

A (shortened) recital

Willem van der Walt

19 April 2020

Programme

Eugene Ysaÿe: Sonata No 2 Op 27 "Thibaud" - Unaccompanied

- Obsession – Prelude: *Poco vivace*
- Malinconia – *Poco lento*
- Danse des ombres – *Sarabande*
- Les Furies – *Allegro furioso*

"By "modernity" I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable". – Charles Baudelaire

Programme Notes:

Ysaÿe wrote 6 sonatas for solo violin, inspired after hearing a recital by Szigeti. The first sonata is dedicated to him, and each sonata thereafter, dedicated to a virtuoso violinist whom Ysaÿe called friend. This sonata was written in the early 20th Century (1922), and at the time, the modernist ethos in the Arts was already setting the world on fire; in flight from the structure, sentimentality and mundanity of the Romantic era. It was a little more than a century ago that the modern age led the world in search of a new utopia of meaning and spiritual transcendence. It was thought that by making new, challenging and purifying everything that was familiar, mundane and certain into abstraction, purism and singularity, would cause the external world to transform and thereby awaken the individual to a unified and transcendental spiritual utopia.

Ysaÿe was of this time, and here we see perhaps, a part of this ethos in reference to the transformation and usage of J.S Bach's modes of counterpoint, harmony and prose. Ysaÿe was a formidable virtuoso of the violin, and was close friends with Jacques Thibaud – also a well-known violinist. This work is dedicated to him.

The first movement has blatant references to J.S Bach's solo violin partita no. 3. You will find several thematic and compositional references to Bach in this work, such as counterpoint and harmonic structures. The theme of *Dies Irae* (the way of wrath) is referenced in multiple ways in this sonata. This theme would generally be associated with or found in a requiem mass. The modernist ethos "to make it new" was meant to be in contrast to the old ways of tradition and class – modernity was the counter measure and equaliser, the way of wrath, a way to purify through relentless abstraction.



Di - es i-rae, di - es il - la, Sol - vet saec - lum



in fa - vil - la, Tes - te Da - vid cum Si - bil - la.

The spirit of modernity has been likened to the process of alchemy – transforming the Everyday into the transcendental like an alchemist would turn lead into gold. Similar to the *Dies Irae* theme denoting a call to the throne of God on the day of judgement, where the worthy will be saved. Without apology, artists, musicians, architects, authors and actors saw themselves as the alchemists of reality, judging the world's tropes and redeeming it through alchemy. It has been noted that at the end of its purism mania, modernism has inherited the world with blood and ash, made manifest in two world wars, the death of the Author and the alienation of meaning.

The world made sense of the modernist's wake by indulging in mass consumption, the flight to relativity, nihilism, inter-textuality, and a sense of deep loss rather than the transcendent. It is interesting therefore to consider the *way of wrath* as a potential analogy or narrative for modernity. Implying the possibility that transcendence cannot come from purism, outside, above (hegemony), or by way of strife and abstraction, alienation or violence, but must come from within!

Mark Rothko, 4th dimensional artist and late-modernity thought leader (combining paint, sculpture, lighting, time and sound), is considered by some to be the last modernist and perhaps one of the most exemplary embodiments of its ethos – to me his narrative is one of apology, moving towards spirituality and transcendence from within. The gap between purism and transcendence was perhaps too large - Mark C. Taylor suggests that this gap became a gaping wound, an abyss. Rothko ended his life at his own hand at the dawn of post-modernity. His requiem left the world sober from modernity drunkenness and perhaps his inheritance is a reminder that we have been searching for utopia everywhere else, but inside.

To me, then, the *Dies Irae* theme in today's context, possibly symbolises an invitation for the individual to transcend by facing into the what is inside, an ever present draw to the wilderness of the heart, to overcome, a relentless call to grow. It is however not manic, fiery, filled with strife and violence – it is kind, patient, persistent, ever present, constant and powerful.

It is a hundred years later, and perhaps society faces a similar call to transcend, this time with the knowledge that the transcendental comes from within, and what is most personal is perhaps most universal. Instead of abstraction and purism a century ago, we now face disruption and relentless acceleration. We can never go back to the modernist's wound. Modernity often left audiences bewildered and afraid to commit themselves to an immersive experience of the work because the modernist mania often made fools of us all. Instead of the

bitter uncertainty of trying to make sense of abstraction, I encourage you to create meaning by simply experiencing the work yourself and if you want, look to my notes as suggestions to what sense I have made for myself.

Since this is an unaccompanied work I can perform it today via digital means, I would however, have started the full program with an ironic reference to the tradition of starting a recital with Baroque – working one's way chronologically like one would work one's way through a 5-course meal. Instead of Bach, I start with Ysaÿe, to reference the tradition, but here, Bach made new, just as the modernists would have wanted.

Obsession – Prelude: *Poco vivace*

This movement's title refers to Thibaud's daily routine to warm up playing Bach Partita No 3 and so the obsession with Bach is clearly visible here, more than in other movements of this sonata. The *brutalmente* that follows is uncharacteristic of Thibaud's sonorous and fluent sound – perhaps poking fun at his seriousness. The *Dies Irae* theme (theme found in a Mass/ requiem – the day/way of wrath) is presented early in this movement.

Imagine a violinist practicing Bach vehemently, obsessively, and breaking it into the smallest parts with analytical exercises – repeated over and over. By breaking it into its smallest parts, the violinist hopes to attain flow. This fire of purism befalls many violinists, the story inevitably containing the belief that nothing is ever good enough. As the violinist indulges in this belief, the *Dies Irae* theme emerges – to me it symbolises the call of transformation from the inside, the notion that we can transcend when we let go, not when we seek purism with strife. The theme also reminds us that strife and perfection is the way of wrath. The ego seeks perfection, but the spirit brings flow.

Malinconia – *Poco lento*

The second movement, *Melancholia*, in a typical *sicilienne* style follows Bach's contrapuntal format the most. You will hear several voices – almost like a choir chanting a holy meditation for redemption with pleading. “This movement is noted to be “a ghostly and intense section... hushed and expectant in mood, with dark figurations and curious muted effects, reminiscent of Ysaÿe's remark that the work was set in a consciously postmodern idiom and still sounds well ahead of its times.” To me this is a deep reflection into the self, a trysting place to be with “how I find myself right now”, a reckoning with compassion and acceptance of reality. The movement ends again with the *Dies Irae* theme, reminding us that this too must and can evolve.

Danse des ombres – *Sarabande*

This movement is a series of variations on the *Dies Irae* theme. The title translates to “the dance of the shadows”. The theme is presented at first by pizzicato almost as if played by a guitar or lute. Then it is positioned as a simple melody – like a child's nursery rhyme or a hymn. This is followed by bagpipes, then two discourses, something akin to the H.D.S-P movement out of Elgar's Enigma variations, and the second last variation, a chaotic flurry of chromatic notes to remind us of the alchemy of modernity and its purism mania. At last we end back in the cathedral, with an organ playing us out of the Mass with the *Dies Irae* theme in an almost redemptive, joyful tone. To me these are the various faces of the soul, the transient manifests of its expression, seemingly permanent and substantial, but not so when explored with courage. Each shadow when brought to the altar of the heart, finds integration.

Les Furies – *Allegro furioso*

Listen carefully to the furies, two parts fighting; an inner conflict in the shape of two birds of atonement or punishment (Valkyries/ furies); keeping our protagonist stuck. You'll hear the fighting, the blaming, and

conflict, the reasoning and pleading. There is turmoil and doubt – until the bell rings to call for mediation (a single pizzicato on middle C).

What follows is *sul ponticello* in an etheric voice, speaking healing, gently tugging away at the armour and resistance, the hurt, the defence and the avoidance. This occurs three times, each time the heart bursts open and all the ugliness spews out, while Love simply carries it away, without ceremony or judgement. This repeats as Love finds its way, until habit returns and a search for the inner conflict resurfaces. Soon the protagonist realises that there is no need to be stuck, no need for the conflict and chooses to evolve, chooses to flow. In a short time the protagonist integrates and heals the conflict, finding integration and redemption through accepting the path of what the *Dies Irae* theme has represented – our wrath, when integrated, transforms to love & belonging.

Thank you:

Firstly, to Markus, for your relentless love and support in my journey inward and for spending endless hours alone with earplugs while I saw and *squeaky* away at odd hours of the day and night. I dedicate every performance to your magnificence.

To Emile, thank you for your guidance, kind coaching and support on my practicing and performance of this repertoire. Working with you towards my life-long goal of completing my licentiate has been transformative. You are an exceptional teacher and rare soul.

To all of you who have joined to share in this journey, enduring lockdown, uncertainty, and creating something meaningful in this time of journeying inside. Hopefully the next time you hear this, it will be with a complete recital, in person, with wine and celebrations!

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