31 JANUARY | WEDNESDAY

**Shlomo Mintz Solo Violin Recital – The Complete Sonatas of Eugène Ysaïe**

Sonata No. 1 in G minor, “Joseph Szigeti”
   I.     Grave
   II.    Fugato
   III.   Allegretto poco scherzoso
   IV.    Finale con brio

Sonata No. 2 in A minor, “Jacques Thibaud”
   I.     Prelude: “Obsession”
   II.    Malinconia (Poco lento)
   III.   Sarabande: “Dance of the Shadows”
   IV.    Allegro furioso: “The Furies”

Sonata No. 3 in D minor, “Georges Enescu”

Sonata No. 4 in E minor, “Fritz Kreisler”
   I.     Allemanda
   II.    Sarabande
   III.   Finale

Sonata No. 5 in G major, “Mathieu Crickboom”
   I.     L’Aurore
   II.    Danse rustique

Sonata No. 6 in E major, “Manuel Quiroga”
Shlomo Mintz
Distinguished Artist-In-Residence

Critics, colleagues and audiences regard Shlomo Mintz as one of the foremost violinists of our time, esteemed for his impeccable musicianship, stylistic versatility and commanding technique alike. Born in Moscow in 1957, he immigrated to Israel and studied the violin with Ilona Feher. At the age of 11, he made his concert debut with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and at the age of 16 he made his debut in Carnegie Hall with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, under the patronage of Isaac Stern.

Since then he is a celebrated guest with orchestras and conductors on the international music scene, and has appeared with historical musicians like Sergiu Celibidache, Pablo Casals, Eugene Ormandy, Claudio Abbado, Lorin Maazel, Mstislav Rostropovich and Carlo Maria Giulini. In the 2012/2013 Season, he celebrated his 50th anniversary with the National Orchestra of France in a special concert at the Champs Elysées Theatre as a conductor and a soloist.

A regular President of Jury (Wieniawski, Sion, Buenos Aires and Munetsugu violin competitions) and Artistic Director of many International Music Festivals, he is currently sought after to conduct masterclasses all over the world. Mintz is also a co-founder of Violins of Hope, a project that aims to promote peace through music.

At the age of 18, Shlomo Mintz added the role of conductor to his artistic endeavors. Since then, he has conducted acclaimed orchestras worldwide. "I started conducting, because my teacher Dorothy Delay, gave me a long speech about 'knowing what other instruments play when you play your concertos'. She was an eloquent pianist herself and was able to accompany her students on several occasions. After I had a few years of piano playing, my interests turned immediately to conducting..."

Mintz is currently the Artistic Director of Crans Montana Classics.
Eugène Ysaÿe (1858 – 1931)

In his marvellously funny portrait of the pretentiousness of academics – *The 2½ Pillars of Wisdom* – the Scottish author (and, coincidentally, founder of Edinburgh’s infamous Really Terrible Orchestra) Alexander McCall Smith dismisses Belgium and Belgians as “ineffably dull”. He had clearly never studied the life of Eugène Ysaÿe.

At the age of 10, Ysaÿe argued so vociferously with his violin teacher (Désiré Heynberg) that he was expelled from the Liège Conservatoire. He also became dangerously addicted to consuming large quantities of Belgian beer and, in later life, various parts of his body had to be amputated as a result of gradual poisoning of his system from so much beer drinking (Fritz Kreisler recalls how he watched Ysaÿe sitting by a river with a fishing rod with which he periodically pulled out of the water a cool bottle of beer). But it was for skills beyond the consumption of beer that he came to the attention of his contemporaries and earned a place in posterity. Carl Flesch called him “the most outstanding violinist I have ever heard in my life”, and he was equally idolised by such great men as Kreisler and Enescu. Modern books on violin playing describe him as “the pioneer of 20th century violin playing”.

Having been expelled in 1869, he was readmitted to the Liège Conservatoire three years later and assigned to another teacher (Rodolphe Massart) with whom he clearly had a better rapport; in 1873 he won a first prize for violin playing and in 1874 won not only the Conservatoire’s Silver Medal but a scholarship to the Brussels Conservatoire where he studied under Wieniawski. Another year saw him in Paris studying with Vieuxtemps and after three years with him, Ysaÿe was appointed Leader of the Bilse Orchestra in Berlin. He was partnered by the pianist Anton Rubinstein on several concert tours of Russia (during one of which, in 1908, his priceless Guarneri violin was stolen from his dressing room and only recovered 40 years later in Berlin) and settled in Paris where he became the preferred soloist for new works by the leading French composers of the time. Among the more significant works dedicated to him are César Franck’s Sonata in A, Chausson’s *Poème*, and String Quartets by Debussy, d’Indy and Saint-Saëns.

As a violinist, Ysaÿe had a somewhat unorthodox way of holding the bow (with a rigid right hand wrist) which exacerbated inherent problems in his arms, causing him to abandon violin playing in his 50s and turn to conducting. Ysaÿe became a popular figure on the rostrum in both the UK and the USA, serving as conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra from 1918 to 1922, after which he continued to give occasional concerts, despite the amputation of a foot in 1929, but concentrated mostly on composition. He completed his final work – the first ever opera in the Walloons language (*Peter the Miner*) – weeks before his death in 1931. Ysaÿe never studied composing formally, and was clearly influenced by a whole range of composers from Strauss to Bartók, but his compositional style is wholly original and, according to Boris Schwarz “he was at his best when writing for the violin, and his Six Sonatas for violin solo Op.27 reveal a searching mind for harmonic and violinistic originality”.

The Six Sonatas were apparently sketched out in their entirety the day after he had heard Joseph Szigeti perform Bach’s unaccompanied Sonata in G minor, BWV1001, at a recital in July 1923, and they were published the following year. Ysaïe stated that they were “conceived as a modern-day response to Bach’s music and a renewal of the message they contain. But they are also a response to everything that had changed in music and violin playing in the meantime”. He dedicated each of the individual Sonatas to a violinist colleague and attempted to depict something of their personality and style in the music. But beyond the jokes, the musical references and subtle allusions (not all of which we can identify), Ysaïe had another goal in mind; “I wanted to associate musical interest with grand qualities of true virtuosity, a much neglected association since instrumentalists no longer venture into composition and are abandoning this task to those who do not know the resources and secrets of the medium”.

**Sonata No. 1 in G minor** (dedicated to Joseph Szigeti)
Grave
Fugato
Allegretto poco scherzoso
Finale con brio

Joseph Szigeti was noted for his scholarly and intellectual performances of Bach, and the First Sonata follows the model of BWV1001 both in its tonality and the design of its four movements. The opening of the 1st movement makes use of triple and quadruple stopping to recreate the Bachian texture, although harmonically this is very much music of a later age. The 2nd movement uses that archetypically Bach genre, the Fugue, and ends with a series of astonishing six-note chords (some have noted the very Bach-like obsession with the number six in these Sonatas). In place of the Siciliano movement of the Bach Sonata, Ysaïe includes as the 3rd movement an amiable allegretto poco scherzoso which, with its flurry of parallel fourths and fifths, is somewhat reminiscent of Debussy, but also reminds us, in passages of counterpoint, that Bach was very much the starting point of this Sonata. That is reinforced with the 4th movement with its assertive rhythmic momentum and strong harmonic foundation. Only at the end does Ysaïe allow virtuoso display to get the better of him and, in the words of Donald Gislason, “operating under the premise that one note should never be used when three would do, Ysaïe ends his sonata with a burst of blunt rhythmic energy that pays homage to the hemiola patterns of Baroque rhythm, while fully engaging the aspirations of the modern virtuoso violinist”.

Sonata No. 2 in A minor (dedicated to Jacques Thibaut)
Prelude: “Obsession”
Malinconia (Poco lento)
Sarabande: “Dance of the Shadows”
Allegro furioso: “The Furies”

The Second Sonata also has elements of Bach in it, but all four movements are more obviously linked by the appearance of the plainchant Dies Irae, a theme long associated with wrath and judgement which had so fascinated Berlioz and became almost the musical calling-card of Rachmaninov. Dedicated to the French violinist Jacques Thibaud, known for his lyrical tone and perceptive interpretations of Mozart, Beethoven and contemporary French music. Thibaud and Ysaÿe were close friends, Thibaud having shared an apartment with Ysaÿe and borrowed his Guarnerius and Stradivarius in emergencies. Thibaud included Bach’s E major Partita, BWV1006, as part of his daily practice routine, but refused ever to perform it in public believing he would make some fatal slip and forever be lost within its labyrinth of notes. Ysaÿe pokes fun at this obsession in the Second Sonata’s 1st movement, presenting fragments of the Bach work as if being practised by the violinist, followed by outbursts (marked brutale in the score) which indicate Thibaud’s anger at his memory lapses and slips. To rub salt in the wound, he intermingles the Bach quotations with frequent references to the Dies Irae to create a heady cross-referencing of themes. The 2nd movement opens with a reflective two-part passage for muted violin before giving way to a free exploration of the Dies Irae. The 3rd movement is a set of five variations, each exploiting differing techniques of double-stopping and bow control, on the Dies Irae which opens the movement as a pizzicato chorale and closes it arco. The 4th movement again brings in the Dies Irae as the climax of a devilishly difficult exhibition of true violinistic virtuosity.

Sonata No. 3 in D minor (dedicated to Georges Enescu)
Ballade

In a single, two-section movement, this Sonata pays homage to Enescu the composer and champion of contemporary music. It opens with a dark, reflective Lento molto sostenuto passage of double stopping which hints at the 12-note style of composition very much in vogue at the time. Occasional passionate outbursts are said to reflect Enesco’s own tendency to explosive fits of anger, and these become more prominent and fiery in the Tempo giusto e con bravura second section. There are elements of the Fugue about this section, but it rapidly moves into a passage of extreme virtuosity full of repetitive figures and an exhausting number of notes.
Sonata No. 4 in E minor (dedicated to Fritz Kreisler)
Allemanda
Sarabande
Finale

Known for his penchant of passing off his original works as earlier discoveries, Fritz Kreisler was a close personal friend whom Ysaïe admired as much as a composer as a violinist. In the titles of each of the Fourth Sonata's movements, we see a reference to titles Kreisler himself used as well as dance forms employed by Bach in his own violin works, but the music begins with a residue of the aggression and fiery passion that closed the Third Sonata. The 1st movement opens with a powerful rhetorical flourish before setting out on its slow journey much in the style of a Bach Allemande and making frequent reference to a rising figure (E-F sharp-G-A) which, later in the movement, is treated fugally. The 2nd movement is built on a descending ostinato which comprises the same four notes in reverse order. The ostinato is initially stated pizzicato (specifically with vibrato) before the bow comes into play and the music becomes more complex while retaining the stately tread of a conventional Sarabande. As with Bach's unaccompanied Sonatas, this ends with a Moto perpetuo, but the inspiration behind the 3rd movement, with its ceaseless 16th notes and brisk tempo, would seem to be more Kreisler's own famous Allegro which he falsely ascribed to the 18th century Italian violinist/composer, Gaetano Pugnani.

Sonata No. 5 in G (dedicated to Mathieu Crickboom)
L'Aurore (Lento assai)
Danse rustique (Allegro giocoso molto moderato - Moderato amabile - Tempo primo - Poco più mosso)

The Fifth Sonata is dedicated to Mathieu Crickboom who, while not having been as internationally famous as the other dedicatees, was a particularly close associate and compatriot of Ysaïe. He was reputed to be Ysaïe’s favourite pupil and played second violin in the Ysaïe Quartet until 1897, when he formed his own string quartet. He was also professor of violin first at the Liège and subsequently the Brussels conservatories, and wrote a tutor for the instrument which included several works of his own designed focusing on specific areas of technique. The 1st movement evokes dawn over the Belgian farmland around Liège where both Ysaïe and Crickboom grew up, and as the sun rises, so the violin becomes more heated and animated, reminding us along the way of Crickboom’s own interest in the finer points of technical skill, not least the ability to produce pizzicato notes with one hand while bowing with the other. The 2nd movement also celebrates their shared rustic roots in an ebullient country dance, with passages of parallel fourths which refer directly to the chapter devoted to this technique in Crickboom’s Technique of the Violin.
Sonata No. 6 in E (dedicated to Manuel Quiroga)
Allegro giusto non troppo vivo – Allegretto poco scherzando

Manuel Quiroga was a Spanish virtuoso who had a life full of promise before him. A student of the Paris Conservatory, he was the first Spaniard to win the Premier Prix since Sarasate. Ysaÿe recognised the vivid similarities between the tone and technique of Quiroga and Sarasate, and wrote this Sonata to celebrate that. Sadly, Quiroga’s career was cut off in its prime when he was run over by a truck in New York in 1937. In this single movement, Ysaye draws considerably from the resources of Spanish dance rhythms, most obviously the habanera. The most harmonically unambiguous of the six, the Sonata provides a glittering and flamboyant conclusion the set.

Programme notes by Marc Rochester