

THE VARIATIONS OF

The first and the strongest encounter this world famous pianist had with classical music occurred in Belgrade. In our capital city, he had a parallel life waiting for him every summer; he would travel here from San Francisco, where he was born. After studying mathematics and music at the eminent University of California at Berkeley, his path led him to the prestigious Paris Conservatory. He won over the hearts of the public, but also impressed the demanding French critics, by performing the works of Claude Debussy in concert halls the world over.

Wherever he appears, the 33-year-old virtuoso named Ivan Ilić attracts the attention of the world media. “A mountaineer of a musician”, according to the *BBC*; “An adventurous classical musician”, according to the *New Yorker*; “A pianist with real personality, whose name is one to remember”, as the French *Le Monde de la Musique* writes. But his arrival in Belgrade, the town from which his parents began their journey towards San Francisco four decades ago, went almost unnoticed...

“I came to see my family. My first and strongest encounters with classical music tie me to Belgrade. Since I was 3 years old, I was a regular visitor of the concerts at the “Kolarac Concert Hall” held every Sunday morning. I had a parallel life here, a life that waited for me every year”, says Ivan Ilić, beginning his story.

One of the world’s best pianists, born in San Francisco, sat at a piano for the first time when he was 6. Five years after, he could boast about his first serious public performance. At the prestigious UC Berkeley in California, he graduated with two degrees, in music and mathematics. And then, his path led to postgraduate studies at the renowned Paris Conservatory. He shook the ground of classical music with his original interpretations of the famous composer Claude Debussy in 2008, with very generous reviews from the French

critics, but he also conquered the world public.

Pink Panther on the Piano

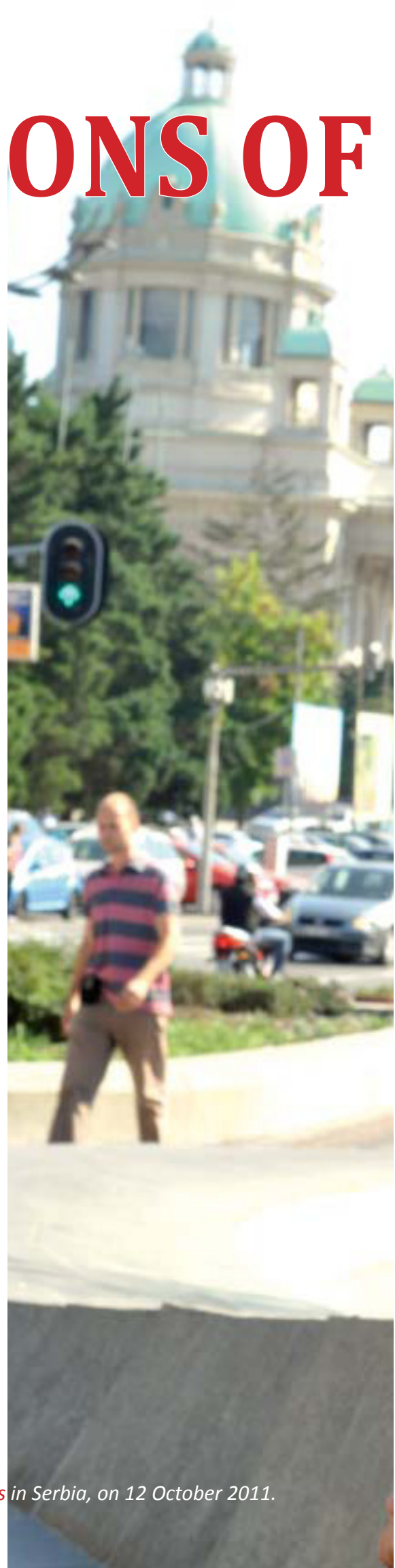
Our interviewee also explains how the Ilić family arrived to America in the 1970’s.

“My father finished high school in San Francisco because my grandfather was the first Yugoslav Ambassador to the United Nations in America. A few later he returned. My mother, Aleksandra, followed him to the US where pursued his PhD studies in physics, which he successfully completed in California.”

The family became bigger in San Francisco, first with the arrival of a daughter, Irena, and three years later, with the arrival of a son, Ivan.

“Every year, our parents would bring us to Belgrade. We went from one family visit to another. Every summer, I was suddenly surrounded by my enormous family. That is precisely what we missed the most in the US. Thanks to that formative experience, I developed an independent view of America, a kind of distance, which helped me tremendously later on.”

Another influential experience for our interviewee was his encounter with his Yugoslav peers, who attended public music school. Ivan was a bit jealous of their privileged musical education, one that the American system did not offer. But,



IVAN ILIĆ *



he says, these circumstances gave him a motive to practice even more.

Along with his first teacher, Paul Fink, he took his first steps in classical music.

“With him, I had absolute freedom. I could play whatever I wanted: pop, rap or jazz. Whatever took my fancy, from the theme song in the “Pink Panther”, to the opening theme of the TV show “Dynasty”. Artistically speaking, he was not a snob, he was an excellent pedagogue that fostered my love of music”.

In high school, his first serious performance took place, after winning a local competition in the San Francisco area. The competition took place in a private salon, before the vigilant eyes of a jury made of Japanese and Russian musicians. The un-tuned piano made the boy’s jitters even worse. Trying to hide his tears, he left the room as soon as his performance was over. He joined his father Dragan, who waited for him in the car, and said with tears in his eyes that he never wanted to play again. However, his performance of works by Brahms and Gershwin said just the opposite. The very next day, the news arrived that he had won first prize, a concert and 100 dollars.

“I had no idea what to do with all that money. I started counting how many ice »»

» creams I could buy when I arrived to Belgrade. I even photocopied that check; I still have it in my bedroom in California”, Ivan says with a smile.

A Musical Baptism at the University

Ivan speaks about the different competitions he won in America with great modesty. He adds that the more serious recognition did not come until his studies at UC Berkeley, where he enrolled in 1996. Ever since a young age, Ivan was good with numbers and musical notes. He could not decide to study only one thing, so he enrolled in studies of mathematics and music at the same time.

In spite of harsh, Russian mathematics professors and a lot of competition, with the help of good friends, talks until dawn about mathematics and music, he managed to finish both degrees on



free concerts in churches on Sundays, in front of an emotional and engaged senior audience. Through different programs I performed throughout the year, I was preparing for my exams, which seemed easier as a result.”

Incredible opportunities kept appearing. He started to tour internationally. His first introduction to the public in Belgrade was in 2004, when he gave a concert for charity at the “Cvijeta Zuzoric Pavilion”.

Four years later, his record company published a CD with wholly original interpretations of the world famous composer, Claude Debussy.

“I chose French music deliberately. It was a great challenge for me, especially knowing that there are still people alive today who took classes with Debussy’s students. I wished to create an original style of playing Debussy, my own interpretation, powerful enough so the public would immediately know who I am.”

The confirmation of success arrived in the form of a prize by the French television “Mezzo Television” dedicated to classical music, as well as entering the top 5 on the American *Fanfare Magazine’s* “Disk of the year” list. Very few worldwide radio stations did not broadcast his Debussy album: from the British *BBC*, over to the French *France Musique*, as well as Italian, American, and German stations, and even African and Asian ones. Also, not many concert halls throughout the planet missed his concerts. He tours took him from the famous Carnegie Hall in New York to numerous European capital cities.

After Debussy, the Polish-American composer Leopold Godowsky has his turn. Ivan plays his pieces using only his left hand. As a part of the project, he even acted the leading role in a short film named “Izak’s Choice” with French director, Luc Plissonneau.

“Luc wrote a story about a pianist who chose to play only with his left hand for love. The point is not to use your right hand at all, which asks for a high level of technical accomplishment; the learning process was very slow.”

The movie has already been completed, and the French public will be able to find Ivan’s new second CD this spring, entitled “Godowsky: 22 Studies for the left hand”. After this athletic work on the virtuoso music of this composer, he says, it is time for him to try his luck with avant-garde American pieces which last up to two hours, a kind of musical meditation. ■

**Jelena Bošković, *Ilustrovana Politika*,
12 October 2011
Translation by Sunčica Jovanović**



time.

“I had to improvise a lot in order to dedicate enough time to those parallel studies. There is a specific, manic kind of energy at Berkeley. Luckily for me, it was not important to be present in class, one’s grades did not depend on it. Exams were the most important, and I perform well under pressure. That is why I skipped classes; I arrived at school at 8 o’clock in the morning, when all the pianos were available. I had the freedom to play all day, which was like a dream to me, and I still somehow managed to get good grades.”

Having finished his first year, there was no more dilemma as to what he wished to do with his life. His musical baptism was

at a lunchtime concert in the university’s concert hall, which was absolutely full. He still remembers the atmosphere from that 45-minute concert in front of 700 people from across campus.

He arrived at the end of his studies, not knowing until the very last minute whether he had passed his final mathematics exam in 2001. Two months later, with a scholarship from UC Berkeley, he found himself at the prestigious Paris Conservatory.

Shortly after that, he received the “Premier Prix” award, the highest recognition of this esteemed institution.

“It was a great honor for me. I realized that Paris afforded me great opportunities, so I decided to stay. During that period, I gave