

## Syncretic art in the Musical Language of the *Opus 27* by Eugène Ysaÿe

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**Abstract:** *Violinist, conductor, pedagogue, composer Eugène Ysaÿe represents a transitional sacrosanct monolith from a musical point of view situated at the crossroads of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the art of which we encounter with much skill the joining of a well established musical system together with a debordant overflowing imagination. Eugène Ysaÿe has managed therefore to obtain a masterpiece worthy of the full attention of musicologists and anyone curious enough about innovative evolutionary principles in music as well as in other domains.*

*Key-words: Eugène Ysaÿe, syncretic art, solo violin, notational system, innovative musical language, Eugène Ysaÿe-Liviu Rebreanu.*

### 1. Introduction

Today the compositions of Eugène Ysaÿe are heard across the globe, and are suggested if not even compulsory in almost all the major music competitions of the genre in Europe, Asia and the United States of America. But the fame as a violinist, pedagogue and conductor has for a long time cast a shadow over its own musical compositions. Together with the 2020 documentary entitled *Ysaÿe's Secret Sonata* we can strongly affirm that Eugène Ysaÿe constitutes an efferescent interest in the willing to enter concretely and abstractly in the mind of this fascinating musician.

The composer confessed "I allowed free improvisation to reign. Each Sonata constitutes a kind of little poeme where I abandoned the violin to its fantasies. I wanted to associate musical interest with grand qualities of true virtuosity, a much neglected association since instrumentalists no longer venture into composition

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and are abandoning this task to those who do not know the resources and secrets of the medium” (Lowell 2012, 2).

## **2. Short insight of the *Opus 27* by Eugène Ysaÿe**

Eugène Ysaÿe has left posterity over 60 works sorted in various categories by Ysaÿe’s son, Antoine (Ysaÿe, Antoine 1947). This classification started from the ones dedicated for solo violin, continued with the ones for two violins, violin and piano, the ones dedicated for chamber music etc. and it ends with an opera. All these compositions represent a brand full of inovativeness and originality. All that being said, the sonatas for solo violin op. 27 are notable and have remarked themselves through the pointing of technical and musical elements which represent a novelty to the genre and are considered to be pinnacle of the creativeness of Eugène Ysaÿe.

What is so special about the compositions of Ysaÿe and especially in the way Ysaÿe constructs the sonatas for violin solo op. 27? It is insinuated that Ysaÿe had a „lack of formal tuition and thus his music lacks subtlety” (Stockhem 2001). Having considered such premises probably we would not enjoy the originality of Ysaÿe’s works if this weren’t the case. We have to remind ourselves the fact that at its base, Eugène Ysaÿe represented a passionate violinist devoted to his own art thus unavoidably his compositions gravitated on the idiom of the instrument that assured his notoriety. As a composer, Eugène Ysaÿe was inspired by predominant cultural movements of the time including: impresionism, naturalism, symbolism and surrealism. An exponent of the french school, Ysaÿe followed the guidances of Henri Vieuxtemps and Henryk Wieniawsky and was inspired by the compositional tendencies of his mentores. In the same time Ysaÿe was involved actively in supporting the young talents like C. Debussy or composeres like C. Frank, E. Chausson a.s.o. Being found in the center of a musical univers or in a creative postulate that changed continuously but having deep roots in the superlative violinistical techniques of the days Ysaÿe facilitated the creation of a significant oeuvre, considered to be a new peak that registers vastly from J.S. Bach to Modernism. In the Six sonatas for solo violin opus 27 by Eugène Ysaÿe we encounter visible direct and implicitly indirect references to J.S. Bach’s Sonatas and Partitas for violin solo BWV 1001-1006 through elements of structure and musical construction.

The metaphorical proximity of Eugène Ysaÿe and J.S. Bach has established the number of the works to six. Identically to the six works of J.S. Bach for solo violin, Ysaÿe’s op. 27 encompasses 6 solo violin sonatas. From the musical point of view we have already established the metaphorical proximity of the works of Ysaÿe

and Bach. Without great difficulty we distinguish similar elements that find themselves converging from such an atemporal association as mentioned above between J.S. Bach and Eugène Ysaÿe. Why such an association? One of the decisive factors that stand out when implying such an association is more than evident considering the fact that J.S. Bach was the first composer that achieved to such extent works dedicated exclusively for solo violin. Under such circumstances and weight, Eugène Ysaÿe decided to create an epitome of all what music and violinistical techniques evolved through 200 years being inspired by the brilliant predecessor J.S. Bach.

On one side, the creation of the op. 27 represents a tribute to J.S. Bach. Meanwhile we observe innovative technical creations inspired even involuntarily by N. Paganini. Through all these innovations we also have to mention the insertion of quarter tones, mostly found in the oriental cultures, also the implementation of 6 notes chord interpreted by a monodic instrument by excellence like the violin and lastly the creation of a language that guides the musician to the intrinsic, inherent, empirical mind of Ysaÿe. Another element worthy of considering when epitomizing such an oeuvre is represented by the unique way the composer moulds each piece on one of the musical and human personalities of the great violinistical exponents of those times. Maybe from all these elements, the one that Ysaÿe decided to capture the personalities of the times in a musical score gives it the higher degree of authenticity. Practically, Ysaÿe dedicates each sonata of the op. 27 to a prominent musician, friend in the personal and profession sphere and captures that ineffable element of the uniqueness of the human essence. Such as composite materials, the works of Ysaÿe have lasted the vicissitudes of time and today are enjoyed with great attention by musicians.

### **3. Eugène Ysaÿe and Liviu Rebreanu**

Maybe you ask yourselves how can we associate the name of a Belgian musician with a Romanian writer as you have clearly observed in the chapter we are currently concentrating on. For a long period of time I have searched to find a link between Ysaÿe's op. 27 musical works with literature but these connections seemed futile the more I tried to spread the horizon of my own personal search. For a long time I have considered the work of the French writer Marcel Proust in the proximity of Ysaÿe's musical oeuvre although the answer was closer than I expected at first. Analogically, the principles of structure, substance, and musical language of the op. 27 solo violin sonatas by Ysaÿe are similar to those of structure, substance, and language found in Liviu Rebreanu's novel *Adam and Eve*

(Rebreanu 2009). To be more particular and specific I would make the claim that the op. 27 works of Eugène Ysaÿe found their literary correspondent in Rebreanu's novel *Adam and Eve*. The same way Rebreanu uses the *tableau en tableau* technique in the seven chapters of the Adam and Eve novel, we can observe the same tendency in Ysaÿe's approach to the op. 27 solo violin sonatas.

Together with Liviu Rebreanu, Eugène Ysaÿe involuntarily uses the principle of reincarnation and rebirth specific to the oriental culture in which they unveil the loom of which's principles form a perspective that joints together the past and the present. If in Liviu Rebreanu's novel we find direct and indirect links to ancient cultures in which we feel the vibration of characters such as Utnapishtim than in the musical language of Ysaÿe we would surely recognise the vibration of J.S. Bach.

Similar to Liviu Rebreanu's novel *Adam and Eve* in which the 7 chapters are moulded on one of the cultures of the ancient world like the indian culture, the sumerian culture, the egyptian culture, etc. in 7 different distinct and divers historical periods; in the same manner Eugène Ysaÿe captures 6 exponential musical personalities of the XXth century and their culture. Practically this innovative principle which we can define as syncretic art that is particular to the work of the two artists reconciles the cultures with the unique inherent personalities and filter them through their own perspective so that the art catches life as to speak.

The only visible difference of such an association is the number of chapters of Rebreanu's novel and Ysaÿe's sonatas opus 27. We can see that Rebreanu's novel has 7 chapters and Ysaÿe's op. 27 has just 6 sonatas. Courtesy to Ysaÿe's *Secret Sonata* documentary distributed on the internet in february 2020 we can observe that Ysaÿe wrote another sonata to complete the opus 27 which remained unfinished. Supposedly had Ysaÿe finished his sonata, we would have had 7 sonatas, 7 chapters, therefore a match in the true sense of the word of the entire creational universe which would have been immortalized under the symbolic and numerological dome. Ultimately, God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh.

#### **4. Notational system of the *Opus 27* by Eugène Ysaÿe**

Eugène Ysaÿe and George Enescu are the only two early composers that I am aware of, speaking here of the first half of the XXth century, in which pedantism and the attention to detail to such extent were captured in a musical score. It is not without reason that many musicians complain on the complexity of the musical text of these two notorious composers.

## Signes - Abréviations.

(Translation to English)

Les 4 cordes:  $\overline{\text{m}}\overline{\text{i}}-\overline{\text{l}}\overline{\text{a}}-\overline{\text{r}}\overline{\text{é}}-\overline{\text{sol}}.$  <sup>Ⓢ</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: - - - - ⑤ (Finger motionless - not moving the finger.)

Poser le doigt sur la quinte juste: ⑥ (To position the finger on the perfect fifth.)

Rester à la position: - - - ⑦ (Remain in the position.)

A la pointe: - - - - - ⑧ (At the point.)

Au talon: - - - - - ⑨ (At the frog.)

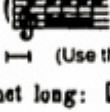
Au milieu: - - - - - ⑩ (In the middle.)

Note jouée isolément - ♠ (Note played separately.)

Le quart de ton au dessus ⑪ (The quarter tone to the top.)

Le quart de ton au dessous ⑫ (The quarter tone to the bottom.)

Le sautillé: - -  (Notated.)

Le détaché à la corde:  (Notated.)

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


Archet court: ⑬ - Archet long: ⑭ (Bow runs - Bow long.)

Vibrant: - ⑮ - Sans vibrer: ⑯ (Vibrate - Without vibrato.)

Sans presser: ⑰ - Sans hâte: - ⑱ (Without pressing - Without haste.)

Bien mesuré: ⑲ - Bien rythmé: ⑳ (Well measured - Rhythmic.)

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

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

S'exécutent par un rapide arpeggio. *Ex.*  (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 doigts, coups-d'archet, nuances et indications de l'auteur, se rapprochera toujours plus rapidement du but.

Fig. 1. Notational system of Ysaÿe

What a paradox isn't it? On one side we have musicians that guide themselves with the principle that less is more and on the other hand we have musicians that appreciate the attention to detail even if it is in abundance converging in the composers' musical brand. I have ask myself many times what is it that made composers start to leave their mark more and more on a musical score. Is it because they (instrumentalist-composers) found themselves in a sort of medium of obscurity? An obscurity which the composers didn't want to propagate further? Let's consider these questions rhetorically since we do not have any written proof to testify these affirmations. What is in a way clear is the fact that we have evolved artistically in a certain direction. Eugène Ysaÿe was a free musical personality which would have enjoyed a rubato, a glisando, an that *je ne sais quoi* that brings a personal note to a musical score. That being said Ysaÿe has invented a notational system (see figure 1 above) that gives the op. 27 (Ysaÿe 2004) a unique flavour that offers guidance to the interpreter. In other words, the solo violin sonatas of the op. 27 would sound every time similar to the visionary image the composer had when he conceived these works.

##### **5. Personalities that have constituted an inspiration to the *Opus 27* by Eugène Ysaÿe**

In one of the chapters before I have mentioned the fact that Eugène Ysaÿe has moulded each of the op. 27 violin sonatas to a remarkable musical personality of the XX<sup>th</sup> century with which he had links based on friendship, mutual admiration and professional basis. These musical personalities are enumerated successively on the base of the op. 27 dedications offered by Ysaÿe as follows: Joseph Szigeti, Jacques Thibault, George Enescu, Fritz Kreisler, Mathieu Crickboom and Manuel Quiroga. The common denominator of these personalities was the city of Paris and specifically the fact that they all had links with this notorious musical center.

The society of the XX<sup>th</sup> century was different from the one that we see in the informational *epoque* of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century. Musicians and artists that have reached a notoriety or a certain professional level were not as many as we see today and the competition was not as fierce like the one of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century. Many times friendships were long life lasting and were bound by the „apostolic musical roles” musicians were often aware. From one point of view we could affirm that musicians were an exclusive artistic club. The reason we enjoy the inspiration and immortalisation of these artists in works that catch aspects of their human and musical characteristics like the oeuvre of Eugène Ysaÿe is the very bond of musical elevation.

The first sonata was inspired by the hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti renowned for the interpretation of the contemporary musical works of the XX<sup>th</sup>

century. Although structurally it holds a pattern inspired by J.S. Bach *sonata da chiesa* form, Ysaÿe introduces harmonic and melodic elements with modern flavour in which the predilection converges to tonal obscurity. Ysaÿe managed to catch Joseph Szigeti's fascination for contemporary music of the XX<sup>th</sup> century.

In the second sonata op. 27 dedicated to the french violinist Jacques Thibault also known as the „pride of the French school for 40 years” (Roth 1997, 50) Ysaÿe surprises the obsession of Thibault for the Prelude of the 3rd J.S. Bach Partita for solo violin BWV 1006 through direct references. The second sonata op. 27 presents programatic elements in which the first movement is called *Obsession* and it reflects the shared obsession for Bach of the two musicians.

The third sonata op. 27 called *Ballade* is dedicated to the romanian violinist George Enescu. George Enescu was considered a phenomenon of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, having superlative qualities and being considered as „equally defined as violinist, pianist, composer and conductor” (Sârbu 2005, 182) or „the greatest phenomenon since Mozart” (Enescu, en.wikipedia.org). In the third sonata Ysaÿe unveils a rhapsodic character without a definite musical form and surprises with a passionate complex lyricism combined with an impetuosity which probably stands as admiration to the nature of the romanian composer George Enescu.

The forth sonata op. 27 is dedicated to the austrian violinist Fritz Kreisler and is also written in classical lines following the *Allemanda, Sarabade and Finale* pattern. On this structure Ysaÿe introduces elements inspired by Kreisler's musical own compositions. Kreisler is known in the musical literature as being one of the first violinists to use continuous vibrato which assured a distinct coherence of the musical text.

The fifth sonata op. 27 is dedicated to the belgian violinist Mathieu Crickboom who was one of Ysaÿe's students and displays an elegiaque melancolic and pastorale picture. The fifth sonata „paints” memories shared by Crickboom and Ysaÿe alike of the beautiful homecountry Belgium.

The sixth sonata op. 27 is dedicated to the spanish violinist Manuel Quiroga and is characterised by excessive technical difficulty with exotic flavour. Similar to the third sonata, nr. 6 has also a rhapsodic manner and presents less links with the other sonatas by Ysaÿe.

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, if we would possess a scanner that would chart the op. 27 by Eugène Ysaÿe than the analysis would sound as such: each sonata of the op. 27 presents innefable elements of the magic dust spread by Ysaÿe in which we find a pattern

inspired by J.S. Bach, on top of which we have the mould of each sonata on a specific musical exponent of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, together with the quarter tones insertions specific to the oriental culture, the 6 note chords, innovatively introduced by Ysaÿe on a monodic instrument such as the violin and last but not least the unique notational system through which Ysaÿe guides anybody who tries to understand his inherent nature.

All these elements converge in the syncretic art of Ysaÿe and represent a peak of individualism and of the universal language of music.

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