

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS 1045

Ysaÿe, the most outstanding and individual violinist I have heard in all my life. – “Memoirs” Carl Flesch

At the close of the Nineteenth Century three great violinists dominated the international concert scene: Joseph Joachim, prime representative of German classicism, the Spanish virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate and the Belgian romantic Eugène Ysaÿe. Remarkably, although Joachim died in 1907 and Sarasate in 1908, all three made records for the infant gramophone. It is fortunate indeed for posterity that they did for, with all their shortcomings, these primitive recordings give us our earliest historical insight into the sound of violin playing. Ysaÿe had long resisted all offers to make records, but on his third tour of America he was finally persuaded to record for Columbia. Twelve titles survive from his first session in December 1912. Two further titles, Dvorák's Humoresque and Schubert's Ave Maria, were made a little later. An arrangement of Chopin's first waltz, mentioned by Antoine Ysaÿe in his biography of his father, has never come to light. His recordings are presented here for the first time in their entirety. He was known also as a conductor and one example of an orchestra under his leadership is included. Ysaÿe was both physically and artistically a giant. Truly the greatest and most acclaimed virtuoso of his day and one of the great violinists of all time. A pupil of the Belgian school as represented by his teachers Vieuxtemps and Wieniawski, his influence and teaching reached far and wide. Without exception he was loved and revered by his younger contemporaries who considered him 'the master of us all'. He has, with some justification, been described as the first of the modern virtuosos, and his records tend to illustrate this claim for, aside from what would be to modern ears an excessive use of portamenti, his playing is remarkably free from those mannerisms which mark so many of his contemporaries 'old-fashioned'. Freedom and spontaneity were essential ingredients of his playing, but it was a freedom built upon a lifetime of discipline, thought and study. Virtuosity was with Ysaÿe not an end in itself, but the servant of musical interpretation. Outstanding among his recordings is the Rondino of Vieuxtemps. Ysaÿe always regarded Vieuxtemps as his chief mentor, and no doubt this piece was near to his heart. There is wonderful lyricism in the main theme; dazzling, clean virtuosity in the climax. Also of particular note is the Finale from the Mendelssohn Concerto, carried off with supreme panache, the sudden acceleration near the end no doubt dictated by the approaching time limit on the record. Ysaÿe himself was particularly fond of this record. 'I never believed I played so well' he confided on first hearing it. Also impressive are the two Mazurkas by Wieniawski, notable for his rhythmic impulse, and his own Lointain Passe Mazurka. Of his playing of

lyrical pieces there is abundant evidence. Curiously impressive are the two Wagner transcriptions. We should not perhaps make too much of the occasional intonation slip in the Prize Song. Everywhere one is struck by the wonderful unbroken cantabile; the lovely phrasing. The Fauré Berceuse, its lilting rhythm so nicely judged, the Schumann Abendlied and his own Rêve d'Enfant - two of his rarest recordings - most beautifully played. But what comes over most forcibly in all his recordings is the communicativeness, the shades of feeling - melancholy, tenderness, ebullience, joy - and frequently all within the same short piece.

Ysaÿe's accompanist in these recordings was Camille Decreus (1876- 1939). Decreus had been a pupil of Ysaÿe's old friend and recital collaborator Raoul Pugno at the Paris Conservatoire. After serving his apprenticeship as répétiteur at the Paris Opéra he made his solo debut in 1906. He was a valued recital partner for many artists both in Europe and America. He became professor of piano at the American Conservatory at Fontainebleau. His wife was the celebrated violinist Renée Chemet.

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The violin records were made in the years 1912 to 1914, the orchestral in 1919. A number of them are considerably longer than the normal limit of the time, this leads inevitably to some loss of sound quality towards the ends of sides.

Brahms' Hungarian Dance No.5 is in F sharp minor but Joachim's transcription is in G minor 'a much more comfortable key for the violin and a transposition which retains the warm lush tone intended' (M.J.Derrick).

It has been suggested that Ysaÿe himself was the soloist in the orchestral record. If so this would be a most interesting and for its time presumably unique document of earlier performing practice. However, five professional violinists have each stated independently that the sound and style are not those of Ysaÿe.

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