

Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931): Overview of Writings

The Belgian violinist, composer, teacher, conductor, and concert organizer Eugène Ysaÿe was an emblematic figure of musical life at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He wrote over the course of his entire life—letters, poems, an opera libretto, articles, meditations, and prefaces. Studying these writings helps us to better understand the musician who had a unique way of sparking and stimulating the creation of new works, who was a convinced advocate of the music of Chausson, Debussy, Fauré, Franck, d'Indy, Jongen, Lekeu, Saint-Saëns and many others, whether in Europe, Russia, or the United States. Ysaÿe's writings also reveal personal concepts of the composer and pedagogue who helped so many young musicians flourish in their careers as instrumentalists, teachers, or composers. Finally, these texts reveal the man behind the public figure.

The largest body of letters and assorted unpublished writings by Eugène Ysaÿe—more than a thousand documents—are held in the collection bearing his name at the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR). In descending order, other important collections of Ysaÿe's writings can be found in the Archives of the Royal Palace (Brussels) and the Library of the Royal Conservatory of Liège which, together, hold more than two hundred and fifty letters dating from after 1881.

Most of this correspondence is between Ysaÿe and his first wife Louise Bourdau, his father Nicolas Ysaÿe, and his friend, the journalist Théodore Lindenlaub. A few dozen letters by Ysaÿe to the American violinist Jeannette Dincin are held in the collection of the Juilliard School in New York. Ysaÿe married Dancin in 1927, and these letters, dating from 1922 to 1929, shed light on this period following his definitive return to Belgium. In addition to Ysaÿe's correspondence held in public collections throughout the world are letters held in private collections, the importance of which is difficult to measure. Apart from a few letters to Debussy, Chausson, Lekeu, and Ropartz, most of these documents remain unpublished.

From the 1880s, Ysaÿe's ties to the poet Jules Larforgue, a friend of his younger brother Théo, who was a pianist, as well as the Parisian literary circles in the orbits of Vieuxtemps and Franck, stimulated him to educate himself and read the poetry of Charles Grandmougin, Sully Prudhomme (which Ysaÿe set), Lamartine, and Baudelaire. During the same period he began to compose and also tried his hand at writing poetry. His readings and his experience as a musician, particularly in the Brussels artistic circle Les XX, encouraged him to break free from formal restraints and pursue the poem in music, beginning with his *Poème élégiaque* for violin and piano dedicated to Fauré (1892). Later in life he would give the title *Harmonies du soir* to a composition for string quartet and orchestra in reference to the poem from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*. Although *Musical America* of 12 October 1918

affirms Ysaÿe was the author of about two hundred poems, only a few of these have survived. *Prière* (1918), published in that periodical, as well as *Tourniquet* (1919), of which only the title remains, were set by the cellist Maurice Dambois, a regular concert partner of Ysaÿe's and the dedicatee of his Sonata for solo cello, op. 28. The library of the Liège Conservatory holds four other poems by Ysaÿe. These include a set of three poems describing Beethoven's sonatas for violin and piano no. 1 in D major, no. 9 in A major (the Kreutzer Sonata), and no. 5 in F major, the latter of which was dedicated to the Russian pianist Victoria Boshko with whom Ysaÿe was having a brief affair in August 1917. The fourth poem, *L'Éveil*, was written in New York in October 1918 and was meant to be the subject of a symphonic poem of the same title for female voice and orchestra, a project that did not come to fruition. Thanks to a publication of 1927, there also remains the verse that Ysaÿe wrote and set in 1919 for his *Paraphrase sur un thème de Mendelssohn* for mezzo-soprano and orchestra or piano, which draws from the second movement of Mendelssohn's String Quartet op. 12 in E-flat Major.

Aside from these letters and poems, Ysaÿe was also the author of an opera libretto. The composition of the text and music for *Les Borains en grève* began in 1898, with the completion of his *Scène lyrique*. He then set this large-scale project aside, only taking it up again in the summer of 1928. In August 1929, he finished a fair copy of the libretto, entirely written in the Walloon dialect of Liège. It was in this form that the work, from then on known as *Piére li Houyeû*, was premièred at the Théâtre royal de Liège on 4 March 1931.

Ysaÿe also took up his pen on several occasions to make public statements about subjects that were important to him. A great admirer of Beethoven, he wrote an article on the symphonies that was published in the daily newspaper, *L'Indépendance belge* of 11 April 1907 and reprinted in several other Belgian newspapers. For him it was the occasion to not only commemorate the 80th anniversary of the composer's death but also to promote the concerts in which he directed his orchestra of the Concerts Ysaÿe in the 9th Symphony. In 1920, on the centenary of the birth of the violinist and composer from Verviers, Henry Vieuxtemps, Ysaÿe composed his reflections on the concertos for violin composed by his former teacher but also, more generally, on the role of the soloist and interpreter. These texts, the manuscripts of which are dispersed between the collections of the Liège Conservatory library and the archives of the Palais royal, were originally notes for lectures given by Ysaÿe in Verviers in 1920 and later at the École Normale de Musique de Paris and the Liège Conservatory in 1926. They were later published in installments by the composer's second son, Antoine Ysaÿe, first under the title "Vieuxtemps" in the monthly *L'Action musicale* in 1927 and 1928, then again in 1968 as "Henri Vieuxtemps mon maître," in the first issue of *Les Cahiers Ysaÿe*. Comparison of the autograph sources with the editions of 1927–28 and 1968 reveals numerous differences indicating that Antoine Ysaÿe's rewrote his father's texts.

Eugène Ysaÿe also wrote numerous texts on his vision of the place of artists in society, the history of the violin, or on musical education, in general, but also in particular regard to the violin.

Finally, Ysaÿe authored prefaces to didactic works on violin technique, like the volume of technical exercises by the Russian violinist Boris Sibor (Moscow, Jurgenson, 1911) or the *36 études de technique pour violon* by his student from Liège, Émile Chaumont (Paris, Eschig, 1913). Ysaÿe also contributed to projects of a more encyclopedic nature, prefacing the *Dictionnaire du violoniste* by Henri Vercheval (Paris, Fischbacher, 1923) or, in English, *An Encyclopedia of the Violin* by his student Alberto Bachmann (New York, Appleton, 1925). His last preface was written for *La Belgique centenaire* of the Belgian writer and poet René Lyr (Brussels, Les Éditions Nationales, 1930).

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Further reading

Marie Cornaz, *À la redécouverte d'Eugène Ysaÿe*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2019.

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