

Maxine Frost interviews Ivan Ilić on May 10th 2014

Ivan Ilic (**II**)

Maxine Frost (**MF**)

Part 1 - <https://audioboo.fm/boos/2181687-ivan-ilic-part-1>

MF: When you told me you were at a dinner party in Paris, it just sounds like your life is a movie, you know?

II: [laughter] Yeah, well...

MF: You were in two movies, right?

II: Yeah that's right. Absolutely.

MF: You played Glenn Gould in one. I haven't seen it yet. So, what was that like?

II: It was very interesting. Part of the challenge with it was that I had to somehow physically evoke Glenn Gould but, you know, I wasn't playing him actually, it was the reincarnation of him, so I was supposed to allude to him without actually being him, so that was pretty tricky. But it worked out well. I was lucky.

MF: Wow. And then, didn't you – you were in another movie about a pianist, right, a different guy?

II: Yeah, that was a much more in-depth experience for me because the director [Luc Plissonneau] wrote the script for me.

MF: Oh really.

II: It was really, really fun. I had a blast with it. And actually, it's online now, finally, for the first time, after two years. So I'm really excited. I'm sharing it. It's going really well.

MF: I just want to start from the beginning. So you born in – was it, is it Yugoslavia?

II: Yes.

MF: And your parents – what language did your parents speak?

II: Serbian. Or I guess at the time it was called Serbo-Croatian, but it's, you know, it's the same language – Serbian and Croatian. It's a Slavic language. It's quite similar to Russian, in terms of its structure. And it's actually quite a useful language for music because it's very, very different from English. And so if one speaks both languages, it gives you access to other languages.

MF: I'm curious if your parents were musicians too.

II: They're not, but they're very appreciative of music. And I would say that they understand the importance of culture in general. That was very important, because otherwise it would have been impossible to pursue the path I did. You know, there are stories of people who forge careers against all odds. I wasn't really one of those people. I mean there were odds, but they were mostly odds I made for myself, rather than odds that were against me. I think it's really important to have support, whether it's your family, or the people that are close to you. It doesn't necessarily mean that they are musicians themselves, but if they just are supportive of somebody working hard toward a goal, I think that's the most important thing.

MF: Yeah, definitely. So at some point you must have told them you needed a piano. So they must have provided it...

II: [laughs] Yeah. I had a really horrible upright piano for years and years, and actually it was a big long debate when I was in high school, whether my parents were going to invest in a really beautiful instrument. And I remember very clearly, my parents being kind of skeptical, saying to themselves, you know, we're going to invest I don't know how many thousands of dollars in this beautiful instrument, and I bet he's going to give up the piano six months later. So I was really – you know, I'm still pretty proud that I didn't. Actually we still have that piano. It's a wonderful piano.

MF: Is that the one in the picture of you on your website, where you're really little – like six or seven – and you're playing...

II: Um, that was the first one, yeah. That was the very first. It was a Baldwin, which was fine. But it was one of these things where (I'm sure that many piano students can relate to this) when I went to my teacher's house, every time I thought his piano keys were so heavy, because he had a grand piano...

MF: Yeah.

II: ...And mine were super light, and I didn't realize that. And it's ironic because I still keep in touch with that piano teacher and now I sometimes go back to his place, and now his piano seems really, really light.

MF: [laughs] It's amazing.

II: So, it's ironic.

MF: You're bigger too.

II: Of course maybe it's just that twenty years later, people have been playing on his piano so much that it's become light...but I don't think so.

MF: So your parents must have brought over, when you were a toddler, to the States.

II: Yeah.

MF: Was it California, that they? Or where did you move...

II: That's right. Yeah, California.

MF: And then you went to, I can't remember, was it UC Berkeley?

II: That's right. Yeah.

MF: Okay. And then, so you majored in piano and math.

II: Yeah. It was a really busy time.

MF: [laughs] That's crazy. So was there ever a period, I mean, did you know that you were going to do the music thing, but you just enjoyed math? Or were you actually considering being, you know, were you going to pursue mathematics, or what?

II: From the very beginning of my studies, I was practicing a lot. I mean, the only people that were practicing as much as I was, were the music majors that were really, really serious. So that just happened immediately. But, it's interesting because at the time, I didn't feel like I had to choose. I knew that I was going to be in school, and that I had at least four years ahead of me. And so it felt like a comfortable surrounding in which I could try different things. And that, for me, was very important. I think, you know, maybe some people at that age just want to practice and do nothing else, but I was really curious about other things.

Math was always something that was easy for me, early on, but the kind of math that you study at a big university is completely different than the kind of math that you learn when you're an adolescent. So, that was a big eye-opener for me and much, much more difficult than I expected. But it was also really attractive to me: that challenge. And, it was fun, because the math majors were all Chinese, or Russians, or Indians, and the teachers were all from the former Soviet Union. They'd gotten – you know, they'd left because their jobs there were not comfortable jobs. Many of them were Jews. And there's this whole scandal that's come out recently, actually, about how there were many Jewish students that were really, really talented that couldn't get a place at the math academies because of anti-Semitism. So, it was just a really interesting cultural experience in addition to the whole math thing.

MF: Right, yeah. Well, you talked before about language being sort of like music, and so I'm kind of trying to construct this thing where language and music is related to math. So are they all kind of connected for you?

II: Yes, definitely. I think that whether it's different languages, or music, or math, there's always some kind of a structure. I think that there are certain people that perceive patterns more quickly and then, you know, they'll get, they'll just learn things by patterns. So therefore, if you learn things by pattern you're not learning the exceptions to the rules very well. So you're making little mistakes, but you get kind of most of it right. And that was something that, I think, was complementary, learning these different things at the same time. So, there were other things that I was less interested in, say, like biology or chemistry. Part of that has to do with having teachers who weren't as engaged as my math teachers. But I think that also some of that is memorization. And I – I never was that interested in memorization. It was more kind of about somehow imposing a structure on a whole bunch of information, so, things would go faster. Like finding shortcuts, is, I guess, another way of saying it.

MF: Right, mm hmm. That's interesting. You know, you kind of carve out your own path, in lots of different ways, it sounds like. But especially with music, I mean, it's been pointed out that instead of, you know, you're not really doing competitions, you're not concertizing and playing the warhorses with orchestras, but you're concentrating on the piano as a solo instrument. So was that a conscious choice, a conscious path you took? Or did that just kind of evolve, or...

II: Yeah, definitely a very conscious choice on my part. Earlier I was playing with orchestra when I was in my early twenties and also a lot of chamber music. I was accompanying singers, I was living with a singer at the time, and that was a big part of my life.

MF: Wow...

II: It was, you know, wonderful. I'm sure there were a lot of important things that happened. But ultimately, there's something – I guess it maybe has to do with my personality type – but when you're alone and faced with your own shortcomings, there's a certain kind of progress you can make, which I find very compelling, [it] just interests me. And I'm lucky that there's both a big repertoire for solo piano and also a lot of audience for solo piano. You know many of the concert series where I play across Europe, there might be, let's say, one big concert a month. And there'll be chamber music and then there'll be – there'll always be a solo piano recital. Because that's something that's, you know, is still pretty popular...

MF: Right.

II: ...In the context of classical music. So it's been possible. And I think that was a big part of it. In terms of repertoire, I became more and more comfortable with playing whatever I was interested in. Earlier in my career I played famous pieces because people want to hear familiar music. But, more and more I feel that it's better to play what you can do well and what you feel like playing, rather than playing something because you think other people expect it of you. I think that if you do that, and I have a few colleagues that have been doing that for decades, you lose your curiosity. You lose, kind

of, your edge. And I think that's probably the most dangerous thing in this profession, is to have it become a routine. It becomes really obvious when someone is on stage and they don't feel like being there.

Part 2 - <https://audioboo.fm/boos/2181809-ivan-ilic-part-2>

MF: So you said your colleagues – you have colleagues who did kind of fall into that, or, are resisting it – I can't remember...

II: Yeah, well, that fell into that trap. I mean, these are just little comments that people make to me. For example, I was playing in a really beautiful, kind of like a private castle in Ireland a couple of years ago, it was a lovely venue. In fact it had a big music room that was made in the nineteenth century for concerts. And it was just fantastic, I loved the experience. And afterwards, I was chatting with the organizers and they were telling me about this really famous pianist, who was going to be playing a few months later. And I was, you know, quite proud to be on the same series as this person. And they told me that this person had played there ten years earlier and they had played the exact same program...

MF: [laughter] Oh gosh...

II: ...that they would be playing a few months later. And that the organizers had asked him if he'd be willing to maybe, you know, at least change one of the pieces. And he wouldn't do it. So...

MF: Oh gosh...

II: ...there are all kinds of reasons why one might do that. I mean, maybe he played nine years of different programs and it just happened to be that one again. But I doubt it. I don't think that it was a coincidence.

MF: Mmm Hmm. Yeah, that's interesting. I don't know, I just idolize you people, so to me it just seems like it must be really easy to just sit down with a brand new piece, and within, you know, a couple of days, you learned it, and then not long after, you can perform it and record it. But I suppose it is work. I mean, it's not that easy, right?

II: Well, I mean there are two sides to it. On the one hand, you do get faster as the years go on. And in fact, I've been working on something, I've had a project now since August or September, where I've been making a conscious decision to try to learn faster, to allow me to play more things, and just to give me more freedom.

You know, if you – let's say it takes you sixteen hours to learn a piece, and you have X pieces to, X number of pieces to learn, imagine if you could somehow bring that number down from sixteen to ten, and play at the exact same level of skill. That would be a huge advantage, right? I mean, you'd have so much more time to do other things.

And so I've been working on that, and it turns out that you *can* get faster. And, you know, one of the things that immediately comes up when someone talks about this is, well, if you're learning faster then you're not learning as well, right? That's kind of – [it] immediately comes to mind – well, like, you must be learning more superficially. But in fact, the opposite is true. If you're able to, kind of, trim the fat from your practicing, you can learn faster *and* the music sticks longer to your brain. So, I've been...

MF: Wow...

II: ...I've been experimenting with this, and taking notes, and kind of making a journal about it. About how I've been kind of teaching myself how to learn faster. And it's been just incredible. I mean, I haven't been this engaged in practicing in, for years and years. So, I guess, if you're the kind of person that's interested in those things, then, it's never boring, you know, it doesn't feel like work. On the other hand, if you say to yourself, well, it's going to take me sixteen hours to learn this piece, I just have to put in the time, then it becomes hell.

MF: Yeah, well I do want to talk about your new CD and the DVD that's coming out. Let's talk about the composers you've chose for this new CD: Feldman, Scriabin and Cage. So what's the common thread?

II: The common thread is the particular pieces I chose. I mean, if you were to put those composers together on a CD, and just choose any random works, then it would be all over the place. It would be like one of these potpourri CDs, which is becoming popular, (unfortunately). But with this CD, I've picked particular pieces.

For example, the two pieces by Cage I've chosen are early Cage, which were very lyrical, meditative, slow. Very easy to listen to, actually, not at all what one would associate with Cage's reputation, for, you know, kind of avant-garde style. With the Feldman, it is probably his most accessible piece because, on the one hand, it's short, for him. Twenty-three minutes is short. You know, normally his pieces are over an hour. And also it's just very gentle. It opens with a melody that sounds like it almost could be Debussy. It is quite melodic, and it becomes more abstract later, but I find that there's that thread.

And the reason I put Scriabin next to all of this, you know, avant-garde American music, is because there's a, a few places in Feldman's journals and his writing where he talks about the fact that the first pieces he ever wrote were Scriabin-esque. And I've been to foundations where they have archives of his, and it seems like these pieces were lost, so we will never know what the pieces sounded like that Feldman wrote when he was, like, say, thirteen or fourteen. But I imagine that they sound just like Scriabin and I love that idea. So I put real Scriabin. And it seems to me like there's a certain continuity, which is of interest. Now, if you put them side by side, you start to hear connections.

MF: So, are you travelling soon in order to promote this CD? Is that what your next tour is about? Or what are you doing?

II: Yeah. Absolutely. I'm travelling a lot, actually, leaving on Tuesday to Bratislava, Slovakia, and then Vienna a few days later. I'll be back to France for a couple of days and then I'm leaving for Hong Kong and then China, at the end of May. And then in June there are a bunch of concerts in France, both in Paris and the provinces. And also, there's a big concert in Dublin, in Ireland, in the beginning of June as well because this record label, *Heresy [Records]*, is based in Dublin. So I'm really excited about that.

MF: So then you have, so what proportion of your year is spent travelling as opposed to, you know, practicing and learning music and stuff? I'm just curious.

II: I'm actually, I'm trying to make it more extreme. I'm trying to make the travelling for concerts part of the year be really, really, condensed. As condensed as possible, so I can spend more time just reading and reflecting and thinking about things. Working on my practice method. Looking for new composers, new pieces, new projects. So I would say now it's about, it's down to about a third of the time travelling. Whereas before it was closer too – well it was more than half actually. So, I'm getting better at, you know, grouping things together, which is great. So, it's difficult, because sometimes you just feel like staying at home and reading about something or learning a new piece, and you can't.

MF: Do you read music books for fun too? Or do you read biographies of composers, or what do you like to read?

II: I probably should read biographies of composers more. I don't that much. What I do like to read is interviews, for example. Primary documents where sometimes like a little anecdote can be really telling and tell you more about the person than a whole biography.

I also like to read things that have nothing to do with music. Actually, I was working on a new CD project, which is not going to be released commercially, but it was the idea of critique. That was the theme. So I was reading critical theory by Foucault and also going back to things like Kant and Hume. Philosophers that I'd read in college but I haven't really gone deep into for a while. And I wanted to – I was interested in this idea of "What is critique in the arts?" In particular in music. What does it mean to look at pieces with a critical eye, not just to say to yourself that these are masterpieces that are perfect in every way and the composers were kind of like, you know, prophets, or something?

MF: [laughter]

II: I think it's more fun to think of composers as *humans*, who make mistakes, or who write music that can be awkward sometimes, or maybe can be improved. You know I like that idea of, kind of, breaking down the icon status of composers.

MF: Right. Uh huh. Something you said really struck me before when you said, being alone with yourself and the instrument and the music, forces you to face your own, shortcomings, was I think the word you used? That really struck me 'cause...

II: Yeah, that's right.

MF: Because to me it sounds like, it's the kind of thing an American – Americans don't really talk about their shortcomings, you know. I mean, maybe artists do? But I just think that's so – when you talk about something that's revealing, about who you are, I think that really is, you know. That maybe that place of imperfection you're talking about is really where art is born, you know.

II: Yeah.

MF: Except maybe for somebody like Mozart, who, like, it sprung, complete from his brain, or, you know, whatever. Who can explain that?

II: Yes, that's right. I mean there are – obviously there are exceptions. But usually, the way that most people work, is that they will start something and then they'll improve it by a tiny bit, and then it will continue to improve by a tiny bit. And then at some point they decide that they're done and they feel like stopping. I mean that's how everyone I know works, whether it's as a performer, as a composer, a visual artist. And that's – it's actually a major topic of discussion among artists, is how do you know when a work is done? And that's something Feldman used to discuss with visual artists in New York back in the 50's and 60's. How do you know when you don't want to touch something anymore? I think that's a really interesting question.

Part 3 - <https://audioboo.fm/boos/2181897-ivan-ilic-part-3>

MF: Definitely. And I mean you have to stop being obsessive about it at some point or else your thing can never go out into the world.

II: Exactly. Yeah. But, on the other hand it's difficult because you know that that obsessive quality is what makes something more refined and ultimately better than it was before. So, how do you stop? I think the only way to know is to have people around you that you trust. That you can ask. You know, you can kind of get a feel for whether something is good enough. I certainly have had experience with this recently, with my writing, because, with, for example, the liner notes of the CD, I wanted to explain the connections between the composers. And I felt very strongly about that. But it's one thing to talk about it, like in an interview, or with a friend over coffee or a glass of wine, and it's another thing to write it. When you write something down the expectation of the logical argument is much higher, and things have to really tie together. Otherwise, you're in trouble.

MF: Ha, right.

II: So that was a lot of work. I was – you know, it was kind of like practicing the piano actually. I was just improving sentences by one word at a time. And it's so much work but it does get better.

MF: Oh yeah, yeah, you're a really good writer. I've noticed that. Are you – you should write a book someday. After you just said how much you hate...

II: Well, I have to find a subject.

MF: Yeah, but it could be something really interesting with you. Because you have so many, so many interests and they all somehow connect. Because it's sort of like, in your worldview, it's like you see – like you were saying earlier – you see these patterns...

II: Yes.

MF: ...among things other people might miss.

II: I think there was a book that I heard about, that I was expecting to be really interesting, which was by a guy who was a really, really talented chess prodigy. And then he quit because he was just completely burnt out. And then he became really expert at some other thing. I think it was Tai Chi – competitive Tai Chi or something like that. And the premise of the book was that he was going to explain how to get really good at something. And the idea of that really excited me, in particular, because I was studying my own learning method. And, to me, the book was kind of a disappointment.

So, I was thinking that if there were some way I could write, explaining how to improve at, you know, anything – in other words if there was some kind of a method that would be universally applicable, then that would be useful. And I think that if I was to write a book, let's say, I would want it to be useful for other people. You know, I wouldn't want it to just be an opportunity for me to talk about something I'm interested in. I mean I'd like it to be helpful. I think those are the books that are the most powerful.

MF: I'd love to know more about that. So you're working on developing this method?

II: Yeah, I've been working on it almost daily. I mean, when I'm not travelling. Very carefully. And also, I've talked to two people I trust about it, in great detail. And, these are people that are older than me, and that are computer programmers. And so they're kind of obsessed with learning and that kind of thing.

MF: Mm Hmm.

II: And I've gotten some really good feedback. But, you know, again, it's kind of like the whole thing with writing. When you have it in your head, certain things seem logical and easy to understand, but then when you have to put it into words for someone else, sometimes you can get tripped up. So, that's very interesting as well.

I would like to talk about the DVD project briefly, in Switzerland, to introduce it. I think that would be interesting. About a year and a half ago I was invited by a well-known visual artist in Paris, to go to Geneva, and work – do a workshop with young visual artist students. And the way that we worked together was that I asked the students to make

promotional videos for me. And I wasn't expecting to make, or rather, to use the promotional videos. I just wanted to see what they would come up with, with their visual arts backgrounds.

And so I spent the first day introducing them to Morton Feldman's music which, you know, none of them had ever heard of before. And it was a really interesting experience because the videos they made reflected many of the things that I'd said, but then they'd kind of digested it and then regurgitated it back at me. And I was really surprised by that, about how effective it can be.

And I would say that probably the most important thing about that whole experience was how interesting it is to work with people who are not part of your field. In other words: where you have to explain things using a vocabulary that is simple enough so that you're not using technical jargon, which you would use if you were speaking to young musicians, for example. But on the other hand, you have to – you can't just use, you know, two-syllable words. I mean you actually have to go into detail and explain what's really going on. So, I think that's very similar to what happens if you are speaking a language in which you aren't fluent yet. You want to communicate your ideas and do justice to them, but you don't quite have the vocabulary you need.

MF: Right.

II: And I think that's probably one of the most important things a human being can do. Is to put yourself in that situation where you're a little bit uncomfortable, but you have something really important to you that you want to say. And to try to communicate it with whatever basic tools you have.

MF: Yeah, because you can communicate something. I mean it's never a complete loss. To be able to...

II: Yes, exactly. And sometimes the enthusiasm with which you communicate is even more important than what you're saying. Which is, you know, another lesson in life.

MF: So you became known as a French specialist, a French music specialist, right?

II: I'd recorded for EMI by the time I was ten and I was playing the Chopin etudes, you know, in the womb. [laughs] It just becomes really boring.

MF: But that's – you didn't want to get locked into that. So that's why you... [inaudible]

II: Exactly. Exactly. And also I didn't even think about what the consequences would be. I was interested in French music for a while and then I was interested in other things. And luckily I wasn't thinking too carefully about how to position myself in terms of a market or something. I was just going from one thing to the other. And I think that's healthy.