



## Eugene Ysaye, Composing style elements

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### I) Listening sample/performance: *Ballade d minor op. 27/3*



Figure 1 Ysaye

### II) Short biographic details and image:

E. Ysaye lived from 1858 to 1931, and was a Belgian violinist, composer and conductor.

He studied violin with J. Massart in Liege, H. Wieniawski in Brussels and H. Vieuxtemps in Paris.

Later he was a soloist in Berlin, and on tours, a professor in Brussels, a leader of his own string quartet and founder of his own concert series, as well as a conductor in Cincinnati USA.

He is also regarded as being the founder of the Queen Elizabeth Competition in Brussels, together with his friend the Queen of Belgium. It is told that they had a son together.

Famous composers' works are written for him: C. Franck's violin sonata, Debussy's string quartet, Chausson's "Poeme", and more by C. Saint-Saens, G. Faure, V. d'Indy.

The great violin pedagogue Carl Flesch said that Ysaye was the most outstanding violinist he ever heard. Ysaye's chamber music friend and pianist Arthur Rubinstein found that Ysaye, through his playing, made all his violin colleagues look like children.

After listening to Joseph Szigeti's performance of the Bach Solo sonatas, he composed his own six solo sonatas, each dedicated to one of his great colleagues, characterizing their way of playing: Szigeti, J. Thibaud, G. Enescu, F. Kreisler, M. Crickboom and M. Quiroga. Ysaye students have been widely sought after for teaching: J. Gingold, W. Primrose, N. Milstein, J. Brodsky, and L. Persinger. Persinger was the teacher of Isaac Stern who later played Ysaye's violin.

### III) Role and directions of composers who wrote for the violin:

At baroque and classical times, the composers, namely Bach and Mozart, were

multiple genius’: they composed, performed and conducted their own violin – and piano concertos by themselves. Starting with Beethoven, this became an increasingly wide – spread field; most composers were still pianists, but the performers’ and particularly violinists’ issue went its own way.

As a result, we then have the “great symphonic composers” such as Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky. etc., who obviously didn’t perform their violin concertos.

Instead, they were close friends and advisors with violinists who eventually also composed, as “violinistic composers”, specifically for the violin: Paganini, Spohr, Ernst, Joachim, Wieniawski, Vieuxtemps, and Ysaye.

This was also the effect of the newly invented Tourte – violin bow, the longer violin neck, and even the chin rest. The violin playing started to become increasingly demanding, and created the character of the virtuoso.

An interesting example of the cooperation between the two sides is the Brahms concerto that has been modified by Joachim and approved in this way by Brahms: we today know this “Brahms – Joachim concerto” as the Brahms concerto. See the manuscript of the score with both handwritings

[1 Brahms Autograph].

After Ysaye there were still Kreisler, Heifetz, Milstein and Szigeti, but their compositional achievements were more in the field of arrangements, nevertheless with great serious skill as well. Kreisler in fact studied composition with Anton Bruckner and Leo Delibes.

Today even the traditional custom to compose our own cadenzas for solo concertos has become rare, since we have so many great cadenza compositions from history.

We may thus conclude that we can see Ysaye as the last great violinistic composer.

#### IV) Ysaye’s role as a composer:

As mentioned, he belongs to the violinistic category, and from studies has been trained with certainly all traditional violin literature of both “great symphonic” and “violinistic” categories.

A curious biographic detail to that is the fact that he only performed the Beethoven and Brahms concertos at a fairly high age in his career, when he was around 40 years old. His teachers, Wieniawski and Vieuxtemps, were outstanding violinists and yet famous composers of the same role. And similarly with them, Ysaye was close to famous symphonic composers in the franco – belgian cultural area.

Since on the edge of 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century there have been various styles overlapping in time, and Ysaye was friend with several different composers.

Cesar Franck was the traditional French – Belgian romantic composer, renewing many elements from baroque time, and also newly composing for the church organ.

Close in style was also Camille Saint – Saens, who composed church oratorios, program music, and absolute symphonic and concerto works. A curious example of his multiple forms is the organ symphony that involves organ and piano soloists at the same time.

Claude Debussy then was one of the French impressionists who aimed to renew the harmonic, rhythmic and colorful composing elements, with church tone modes, whole – tone scales, fourth – and fifth – intervals, extended and diminished triads. He wrote both absolute and programmatic compositions, and involved the cliché of the “orientalism”. While being categorized as the impressionist, he can also be seen as absolutely unique.

Ernest Chausson, most famous through his “Poeme”, closely followed Debussy, and at the same time went to visit and learn from Wagner’s operas in Bayreuth. At that time in France there

were also close friendly artist connections with painters (such as Renoir) and poets (such as Mallarme). Thus many musical works have picture and poetry background and meaning, and inspire fantasy, visual and acoustic colors together, stories, and tend to invite audiences to dream.

Regarding the new achievements and directions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is certainly worth and important considering the 2<sup>nd</sup> Viennese School that also experimented with whole – tone scales and came to the 12 – tone row.

And yet, at the same time there were also Mahler, Strauss and Stravinsky who, each in his own way, enlarged the expressive range in eminent historic positions. And, not to forget, the experiment with the quarter – tone steps, which – besides traditional Indian composers for example – also Bartok tried out. Bartok was also famous for folk music elements; Stravinsky for being “Neo – Classicist”, citing and recomposing elder and ancient compositions. And what of course has influenced most every composer around that time, is the Jazz.

## V) Scales

The scale is, obviously, the basis of all music, together with the triad/arpeggio, that is retrieved from the overtone – series or – scale [2: Overtone series].

In violin music history practically all concertos directly involve scales in the compositions: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Tchaikovsky etc.

[3: composers’ examples of applied scales]

Thus the scales on violin have become all basis of violin practicing.

They have become our daily duty and homework, for a life – time, including and especially for all famous violinists. And therefore for violin today we also have another, so to say third category, the “pedagogic” composers who wrote scale systems for daily use: Sevcik, Flesch, Rostal, Schneiderhan, Galamian, Schradieck, and

also already centuries ago Tartini and Geminiani [4: Flesch sample page].

In a certain sense also Paganini can be seen as “pedagogic”. While today he is highly respected on concert stage, some of his less known variations certainly stand for daily techniques. And there, with the new and demanding style elements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ysaye in his daily etudes started including more fourths, fifths, sevenths etc., and composed them under the title “dix preludes”, to be applied as a, so to say, 20<sup>th</sup> – century – style appendix to the scale system.

[5: Ysaye Preludes a) manuscript and b) sample page]

## VI) Specific examples of compositional influences and similarities:

1) Baroque elements

a) J. S. Bach:

Generally, the writing of six solo sonatas is inspired and reminds of Bach’s similar work.

In particular, Ysaye’s Ballade stands in d minor, which suggests that it is close to Bach’s Chaconne.

Both works are famous for chords and arpeggio figurations.

(Chaconne: bar 1 – and 63 – 64; Ballade bar 13 – and 113)

b) Organ point:

Franck sonata 2<sup>nd</sup> movement beginning; Ysaye bar 107

c) Fuge/fugato:

Bach g – minor BWV 1001 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt. and Ysaye op. 27/1 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt.

d) Ornamentations:

Turns and trills op. 27/4 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt. bar 26/27;

Bach BWV 1006 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt. beginning

e) Forms:

Siciliano: Ysaye op. 27/2, 2<sup>nd</sup> movement and Bach BWV 1001, 3<sup>rd</sup> mvt.

Prelude: Ysaye op. 27/2 and back BWV

1006, with directly cited head motive

Sarabande: Ysaye op. 27/4 and Bach

BWV 1004

f) Characteristics:

Sequences: Ysaye op. 27/3, bar 60, with diminution

2) Classical and Neo-classicist elements

a) forms:

Variations: op. 27/2, 3<sup>rd</sup> mvt.

“Scherzoso”, “Finale”: op. 27/1, mvt. 2

and 3

Sonata – Allegro form: op. 27/6,

with introduction, exposition, development, recapitulation and coda/stretta

b) characteristics:

trill – cadenza: op. 27/3, bar 43

short cadenzas: op. 27/6, bar 149

c) cited motives:

Bach E major Preludio head motive in op.

27/2, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt. (see 1e)

“Dies Irae” (wrath of the Gods) motive in

op. 27/2, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt.

and throughout mvts. 1,3,4

d) Cantus firmus:

Op. 27/4, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt.

3) specific violinistic techniques

a) glissando:

op. 27/5 1<sup>st</sup> mvt. bar 33; compare

Paganini Caprice op. 1/23

b) pizzicato left hand:

op. 27/5 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt. Bar 62 – 64; compare

Paganini op. 1/24

c) double – stop progressions:

op. 27/6 bar 194; compare Paganini op.

1/4

d) virtuoso bowings:

staccato op. 27/6 bar 38/39 Paganini op.

1/10

e) high position arpeggio:

op. 27/6 bar 186 – op. 1/1

f) wider use of intervals and dramatic or

fast chords:

10<sup>th</sup>s op. 27/3 bar 93 – op. 1/24;

Wieniawski concerto f# minor opening

Combined sixths and tenths: op. 27/3 bar 66 and Brahms concerto 1<sup>st</sup> mvt.

op. 27/2 bar 14/15 – op. 1/4 and 1/24; also Brahms concerto 1<sup>st</sup> mvt.

g) use of high G – string:

op. 27/6 bar 141 – op. 1/3

4) romantic similarities particularly with his friend composers:

a) free meter and cadenza

Ysaye op. 27/3 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> line –

Franck sonata 3<sup>rd</sup> mvt. beginning

b) motivic double – stop progression

op. 27/3 bar 69 – Chausson Poeme

Cadenza

e) figured organ point (see 1b)

op. 27/3 bar 107 –

Franck sonata 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt. beginning

f) forms:

“Ballade” as by Chopin,

and in poetry: Goethe/Schubert:

“Erlokoenig”

g) program music and Character titles::

Op. 27/2: “Danse des Ombres”, “Les Furies”

5) 20<sup>th</sup> – century elements

a) Jazz – and dance – like rhythmic progression:

Op. 27/3 bar 12 (see 1 a)

Debussy Golliwogg’s cake – walk bar 1

b) Impressionist – like color and Arabesque:

Op. 27/3 bar 44 – Debussy “Gradus ad Parnassum”

c) Quarter – tones

Op. 27/3 bar 44/46 (see 5b) – Bartok violin concerto cadenza

d) Extended triads:

Op. 27/3 bar 1, 2, 7

e) Chromatic scales fast, cluster – like:

Op. 27/3 bar 88 – 90 and Bartok concerto 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt. Bar

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| f) “sul ponticello” (over the bridge) color:<br>Op. 27/2 4 <sup>th</sup> mvt. bar 44  | Op. 27/3 bar 5  |
| g) Folk music elements:<br>Op. 27/6 bar 106: Habanera/Havanaise –<br>rhythm –<br>Saint Saens Havanaise bar 10<br>“Danse Rustique”: op. 27/5, 3 <sup>rd</sup> mvt. | b) Chromatic scale in sixths:<br>Op. 27/6 bar 182   |
| 6) extended techniques as in his own<br>scale publication<br>a) Whole – tone scale in sixths:   | 7) personal explanation chart on playing<br>techniques<br>(in original edition by Schott Brussels)<br>VII) Putting the piece together again,<br>perform and listen to it once more. |

### Sources:

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