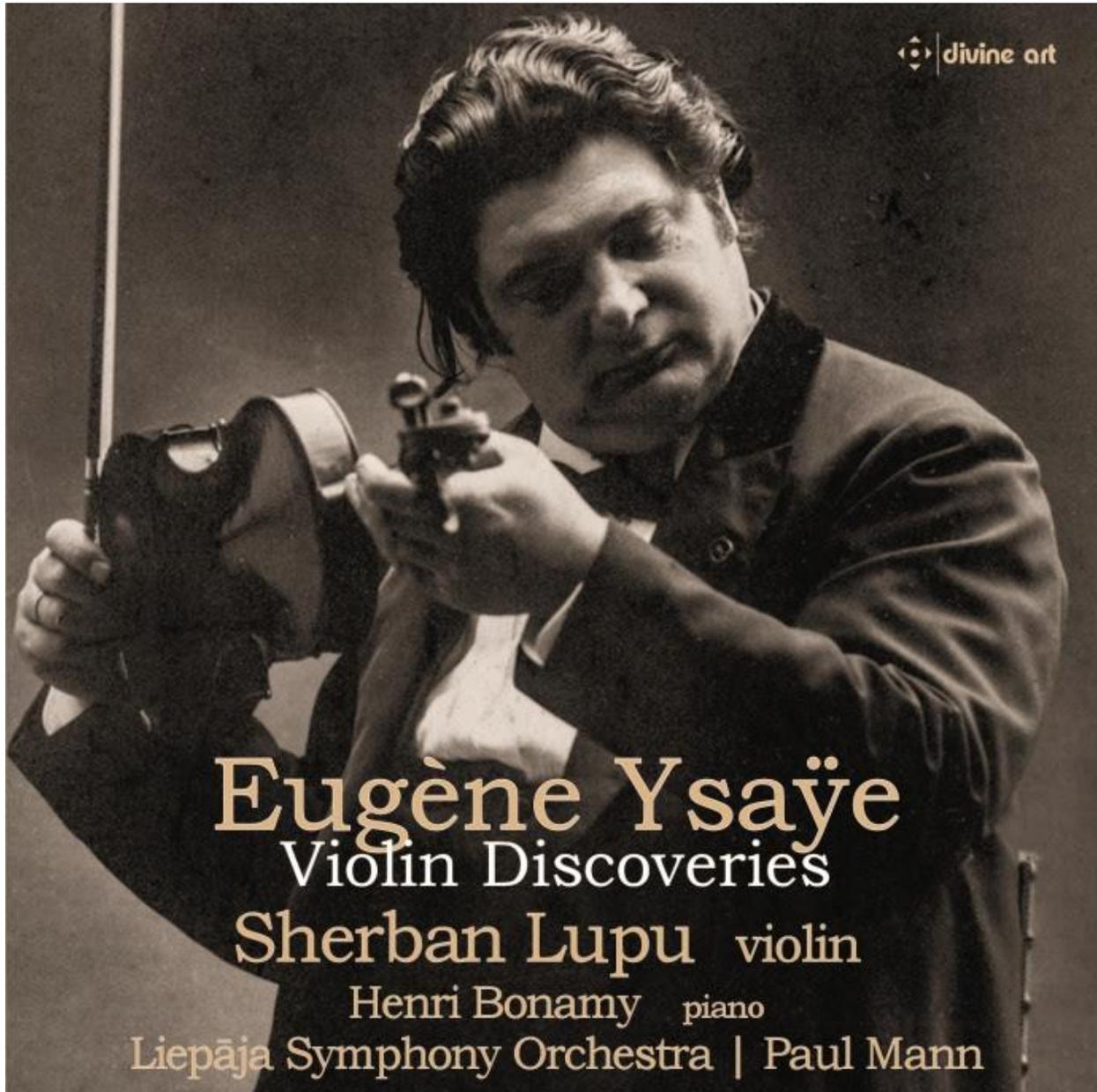


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Lupu “Rediscovered” Ysaÿe



YSAÿE: *Scènes Sentimentales. Élegie. Trois Études-Poèmes. Petite fantaisie romantique. Violin Concerto in G min. / Sherban Lupu, vln; *Liepāja Symphony Orch., cond. Paul Mann / Divine Art 25222**

This is the sort of album I can understand being recorded and released, because Eugène Ysaÿe's six solo violin sonatas are true masterpieces. Written in the 1920s, they are a far cry from the usual fare written by other late-Romantic-era violinists such as Kreisler or Elman, and I was really thrilled when violinist Philippe Graffin discovered a *seventh* sonata that was unpublished but nearly as good as the established six.

As Qianyi Fan points out in the liner notes, “many of his works remain unknown and unpublished,” probably because his world renown as an interpreter of the Romantic repertoire overshadowed his compositional talent. Though the six famous sonatas *were* published, it was years and years before they began to be played in public with any regularity and several decades before they were established as masterpieces. In addition, for whatever reason, Ysaÿe himself underplayed his compositional talent:

In the days of Viotti and Rode the harmonic possibilities were more limited— they had only a few chords, and hardly any chords of the ninth. But now harmonic material for the development of a new violin technique is there: I have some violin studies, in manuscripts, which I may publish someday, devoted to that end. I am always somewhat hesitant about publishing—there are many things I might publish, but I have seen so much brought out that was banal, poor, unworthy, that I have always been inclined to mistrust the value of my own creations rather than fall into the same error. We have the scale of Debussy and his successors to draw upon, their new chords and successions of fourth and fifths—for new technical formulas are always evolved out of and follow after new harmonic discoveries—though there is as yet no violin method which gives a fingering for the whole tone scale. Perhaps we will have to wait until Kreisler or I will have written one which makes plain the new flowering of technical beauty and aesthetic development which it brings to the violin.

Of the pieces recorded here, we have some descriptions from the booklet. The *Scènes Sentimentales* were composed when Ysaÿe left Berlin for Paris to become a concert violinist (1885), thus they were written to showcase his virtuosity. The *Élegie* (c. 1912) was a manuscript that had no title and no ending. The *Trois Études-Poèmes* (1924), actually written at different times and dedicated to different people, were grouped by Ysaÿe himself and intended to be sent for publication but never done so. The *Petite fantaisie romantique* (1901) is just a piece of fluff written to mollify his listeners who wanted a “sweet” little piece, but the *Violin Concerto* (1910) is a fine piece, completed and orchestrated by Sabin Pautza in 2017.

Considering its time and place, the *Scènes Sentimentales* are late-Romantic but not entirely formulaic works. Ysaÿe is late-Romantic but not entirely formulaic. Ysaÿe was already pushing the harmonic envelope; though not based on the advances

of Debussy and Ravel, it is clearly influenced by Richard Strauss. Its construction is quite interesting and hardly written-to-formula music. I listened carefully to Lupu's playing and compared it in my mind's ear to the way Ysaÿe himself sounded on those old records (though he lived until 1931, his playing skills had eroded by 1924 and he made no electrical recordings), and he actually comes very close to his model, using a sweet tone and employing a medium-wide vibrato on the held notes, just as Ysaÿe himself did. He also has a wonderfully fluid way of playing the fast passages, an occasionally wide *portamento* and a wonderful string attack which also compares favorably to his model. This is historically-informed performance style at its absolute best. The "Moderato" also contains restless mood shifts and downward-moving chromatics that look forward to the unaccompanied violin sonatas.

The 1912 *Élegie* already shows the influence of Debussy; except for the more passionate melodic line, it might pass for a violin piece by the latter, and once again Lupu nails Ysaÿe's performing style—something that Graffin, for all his superb qualities, did not do. (May I suggest to Mr. Lupu that he record that seventh Ysaÿe sonata?) The first two *Études-Poèmes* are not as advanced as I thought they might be, but more a showcase for the violinist's technique...though still more interesting than most of Kriesler's compositions. The middle section of "Au ruisseau" is particularly interesting, yet the third piece, "Cara memoria," sounds the least modern though it is, ironically, the most fully developed as a composition; it almost sounds like a sonata movement, with a particularly dramatic middle section, and near the end we hear Debussy-like harmonies sneak in.

As I noted above, the *Petite fantaisie romantique* is the least substantial piece on this disc although I'm sure it will appeal to Romantic music lovers everywhere, and the fast section has some interesting music. But also as noted above, the *Violin Concerto* is a masterpiece, fusing elements of French and early Russian modernism with a German sense of construction. You might not guess, from the ominous orchestral introduction, that this even *was* a violin concerto—the orchestral exposition, complex and fully developed, runs for more than four minutes before you even hear the solo violin—and you may have a hard time believing that it was written as far back as 1910. During the long violin solo, which almost sounds like a *sinfonia concert ante*, there is also his trademark chromatic harmonies. Although I fully realize that Ysaÿe himself did not orchestrate this piece, the music clearly suggests the kind of rich Germanic orchestration used here, with moments of Debussy as at the 8:50 mark. The whole enterprise sounds like later Strauss mixed with some Ravel and Debussy; not only is the music richly written, but also emotionally affecting, something that Debussy's music is not always. Indeed, though the solo part is quite virtuosic, virtuosity is not its primary goal; like some of the better modern violin concerti I've reviewed, the underlying construction of the piece is a whole. This is not

just a showcase for a fiddler thrown on top of a flashy orchestral part, but a real composition with quite complex interaction between soloist and ensemble. In short, this is quite a piece.

Lupu must be congratulated for resuscitating these pieces and bringing them to life in a manner that almost sounds like the composer himself playing them. A truly stupendous achievement, recommended to all lovers of Ysaÿe's sonatas.

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