

THE
TRANSCENDENTALIST

Jovan Tlić



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IN CLASSICAL MUSIC, particularly piano music, the word transcendental is closely associated with the title of twelve piano studies by Franz Liszt. Liszt used the word to allude to the extreme difficulty of the music. The implication is that the musician who masters these works will transcend his or her technique, while stretching the physical, and by extension, expressive limits of the instrument.

It's ironic that the word transcendental has become so strongly associated with virtuosic technique in music. A broader awareness of the word's use might lead us to expect that transcendental music would exhibit the opposite of the quest for speed, agility, or control.



A year ago I met the pianist Ivan Ilić in Vienna where the alchemy of a quick coffee turned into this album. From the outset Ivan wanted to focus on qualities other than speed, virtuosity and technique. His desire was to explore a pianistic, sonic and affective world that was intricate and reflective.

We discussed works by American composers and authors such as Cage, Feldman, Emerson and Thoreau.



The words transcendental and Transcendentalism emerged as a conceptual link uniting the repertoire we were considering, our objectives for the recording, and the men whose ideas and music were influencing the direction of the project.

As for Transcendentalism, it was America's first indigenous, notable intellectual movement. In two manifestos by Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* in 1836 and *The Transcendentalist* in 1842, he laid out the philosophy and tenants of transcendental thought. In reductive terms, the movement was founded as a reaction to and against rationalism and materialism and was influenced by oriental religions, German idealism and Romanticism. Its members embraced spirituality, idealism, inspiration, intuition and the worship of beauty and nature as guiding principals.

The music on *The Transcendentalist* has a connection to these themes, as do the composers themselves. Scriabin's mysticism, Cage's embrace of Zen Buddhism, Feldman's highly intuitive approach to composition and Wollschleger's synaesthesia align these artists with the ideals of the Transcendentalists. The virtuosity they display on this recording is one of thought and originality rather than technical prowess. Their path to transcendence is one of introspection and contemplation.

ERIC FRAAD





T H E

Excerpts

BY

*Ralph Waldo
Emerson*

FROM A LECTURE READ
AT THE MASONIC TEMPLE,
BOSTON, JANUARY, 1842

But this class are not sufficiently characterized, if we omit to add that they are lovers and worshippers of Beauty. In the eternal trinity of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, each in its perfection including the three, they prefer to make Beauty the sign and head.

It is well known to most of my audience, that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Konigsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them Transcendental forms. The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man's thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent, that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought, is popularly called at the present day Transcendental.

T R A N S C E N D E N T A L I S T

In like manner, if there is anything grand and daring in human thought or virtue, any reliance on the vast, the unknown; any presentiment; any extravagance of faith, the spiritualist adopts it as most in nature. The oriental mind has always tended to this largeness. Buddhism is an expression of it. The Buddhist who thanks no man, who says, "do not flatter your benefactors," but who, in his conviction that every good deed can by no possibility escape its reward, will not deceive the benefactor by pretending that he has done more than he should, is a Transcendentalist.

Nature is transcendental, exists primarily, necessarily, ever works and advances, yet takes no thought for the morrow.

The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy.

LOOKING THROUGH THE PAST IN THE EYES

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN contemporary music and music history has been so fraught that it could be the subject of a Freudian analysis. Composers often see the works of their musical forefathers as an overbearing, paralyzing legacy. The antagonism has been particularly acute during the last 70 years. For decades following World War II, composers did everything they could to break with what they considered to be a corrupt aesthetic.

Ironically, many composers allowed the past to influence them, precisely *because* they defined themselves in opposition to it. The works on this album are evidence of a different approach. Each composer

produces an individual style while looking the past right in the eyes, so to speak.

If one were to draw a family tree for the solo piano repertoire, the works on this album would all fall on branches descending from Frédéric Chopin. Chopin was perhaps the most idiomatic composer for the piano, but his music epitomizes an affect that many 20th century composers rejected outright.

It is therefore all the more surprising that one of the most distinctive composers of the early 20th century, Alexander Scriabin, took Chopin's writing as a point of departure. Few composers developed their musical language as quickly and as dramatically

as Scriabin, yet the surface of his piano music maintains a palpable link to Chopin's. In addition to the "liquid" quality they have in common, the result of luxurious pedaling, there is also the intimate knowledge of the piano's different registers, and the gently melancholic, yet elegant characterization of their melodies.

All of these traits are shared by the works of John Cage, Morton Feldman and Scott Wollschleger featured here. In these works each of these American composers tries not so much to reinvent the use of the piano, as to extend it towards a possible future. Although Cage once said in an interview that he "did not like the idea of influence", one might reply with a quote

from Feldman: "there's a gap, a discrepancy between what [Cage] says, and what he does."

Cage would see no contradiction; his attitude was compulsively inclusive. When asked to choose between two things, Cage was the type of person who would answer, with a smile, "Why not both?" He composed *In a Landscape* and *Dream* in 1948, the same year that he finished his groundbreaking *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano. For many 20th century composers it would be unthinkable to compose such different works side by side.

In a Landscape was written to fit a pre-conceived rhythmic structure, a technique inspired

by Erik Satie's sketchbooks. *Dream* is deliberately harmonically ambiguous. Its three consecutive repetitions of the same music seem to infer that the music could go on and on, like Satie's *Vexations* (1893).

But the influence of Satie is mainly structural: the abundant use of the pedals, the alienating modal colors, and the transparent quality of both works recall a more distant past. They also anticipate postmodernism before many of the iconic modernist works were written.

Although both works offer a distanced look upon the past, their pianistic atmosphere evokes works from the repertoire such as Scriabin's, whose music Cage first heard at the age of 18. The experience led Cage to purchase an anthology of modern piano miniatures, *Das neue Klavierbuch*, which exposed him to Schoenberg and Satie, and had a decisive influence on his early development as a composer.

Morton Feldman, one of Cage's protégés who is increasingly considered a major figure of 20th century music, was also introduced to Scriabin early on. Feldman's first piano teacher was Vera Maurina-Press, a close friend of the Scriabin family. Under her tutelage, Feldman studied Scriabin's works, and he later said that his earliest compositions were "Scriabinesque" piano miniatures. Although he credited Cage with giving him "early permission to have confidence in [his] instincts," Feldman's pre-Cage education remained a part of his musical identity.

Feldman subsequently went through phases of admiration for other 20th century masters, including Webern, Stravinsky, and Varèse. But the texture and gestures of Feldman's "late style", in particular his piano writing, are indebted to Scriabin, with their generous washes of pedal, their lyrical yet abstract aesthetic, and the dominant 9th, 11th, and 13th chords that hint at a tonal center, but eschew resolution.

The most salient characteristic of Feldman's music is the consistently low volume: pianissimo was his niche. But there is also the obsessive repetition of asymmetric fragments. Feldman repeatedly said that the compositional process was like "watching bugs on a slide". The metaphor combines two ideas: that of magnifying something to better see its movement, and the idea of being an observer, of watching things unfold rather than controlling them.

Perhaps even more revealing, but different, is an observation Feldman made 15 years earlier: "What I want is to listen to music through a telescope." Again, there is the idea of magnifying something. But in this earlier version, the object we are watching is far away in space, in a mysterious, cool place, out of reach. The scale of the empty landscape is beyond our comprehension; we are transfixed by objects in constant slow motion.

Feldman's *Palais de Mari* (1986) was written at the request of his student and confidante, Bunita Marcus, who asked for a 15-minute piece. At the time many of Feldman's works stretched well over an hour; a handful even lasted several hours. Therefore it is not surprising that Feldman overshot by 10 minutes. Still, I've often wondered whether it was possible to write shorter pieces in the style of late Feldman. Is the magic of Feldman's late works somehow dependent on the prodigious span of the music? Not necessarily: Scott Wollschleger's *Music Without Metaphor* (2013) proves that it is possible to extrapolate the style to a smaller scale. Wollschleger, a young New York-based composer, is a student of Nils Vigeland, who Feldman called "one of the most brilliant students I ever had." But Vigeland's music sounds nothing like Feldman's; the stylistic genes seem to have skipped a generation. Wollschleger is to Feldman as early

music without metaphor

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Scriabin is to Chopin: there is a recognizable link, but also a powerfully direct communicative voice in the younger composer that transcends the link.

Cage once said, “I would like us to think, as one can in Zen Buddhism, that, ‘I am here where I need to be.’” This idea is one of the aesthetic cornerstones of *Music Without Metaphor*. There is a sense of patience and introspection. Although these qualities are noticeable in all of the music on this album, they are particularly important in the Wollschleger. They are even reflected in the manuscript, which Wollschleger painstakingly copied out in black ink. The score is elegant in a way that recalls Japanese calligraphy; it communicates the same poetic sense as the music itself.

“My problem is that I don’t want to change,” Feldman once confessed. “My problem is that I would like to repeat myself, and I can’t. I have

no desire to change. But my music changes continuously. It’s getting older.” This metaphor could be applied not just to the output of an individual composer, but to the shared legacy of music over the centuries. Certain inter-generational connections are well documented. Others languish, waiting to be considered.

While flipping through books about these composers, my eyes fell upon the words: “His intimate tone was charming. His pianissimo remarkable. His coloring bordered on the fantastic.”¹ I blinked, and realized that what I thought had been an uncanny description of Feldman was actually about Scriabin.

IVAN ILIĆ

1. Fabion Bowers, *Scriabin, A Biography* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1996), p 170.

I V A N I L I Ć

Described by the New Yorker as an “adventurous pianist” who “likes his music on the brainy side,” Ivan Ilić started music studies at age 6. He earned degrees in mathematics and music at the University of California, Berkeley before moving to Paris on a fellowship from the university. Shortly afterwards Ivan was admitted to the Conservatoire Supérieur de Paris, where he took a *Premier Prix* in piano performance. The City of Paris sponsored his first recording.



Career highlights include recitals at Carnegie Hall (New York), Wigmore Hall (London), the National Concert Hall (Dublin), Glenn Gould Studio (Toronto), and the American Academy in Rome. Other recent engagements include débuts in São Paulo and Vienna. Ivan’s CD of 24 Préludes by Claude Debussy (2008) received Mezzo Television’s Critic’s Choice Award in France, and was featured as a Top Five CD of the Year by America’s Fanfare Magazine. It was also selected by Classique News in France as a Top 5 CD of the Month.

His most recent CD (2012) features the complete Chopin Studies for the left hand by Leopold Godowsky. The recording, described as “a major achievement” and “breathtaking” by BBC Radio 3, was The Daily Telegraph’s CD of the Week, a Top 5 CD of MDR Figaro in Germany, a Top 5 of Classique News in France, and was given a 5-star rating by Czech Radio 3 – Vltava. The CD was broadcast widely on six continents; videos of Ivan playing Godowsky on YouTube have attracted over 500,000 views.

Ivan recently made his acting début in two French short films: Luc Plissonneau’s *Les Mains*, and Benoît Maire’s *Le Berger*.

His next two recordings will include music by Morton Feldman. He is also finalizing a book/CD/DVD about Feldman to be published in collaboration with the HEAD – Geneva University of Art & Design in 2014.

ALEXANDER SCRIBIN

Alexander Scriabin (1872 – 1915) was born into a diplomat’s family in Moscow, and his unusual talent was discovered and nurtured at an early age. He wrote his first piano sonata at the age of 14, and gained admission to the Moscow Conservatory in 1888. He composed his first ten Mazurkas the following year.

Scriabin left the Conservatory in 1892 without a composition diploma, but with a gold medal in piano. He then focused on developing performance repertoire for his budding concert career. Within a short time he had written the Preludes Opus 11, 15 and 16 included on this disc. Scriabin is said to have slept with Chopin’s music under his pillow during this period.



In 1898 Scriabin accepted an offer to teach at the Moscow Conservatory, a position he held until 1903. By the end of 1903 he had written the Opus 31 and 39 Preludes, four Piano Sonatas, his first two Symphonies, and numerous other works for the piano.

The last movement of the 1st Symphony is the first sign of Scriabin’s increasingly idiosyncratic aesthetic. The movement calls for a choir and solo voices to sing a *Hymn to the Arts* written by Scriabin himself. The text proclaims an exalted place for music, bestowing on it religious and ecstatic powers.

The 2nd Symphony (1902-05) followed, coinciding with Scriabin’s move to Switzerland, then the 3rd and final Symphony, the Divine

Poem Opus 43. The work uses an increasingly extended harmonic language based on what Scriabin dubbed his “synthetic” chord (a minor seventh, an augmented ninth, and a thirteenth).

His next major work was the one-movement Poem of Ecstasy Opus 54; its composition ran parallel to the failed Russian Revolution of 1905. Scriabin’s final orchestral work was Prometheus: The Poem of Fire, composed between 1908 and 1910, built from a six-tone chord made up of fourths. A parallel line of the score is written for a “color piano”, an invention of Scriabin’s intended to illustrate the different colors related to each key.

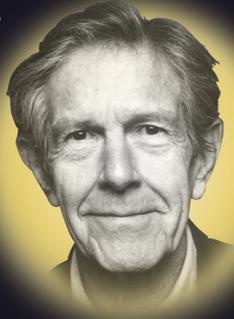
The remaining five years of Scriabin’s life were dedicated to the piano; between 1911 and 1913 he completed five

more Piano Sonatas. In 1914 he produced an abundance of piano music, including Garlands Opus 73, while in the midst of a series of triumphant performances. Scriabin intuited that he was at the beginning of a new stage of his development. He noted in his diary that it was imperative that he live “as long as possible” to fully realize his visions. Less than a year later, Scriabin died from an infected insect bite on his back. He was 43 years old.

J O H N C A G E

Born in Los Angeles, John Cage (1912 – 1992) began piano studies as a child, with a particular interest in sight-reading. At first he was determined to become a writer. After dropping out of Pomona College and traveling in Europe for 18 months, he returned to America and dedicated himself to music. From 1934 to 1936 he studied analysis, composition, harmony and counterpoint with Arnold Schoenberg. Schoenberg was a strict disciplinarian, but Cage emerged with his creativity (and curiosity) intact.

Between 1938 and 1940, Cage worked at the Cornish School of Music in Seattle. It was there that he met choreographer Merce Cunningham, who became his lifelong



collaborator and companion. In 1940 Cage wrote a manifesto, *The Future of Music: Credo*, which advocates the use of noise as a musical material. In the same year he invented the “prepared piano”, a way of transforming the sound of the piano by inserting screws, bolts, and other objects inside the instrument.

The 1940’s were a decisive intellectual period for Cage. An eclectic range of influences shaped his aesthetic, including Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Meister Eckhart, Erik Satie, Marcel Duchamp, Pierre Boulez, Zen Buddhism, and the Abstract Expressionist painters of New York. In 1948 he finished *Sonatas and Interludes*, his masterpiece for prepared piano. After a year in Paris

in 1949, he returned to New York where he met Morton Feldman and Christian Wolff in 1950. This led to a new phase in his creative development.

Wolff gave Cage a translation of the *I-Ching*, a classic Chinese text which Cage used to write music for the rest of his life. In an attempt to ever widen his perception and experience, Cage used chance operations to “free myself from the ego.” The first result was *Music of Changes* (1951), a 4-volume work for solo piano that sounds nothing like his earlier music. The following year he wrote his infamous silent piece *4’33”* in which no intentional sounds are made. Cage went on to pioneer “indeterminate music” in which both the composition and performance have chance elements, so that no two performances are alike.

Because Cage wrote “chance music” for over forty years, it is easy to forget that he wrote beautiful lyrical pieces early in his career. In *Landscape and Dream*, both from 1948, are typical of this style, now considered “early Cage”. Those who would like to explore this style further should listen to *Experiences No. 1* (1945) for two pianos, *Experiences No. 2* (1948) for voice, *The Seasons* (1947) for orchestra or piano, *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1949-1950), *Music for Marcel Duchamp* (1947) for prepared piano, and the delightful *Six Melodies* (1950) for violin and piano, among others.

MORTON FELDMAN

Morton Feldman (1926 – 1987) first studied the piano with Vera Maurina-Press, a pupil of Busoni. As an adolescent Feldman composed short Scriabin-esque piano miniatures until, in 1941, he began composition lessons with Wallingford Riegger, and later with Stefan Wolpe.

In 1950 Feldman met John Cage. This proved to be a pivotal moment for Feldman, and the start of a musical friendship of crucial importance to 20th century American music. Cage encouraged Feldman to have confidence in his instincts. This resulted in Feldman developing an intuitive, personal approach to composition. Also, thanks to Cage's introductions, Feldman's social circle during the 1950s comprised a who's-

who list of New York-based visual artists: Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg and, above all, Philip Guston.

Feldman's experiments led to graphic notation, which he pioneered. He also wrote a series of instrumental works called *Durations*, in which the performers begin simultaneously, but are free to choose their own durations within a given general tempo. Ultimately though, Feldman's greatest contribution is widely considered to be his 'late style', a series of gently abstract one-movement chamber music works. Often lasting over 90 minutes, they are intended to be played so quietly as to be barely audible.

Having worked in his family's textile businesses well into his 40's, in 1973 Feldman became a professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he remained until his death in 1987. In addition to composing, Feldman gave sprawling lectures that are among the most insightful and entertaining talks about 20th century music. Notable examples include lectures from Frankfurt (DE), Darmstadt (DE), Middelburg (NL), Johannesburg (SA), and Toronto (CA), all of which are published.

www.cnvill.net/mfhome.htm



SCOTT WOLLSCHLEGER

Scott Wollschleger (b. 1980, Erie, Pennsylvania) received a Master's degree in composition from the Manhattan School of Music in 2005, where he studied with Nils Vigeland. An avid supporter of collaboration and experimental creativity, Wollschleger was previously the Artistic Director of *Red Light New Music*, a non-profit organization dedicated to presenting contemporary music.



Wollschleger cultivates a strong emphasis on solo and chamber works, and his music has been widely performed in the United States and abroad. His music often explores synaesthesia¹ and color in sound, in addition to the a-temporal and discontinuous nature of experience.

Wollschleger has received support from organizations including New Music USA and the Yvar Mikhashoff Trust for New Music, and he has collaborated with several of New York City's finest contemporary musicians and ensembles. Wollschleger's music is published by Project Schott New York, where he works as Senior Production Manager and Associate Director of New Publications.

www.scottwollschleger.com

¹ Synaesthesia is a neurological phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway. In this case Wollschleger intuitively links sound with color, a characteristic he shares with Scriabin.



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KAZUTO OSATO AND FRANCK TERREAUX

Session Producer and Recording Engineer: **JUDITH CARPENTIER-DUPONT**

Digital Editing: **IVAN ILIĆ**

Mastering Engineer: **JAMES DURKIN**

Art Direction: **ERIC FRAAD**

Photography: **LAELIA MILLERI**

Graphic Design: **GARETH JONES**

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For information about Ivan Ilić please visit
www.ivandg.com or
www.heresyrecords.com/ivan-ilic/





01. *Prelude, Opus 16 no. 1 in B major* ALEXANDER Scriabin (2:48)
02. *Prelude, Opus 11 no. 21 in B-flat major* ALEXANDER Scriabin (1:17)
03. *Dream (1948)* JOHN CAGE (9:03)
04. *Guirlandes, Opus 73 no. 1* ALEXANDER Scriabin (4:15)
05. *Prelude, Opus 31 no. 1 in D-flat major* ALEXANDER Scriabin (2:28)
06. *Prelude, Opus 39 no. 3 in G major* ALEXANDER Scriabin (1:23)
07. *Prelude, Opus 15 no. 4 in E major* ALEXANDER Scriabin (1:11)
08. *Music Without Metaphor (2013)* SCOTT WOLLSCHLEGER (b.1980) (6:50)
09. *Rêverie, Opus 49 no. 3* ALEXANDER Scriabin (1:10)
10. *Poème languide, Opus 52 no. 3* ALEXANDER Scriabin (1:36)
11. *In a Landscape (1948)* JOHN CAGE (9:30)
12. *Palais de Mari (1986)* MORTON FELDMAN (22:37)
- BONUS TRACK
13. *Feuillet d'album Opus 45 no. 1* ALEXANDER Scriabin (1:17)

TOTAL TIME 64:08



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