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“Colors of Virtuosity”

Amitié, Poème No.6, Op.26 Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931)

Imagine hearing a violinist, or any string player, for that matter, performing without vibrato! We consider the resonant shimmer of vibrato to be an essential component of fine string playing. But until Eugène Ysaÿe, violinists did not routinely employ the technique when playing. He was the first major violinist to play with consistent vibrato, even on passing tones and when playing pizzicato. These were considered unusual interpretive embellishments.

Ysaÿe brought the Belgian violin school to its peak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He studied with Rodolphe Massart, Henry Vieuxtemps and Henryk Wieniawski, soared into a fine solo career of his own, and founded the most important string quartet of his day. César Franck and Guillaume Lekeu both wrote violin sonatas for him; Debussy wrote his string quartet for the Ysaÿe Quartet, and both Fauré and Chausson composed works for the celebrated Belgian. Curiously, Ysaÿe never studied composition, yet like most of the virtuosi of the day, he composed a great deal of music as concert vehicles for himself. These include eight solo concertos and a number of other works for violin and orchestra.

He is best remembered not for those concerted works, but for six sonatas for unaccompanied violin published in 1924 as Op.27. The set was initially inspired by the famous Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti, whose playing of a Bach unaccompanied Sonata impressed Ysaÿe enormously. Eventually he dedicated each of his own six sonatas to another contemporary violinist of note, to wit: Jacques Thibaud, George Enescu, Fritz Kreisler, Mathieu Crickboom, and Manuel Quiroga.

Less well known are a series of nine symphonic poems Ysaÿe composed for string instruments and orchestra. More than half of them feature solo violin with orchestra; however, this genre seemed to fire Ysaÿe’s imagination for the entire string family. *Méditation*, Op.16 is for cello and orchestra; *Poème nocturne*, Op.29 for violin, cello and orchestra; and *Harmonies du soir*, Op.31 for the unusual combination of string quartet and string orchestra. Only one, *Amitié*, Op.26 is for two violins and orchestra. We hear it today in a reduction for two violins and piano that was almost certainly prepared by his son Antoine Ysaÿe, who was also his Brussels publisher and would later become his biographer. Éditions Ysaÿe published this trio version in 1927, when the composer was still alive, so it was presumably issued with his approval.

Like the other symphonic poems, *Amitié* is an extended single movement with a rhapsodic, sectional structure. This genre allowed Ysaÿe considerable latitude with respect to tempo and mood, though he favored a lyrical tone with occasional surges of energy or passion. The poems freed his imagination to explore his unusual approach to harmony and musical narrative, unconstrained by formal demands.

The title, *Amitié*, is the French word for friendship. Ysaÿe dedicated it to Théodore Lindenlaub, a French journalist who, by 1927, resided in Switzerland. He was the musical correspondent of the Parisian newspaper *Le Temps*. Ysaÿe met him in the late 1870s and the two became close friends. That comes through in the intimately entwined ‘voices’ of the two violins in this thoughtful, largely introspective piece. While the music swells in two places to turbulent climaxes, the great impression it leaves is of two people who can finish each other’s sentences, who communicate so well that they can practically read each other’s minds.

What this translates to in music is a need for uncanny timing and flawless ensemble, knowing how to ‘grow’ a phrase similarly, how to match tone and volume. Because Ysaÿe was himself an impeccable virtuoso, both violin parts are technically demanding; however, it is the collaborative effort and unity of purpose that make *Amitié* so difficult to perform. Ysaÿe’s unusual approach to harmony and his lyric gift make the piece a welcome discovery.

Trio-Serenade, Op.12 (1919-20) **Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967)**

If you Google Zoltán Kodály, you’ll gather that he was a major force in music education. The Kodály method is designed to promote universal musical literacy by teaching children to sing based on a progressive repertory of Hungarian folk songs and vocal exercises. It is used today throughout Hungarian schools and continues to be popular in other countries as well.

If Kodály’s music is familiar to audiences, it is largely because of his major orchestral scores like *Háry János* (1926) and the *Dances of Gálanta* (1933) and his many unaccompanied choral works, which are popular with high school and church choirs. Few concert goers associate Kodály with chamber music.

String players know better. A majority of Kodály’s early works are chamber music for strings. Of the dozen or so pieces of chamber music he composed between 1899 and 1922, only three include piano. The balance favor strings, often in unorthodox combinations. An early *Intermezzo* is for two violins and viola. The powerful Duo, Op.7 is for violin and cello. Kodály’s monumental unaccompanied Cello Sonata, Op.8, is a Mount Everest for the instrument. There are also two string quartets from this youthful period, as well as this Trio-Serenade.

The early emphasis on chamber music was a natural outgrowth of Kodály’s musical childhood. His father was an accomplished amateur violinist and his mother sang and played piano. Young Kodály became accomplished on piano, violin, viola, *and* cello and participated regularly in chamber music in his home, orchestra at school, and choir at church. When he began to compose seriously, it was natural for him to seek a comfort level in writing for the instruments he knew best, before attempting a larger scale work for orchestra.

The most celebrated precedent for the unusual combination of two violins and viola is Dvořák’s Terzetto of 1887, a work that Kodály certainly knew. His own 1912 piece is an early example of neoclassicism, with a textbook sonata form for its first movement.

Kodály's colleague and friend Béla Bartók published a review of the Trio-Serenade in 1921, noting its similarity to Kodály's other works up to that point, and providing a fascinating manifesto for new music at a time when Schoenberg was on the cusp of developing his revolutionary twelve-tone technique.

In spite of its unusual chord combinations and surprising originality, it is firmly based on tonality, although this should not be strictly interpreted in terms of the major and minor system. The time will come when it will be realized that despite the "atonal" inclinations of modern music, the possibilities of building new structures on "key" systems have not been exhausted. The means used by the composer—the choice of instruments and the superb richness of instrumental effects achieved despite the economy of the work, merit great attention in themselves. The content is suited to the form. It reveals a personality with something entirely new to say and one who is capable of communicating this content in a masterful and concentrated fashion. The work is extraordinarily rich in melodies.

Bartók was particularly impressed with the slow movement:

A double thread of mysterious, sustained seconds and ninths, tremolo passages in the second violin played *pianissimo*, and *con sordino* [with mute], provide a harmonic frame. There is also a kind of dialogue between the first violin and the viola. The strangely floating passionate melodies of the viola alternate with spectral flashing motifs on first violin. We find ourselves in a fairy world never dreamed of before.

Indeed, the slow movement looks forward to Bartók's own "night music" passages in such works as his Music of Strings, Percussion, and Celesta, the Fourth String Quartet, and the Third Piano Concerto.

The concluding *Vivo* is pure Kodály. Dance rhythms and the modal piquancy of Hungarian music course through it with a generous dose of humor.

Piano Quintet in A Minor, Op.84 Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

In the waning months of the Great War, as Armistice looked increasingly likely, Edward and Alice Elgar leased a cottage called Brinkwells, situated in Sussex between the tiny village of Fittleworth and Wisborough Green. The oak-beamed, thatch-roofed cottage was situated on a hill. A studio across the property had a splendid view of wooded countryside, the Arun River, and the South Downs hills toward the coast. On a nearby plateau, a gaggle of gnarled trees was visible. They had been struck by lightning, denuding the branches and, of course, killing the trees. At dusk and after nightfall, their bizarre silhouette against the night sky resembled eerie, deformed figures. Local legend held that, centuries before, an order of Spanish monks had been

engaged in ‘impious rites’ - presumably some blasphemy unacceptable to Catholic liturgy--and were struck dead; the trees were said to be their earthly remains.

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Elgar was enchanted with Brinkwells and its surroundings and found himself full of new musical ideas. During the summer months he embarked on a series of three works that were to be his most substantial effort in the realm of chamber music. The first to be completed was a violin sonata. The day he completed the sonata, 15 September 1918, he began composing the Piano Quintet. The String Quartet followed in 1919. The three were published, respectively, as his Opp. 82, 83, and 84.

The dead trees on the plateau found their way into the Quintet in its second theme, which has a faint Spanish flavor. There were, of course, no Spanish monastic orders in the British Isles; however, the chant-like piano opening of the Quintet has spawned theories that Elgar was paraphrasing the 11th-century *Salve Regina* antiphon. He planned to dedicate the work to Ernest Newman, a prominent English writer on music. In a letter dated 5 January, 1919, Elgar reported to his friend:

Your Quintet remains to be completed—the first movement is ready & I want you to hear it—it is strange music I think & I like it—but—it’s ghostly stuff.

He composed the Adagio that month and completed the work by March. A private performance took place at Severn House, the Elgars’ London residence, on 7 March, introducing the Violin Sonata, the Quartet, and the Quintet to a group of friends. George Bernard Shaw was among the guests and wrote to Elgar the next day, dwelling on his impressions of the Quintet.

The English biographer Ian Parrott has observed, “The main paradox of Elgar’s three mature chamber music works is that in one sense the composer has too few instruments yet in another he has too many.” The Quintet, which is regarded as the best of the three, has a symphonic grandeur in some places and an aching solitary soulfulness in others. The outer movements often struggle to break free of chamber music, surging toward symphonic grandeur. Elgar’s piano writing is marvelously effective, particularly in the surges to climaxes. The textures have a Brahmsian thickness; it is much to Elgar’s credit that he frequently matches Brahmsian breadth, drama, and nobility as well. Harmonically the language is more conservative than Elgar’s music of the previous decade. He employs a Wagnerian chromaticism that lends the music a post-romantic appeal. Structurally, the Quintet suggests César Franck, with its use of cyclic quotations or allusions. Themes introduced in the opening movement recur in the second and third movements.

Elgar has been criticized for some passages that evoke salon music in both outer movements. The *Adagio*, however, is unimpeachable and the Quintet’s greatest glory. Opening with a creamy viola solo, the slow movement is now wistful, now melancholy, now tender. Elgar ascends to the sublime, achieving the same qualities as the beloved ‘Nimrod’ Variation from *Enigma* and the lesser-known, but eloquent slow movement to his First Symphony.

