



**Solo violin repertoire, with special focus on works
of Bach and Ysaÿe - Solo Sonatas (and Partitas) for Violin**

“Bach and (Vs.) Ysaÿe. A timeless and endless journey. To unknown.”

by D. Sekulić

Program

J. S. Bach – Sonata for Violin Solo No.1 in g-minor BWV 1001

Adagio – Fuga – Siciliana – Presto

E. Ysaÿe – Sonata for Violin Solo in g minor Op.27, No.1

Grave – Fugato – Allegretto poco scherzoso – Finale con brio

J. S. Bach – Partita for Violin Solo No.3 in E BWV 1006

Preludio – Loure – Gavotte en Rondeau – Menuet I-II - Bourrée - Gigue

E. Ysaÿe – Sonata for Violin Solo in a minor Op.27, No.2

Prelude. “Obsession” – Malinconia – Sarabande. “Danse des Ombres” – Les Furies

J. S. Bach – Partita for Violin Solo No.2 in d minor BWV 1004

Allemande – Corrente – Sarabande – Giga - Ciaccona

E. Ysaÿe – Sonata for Violin Solo in E major Op.27, No.6

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Preface

At the beginning, the main intention was mostly to write a proper structural, analytical summary of the work done. But, as fate would have it, little by little it turned into a heartfelt "confession" over a timeless, everlasting musical journey. Once I read that one should read same book at least three times. First, when one is younger than the lead character, then when one is the same age and, at last, when one is older. This thought has been lingering in my head for some time now. Time spent with these two great masters - Bach and Ysaÿe. Because, similarly to literature - music also brings the out puzzles of joy and life. And while our life unfolds, so do perspective and impressions we would like to convey when performing the pieces. But there is one additional detail, much as a performer desires to implement oneself in the piece, our imperative has to be the music itself - the music written, composed and invented by the composer. While trying to reach the essence of what we believe one was thinking while writing we are developing our own perspectives and perception of music. A while ago there was already an opinion, which was influenced by, I am sure, increasing availability to read and listen the great performers of our times, and even some older – the opinion was that Bach and his solo sonatas and partitas for violin are a kind of a bible for violinists. We start usually with a movement or two while in the delicate early years of studying. And this is where it becomes a real proof of how well and complex this is. While still in the phase of forming of the technique and sound through working on these pieces we simultaneously develop technique and train our ear (and our

inner ear) to search for a beautiful sound. Add to that the always interesting melodies and rhythmical changes with expressivity and movement within the "grand" tempo - as a "youngster" you already are given the chance of having the feeling of a real performer. An artist. And to addition of your technical improvement, comes also this psychological moment of pushing oneself to make it to the next level. Than we come to that next level. When we are already older. More capable. Already settled a great portion of technical development. But still in the middle phase of our journey. This is the moment when we approach Solo Sonatas and Partitas with completely different gaze. And ears. The beautiful, everlasting and ever inspiring music is what will most likely draw artists to come back to them over and over again. Always making them slightly different. Slightly better. This is the "adult" phase. The third reading, if we are to go back to the terms of literature. This is what, in my humble opinion, makes this piece even greater. A true masterpiece. Because it becomes a part of our life, a part that is growing and being built through our life. And in the same time a part that is building our life (as a violinist). And than, along the way, along this journey - we also meet Ysaÿe. The equally, ever so great and amazing Ysaÿe.

Bach and Ysaÿe – “A Violinist’s Bible”

In a way, together Bach’s “Sei Solo”^{*} and Ysaÿe’s Op.27 form something like a bible for a violinist. Like Old and New Testament. Something that every violinist^{} should work and master through on their way to becoming a complete musician and artist – weather their main focus would be on performing or teaching. Or both.**

It is often said about the composers and their work, that in "their own time" they were under appreciated. If one looks closely, this was often the case with those we today consider the most innovative and those who made strongest impact of how we read and perform today. If, for example, Mendelssohn did not recognize the beauty and magnitude of greatness in Bach's St Matthew Passion, would we even know of him? And then would Ysaÿe find his inspiration for op.27 in Bach, or search elsewhere or we would be withheld for that jewel as well? Luckily, we do not have to speculate, what if ... fortunately it happened the way it happened. If one looks closely also in which period of life of both of them these pieces were composed, there is again a striking similarity. Both of these pieces were composed after the death of their wives, their loves. For Ysaÿe there were two additional moments of inspiration – the concert of Szigeti, where he played Bach's Solo sonata and the fact that each sonata was dedicated to one of his contemporary violinists^{*}.**

Innovations both of them brought to violin music and technique with these two (twelve)

pieces is immense and irreplaceable.

As there is little to none information of how Bach intended sonatas and partitas to sound, we are pretty much left on our own understanding, though it is questionable if it is really "our own" or influenced by long tradition of interpretation and cultural history. First thing that comes to mind - the violin of that time was not the same as the modern day instruments. But still the polyphony Bach brought in with 4-5 cords, played on all strings "at once" – presented a difficulty. Until then, violin was more considered as a melodic instrument (though there have been some attempts of polyphony before, non of them as this masterpiece***). In fact, one could probably easily think that the "inspiration" and goal is to reach similarity to the sound of organ in the church. That sonority with violin would mean creating an illusion. Playing four strings at once for a long time, while keeping beautiful sound that also brings out the melodic line but still keeps the resonance of the "vertical" line – not the easiest task, but the execution and making this illusion of all notes in the cord sound together real is something possible to do.

By the time Ysaÿe wrote his sonatas this technique is mastered and something that is almost outdated, so he has to go further. If we analyse the cords for example: he uses "regular" cords, but along side to arpeggios, the double, triple, quadruple notes he goes so far as having even six simultaneous sounds - something that, at beginning, would seem close to impossible, but he also notes down execution possibilities making it easier for player to reach good interpretation. And on top of that he brings the innovation in harmony as well – by not being afraid to use quartet-tone, when he thought and felt it was necessary for the music.

Of course we should never forget another great technical achievement in between these two milestones for violin playing - Paganini. However, the "custom" of playing Paganini (and in lot of occasions Bach) would ask for a somewhat more "vertical" technique. Meaning that "the execution" of the notes in the left hand would ask that the hand is lifted away from the fingerboard and in to be very articulated - making possible fast passages, clear sound and changes, with all the brilliance this music requires. However, Ysaÿe brings a "new" way of playing. "Horizontal" movement of the left hand. In order to reach that perfect musical connections and smooth changes so that the musical goal would be achieved, rarely, the left hand is to slide along the fingerboard (or across the strings), rather than fingers being lifted from it. This innovation at the time seemed very difficult. So difficult, or more precisely unusual, in fact that violinists of Ysaÿe time to whom he dedicated his sonatas, never played them****. But this probably is the normal cycle of creating something new, and that people initially shy away from the innovation. Similarities with modern can be found in classical and contemporary music – our "cultural habits and expectations" still have to get used to

innovations. Until fairly recently, Ysaÿe's op.27 was unfamiliar to the most of violinists, not to say musician in general, around the world, especially when compared with the presence of Bach Solo Sonatas and partitas. The innate knowledge “acquired” by generations before us playing, recording and therefore making available for younger generations to get accustomed to this sound and execution is only now giving the fruits of merits. Of course, it is also to be considered that in the beginning of the "recording era" - the recordings were quite expensive and that even some of the greatest violinists of early and mid 20th century recorded rarely and we do not even have the complete Bach recordings, yet alone Ysaÿe. Now, because we have already got accustomed to the "new ways", soon after taking on Bach young violinists start working and playing also Ysaÿe. Treating them almost as equal. The progression of "popularity" of Ysaÿe sonatas is much faster than Bach Sonatas and Partitas - most likely because of the culture, and much better and easier access to information, both written and recorded, than century ago. While Ysaÿe was, roughly said, in the mid 20th century to 1970s considered more in the lines of contemporary, now his solo sonatas are becoming equally represented in the repertoire and competition demands. But it is only for the best. Because not only that we get technical improvement, but through music and depth and search for meaning of the music presented, the goals and striving limits are constantly pushed forward.

Another thing. After working on Ysaÿe, and putting aside the music itself, the achieved technique opens the mind and ideas of trying and finding different and maybe better solutions for technical execution of some of the Bach passages - but keeping in mind that the ultimate goal is music and sound.

By giving both the recapitulation of what preceded and “looking” far in the future with innovative technical but also musical demands, this two great composers, musicians, artist and people gave us a perfect “tool” to perfect and overcome any difficulties – so to reach the main goal, music and it’s meaning.

** The “original” name Bach signed was “Sei Solo – a violino senza Basso accompagnato”. Later on the title became, as we know it today.*

*** In the time of 21 century, and with all the possibilities of human experimenting, this might not be only a case for violinists, but rather musicians-artist in general. One of the vocal (I will be somewhat free to say in my own opinion, but I am sure it is a generally accepted one) geniuses of our time Bobby Mc Ferrin uses Bach, and some of his instrumental pieces in his performances - by singing them. And on one of the occasions he suggested that all singers, striving for greater technical abilities, as well as musical understanding and expression should practice Bach - in particular the Prelude of Third Partita.*

**** More in the chapter “Bach and Ysaÿe. The men. The life. The work”*

*****This statement is maybe just partially true. In some sources it is mentioned that none of them played them. But in the "Ysaÿe: His life, Work and Influence" by A. Ysaÿe and B. Ratcliffe it is said that in fact only the No.5 and No.6 were not performed during the life of Ysaÿe and by the violinists to whom they were dedicated. The preceding four very often played and regularly performed in public, by the artists they were dedicated to.*

“End note”

...how much recognition and influence is present in forming our history and musical heritage. And how “gathered information” can shape and influence our performance, even while staying in our subconscious while we explore our desire of playing certain piece.

...

Often "what if" question can pop up in mind. And how would all those “what-ifs” reflect the culture and violin world, playing and repertoire as we know it now. But in the same time, while these questions come to mind, it is always very valuable to get deeper and better insight of certain piece, composer, musician... also looking at them through eyes and creations of equally great composers, musicians... How much do we only find out and how much is our knowledge broadened by seeing how much has Bach and his music influenced and inspired generations to come. But also, how we learn and see different aspects of personality - Frank's violins sonata, ever so beautiful and with moments of gentleness and grandiosity in the same time - dedicated and written as a wedding gift for Ysaÿe... How much we learn and find out other sides of Ysaÿe through pieces dedicated to him - giving us another level of understanding his own music. The same as his dedication to other musicians, composers for his pieces... How much we get a new dimension of what it is hidden in the music when we pay attention to whom it was dedicated – especially in Ysaÿe Solo sonatas... These are all the little details that can help one to create unique and extraordinary interpretation of having all the “written” aspects in mind, while putting ones own self and impressions in the music.

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