

Futurs Composés, Paris
CDs of the month, August 2014
Catherine Peillon's Selection

Ivan Ilić – *The Transcendentalist* – by Ivan Ilić (piano) – Music by Alexander Scriabin, John Cage, Morton Feldman and Scott Wollschleger – Heresy Records, 2014

Ivan Ilić is a singular pianist. A mathematician, a musician to the tips of his fingernails, occasionally an actor, he is as profound as he is multifaceted, mischievous and full of surprises.

One of his latest recordings, *22 Chopin Studies by Leopold Godowsky*, was a huge success as soon as it appeared in 2012. Described as a “major achievement” that “takes your breath away”, the album was unanimously acclaimed by critics worldwide, but also on YouTube, where a filmed excerpt was viewed more than 500,000 times.

Unexpectedly, without insolence, he now proposes a wander through miniatures by Scriabin, pieces by John Cage and Morton Feldman, and an unknown work by Scott Wollschleger (an American composer born in 1980).

The title *Transcendentalist* sounds odd to our French-speaking ears, but is justified by the choice of pieces that are meditative, even contemplative, and as a reference to John Cage (who once said, "I would like for each person to focus their attention on themselves...")

The booklet reminds us that, for the pianistic world, the word “transcendental” is linked to Liszt's *Transcendental Études*: the word is associated with ideas of virtuosity and insurmountable difficulties. By overcoming the organological limits of the instrument the instrumentalist overcomes his or her mental and musical limits as well.

The paradox is apparent, for Ivan Ilić takes us back to the spiritual sense of the word: as in meditation, it is mainly an introspective path leading to a sort of illumination where we focus on and are absorbed in each sound, each silence, each interstice and the absolute present.

The reference is also to Ralph Waldo* Emerson's 1836 manifesto *The Transcendentalist*, which was at the forefront of a new American intellectual current. A syncretic way of thinking, combining Kantian idealism and Oriental theories and practices, it also owes a great deal to Pythagora, Plotinus and the neoplatonists. Inspiration, intuition, liberation... Man is naturally good but is culturally corrupted by all institutionalism and is thus socially alienated. The world must re-form itself around a mental village inhabited by liberated and independent individuals. These utopias reappeared in the 20th century in the 1950s, with the Beat Generation and the hippies.

Feldman, who advised breathing rather than counting, ensorcelled the mathematician, or exacerbated his taste for a world of pure abstraction. The pianist's playing is no longer play, there is no distance left between the instrument, the score, the sound, the performance, the exhalations of sound. Everything is in all.

* “Waldo” is said to be a diminutive of “Walden”, the hero of Henry David Thoreau's great work *Walden, or Life in the Woods*.

Translation by JA Macfarlane