

Ivan Ilić, a desire for a comprehensive art

THURSDAY 30 APRIL 2015

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American pianist of Serbian descent Ivan Ilić currently resides in France.

Photo by DH KONG

MUSIC • The Serbian-American pianist speaks to us about his interdisciplinary approach, about contemporary composer Morton Feldman, and about his interest in... weightlifting.

Interview.

In his search for an exhaustive form of artistic expression, Ivan Ilić doesn't hesitate to move closer to the contemporary visual arts, such as video, film and art publishing. Born in California to Serbian parents, who had recently emigrated, the musician undertook university studies in mathematics and philosophy in parallel to his pianistic development. A recipient of several international awards, the pianist continued his studies at the Conservatoire Supérieur de Paris, where he earned a Premier Prix in 2001.

This grounding in the humanities is doubtless the explanation for his preference for an exhaustive musicological methodology, including long-form radio interviews, short films and written essays. But also the virtuosic display of an indisputable musical talent, disseminated via recordings and concerts. Recently we heard him on Swiss Radio Espace 2, following the autumn publication of "Detours Which Have To Be Investigated", an art book in homage to American composer Morton Feldman (1926-1987), produced in collaboration with the Geneva University of Art & Design, the design studio AMI and the visual artist Benoît Maire.

An interview with an intense artist who aspires to unbounded creativity.

After having explored, as a pianist, the classical vitality of Haydn, the impressionistic spirals of Debussy, and the romantic virtuosity of Chopin filtered through the prism of Godowsky, you have recently focused on contemporary music by John Cage and, above all, Morton Feldman. Is your conceptual approach an essential tool, used to penetrate distinct creative worlds?

Ivan Ilic: Precisely. The creative act of a performer consists of getting as close as possible to the composer's imagination. And this implies opening a window to the composer's creative intentions, one that is as authentic as possible. This includes developing an interest in their preoccupations, both intellectual and spiritual. So I try to soak up as much as possible, and by all means possible – correspondence, manuscript scores, interviews – the energy and the personality of the composers whose works I play.

And Morton Feldman is the most recent composer under your microscope?

As a matter of fact, I've already opened a new chapter with the Czech composer Antonín Rejcha, who was a contemporary of Beethoven. They studied together at Bonn University, and then met again later as acclaimed composers.

But yes, Morton Feldman is the one who has fascinated me these past few years. And this almost obsessive fascination has resulted in a triptych of work, which spans several media: the album "The Transcendentalist" [editor's note: nominated for 2015 Solo Album of the Year by the International Classical Music Awards] and the upcoming "For Bunita Marcus", a single work which lasts 70 minutes. The third installment is literary: an art book which collects texts, audio and video about his life, his thoughts and his artistic circle.

Is this quasi immersion in the composers' lives, whose works you perform, a fundamental element in your own creativity?

I think so. But it's only one of many elements that feeds and stimulates it. For example, one of the best ways to get closer to a work's quintessence seems to be to perform it repeatedly in concert. When you share someone else's composition with the public, really trying to do it justice, an understanding, a kind of musical illumination, becomes possible. Unfortunately it's usually only a partial glimpse of what's there. The intense concentration of the concert platform seems to be the best context for this kind of intellectual lightning to strike.

But you have, like Glenn Gould, been an apologist for recordings...

That's true. Recording allows one to verify, in the most objective way possible, the relevance of an interpretation. However the performer's veritable creative act requires the presence of, and communication with, the public.

Is this quasi omniscient state that you describe as a creative performer similar to meditation?

Among other things, yes. I do practice this state, which I would describe as a kind of sensorial hyper-concentration, outside of music as well. At the moment the best way I have found to gain access to this extreme mental and physical discipline is through barbell training. When you have one hundred and twenty kilos on your shoulders, which can crush your body at the slightest loss of concentration, you are forced to push your focus to the limits! And this pulsating concentration colors life with a kind of transcendence.

> The pianist Ivan Ilić performed Debussy and Scriabin live at the BBC on Tuesday.

You can listen to the podcast here: bbc.in/1HpLxVu

> www.ivancdg.com