

ILYA KALER

Eugene Ysaÿe: Solo Violin Sonatas – Album Review

There are some works which should never be attempted – either in performance or recording – unless the artist is supremely confident in carrying them off and has the technique to match. Chopin's 24 Etudes, Liszt's Transcendental Etudes and Paganini's 24 Caprices – all finger-twisters – come to mind. To these one might add the six unaccompanied violin sonatas Op.27 by the Belgian violin virtuoso Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931). However under Ilya Kaler's hands, all six sonatas pass like a breeze. So seemingly effortless is his account that one forgets its longeurs or technical difficulties. It is as if this 1986 joint First Prizewinner of the International Tchaikovsky Violin Competition knows no fears. His intonation is spot-on, so squeaky clean (perhaps the wrong choice of words) that some superhuman mechanism is operating behind his fingers. This is not to say that the playing is robotic or unvarying. Far from it, Kaler breathes the music – its peaks and troughs – and traverses all form of dynamic shifts – from pianissimo to fortissimo - so naturally that it is unnerving. Just sample the first movement, Obsession, from Sonata No.2, which switches gear from the Preludium of Bach's Partita No.3 to the Dies Irae and back like some crazed Grand Prix driver. The playing is breathtaking, and often hair-raisingly so. I could go on, but its best to let the music bring on the superlatives. As a corollary, I checked out Kaler's recording of the Paganini Caprices (on Naxos 8.550717), and found it equally enthralling. I would even put it ahead of more famous recordings by Itzhak Perlman or Ruggiero Ricci.

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