in your hands and put it on and then hear something that would be in connection to that image...that is a real connection.

But the idea of just taking the original Dalí and putting it on the cover is boring. The idea was to recreate the mood with me as the principal figure. It was a lot more interesting to do it all over again, so it's a bit different, it's a variation.

On one hand if you want to analyze each one of the symbols in the image you can find reasons why they would make sense. So: replacing Emerson with Lenin is a way of replacing Communism with Transcendentalism in saying that Emerson is the philosophical figure for this... he is the center, philosophically, or in terms of a feeling. In the original Dalí it was Lenin because you know there were some kind of...because he wanted to make an allusion to Communism. But this CD has nothing to do with Communism so we had to replace that.

The cherries are, to me, symbolic of a kind of food which is there. They are bright and wonderful which is a reminiscence of the music...but again it shouldn't be taken too literally, it's merely a symbol that is there. The ants on the score for me are the symbol of the fact that this is not the Liszt *Transcendental*

études. In other words it's like the scores are rotting; in other words I am not using them everyday for 6 hours a day, practicing. What I'm doing is sitting, away from the piano, reflecting, and that was the work necessary to make this recording. So all of that is coherent to me in terms of the relationship between the image and both the music and also the preparation of the music.

In the original Dalí there is a door in the back of the painting, and there is a person, or figure there. But we got rid of that figure on the cover. The reason is because with this CD, with this music and Transcendentalism, the whole idea is to be alone with yourself and reflect. So the idea of having a second character in the scene of this "film" is inappropriate. So that is something we changed.

Now I've just explained several elements of the cover. This is something that is new to me so this is something which is Eric's domain. Erick Fraad is the director of Heresy. He makes these images, and these are his ideas. So in some ways it should be *him* that is answering the question.

But I think it's important to keep in mind that, again, these images are something we fabricated with photographs. It was very difficult to make the photograph look like the Dalí, and then they were worked on for weeks. This is not something we worked on at random, there was a discussion about each one of these symbols, trying to decide which ones do we keep or leave out. Do we need the cherries? Are they necessary? What about that thing on my arm, what does that mean? What about this kind of war reference, what does that mean? What could that potentially mean?

That is a very interesting process which is something that, certainly in my experience, not many musicians have access to. So that was an enriching experience. When you make a CD it's not just the CD that counts, it's the process that makes it. I was lucky to be able to experience this process.

Rainer Aschemeier – Mr. Ilić thank you very much for the interview. I think it was a very interesting talk.