

Melanie Spanswick interviews Ivan Ilić  
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**Music: Dream (1948) by John Cage, played by Ivan Ilić  
Excerpt of The Transcendentalist (Heresy 015)**

**Melanie Spanswick:** My music talk interview guest today is Serbian American concert pianist, Ivan Ilić. I've already interviewed Ivan as part of my Classical Conversation series. But we thought we'd reconvene today here in West London and talk a little bit about his new recording. Welcome, it's lovely to see you again!

**Ivan Ilić:** Likewise. Thanks for having me again.

**Melanie:** Lovely to chat about your new recording which is called "The Transcendentalist."

**Ivan:** Yes.

**Melanie:** Very interesting title. Why did you decide to do a compilation, is my first question? Because it's [a collection of] varied composers.

**Ivan:** I think that in today's world once something has been recorded several times, let's say more than three or four times, it's important to contextualize it in a way that's a little bit different. I think that in the history of recording there has been, in particularly in classical music, this desire to document everything. We have to have the complete recordings of Bach or Mozart. And we have this obsession with knowing what everything sounds like. I remember very clearly when I was a student, the complete Liszt edition, which I'm sure you are aware of, by Leslie Howard. And I remember the excitement of going to the library with these dozens of CDs, hearing music that no one would have [had] access to before. So I think that there was a period of time when that was needed.

But we are now beyond that period. And it seems to me that what we lack is understanding. In other words, we have so much information. Whether it's the scores on IMSLP[.org]...basically every composer, we have access to, but we understand nothing. I feel that way myself. So I guess I'm trying to draw connection between composers. In, I guess, a way that one does in a programme. But a CD is obviously different than a programme, because the connection is meant to last. You're meant to make a statement of some sort. So that's what I've been trying to do. And it's been wonderful and scary.

**Melanie:** You're renowned for your performances of Morton Feldman, and there's some Feldman on the CD and quite a bit of Scriabin. So what's the connection there?

**Ivan:** There's an initial documentary connection which I found during research I did on Feldman. He said when he was a child, his first pieces were "Scriabinesque". So we've been trying to figure out what those pieces were. As far as I know, they've been lost. So I thought that maybe if we put Scriabin next to Feldman, it would be revealing in some way. It would be as if we were listening to Feldman's first pieces. And it seems to have borne fruit, at least from my perspective. There's a certain type of piano writing which we associate with Scriabin; lots of pedal, lots of extended chords, dominant chords in particular, kind of crunchy, cluster chords that have a certain smoothness of texture to them. And I think that when playing Scriabin both early and late, it seems to me that there is a connection there which is quite coherent and worth thinking about.

In general...that's a very specific explanation but I would like to pull back and zoom out a bit, and say that with every contemporary composer, there are roots [of] these composers. Even if they reject the past, as some do, they were brought up playing Bach and Scriabin and other things and those things can be found in the music somehow; they're ingrained in the DNA. So I think that we need to get away from this tendency to say that after World War Two music history started anew. That's actually not true. There's *always* a link somehow. So I'd love to know, let's say, if there was a CD with Xenakis's piano works, what would be the composer that we should put with him? Maybe Debussy, that might be really interesting. And I think there are lots of connections like that.

**Melanie:** You decided to record a young composer as well on the CD. And apparently you'd never heard his music before, you'd never met him before. So what was the connection here?

**Ivan:** A complete unknown (laughter) I was thinking [about] Feldman and going backwards. I was thinking where does that come from? And also coming from Feldman, who died 26 years ago, and going *forwards* to the present day, who took his language as a point of departure? And I was really surprised because Feldman has become this huge contemporary music icon now. A lot of people have been talking about him in the last few years. In particular, in the British and American press. I was curious to know who writes music that reminds you of Feldman but isn't Feldman. And actually, there were not as many as I was expecting. In particular among my generation, pianists in their 30s let's say, or composers.

So I did a lot of research and I listened to hundreds of pieces trying to find the right piece that would fit alongside Feldman and John Cage, who is the other composer on this CD. And when I heard this piece, it was immediately clear that this was the right one. Because it's kind of like a distilled Feldman. It's as if, like the distilling process with various hard liquors and alcohols, you get to the essence and it's quite condensed and much shorter. So that intrigued me. And I also love the idea of recording someone's music who I've never met. I have no reason to. It's not as if he's going to invite me to play at Carnegie Hall because I played his piece. It's just for the pure beauty and the belief in his music. And I find that it's kind of an idealistic gesture that, I find touching and beautiful to participate in. It's become something, actually it's probably the biggest experience of the CD is having done that; that makes me want to do more. Just choose a composer's music because it's the right piece at the right time, for whatever reason.

**Melanie:** And also John Cage. How does that fit in?

**Ivan:** Well, I've been playing these two pieces by Cage, "Dream" and "In a Landscape" from 1948, which have intrigued me for a long time because they're in a strange and naive style that you don't associate with Cage. And it's true that right afterwards Cage started writing chance music and all this music he's known for which is very strange music and is all over the place. Because he was trying to get away from his own judgments, I guess, of what was beautiful. So he started using techniques like flipping coins to get away from his own tastes, really, which is a very interesting story.

But before that he was really interested in Satie and other things. And there's something about the music "Dream" and "In a Landscape", it's played with pedal which is never lifted, it's dreamy, thus the title. And it fits really well with this other music. I like playing pieces by composers that are not necessarily typical of what they're known for. So sometimes composers, they have a style, and they go off and they want to do something else. And we like to put everyone in boxes. And to say "John Cage is like this", "Morton Feldman is like that". In fact, the reality is messier...and more interesting.

**Melanie:** So which composers do you think particularly important for performers like yourself recording today and into the future? When you're planning a recording, you know? What do you think about?

**Ivan:** Well when one of the things I've been increasingly aware of is the fact that 2014 is not 1994 or 1974. I'm

becoming more and more aware of the psychological baggage of these beautiful, stunning recordings which were made in the heyday of the recording industry, by Philips, Deutsche Grammophon, Decca...all of these great musicians and the fact that they were documented. And Schnabel playing all of the Beethoven sonatas and recording them for the first time. I think it's really dangerous to try to redo that. In other words, it is not of 2014 to do that. So I've been trying to ask myself the question 'What would be the thing to do today' right?

So it seems to me there are two main things that would be of interest. The first is to record new work. To make sure that classical music doesn't die, by definition, you perpetuate [it by] creation of new work. So that's something I did a little bit in this new album.

Another thing would be to change the way we play. There are questions we need to ask in terms of breaking some really fundamental rules in classical music. I mean I'm not talking about giving concerts in jeans. To me, that's not innovative. Or having long hair - I mean it's great but it's not really innovative. There are certain things, not just the context in which we play. But there are rules. You play the notes that are written. You play composers in a certain way, in a certain order. Certain composers you wouldn't mix. If you play a Sonata or something you have to play the whole thing. You can't play movements.

Now, I'm not advocating for dumbing down and turning the concert ritual into like a Classic FM-esque, excerpts of this or that, and everyone changes music in ways that are just superficial. But I think that are real questions that we are collectively avoiding in this industry. That's why everyone talks about the death of classical music. We don't have innovation. We do the same thing. It's shocking if you think about it. At concert programmes we are doing the same thing for decades. So I don't have an answer yet. But I'm thinking about it a lot. I'm thinking about it every day. And I think there are things to be done. I'm sure there are people doing it somewhere. If people don't ask themselves this question at least, then the recordings that are made, they have no real resonance with this epoch. So that's what I'm looking at, looking forward. There's a lot to be done. And I'm optimistic. When you ask questions like this, sometimes they take you to scary places.

**Melanie:** Very good luck, thank you for joining me today.

**Ivan:** Well, thank you!