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Eugène YSAÿE : Six Sonatas for Solo Violin Op. 27

Jae-hong Yim - violin

Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931)

- * Sonata No. 1 in G minor. À Joseph Szigeti
- * Sonata No. 2 in A minor. À Jacques Thibaud
- * Sonata No. 3 in D minor. À Georges Enesco
- * Sonata No. 4 in E minor. À Fritz Kreisler
- * Sonata No. 5 in G major. À Mathieu Crickboom
- * Sonata No. 6 in E major. À Manuel Quiroga

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Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931) was in his lifetime considered to be one of the world's best violinists, and was mentioned in one breath alongside such celebrities as Niccolò Paganini, Henri Vieuxtemps, and Henryk Wieniawski. Fame is fickle: in childhood, when little Eugène began learning music from his father at five, nothing seemed to announce his future success. Sure, the boy had artistic abilities, musicality, and physical predispositions, but making him into a wonder child simply did not work. His first public appearance at seven did not fulfill, to put it mildly, his father's exaggerated parental ambitions. But it is difficult to escape the impression that ultimately this turned out well both for the young child's personal life, as well as his artistic development. Without artistic 'circus shows' and numerous, exhausting concert travels, as well as incessant competition and enormous stress, Ysaÿe was able to calmly fathom his own stores of talent and artistic sensibility. Especially considering that fate put on his path no small masters: he was taught by Henryk Wieniawski himself. The latter's modest set of 12 lessons were a turning point in the young violinist's artistic path. Ysaÿe admired the Polish composer and for a lengthy time remained under his influence, writing various pieces *à la Wieniawski*, not only for his own needs. Lucky chance then put him under the artistic care of Henri Vieuxtemps. This artist in turn assured him a worthy stipend to live and study in Belgium's capital.

Ysaÿe was lucky in terms of people, and his developing talent was fully recognized both by other musicians, and critics as well as the public. During his concerts in Cologne, he was presented to Joseph Joachim, and had the opportunity to play Beethoven's Sonata in C minor op. 20 no. 2 with Klara Schumann. This is when his career took on momentum. In 1880, he became concertmaster to Berlin's Bilsé Orchestra (which soon transforms into the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra), travels and plays concerts. After his appearances at the Conservatory in Paris, he made friends with César Franck (who dedicated his charming Sonata in A major to Ysaÿe) and Ernest Chausson (who offers the Belgian musician his equally famous *Poème* op. 25). The growing number of appearances on both sides of the Atlantic guaranteed Ysaÿe fame, recognition, and money. But they also slowly took a toll on his health, together with the alcohol abuse, passion for late-night revelry, and chronic lack of rest. The artist finally had to realize that he could no longer handle the performer's career. It is thus a happy turn of events that he could now express himself in composition, for which he at last had the time and energy. Although he was thoroughly trained in music, in this domain he was not a professional. But he composed mostly pieces for violin, and had intimate knowledge of this instrument's secrets. In any case, he also developed his own violin technique in practice, which he said was not for everyone to imitate. Ysaÿe gave special attention to the performer's individual possibilities. His own physical attributes – namely his large hands – allowed him to achieve other effects than those possible for someone with different physical predispositions that could also be useful in performance. Perhaps such individual approach guided him also in dedicating his works to talented violinist friends. In the 1920s, a time when Ysaÿe wrote his best violin masterworks, the echoes of his fascination with Wieniawski's output quieted, and he created under the influence of contemporary currents: impressionism and symbolism. He remained faithful to his love of Bach, a sublime relation that brought into being his **6 Sonatas for Solo Violin op. 27**. Ysaÿe's writing of this cycle was inspired by his friend Joseph Szigeti's recital and his performance of the Sonata in G minor for Solo Violin BWV 1001. Ysaÿe's first Sonata, written in the same key and dedicated to Szigeti, ties into Bach's masterpiece in multifold ways: the head motive, the fugato second movement, and numerous figurations calling on the Baroque master's style.

Ysaÿe devoted his Sonata in A minor in turn to Jacques Thibaud, the French violinist and his close friend. Here too, the first movement titled *Obsession* makes direct reference to the *Preludio* from Bach's Partita in E major BWV 1006, a work that Thibaud loved with a passion, but feared to perform publicly. Additional cohesion is achieved in all the movements of Ysaÿe's work through motivic references to the melody *Dies irae* from the *Requiem*. The work was created in 1923, a year before the death of the composer's wife; were its mournful motives perhaps its foreboding?

The third Sonata in D minor – titled *Ballade* – was dedicated to the Romanian artist George Enescu. It is a single-movement composition that opens with a recitative motive making its way from passages in 5/4 metre to dotted triple rhythms in an impetuous *Allegro*.

In the fourth Sonata in E minor devoted to Fritz Kreisler, we again encounter a three-partite configuration of dances recalling a Baroque suite: *Allemande*, *Sarabande* and *Finale*. References to Bach are still present, while the third piece – a dazzling ending to the work – brings to mind some works by Kreisler himself, a close friend of Ysaÿe.

The composer dedicated the fifth Sonata in G Major to Mathieu Crickboom, member of the Ysaÿe Quartet, a prominent musician and musical pedagogue at the time. The composition is maintained in a calm aura typical of contemporaneous French music (the first movement is characteristically titled *L'Aurore*, i.e. dawn), only to transform in the second movement into an impetuous *Danse rustique* filled with irregular metre.

Finally, we come to the last piece, the Sonata no. 6 in E Major, dedicated to the Spanish virtuoso Manuel Quiroga. It is a technically very demanding work, impetuous and wild, and full of musical allusions to the Spanish musical tradition.

It is evident that Ysaÿe selected his dedicatees very carefully, and probably had them in mind while composing, utilizing not only their strong performance points, but also the motives they cherished.

He himself said the following of his sonatas: "I allowed free improvisation to reign. Each sonata constitutes a kind of little *poème* where I abandoned the violin to its fantasies. I wanted to associate musical interest with grand qualities of true virtuosity".

Agnieszka Jeż

Translated by Maksymilian Kapelański

Harmony of brilliant virtuosity and thoughtful musicality

One might wonder if there is a violin work that could be compared with such masterpieces as Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin or 24 Caprices for Solo Violin composed by respectively Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) and Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840), two great maestros living in different times. Certainly, there are Sonatas for Solo Violin by Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931), a Belgian violinist, composer, and conductor. Pablo Casals, one of the greatest cellists of all time (1876-1973), claimed to have never heard any violinist before Ysaÿe play as accurately in tune, and Carl Flesch (1873-1944), who taught many greatest performers, called him the king of violin and the last virtuoso who would be long remembered for setting up an unforgettable monument in the history of art.

It is hard to believe that after having heard Joseph Szigeti, a Hungarian violin virtuoso (1892-1973), perform Bach's Sonata for Solo Violin, Ysaÿe was inspired to compose violin works and sketched out the ideas for all the six sonatas in one night in the summer of 1923 and completed them the following year. As such, Ysaÿe's Sonatas for Solo Violin are incredible masterworks that integrate all the violin music experienced by the composer, who was in his 60s at that time. This set of violin sonatas was rarely put on stage for some time due to its complicated musical motifs, high technical demands and a modern approach, though perfectly capturing the maestro's noble character. However, it has been played more often after it was selected as one of the works performed at the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Belgium. Even though, it is still not an easy work to interpret. It is enough to think about Sonata No. 1 in G minor dedicated to Joseph Szigeti, which comprises four movements, including a Fugato in the middle, and is plenty of polyphonic lines; all these elements somehow show the work's similarities to Bach's Sonata No. 1. At the same time, however, it is considered an extremely intense and avant-garde piece; it starts with powerful four notes and repeats persistently ascending motifs.

In Sonata No. 2, dedicated to Jacques Thibaud (1880-1953), the theme of the Gregorian chant "Dies Irae" appears in all four movements. It bitterly expresses the composers' obsession with Bach's Partita No. 3 and his denial of it, as well as anger and grief in life. In Sonata No. 3, "Ballade," which is dedicated to Romanian violinist George Enescu (1881-1955), Ysaÿe tries to step out of Bach's shadow by seeking to build his own independent world. The piece gently starts with a chromatic scale, gradually builds up speed, and adds improvisatory phrases and colourful expressions to the D minor chord in order to express fantasy and passion. Yet, in Sonata No. 4, dedicated to Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962), the composer returns to Bach by naming the three movements after dance movements in Bach's Partitas. The only difference is probably the fact that Courante is left out. The fifth Sonata, which is dedicated to Mathieu Crickboom (1871-1947), the 2nd violinist in the Ysaÿe Quartet, stands out by the fact that it is intensely picturesque unlike the other 4 sonatas. The first passage of the first movement, "L'Aurore," reminds a sunrise. Sonata No. 6, which is dedicated to Spanish violinist Manuel Quiroga (1892-1961), is a demonstrative piece based on a habanera rhythm.

Yim Jae-hong's latest, full-length recording of Paganini's 24 Caprices provoked a commotion on the music scene last year. It is the first CD of this kind recorded by a Korean violinist and still a rare case for any musician around the world. Jae-hong displays an excellent performance as an established violinist representing Korean musicians. The tone of his

interpretation in Sonata No. 1 is sharp, yet flexible. His playing is cool but at the same time, there is a subtle warmth in it. Sul ponticello at the end of the first movement conveys a certain spiritual mystery, which offers listeners a brief moment of meditation. It is not an exaggeration to say that his violin has an unrivalled voice that has never been heard in any blockbuster album of internationally recognised violinists.

The second movement of Sonata No. 2, played with mute, conveys well the intended old-world mood that reminds of church music. In the third movement, where the theme of the previous movement is transformed into six pizzicato-based variations, he delicately expresses different musical subtleties of each variation, which leaves you in awe. The rough finale that mainly uses middle register sounds makes an eloquent impression, through which he shows that the finale, which title "Les Furies" refers to the goddesses of vengeance in the Greek mythology, is a bold attempt by the composer to throw down the gauntlet to Bach. It is also worth mentioning the violinist's impeccable, brilliant virtuosity. Even in the single-movement Sonata No. 3, Jae-hong's creative musicality still shines glaringly. Endless joy and ecstasy overflow this relatively short performance, which yet again allows listeners to appreciate Ysaÿe's noble artistry.

Sonata No. 4 written in triple time as its main time is the special domain of Jae-hong who perfectly handles the elastic sense of rhythm, elegant motility, and dynamic amplitudes. The dedicatee Fritz Kreisler would have probably smiled with delight if he listened to Jae-hong's recording. On the other hand, the first movement of Sonata No. 5 brings comfort to listeners with its bucolic and gentle harmonies, to the extent that one may argue whether its musical motif is similar to that of Claude Debussy. From low-note left-hand pizzicato to dazzling arpeggio at the end, the burst of bravura throughout the movement is just an example of Jae-hong's excellent technique. That is also the case with Sonata No. 6, where he adroitly performs all the intricate and complex passages. His violin guides you through a dark tunnel of nightmares to a bright sunny Spanish landscape as the grand finale.

Sound quality is also top-level, on a par with his previous Paganini albums. Sound waves widely stretch out in every direction, producing spatial qualities, while there is no single sound sticking out to bother one's ears even on the strongest measures. The sounds with proper reverberation and moderate saturation do not irritate eardrums. That is an ideal sound quality for a violin sonata. All in all, Yim Jae Hong's full-length Ysaÿe Violin Sonatas is an outstanding album among all the other recordings of the compositions. Therefore, it can be said that this recording is another library version of this set of masterpieces that exquisitely mixes baroque, neo-romantic, and folk music.

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