

## Elements of musical legacy reflected in Eugène Ysaÿe's solo violin works

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**Abstract:** *Without question the world we are living in is constantly changing hence experiencing new perspectives. Every now and then there is a personality that inspires others and brings forth new ideals and ideas that capture innovative inherent expressions. One of those musical personalities was Eugène Ysaÿe. Ysaÿe has managed to encompass and bring new pedagogical-interpretative violinistic ideals that merge together the history of performance on the violin together with the music history as a whole. The op. 27 of Eugène Ysaÿe represents his most notable composition that bears a distinct mark of this fascinating violinist and musician.*

Key-words: *Eugène Ysaÿe, solo violin works, violin history of performance.*

### 1. Introduction

The musical universe of Eugène Ysaÿe bears a distinct mark of freshness, originality and genius therefore musicians around the globe appreciate and perform Ysaÿe's works in concerts, recitals or competitions. One of those notorious competitions is called Queen Elisabeth Competition for young performers. It is a well known fact that the competition in Brussels is named after Queen Elisabeth of Belgium who was a close friend of Ysaÿe and a patroness of the arts. Ysaÿe has long thought of creating a competition for young classical musicians but unfortunately it never materialised during his life time. In his memory and regarding Ysaÿe's musical prestige the Queen Elisabeth Competition was created. In respect to Ysaÿe's musical legacy, during the unfolding of the violin section of the Queen Elisabeth Competition there is always a compulsory work of the op. 27 of E. Ysaÿe to be performed by violinists. The cycle of the six sonatas for violin solo op. 27 by Eugène Ysaÿe represent an epitome of musical elements that span from the baroque period combined with the development of the violin as a whole, together with the

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openness of a musical mind that enabled exotic elements to be implemented in a unique musical flavour. The cycle of the six violin sonatas op. 27 by Eugène Ysaÿe represent from a musical point of view his most distinguished composition. Ysaÿe's works reflect a musician that was fully aware of the technical and musical elements available on the violin. We should bear in mind the fact that Ysaÿe was a potent violinist therefore he used all the idiomatic musical language available combined with the inherent artistic movements of the times. Ysaÿe's idiomatic elements like his violinistal-knowledge, his fondness for the artistic movements of the time, his openness to contemporary musical figures together with his appreciation and inspiration of the baroque period, particularly J. S. Bach's solo violin works are reflected in his own musical legacy. Going through one of the most important violinistal books of the 21st century called *The violin and its Masters – from the origins to the present day*; we come across an interesting and intriguing paragraph inserted by Ion Sârbu. The paragraph mentions the words of David Oistrakh stating: "After Paganini, Ysaÿe brought a completely new renewal in the violinistal art by enriching the technical and polyphonic possibilities of the instrument (violin). We could never emphasize enough the contribution of the works of Ysaÿe to the universal musical treasure" (Sârbu 2015, 166).

## **2. Short insight on the history of musical performance on the violin**

The previous chapter offered an insight of the elements that Ysaÿe used throughout his compositions. This chapter unveils and stresses on the importance of violinistal performance in music history that merge with elements of instrumental development together with the music history as a whole in which Ysaÿe brought his own contribution. The history of performance on the violin is quite a vast subject comprising of different historical periods, artistic movements, composers, interpreters, pedagogues, artisans, innovators, luthiers and so on. In the more „recent history” the baroque period was definitely an interesting transitional pivotal moment in the understanding and creation of musical compositions and musical performance in which the new philosophy was intended to crystallize the quality of expression. Therefore the transition of cultural ideas was manifested in musical creations that were emphasizing musical expression through the development of technique. A new level of emphasis on new ideals of technique, virtuosity and expression was reached through compositions intended for stringed instruments that were no longer necessarily used for accompaniment purposes but thrived for individuality and virtuosity. The fusion of distinct and diverse cultures were found particularly in the instrumental repertoire. The instrumental music

attained a special enhanced attention from composers that illustrated new compositional musical forms like the invention, the fugue, the concerto, the sonata, the suite and so on. XVII-XVIIIth century Italy, the violinistic repertoire was dominated by names such as Arcangelo Corelli, Antonio Vivaldi and Giuseppe Tartini.

XVIIth century France instrumental music was dominated by the suites of dances, solo organ music, harpsichord, viola da gamba, lute and so on. In the XVII-XVIIIth century Prussia (Germany) the famous polyphonic German school of music was epitomized by the works of J .S. Bach. The works of J. S. Bach represent an inspiration to all composers until today. Other Prussian notable instrumentalist-composers of the period were Heinrich Ignaz von Biber, Johann Jakob Walther and Paul von Westhoff. They have contributed and lead the development of instrumental music and implemented a number of new technical elements that enriched the new technical approach on instruments such as the violin.

The XVIII-XIXth century brought another pivotal moment in the history of performance on the violin together with the creation of the Tourte bow that belongs to the notorious french luthier François Xavier Tourte. The Tourte bow facilitated a new technical approach of the right-hand technique which opened new interpretative perspectives on instrumentalists like Niccolò Paganini. Niccolò Paganini was without question a phenomenon in the violinistic world, the missing link from which the development of technique on the violin would not have been possible. Niccolò Paganini was the leap to the future regarding the violinistic school of technique. Apart from these ground-breaking figures, in respect of the violinistic performance approach, we would like to also stress the importance of the development of strings that were produced from gut initially and afterwards evolved to metal, synthetic nylon, hybrids and so on. Notable pedagogues that have left a distinct mark on the history of performance of the violin include names such as Leopold Mozart, Leopold Auer, Carl Flesch, Ivan Galamian, Shinichi Suzuki etc. XIX-XXth century interpreter-composers such as Pablo de Sarasate, Joseph Joachim, Henri Vieuxtemps, Henryk Wieniawsky and Eugène Ysaÿe have also left a distinct mark on the musical scene and history of performance on the violin. Eugène Ysaÿe is presented as the dominant personality and musical figure of the first half of the XXth century and he is placed on the frontispiece of the book called *Violin Mastery* written by Frederick H. Martens. Eugène Ysaÿe has brought a fresh approach and perspective on the performance of the violin repertoire. The op. 27 cycle of Eugène Ysaÿe represents the pinnacle of the creativeness of a musician that knew inside out the idiomatic language of this fascinating instrument, the violin. The op. 27 cycle summarizes a period of performance on the violin that

spans through two centuries and links the baroque period being structurally and musically inspired in particular by J. S. Bach, his predecessors and his successors.

There are a couple of composers that have written solo violin sonatas like Béla Bartók, Sergey Prokofiev, Max Reger and others but Eugène Ysaÿe and J. S. Bach are the only two classical composers that have left a distinct and particular mark of freshness and originality in works written extensively to such degree in the sonata genre for solo violin.

### 3. Dissemination of information on solo violin works by J. S. Bach and E. Ysaÿe

The degree of which Ysaÿe was inspired by the works of J. S. Bach is considerable especially if one prepares a performance consisting of works for solo violin of the composers mentioned in this chapter. The moment a performer gathers the works of Eugène Ysaÿe and J. S. Bach in the same event is a moment in which one starts noticing the similarities and differences. J. S. Bach represents an ocean of originality that managed to inspire other composers throughout music history until today.

The first thing we notice when we put together solo violin works by Ysaÿe and Bach is structure. The approach of Ysaÿe's 1st and 4th sonata is similar in structure to the *sonata da chiesa* form that Bach was using throughout his solo violin sonatas. We also find reminiscences of structure in Ysaÿe's op. 27 works particularly in the 4th sonata that are similar to the partita structure that we also find in the solo violin partitas of Bach. Therefore Ysaÿe's 1st sonata is composed of 4 movements called *Grave*, *Fugato*, *Allegro poco Scherzoso* and *Finale con brio* similar to the structural approach that we find in Bach's solo violin works that consist of a *Praeludium* opening movement that establishes the tonic key followed by a *Fugue* movement in which we observe a wide palette of polyphony, counterpoint and imitation. The third movement consists of a dance like movement composed usually in the relative major key that changes and lightens the entire performance mood and eventually the final movement which consists of a fast paced movement which resembles a sort of a *moto perpetuo* movement. The 4th sonata by Ysaÿe resembles more the partita structure of J. S. Bach's works for solo violin; in the words of Antoine Ysaÿe the 4<sup>th</sup> sonata is written in, „classical lines”(Ysaÿe 1947, 224) . We therefore observe the structure and construction of Ysaÿe's 4th sonata of the op. 27 which consists of 3 movements: *Allemande*, *Sarabande* and *Finale*; two of which represent dances of the baroque suite. Throughout his op.27 Ysaÿe managed to mould musical personalities of the XXth century and merge his own original musical view. Therefore, we observe a fresh, impressionistic and modern approach in Ysaÿes' solo violin works. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>

sonatas of the op.27 cycle by Ysaÿe bear a mark of programmatic flavour with a more personal touch. The second sonata op.27 by Ysaÿe consists of 4 movements called *Obsession*, *Malinconia*, *Dance des ombres* and *Les Furies*. The first movement called *Obsession* represents the obsession of Ysaÿe and the dedicatee of the sonata, Jacques Thibaud, on Bach's solo sonatas and partitas. In the *Obsession* movement we find direct quotes and references from Bach's E major *Preludio* of the 3rd solo violin partita. In the 3rd movement called *Dance des ombres* we observe microstructural variations that are similar to the *Double* movements in Bach's solo violin works. The 5th violin sonata of the op. 27 consists of 2 movements called *L'Aurore* which literally translates as *the breaking of dawn* and *Dance rustique*. The 3rd and 6th sonatas of the op. 27 cycle by Ysaÿe are composed from a single free form movement. The 3rd sonata of the op. 27 cycle is called *Ballade* and is dedicated to the Romanian composer George Enescu. George Enescu is regarded as one of the greatest musicians in Romanian history. (Enescu Wikipedia) The 6th sonata of the op. 27 cycle is dedicated to the Spanish violinist Manuel Quiroga in which we find a *Habanera* character movement. The main difference in the op. 27 works by E. Ysaÿe compared to the works of J. S. Bach is the new original notation system (see figure 1) that Ysaÿe implements throughout his op. 27 cycle, the attention to detail and also the approach of technique and music (Ysaÿe 2004).

We observe a new technical approach of the left and right hand that were developed after Bach's time, like the succession of fifths and octaves (also fingered octaves) that we find throughout Ysaÿe's op. 27 cycle that were not so appealing in Bach's time and compositions. We also observe the impressionistic view of chords, the 6 note chords, the quarter tone notes and finally the moulding of the 6 musical personalities of the XXth century that we find engraved in the music of Ysaÿe's op. 27 cycle. All of these elements bring Ysaÿe on the same scale of importance and originality as anyone who has achieved a breakthrough in the pattern of creation. The method J.S. Bach used and managed to transpose the entire creational universe that comprised the immensity of the organ music that was Bach's principal instrument, on a small instrument like the violin is truly remarkable. In the same way, Ysaÿe managed to break boundaries by adding inherent musical idioms and expressions. What is also truly fascinating about Ysaÿe is the way he managed to capture unique musical personalities of the XXth century in the music such as: Joseph Szigeti, Jacques Thibaud, George Enescu, Fritz Kreisler, Mathieu Crickboom and Manuel Quiroga. Ysaÿe managed to capture Joseph Szigeti's fondness for modern music therefore we find a lot of dissonances in the music of the 1st sonata of the op. 27 cycle. In the 1st movement of the 2nd sonata Ysaÿe captured Jacques Thibaud's obsession of J.S.Bach's *Preludio* of the 3rd partita with direct references that were ultimately transformed in an Ysaÿe-stique manner. The 3rd sonata of the

op. 27 is named after a piece composed by the Romanian composer George Enescu written in 1895 called *Balada* and captures a part of the spirit of Enescu's composition.

## Signes - Abréviations.

(Translation to English)

Les 4 cordes:  $\overline{m\dot{i}}-\overline{l\dot{a}}-\overline{r\dot{e}}-\overline{sol}$ . <sup>④</sup> (The four strings E-A-D-G.)

En se maintenant sur une corde ① ② ③ ④ (While being maintained on a string.)

Doigt immobile: - - - - ① (Finger motionless - not moving the finger.)

Poser le doigt sur la quinte juste: ② (To position the finger on the perfect fifth.)

Rester à la position: - - - ③ (Remain in the position.)

À la pointe: - - - - ④ (At the point.)

Au talon: - - - - ⑤ (At the frog.)

Au milieu: - - - - ⑥ (In the middle.)

Note jouée isolément - ⑦ (Note played separately.)

Le quart de ton au dessus ⑧ (The quarter tone to the top.)

Le quart de ton au dessous ⑨ (The quarter tone to the bottom.)

Le sautillé: - -  (Notated.)

Le détaché à la corde:  (Notated.)

Employez tout l'archet:  $\rightarrow$  (Use the entire bow.)

Archet court:  $\overline{AC}$  - Archet long:  $\overline{AL}$  (Bow runs - Bow long.)

Vibrant: -  $\overline{VA}$  - Sans vibrer:  $\overline{VA}$  (Vibrate - Without vibrato.)

Sans presser:  $\overline{SP}$  - Sans hâte: -  $\overline{SR}$  (Without pressing - Without haste.)

Bien mesuré:  $\overline{BM}$  - Bien rythmé:  $\overline{BR}$  (Well measured - Rhythmic.)

Marqué-accentué:  $\gg \gg$  (Marked - accentuated.)

Les accords ainsi notés: - -  (The chords notated as)

S'exécutent par un rapide arpeggio. *fz.*  (are carried out by a rapid arpeggio.)

N. B. Sans contester que les procédés techniques soient du domaine individuel, on peut dire, avec certitude, que l'artiste qui regardera de près les doigtés, coups-d'archet, *staccato* et indications de l'auteur, se rapprochera toujours plus rapidement du but.

Fig. 1. Notational system of Ysaÿe

George Enescu showed precocity as *Balada* was written when Enescu was just 14 years old and unveils a sense of nostalgia for the hometown land Romania with a generous inspirational melody and proves the genius of the young visionary composer. The 4th Ysaÿe sonata of the op. 27 captures Fritz Kreisler's musical idiom of *Praeludium und Allegro* piece. The 5th sonata op. 27 captures the composers' and his disciple, Mathieu Crickboom's reminiscences of their homeland, Belgium. The 6th sonata of the op. 27 unveils a Spanish approach to the music with the insertion of the *Habanera* section that captures Manuel Quiroga's fondness for technique and virtuosity. Also in the 6th sonata op. 27 Ysaÿe captures a ferocious amount of technical elements encompassing the whole palette of right and left hand technical approaches like upbow and downbow, diverse portamentos, spiccato, detachées, double stops, triple stops, quadruple stops, quintuple stops, sextuple stops and so on. Ysaÿe managed to add all what was more technically challenging to the instrument bringing the whole idea of violin performance to a different level. The amount of originality is overwhelming and definitely worth approaching. Particularly interesting is the fact that Ysaÿe created a musical universe that encompasses a large cultural vision that requires a profound insight on the Ysaÿe phenomenon.

#### **4. The inspiration of well built instruments and exquisite accessories on Ysaÿe's musical universe**

The way one hears produced sounds can impress and inspire either a composer or an interpreter in a certain direction. That being said I would like to stress the fact that the quality of an instrument can determine a particular musical conception especially when it comes to solo instrumental music. It is to be taken in consideration that Ysaÿe was using the best instruments available in his time including a G. B. Guadagnini violin, a Lupot violin, a Giuseppe Guarnerius violin, the „Hercules” Stradivarius, a couple of Vuillaume's violins etc.; he even gave a recital on Paganini's violin the Guarneri del Gesù „Il Cannone”. Ysaÿe knew exactly what he wanted to hear from a violin as he himself stated in a letter intended to his wife Louise after lending a Guarneri instrument: „The instrument seems capable of every shade of feeling from drama to romance. Its tone is immense”(Potter 2018). Ysaÿe was also very fond of chamber music and he also bought a Testore viola. One of his famous pupils William Primrose stated that „very few violinists can play the viola [...]. Ysaÿe was one of them. His style of bowing and his unique system of fingering amply qualified him” (Potter 2018). We believe it is important for violinists to know that Ysaÿe was also a capable viola player that clearly shows a different side of the violinist we know. We believe this also influenced Ysaÿes'

compositions and asserts the fact that Ysaÿe had potent hands. Ysaÿe used a lot of technical left hand techniques in his op. 27 and in his compositions in general also because he was able to overcome by nature such difficulties. Ysaÿe also owned a large collection of bows including a F. X. Tourte, a E. Sartory, a D. Peccatte and so on. The development of the violins and bows was made in regard to the demands of bigger and bigger concert halls that musicians had to fill and make themselves heard. Therefore the demand for exceptionally built instruments and bows was great. We should always remember that Ysaÿe had all these elements converging to his own musical compositions. Through this evidence we assert the fact that Ysaÿe was using really well built instruments and bows that gave him a plus of inspiration for writing such exquisite music.

## 5. Conclusion

The musical legacy that we find in Eugène Ysaÿe's works for solo violin encompasses a period of two hundred years of music history and violin performance together with a debordant imagination of a musician that brings a fresh new perspective with an oriental, exotic musical flavour. Ysaÿe was an altruistic type of musician that was always there to help and support emerging talents or contemporary music colleagues. In the support of the previous statement we could clearly observe the respect Ysaÿe had for his music colleagues, a virtue that we find in very few classical musicians nowadays. Apart from his original compositional perspective Ysaÿe managed to capture the inherent musical expression of his colleagues engraved in the music of the op. 27 cycle. From what we know Ysaÿe is the only composer that brought this unique type of perspective into composition.

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