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## Bach-to Ysaÿe: History and Performance Considerations of Sonata No. 2

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University of Connecticut

BACH-TO YSAÏE: HISTORY AND PERFORMANCE  
CONSIDERATIONS OF SONATA NO. 2

Mai Vestergaard

May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I want to thank all of my mentors who have supported me along the way to complete this project. I want to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. Jesus Ramos-Kittrell, along with Dr. Peter Kaminsky, who took their precious time to help me with the theoretical and historical analysis of this piece.

This project was a journey. Learning Eugene Ysaÿe's Sonata No.2 was the most challenging piece of repertoire that I have learned in my undergraduate career. It brought forth novel ideas in tonality that I have never been exposed to, but it also challenged me about performance practices for the violin. I relearned how to focus on bow control and intonation while further developing practice techniques to finesse the piece. As my recital got postponed, this project is the perfect opportunity to share my passion for music with the community.

I am looking forward to sharing my love of music in a recital in the upcoming fall. I am incredibly grateful for all of the opportunities that I had at the Music Department here at UConn. I would like to especially thank my mentor, Dr. Solomiya Ivakhiv, for continually believing in me and helping me pursue the opportunities that I would not have without her help.

Words cannot describe how much I can thank everyone for their continuous support here at the University of Connecticut. Lastly, I would like to thank my Mom and Dad, for inspiring me to continue studying the violin and music throughout my undergraduate career, encouraging me to keep my lifelong journey to play the violin as I further pursue my interests in Pharmacy.

## WHO IS YSAÏE?

Eugene Ysaÿe was a Belgian violinist, composer, and conductor, born in Liège, Belgium, on July 16th, 1858. He grew up studying the violin with renowned teachers of the time, Henryk Wieniawski in Brussels and Henry Vieuxtemps in Paris, France. It was through this musical upbringing that Ysaÿe became influenced by the instrumental performance practice of the so-called Franco-Belgian violin school, which extended to his approach towards composition as well.

Ysaÿe had an established musical career while living in Europe from 1874- 1894. During these twenty years, he taught at the Brussels Conservatory and founded the Ysaÿe Quartet—an ensemble established at the Brussels Conservatory, focusing on "avant-garde" music. Ysaÿe was recognized for premiering works by French composers (some of which are now well known) such as César Franck, Claude Debussy, Vincent d'Indy, and Ernest Chausson.

Ysaÿe's career was at its virtuosic peak when he traveled to the United States during his American Tour from 1894-1914. He was recognized as a virtuoso and performed as a soloist in famous concert halls. Not only that, but he also managed and conducted the Société Symphonique des Concerts Ysaÿe, focusing on modern repertoire.<sup>1</sup> He returned to Europe to perform a short tour, but Ysaÿe returned to the United States in 1916 for his last American tour. During this time, Ysaÿe's health started to decline due to diabetes, which made him take a step back from performing to conducting, along with shifting his focus to composition. He became

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<sup>1</sup> Stockhem, *Ysaÿe, Eugène(-Auguste)*, 1.

the conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and held his post until his contract ended before he moved back to Belgium in 1922.<sup>2</sup>

Once back in Belgium, Ysaÿe returned to performing as part of the Ysaÿe Quartet and continued teaching violin lessons. Amidst performing and composing, in 1923, Ysaÿe published his *Six Sonatas op. 27* for Solo Violin. His last violin performance publicly was the Beethoven Triple Concerto, along with cellist Pablo Casals in April 1927.<sup>3</sup> Soon afterward, Ysaÿe's health deteriorated further, and he passed away in Brussels on May 12th, 1931.<sup>4</sup>

Ysaÿe has been recognized as one of the most virtuosic performers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Being the student of Wieniawski and Vieuxtemps, it can be argued that Ysaÿe was the leading exponent of a distinctively Franco-Belgian violin school, which he promoted through performance and compositional approaches, incorporating advanced techniques. The Franco-Belgian violin school had approached performance and compositional techniques with regards to phrasing, tonality, and virtuosic techniques for the violin, incorporating chromaticism, double-stops, and large leaps and shifts for the violin.<sup>5</sup>

## **ELEMENTS OF THE FRANCO-BELGIAN VIOLIN SCHOOL**

Going as far back as Giovanni Battista Viotti (1771-1842), several figures in history shaped the musical style of the Franco-Belgian violin school promoted by Ysaÿe. Viotti was an Italian violinist responsible for founding a violin school training Pierre Rode, Rodolphe Kreutzer, and Pierre Baillot, all teaching at the Paris Conservatoire, accountable for influencing

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<sup>2</sup> Ysaÿe, *Ysaÿe, His Life, Work and Influence*, 134.

<sup>3</sup> Ginsburg, *Ysaÿe*, 203-205.

<sup>4</sup> Stockhem, *Ysaÿe*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ginsburg, *Ysaÿe*, 257-260.

performance practices and style for the French Violin School<sup>6</sup>. Charles de Bériot (1802-1870) was trained from the French Violin School and was responsible for the uprising of the Belgian Violin School, who studied from André Robberechts, (1796-1866). Robberechts studied from Baillot and Viotti. Wieniawski from the Belgian Violin School had ties to Lambert Joseph Massart (1811-1892), who studied from Rodolphe Kreutzer. Massart also taught Pablo de Sarasate<sup>7</sup>.

Vieuxtemps was a prominent figure in the French Violin School, commended for his virtuosity. However, Vieuxtemps was also linked with the rising of Pablo de Sarasate and Eugene Ysaÿe. Sarasate and Ysaÿe, prominent violinists from the Franco-Belgian Violin School, contributed to a polarization of musical styles from the German Violin School, which was prominent during the nineteenth century (see Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> The German school was influenced by the Italians, focusing on musicality and expressionism, and phrasing.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the Franco-Belgian school focused on “technique rather than musicality” and aimed at bringing virtuosity to performance<sup>10</sup>. Musicians trained in the Franco-Belgian violin school developed innovative performance techniques, for example, pertaining vibrato and phrasing. This approach toward vibrato was different from German practice, being more sparingly used, with emphasis on

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<sup>6</sup> Schueneman, *The French Violin School*, 757.

<sup>7</sup> Milsom, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Performance: An Examination of Style in Performance, 1850—1900*, 23-24.

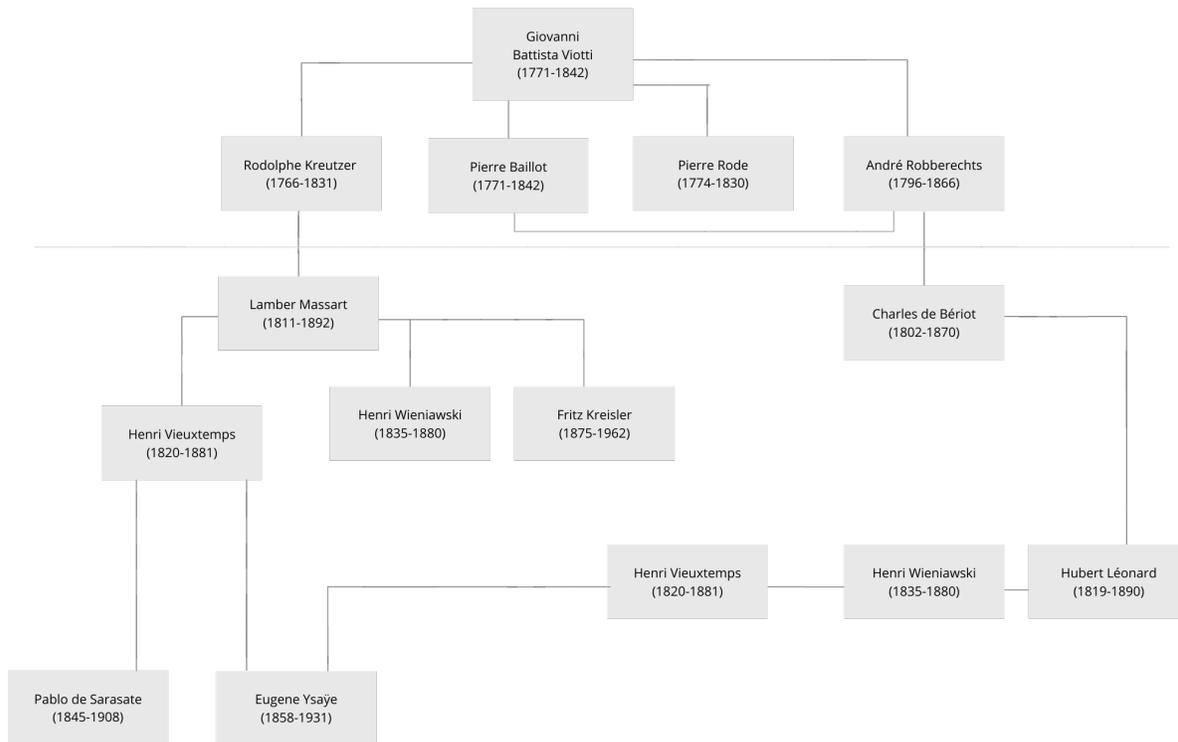
<sup>8</sup> Milsom, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Performance: An Examination of Style in Performance, 1850—1900*, 23-25.

<sup>9</sup> Milsom, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Performance: An Examination of Style in Performance, 1850—1900*, 25-26.

<sup>10</sup> Milsom, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Performance: An Examination of Style in Performance, 1850—1900*, 25.

cadences to highlight musically essential moments.<sup>11</sup> Franco-Belgian phrasing became characterized by the use of dynamics and bow control, which gave melody a ‘fluid’ shape.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 1. Origins of the Franco-Belgian Violin School.<sup>13</sup>**



Eugene Ysaÿe incorporated these practices into his compositions. And while it is up to the performer to interpret such gestures (paying attention to dynamics, phrasing, vibrato, and bow control), the musical setting of these parameters in the score stands in contrast with German music. The German School focused on the “vocal means of style,” focusing on ‘classicism’ and

<sup>11</sup> Milsom, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Performance: An Examination of Style in Performance, 1850—1900*, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Milsom, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Performance: An Examination of Style in Performance, 1850—1900*, 51.

<sup>13</sup> Milsom, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Performance: An Examination of Style in Performance, 1850—1900*, 15.

the refinement of performance practice.<sup>16</sup> The focus of Franco-Belgian Violin School, allows the performer to have the liberty to emulate these musical ideas elsewhere in the score—though taking into consideration tonal and harmonic contexts—as part of virtuosic performance. A performance can promote a new musical idea and bring it to recognition. That is why I have learned Eugene Ysaÿe's Sonata No.2 in A minor.

### **SONATA NO 2 IN A MINOR**

Ysaÿe published his six sonatas Op. 27 for solo violin in 1923. Today, these sonatas are considered a staple of the virtuoso violin repertoire and are recognized with "exceptional artistic value," according to David Oistrakh.<sup>17</sup> The dexterity and the finesse of the pieces have been compared to the virtuous music of Italian violinist and composer, Niccolò Paganini. Inspired by one of his colleagues, Joseph Szigeti, who at one point Ysaÿe watched perform the Bach violin sonatas, the composer wrote six sonatas for the instrument. Bach's influence is present in each sonata, with the presentation of six sonatas, with both Bach and Ysaÿe composing four sonatas written in a major key, along with two sonatas written in a minor key. The inspiration by Bach is especially evident with specifically in terms of structure, melodic timbre with its musical color, range, rhythm, and tempo in his second sonata. Yet, Ysaÿe puts his distinctive approach to these elements, incorporating compositional techniques emphasizing chromaticism, tonality changes, and parallelism.

Each sonata has been dedicated to one of the famous violinists of the time.<sup>19</sup> Sonata No. 2 in A minor was dedicated to French Violinist, Jacques Thibaud. It comprises four movements,

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<sup>16</sup> Milsom, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Performance: An Examination of Style in Performance, 1850—1900*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Ginsburg, *Ysaÿe*, 331.

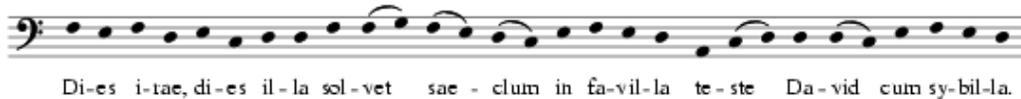
<sup>19</sup> Ginsburg, *Ysaÿe*, 331.

named *Obsession*, *Malinconia*, *Danse des Ombres*, and *Les Furies*. Each movement has a unique timbre and tonal quality, including techniques such as *ponticello*, double stops, with emphasis of the tritone and chromatism. But Ysaÿe also incorporates Bach's influence (specifically melodic texture), such as the direct quotations of Bach's Partita No.3 Preludio in the first movement, *Obsession*. Ysaÿe also incorporates the *Dies Irae* plainchant throughout the whole sonata. Not only does this look back at the past of Bach's and previous musical contemporaries, but it also uses unique components that influence the performer to take their stance for the performance.

The *Dies Irae* chant is weaved melodically throughout each movement, the performer or interpreter of the music is curious about the significance of the melody throughout the piece. *Dies Irae* (day of wrath), is a sequence featured in the Mass for the Dead in the Roman liturgy, and it has been used as an ominous form of melodic symbolism in western music history. This example of the plainchant melody is used polyphonically or homophonically in each movement of Ysaÿe's second sonata (see Figure 2). There is a further story told within the piece, which turns to the performer for interpretation.

**Figure 2.** *Dies Irae* Chant Melody<sup>22</sup>.

Ex.1 LU, 18 10



## OBSESSION

The first movement of the sonata, *Obsession*, is a fast, spirited *Prélude*, with *poco vivace*. For interpretation, an obsession is the “domination of one's thoughts or feelings by a

<sup>22</sup> Caldwell, John and Malcolm Boyd, *Dies Irae*, 1.

persistent idea"<sup>23</sup> In terms of this *obsession* in this movement, Ysaÿe is obsessed with the figuration of Bach, by quoting statements from his third Violin Partita in E major, the Preludio (see Figure 3). However, Ysaÿe puts his statement by responding using techniques unique to music of this time (see Figure 4). He incorporates specific notations for the music, which adds suspense and is symbolic of the musical language.

Figure 4. Bach Partita No. 3, mvt 1. Preludio (mm. 1-2)<sup>24</sup>

**Preludio.**



Figure 5. Ysaÿe Sonata No. 2, mvt 1. Obsession (mm. 1-8)<sup>25</sup>

The image shows the first eight measures of the 'Obsession' movement from Ysaÿe's Sonata No. 2. The music is in E major and 3/4 time. It begins with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note E5, a quarter note F#5, and a quarter note G5. The second measure contains a half note A5, a half note B5, and a quarter note C6. The third measure contains a half note D6, a half note E6, and a quarter note F#6. The fourth measure contains a half note G6, a half note A6, and a quarter note B6. The fifth measure contains a half note C7, a half note D7, and a quarter note E7. The sixth measure contains a half note F#7, a half note G7, and a quarter note A7. The seventh measure contains a half note B7, a half note C8, and a quarter note D8. The eighth measure contains a half note E8, a half note F#8, and a quarter note G8. The notation includes dynamic markings such as *p leggiero*, *ff (brutalemt)*, and *p*. There are also performance instructions like *court.* and *ff*.

Different techniques include:

- The use of Rubato, to allow for musical flexibility and performer interpretation.

<sup>23</sup> "Obsession."

<sup>24</sup> Bach, Johann Sebastian. 1720. *6 Violin Sonatas and Partitas*.

<sup>25</sup> Ysaÿe, *Sonata No. 2*

- The use of the fermata and *brutalement* within each Bach-Ysaÿe Statement and response.
- Chromaticism and the emphasis of the tri-tone.
- Notation techniques that Ysaÿe incorporated in his music, such as the indication noting full bow lengths.

**Figure 5. Sonata No. 2 in A minor, mvt 1. Obsession.**

Measures 1-2	Direct quote from Bach's E major <i>Partita</i> for violin E major (V), which is the Dominant of A minor
Measures 3-5	Ysaÿe's figuration adapted from Bach as a response to the quote <i>Brutalement</i>
Measures 6-7	Direct quote from Bach's E major <i>Partita</i> for violin E major (V), which is the Dominant of A minor
Measures 8-9	Ysaÿe's figuration adapted from Bach as a response to the quote <i>Brutalement</i>
Measure 10	Direct quote from Bach's E major <i>Partita</i> for violin E major (V <sup>7</sup> ), which is the Dominant of A minor
Measures 11-13	Ysaÿe's prelude-like material in A minor
Measures 14-19	Continuation of Ysaÿe's prelude-like article in E minor with a transition to a new thematic material
Measures 20-30	Ysaÿe's thematic material with the incorporation of the Gregorian Chant theme Dies Irae with arpeggiation of the chords E minor
Measures 31-32	Transposed Quote from Bach's E major <i>Partita</i> for violin C major (III of A minor)
Measures 33-34	Ysaÿe's figuration adapted from Bach as a response to the quote
Measures 35-41	Ysaÿe's thematic material with the incorporation of the Gregorian Chant theme Dies Irae with arpeggiation of the chords D minor (iv of A minor)
Measure 42	Transposed Quote from Bach's E major <i>Partita</i> for violin D minor (iv of A minor)
Measures 43-44	Ysaÿe's figuration adapted from Bach as a response to the quote
Measures 45-53	Ysaÿe's prelude-like material that acts as a transition Use of chromaticism to change the color and develop into next thematic material
Measures 54-59	Ysaÿe's thematic material with arpeggiation and tonal change A major (V of D minor)
Measures 60-63	Usage of the E minor chord to serve as a pivot point for new thematic material

Measures 64-69	Ysaÿe's thematic material with the incorporation of the Gregorian Chant theme Dies Irae with arpeggiation of the chords A minor
Measures 70-72	Transposed Quote from Bach's E major <i>Partita</i> for violin A minor
Measures 72-73	Ysaÿe's figuration adapted from Bach as a response to the quote
Measures 74-80	Arpeggiation of the Dies Irae theme A minor
Measures 81-84	Ysaÿe's figuration of prelude-like material A minor
Measure 84	Transposed final statement quoted from Bach's E major <i>Partita</i> for violin A minor

## MALINCONIA

The second movement of the sonata is Malinconia, performed at a tempo of Poco Lento. This movement is written in E minor. Ysaÿe specifically noted for the violinist to play this movement *con sordino*, or with a mute. The timbre of this movement is delicate and has a melancholic voice. This movement is depicted to be sad, as there is an overlap of two delicate melodies interplayed with each other. Surprisingly, Ysaÿe does not use the Dies Irae theme in this movement until the last two measures of the piece. During this moment, Ysaÿe uses mensural notation as an indication to yearn and lament from the past.<sup>26</sup>

### Figure 6. Sonata No. 2 in A minor, mvt 2. Malinconia.

Measures 1-6	Introduction of the melodic line in E minor
Measures 7-11	Melodic line repeated in an octave higher Resolves to B minor
Measures 12-23	B minor melody develops Resolves to E minor
Measures 24-25	Dies Irae theme notated in mensural notation

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<sup>26</sup> Ysaÿe, *Sonata No. 2*

## DANSE DES OMBRES

The third movement, Danse des Ombres means “Dance of the Shadows” in French. This movement is a Sarabande, written in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time and  $\frac{5}{4}$  time. This movement is written in G major, and the Dies Irae chant acts as an Idée fixe throughout the theme and variations. The theme is introduced with a chordal melody with pizzicato, embedded with the Dies Irae theme. Each section of the movement goes from a simple melody to the last variation becoming complexed with thirty-second notes. The final statement of the movement is the opening theme, performed with grandiose gestures as a conclusion to the movement.

The first variation is the most straightforward variation of the six. It is in the relative minor of G major, E minor. Ysaÿe intends for the performer to play the variation simplistically, with a delicate touch without vibrato. Throughout this variation, Ysaÿe adds another line, using double stops to outline the Dies Irae theme while adding another texture and expression to the music. The second variation is described to be performed like a musette. A musette can play a melody over a drone, which is similar to the melodic lines that Ysaÿe composed in his second variation<sup>27</sup>. Adding components of the Dies Irae theme along with phrasing techniques and dynamic contrast, Ysaÿe adds a theme that acts as a transition to the next variation.

The third variation is Minore. The musical lines in this variation are more complex, with two musical lines playing together. As they are practiced individually, there is an evident component of the Dies Irae theme. With double-stops, this allows for the musical line to flow simultaneously, with hidden ideas demonstrating the virtuosity of Ysaÿe’s music. The fourth variation has a continuous Dies Irae idée fixe throughout the movement composed as eight notes.

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<sup>27</sup> Kernfeld, Barry. 2003. *Musette (I)*, 1.

On top of this layer, Ysaÿe uses continuous chromaticism to demonstrate tonal quality and musical flow.

Ysaÿe uses arpeggiation with sextuplets to add color and a shadow-like quality to the fifth variation. There is notation specifically for this section of the movement to play it at the tip of the bow, adding for piano-like effect. This is in preparation for the contrast of the running thirty-second note passage of the sixth variation. This variation uses chromatism, a dynamic-change in color, which is a transition to the final presentation of the original theme. The last statement of the theme is a bowed version of the first statement of the theme. It is grandiose and back in the original key of G major.<sup>28</sup>

**Figure 7. Sonata No. 2 in A minor, mvt 3. Danse des Ombres.**

Measures 1-9	Introduction of the Theme G Major and Pizzicato
Measures 10-18	Variation 1 G Major
Measures 19-27	Variation 2 Musette G Major
Measures 28-36	Variation 3 Minore G minor
Measure 37-45	Variation 4- Tranquillo E minor
Measures 46-54	Variation 5- Semplice non-più vivo E minor
Measures 55-64	Variation 6- E minor
Measure 65-73	Theme G major and Arco

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<sup>28</sup> Ysaÿe, *Sonata No. 2*

## LES FURIES

Les Furies is the final movement of the Sonata. In Greek mythology, Les Furies are Greek goddesses of punishment and anger.<sup>29</sup> Since this movement is in A minor, Ysaÿe uses a G-sharp diminished seventh chord, which is a leading tone to A minor as an introduction to the thematic material of the movement. This movement is virtuosic, using multiple types of realist techniques creating dramatic color changes using pronounced dynamic contrasts and the use of ponticello throughout the movement.

In some passages in this movement, Ysaÿe embeds the Dies Irae theme and embellishes the melody throughout the piece using arpeggiations and double stops. Within these passages, Ysaÿe emphasizes the tri-tone, adding a menacing quality to the movement. To add a pivot-point to help transition between sub-sections of the movement, Ysaÿe uses enharmonic equivalents, such as C-sharp and D-flat, throughout the movement.<sup>30</sup>

### Figure 8. Sonata No. 2 in A minor, mvt 4. Les Furies.

Measures 1-9	Introduction G-Sharp Diminished
Measures 10-16	Thematic Material with double stops in A minor. A minor
Measures 27-31	Dies Irae Theme embedded with arpeggiation and double stops A minor
Measures 32-40	Variation 3 Minore G minor
Measures 41-47	Dies Irae Theme embedded with arpeggiation using contrasts between <i>sul Ponticello</i> and <i>ordinaire</i> .

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<sup>29</sup> *Furies* 2004. Philip's.

<sup>30</sup> Ysaÿe, *Sonata No. 2*

- Measures 48-54 Sextuplets emphasizing the Tri-tone with dynamic contrast (Fortissimo and Pianissimo)
- Measures 55-61 Dies Irae Theme embedded with arpeggiation using contrasts between *sul Ponticello* and *ordinaire*.
- Measures 62-7 Sextuplets emphasizing the Tri-tone with dynamic contrast (Fortissimo and Pianissimo)
- Measures 70-78 Arpeggiation embedding Dies Irae provides a transition to the recapitulation of the movement. There is a chordal passage using a G-sharp diminished chord prepares the last- section of the movement.
- Measures 79-91 Recapitulation of the theme  
A minor
- Measures 92-99 Virtuoso ending embedding the Dies Irae theme with arpeggiation, double stops, and dramatic tempi changes between Lento and Allegro Furioso.

## CONCLUSION

The Franco-Belgian Violin School brought forth prominent violinists and composers that had a long lasting impact on the performance of the violin. New techniques have been incorporate, along with performance practices, shifting from the contrast of the German school of the violin. Eugene Ysaÿe, a figure with a long-lasting legacy for the performance of the violin, has demonstrated novel musical ideas for the violin. Not only has he been known for his virtuous performances, but he, as a musician, demonstrated innovative composing techniques, as shown in his Sonata No. 2, to incorporate the musical traditions of the Franco-Belgian Violin School.

Using ideas from Bach as inspiration for his Sonata No. 2 in A minor, Ysaÿe incorporates the “musical past” and adds his virtuosic techniques, including double stops, chromaticism, dynamic contrasts, and Franco-Belgian musical phrasing, which highlighted key moments in the musical line. His compositions will be remembered, but his musical legacy will always be

present, as the Queen Elizabeth Violin Competition in Belgium has been continued from the Ysaÿe Violin Competition to recognize violinists to this day in his honor.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ginsburg, *Ysaÿe*, 502.

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