Johannes Sebastian Bach’s influence on Eugène Ysaÿe: Solo Violin Sonatas and Partitas

Caitlin S. Colie
University of Mary Washington College of Arts and Sciences
Department of Music
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Abstract

Johannes Sebastian Bach composed a collection of six works known as *Six Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin*. Eugène Ysaÿe composed a similarly structured collection of six works of just sonatas for solo violin, *Six Sonatas for Violin Solo, Opus 27*. I will be researching the history behind each collection, and a brief history of each composer, with the intention of highlighting how Bach influenced Ysaÿe’s compositions. I will provide examples and perform musical excerpts from Ysaÿe’s sonata, *Obsession*, from Sonata No.2, A Minor and similarly from Bach’s collection, *Prelude* from Partita No.3 in E Major. This research will highlight how these two movements are similar in musical technique, how both overall collections are similar or different historically, and will describe how Bach influenced Ysaÿe and these works.
In the early 18th century, Bach composed a collection of six works known as *Six Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin*, which are well-known for showcasing the violin’s technical capabilities in style and rhythm. Sonatas and partitas are known for their multi-movement characteristics with minor differences between the two.¹ Bach used these two forms in a harmonious collection for solo violin. Later in the 20th century, Eugène Ysaÿe composed a similarly structured collection of six works for solo violin, *Six Sonatas for Violin Solo, Opus 27*. Even though these two works were composed in different time periods, various hints of Bach’s ingenious motifs can be found, through the movements I have selected in Eugène Ysaÿe’s works, through rhythm, and structure. This research will explain the historical background behind each composer, and emphasize how Bach’s usage of rhythm and structure in his *Prelude* from Partita No.3 in E Major inspired Ysaÿe to follow suit in *Obsession*, from Sonata No.2, A Minor.

Johannes Sebastian Bach, born on March 21, 1685, is often described as “the most important member of the family, his genius combined outstanding performing musicianship with supreme creative powers in which forceful and original inventiveness, technical mastery and intellectual control are perfectly balanced.”² J.S Bach by no means lacked a musical background, and was the driving force of the baroque era. He grew up surrounded by siblings and parents who invested a great deal of time in the art of music. For instance, it is speculated that he had help from his brother, Johann Christoph, in learning the organ and piano.³ During his lifetime, he was known as an organist, with a natural knack for composing music. In the journal article “J.S Bach’s Youth,” published by the *Oxford University Press*,

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Friedrich Blume and Wilburn Newcomb attest that in his earlier years “Bach became an outstanding, even a virtuoso organist, an expert in organ building, and a full-fledged composer, even if he still wrote in an older style.” These qualities of Bach have withstood the test of time, as he is still well-regarded as one of the ‘top’ music idols, with more recognition for his compositional works. Today, Johannes Sebastian Bach is still distinguished for possessing these various attributes.

Later on in J.S Bach’s life, he accepted a position from the Duke of Weimar, a Calvinist, who had no need for sacred music, so therefore an organ was not necessary in his chapel. This pushed Bach to conduct and compose for secular instrumental music, which later resulted in the creation of his sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin. This is one of Johannes Sebastian Bach’s many respected compositional works, completed in 1720, called *Sei Solo a Violino senza Basso accompagnato*, or “*Six Solos for Violin without Bass accompaniment*.” Today, they are known as *Six Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin* (BWV 1001-1006). This work is a mass collection of six works in its entirety, with specific movements belonging to each of the six works, varying from the two musical forms, sonata and partita. These two differ in that, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, a sonata is a “… type of musical composition, usually for a solo instrument or a small instrumental ensemble, that typically consists of two to four movements, or sections, each in a related key but with a unique musical character.” Whereas a partita, taken from the *Oxford University Press*, is described as “…A term used at different times for a variation, a piece, a set of

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4 Blume, Friedrich, and Wilburn W. Newcomb. (3)
variations and a suite or other multi-movement genres.” Listed in Table 1 are all six works in Bach’s collection, taken from an edition edited by Ivan Galamian with facsimile of the autograph manuscript.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sonata No. 1 in G minor (S.1001)</th>
<th>Partita No. 2 in D minor (S.1004)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Adagio</td>
<td>1. Allemanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Fuga</td>
<td>2. Corrente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partita No. 1 in B minor (S.1002)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Allemanda</td>
<td>1. Adagio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Corrente</td>
<td>2. Fuga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sarabande</td>
<td>3. Largo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tempo Di Bourree</td>
<td>4. Allegro Assai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sonata No. 2 in A minor (S.1003)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Grave</td>
<td>1. Preludio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Fuga</td>
<td>2. Loure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Andante</td>
<td>3. Gavotte en Rondeau</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Bourree</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Giga</td>
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</table>

Table 1

Bach also switches between the two forms of sonata and partita. For example, *Sonata No. 1 in G minor*, is followed by *Partita No.1 in B minor*. From the edition edited by Ivan Galamian of Bach’s *Six Sonatas for Solo Violin*, Paul Affelder describes the usage of the sonata and partita in this work as the following: “Each of the sonatas is in the form of the baroque *sonata da chiesa* -or “church sonata”- with a four-movement pattern of slow-fast-slow-fast…The style of the three partitas is lighter and freer, following rather loosely the

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pattern of the baroque dance suite.” 8 This collection of works is argued to be some the best literature for solo violin. Little did Johannes Sebastian Bach know that his compositional skill would have such a vast influence on composers of the future.

One of those many composers was born on July 16, 1858. Eugène-Auguste Ysaÿe was from Liège, Belgium. Eugène Ysaÿe was a violinist who had demonstrated promising qualities of dedication towards the violin. He originally acquired the knowledge of music through his father, and later entered into the Liege Conservatory. 9 However, his skills on the violin only took him so far in life, which is when he turned to composition. Michel Stockhem, preface writer from Eugène Ysaÿe’s, *Sechs Sonaten fur Violine Solo, Opus 27*, an edition edited by Norbert Gertsch, indicated that, “Ysaÿe reached his zenith as a composer at a time of artistic upheaval, when his stature as an instrumentalist had entered a steep decline. He too was forced to discover how easily a world with no notion of “high fidelity” can forget one of its greatest masters.” 10 Ysaÿe also began to shift his focus to conducting, as his health declined in the later years of his life, and the violin started to slip out of his ability. At this crucial point in his life, Ysaÿe produced a similar collection of works to that of J.S Bach’s, *Six Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin* (BWV 1001-1006).

Eugène Ysaÿe’s most noticed and outstanding collection of works is that for solo violin named, *Sechs Sonaten fur Violine Solos, Opus 27*, translated into English as, *Six Sonatas for Violin Solo*. Like Johannes Sebastian Bach’s, *Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin*, Ysaÿe’s collection consists of six works with movements belonging to each specific section, or in this case, sonata. Ysaye’s assortment of sonatas is as follows in Table 2 below, taken from *Sechs Sonaten fur Violine Solo, Opus 27*, an edition edited by Norbert Gertsch. Notice how each sonata has a name presented next to it. Eugène Ysaÿe dedicated and wrote

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8 Affelder, Paul. Pg 2  
10 Stockhem, Michel. Pg. 7
each sonata personally for the following virtuosic violinists: Jozef Szigeti, Jacques Thibaud, Georges Enesco, Fritz Kreisler, Mathieu Crickboom and Manuel Quiroga.\textsuperscript{11} The specific violinist Ysaïe tied to the work I have selected is Jacques Thibaud. Ysaye wanted to highlight the characteristics of each violinist he wrote for. In this case, the characteristic that Jacques Thibaud had was noted as “Tender Lyricism”.\textsuperscript{12}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sonate No. 1, G Minor, Joseph Szigeti</th>
<th>Sonate No. 4, E Minor, Fritz Kreisler</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Grave</td>
<td>1. Allemanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Fugato</td>
<td>2. Sarabande</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Allegretto poco Scherzoso</td>
<td>3. Finale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Finale con brio</td>
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</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sonate No. 2, A Minor, Jacques Thibaud</th>
<th>Sonate No. 5, G Major, Mathieu Crickboom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Obsession, Prelude</td>
<td>1. L’Aurore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Malinconia</td>
<td>2. Danse Rustique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Danse des ombres, Sarabande</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Les Furies</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sonate No. 3, D Minor, Georges Enesco</th>
<th>Sonate No. 6, E Major, Manuel Quiroga</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ballade</td>
<td>1. Allegro giusto non troppo vivo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Allegro in tempo giusto e con bravura</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

The movement in Ysaïe’s collection in which Bach’s influences are most notable, is \textit{Obsession} from Sonate No. 2, A Minor. Various excerpts are written into Ysaye’s \textit{Obsession}, taken from Bach’s \textit{Prelude}, from Partitas No.3 in E major (S.1006). These two movements are similar in rhythm, in that they are comprised, almost exclusively, of sixteenth notes. They also have the same meter of $\frac{3}{4}$ time and are known for challenging the violin’s technical capabilities.

\textsuperscript{11} Stockhem, Michel. Pg. 7
\textsuperscript{12} Stockhem, Michel. Pg 7
The excerpts to follow are in the order in which they appear in *Obsession*. The first excerpt that Ysaïe uses, in *Obsession*, from Bach’s *Prelude*, is the most apparent declaration of influence from Bach. In Figure 4, Ysaïe took the same opening that is used in Figure 3, the *Preludio*, which consists of an eighth rest, followed by sixteenth notes and eighth notes, with the minor differences such as staccato, or “detached” bowing. This direct usage of Bach’s theme makes it apparent that Bach impacted Ysaïe and this body of work, and is a preliminary taste of what other motifs are to come in *Obsession*.

**Figure 3. Bach**  
(mm 1-2)  

The next point in which there is a direct quote is taken from the *Prelude* and added to *Obsession*, is noted in Figure 5 and 6. The bracketed section in Figure 6, makes use of the same notes, in the identical ascending pattern and rhythm as displayed in Figure 5. Ysaïe again adds staccato to his sixteenth notes. Figure 5 continues on with ascending sixteenth notes with no break. Whereas, Ysaïe seems to highlight his inclusion of Bach’s motif, by putting quarter rests at the beginning and end of the bracketed section, singling out the reference to Bach’s *Prelude*, with the addition of staccato or “detached” bowing.
Figure 5. Bach
(mm 29-30)

Figure 6. Ysaÿe
(mm 6-7)

The smallest excerpt that will be viewed is one measure in length. Unlike any other excerpt we will view, this is the one passage where Ysaÿe continues on with sixteenth notes after introducing Bach’s quote, without a break as you can see in Figure 7 and 8.

Figure 7. Bach
(mm 79)

Figure 8. Ysaÿe
(mm 10)

In Figure 9 Bach wrote a continuous sixteenth note passage and Ysaÿe, yet again expresses the idea of “highlighting” Bach’s theme, by adding two sixteenth note rests and
fermata at the end of the phrase in Figure 10. However, Ysaÿe leaves out the C#, D#, E# and F# originally used in Bach’s Prelude.

Figure 9. Bach
(mm 80-81)

Figure 10. Ysaÿe
(mm 31-32)

The final excerpt we will view today is in some of the last measure of Bach’s Prelude. Figure 11 starts on E and revisits E several more times. Similarly, in Figure 12 Ysaÿe follows this same concept and structure, but instead starts on A, and consecutively revisiting A as the sixteenth notes follow the same descending pattern. Also in Figure 12 Ysaÿe notated slurs, instead of separate bows, giving it a more connected feel.

Figure 11. Bach
(mm 136-137)

Figure 12. Ysaÿe
(mm 70-71)
Not only do these musical excerpts give light that Bach touched the life of Eugène Ysaÿe through his works, but there are several accounts that describes Ysaÿe’s fascination with Bach’s works. For example, Michel Stockhem preface writer from *Six Sonatas for Violin Solo*, stated that Ysaÿe, “...had long occupied himself with Bach’s works for unaccompanied violin and had frequently played the d-minor Chaconne in public.”

Stockhem also stated how some speculate that “Ysaÿe’s six sonatas were conceived as a modern-day response to Bach’s music and a renewal of the message they contain.” No matter how one may interpret Ysaÿe’s utilization of certain phrases from Bach’s *Prelude*, it is evident that Bach’s work has withstood the test of time, and that his compositions are an inspiration.

In conclusion, Eugène-Auguste Ysaÿe was inspired and influenced by Johannes Sebastian Bach’s genius. More specifically, he was impacted by Bach’s *Prelude* from Partita No. 3 in E major (S.1006), which we can see clearly through the various direct quotes Ysaÿe uses in *Obsession*, from Sonate No.2, A Minor. We previewed the backgrounds of Eugène Ysaÿe and Johannes Sebastian Bach, and discovered various attributes to both of the collected works I have selected to examine. Finally, excerpts were performed and viewed, for the greatest possible understanding of the connection between the movement *Obsession*, and *Prelude*. With all this in mind, it is clear to see how even today J.S Bach always manages to come back to the future, and enlighten our senses and inspire composers such as that of Eugène-August Ysaÿe, in this case through solo violin for sonatas and partitas.

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13 Stockhem, Michel pg 7  
14 Stockhem, Michel pg7


