



George ENESCU

Complete Works for Violin and Piano • 2

Violin Sonata No. 1 • Ballade • Tarantella
Aubade • Hora Unirii • Andantino malinconico
Impressions d'enfance

Axel Strauss, Violin • Ilya Poletaev, Piano

George Enescu (1881-1955): Violin Sonatas No. 1 • Aubade • Tarantella

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Among the vast repertoire of music for violin and piano, the works of George Enescu occupy an altogether special place. One of the twentieth century's towering musicians, Enescu was once called by Pablo Casals "the greatest musical phenomenon since Mozart". A prodigious talent, who was said to have by memory most of the works of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Brahms, he was not only one of the century's most important violinists, but an excellent pianist, a conductor of some of the most eminent orchestras of his time, an unforgettable teacher and, most importantly, a composer of some of the most moving, complex, and refined music of his day, music that has only recently begun to find a wide audience outside his native country. Born in Romania, he studied first in Vienna, where as a boy he played under the baton of Brahms, and later in Paris, where his teachers included Gabriel Fauré and the great contrapuntal pedagogue André Gedalge. Upon graduation from the Paris Conservatoire with a Premier Prix in violin playing, he launched a brilliant career that took him to some of the most important concert stages of Europe and the United States and to partnerships with other contemporary luminaries such as Alfred Cortot, Jacques Thibaud, Pablo Casals, and many others. His international upbringing is reflected in his music, which organically absorbs and transforms a wealth of diverse influences: the drama and the complex organizational procedures of German music, the refinement of harmony and colour of the French school, and the vitality, variety and sophistication of the folk-music of Romania, with its unusual scales and fluid rhythms.

Enescu's published *oeuvre* is relatively small – 33 opus numbers in total. Among these are several large-scale works, his only opera, *Oedipe*, three symphonies,

three suites for orchestra, some weighty chamber works (sonatas for violin and cello, two string quartets, two piano quartets and a piano quintet), a chamber symphony, songs, and other works of smaller dimensions. Behind this published output lies an enormous mass of unfinished manuscripts, which is at present kept in the Enescu Museum in Bucharest and which is being gradually mined for performable material by eager scholars and performers alike. A busy life, combined with perfectionism of a rare order, meant that works flowed slowly from Enescu's pen, often taking years or even decades to reach their final shape. He was also notoriously reticent about promoting and programming his own music. This fact, and the ill-health Enescu suffered in his later years, goes some way towards explaining the relative neglect of his output outside Romania. It is also the quality and intensity of his writing, however, that makes for some special challenges for the audience. Enescu's music is highly complex, overlapping layer upon layer of melodic lines into what one of his contemporaries called "a magic jungle" – often derived, however, from very simple basic building blocks. Another characteristic feature of his language, one that became more pronounced as his style developed, is avoidance of symmetry and literal repetition: everything is constantly being modified and varied, with the end result that no two moments in Enescu's mature music are ever exactly alike. Yet, despite the formidable intellectual craft with which it is constructed, Enescu's music is never pedantic, or artificial, although its richness can be almost too involved for a casual concert hall encounter. A recording of Enescu's complete works for piano and violin thus gives the listener a unique opportunity for an intimate, and unhurried, traversal of his creative trajectory.

Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano, Op. 2 (1897)

If the *Second Violin Sonata, Op. 6* (see Disc 1 / Naxos 8.572691) was a piece in which Enescu was for the first time able to obtain a convincing, individual stylistic synthesis between the Germanic and the French sides of his musical upbringing, the *First Sonata*, though written in Paris, is almost entirely dependent on the musical world of Beethoven and Brahms. Despite its obvious influences, this attractive and spirited work, written when Enescu was only sixteen years old, says a lot about its author. It is clear that he is extremely comfortable instrumentally on both violin and piano, that he uses the combination of these two instruments to effectively simulate an orchestral, symphonic texture (Enescu also composed several "school symphonies" at the same time), and, most importantly, that he is preoccupied, as he would be for the rest of his life, with continuity of musical thought, clarity of formal design and continuous polyphonic development. Especially notable in this regard are several dense fugal episodes in the second and third movement, reminding us that Enescu was a star pupil in counterpoint and that one of his student fugues was chosen for inclusion in an influential textbook on fugue by his counterpoint teacher, André Gedalge. In fact, there are some similarities between the opening motive of the finale and the first movement of Gedalge's *Second Violin Sonata*, published in 1900 (while the *First* was actually dedicated to Enescu).

Ballade, Op. 4a (1895-96)

The original instrumentation of Enescu's *Ballade, Op. 4a*, is for violin and orchestra. A songful, warm, heartfelt melody is juxtaposed with a more dramatic, recitative-like central episode. Though Romantic in inspiration, Enescu's love for counterpoint and Baroque music is evident here as well, in the chorale-like character of the melody, the "walking", Corellian accompaniment in the piano (played pizzicato by cello in the orchestral version) and the way the principal melody itself is skilfully used as a bass line when the accompaniment is transferred to a high register.

Tarantella (1895)

Tarantella is as close as Enescu ever came to writing a conventional virtuoso violin *morceau*, in the vein of countless pieces by Paganini, Sarasate, Vieuxtemps, Wieniawski, and many others whose point of inspiration was mainly instrumental in nature. Throughout his life Enescu suffered from being categorized as a violin "virtuoso", a rôle he despised, and for which he, a musician of encyclopedic knowledge and enormous, complex musical intelligence, was fundamentally unsuited. In this early and difficult work, however, he clearly enjoys giving his fingers an elegant romp around the fingerboard, with modest, yet effective accompaniment from the piano. However, alongside traditional virtuoso gestures, an echo of a much more substantial piece can also be detected – that of Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata*.

Aubade (1899/1903)

An *Aubade* is a morning song, and here Enescu recast a piece originally written for string trio. He published it in a piano and violin version, presented here, in 1903. This impish and enticing serenade (its original title, in fact) runs its pleasant course until, at the end, the older Romanian national anthem, *Trăiască Regele* (Long live the king), suddenly appears, superimposed upon the opening theme. From his very early days as a child prodigy, Enescu was a favourite with the Romanian royal family, especially with the artistic and eccentric Queen Elisabeth. This gifted woman published numerous literary works under the pen-name Carmen Sylva, and was also a great music-lover. It is quite likely that this lighthearted work was first heard in the lavishly decorated music-room at the Peleş castle in Sinaia, the sumptuous summer residence of the Romanian royal family.

Hora Unirii (1917)

The manuscript of Enescu's *Hora* bears the date "Jan 24 1917". On this date Enescu found himself in the Moldovan city of Iași, where celebrations for the anniversary of the

Romanian unification of 1859 were underway. Associated with this important historical event is a tune well known to Romanians, also called *Hora Unirii* (the Hora of Unity), with lyrics by Vasile Alecsandri and music by Alexandru Flechtenmacher. A *hora* is a traditional Romanian circle dance, and Enescu here creates a highly idiomatic version that retains much more of the traditional, folk flavour than the plainer melody known to most Romanians today.

Andantino malinconico (1951)

Like a strange relic from the outer reaches of Enescu's musical universe, the *Andantino malinconico* (1951), written for the Paris Conservatoire's sight-reading test, is an enigmatic, haunting two-and-a-half-minute kaleidoscope. In his last years Enescu took to writing music that was ever more oblique and elusive in tone and compositional technique. Instead of complete statements, clear thematic presentations and audible phrase structures, the listener is given only the barest initial premises – a small gesture or an interval here, a persistent rhythmic cell there. The end result is a fascinating web of highly sensuous, yet curiously runaway musical events. Although nominally within the bounds of traditional tonality, this music, like many pages of the late *Chamber Symphony* (1954), or the great symphonic poem *Vox Maris*, requires many repeated hearings before listeners can begin to sense the guiding threads in its extraordinary musical labyrinth. Remarkably, it sometimes resembles the sound-world and the linear logic of Schoenberg (the author of the two *other* great chamber symphonies of the twentieth century) and leaves one wondering what the unfinished fourth and fifth symphonies would have been like (though necessarily conjectural completions by Pascal Bentoiu exist and have been recorded).

Impressions d'enfance, Op. 28 (1940)

Enescu had a life-long preoccupation with the suite – he wrote several for piano and for orchestra, and *Impressions d'enfance*, his last major creation for violin and piano, is a summation not only of his stupendous compositional craft, but also, perhaps, of his own life. On the surface it is a series of exquisitely wrought vignettes – a musical diary that tells the story of a day in a life of a child. It opens with an extended improvisation by a folk fiddler, followed by a mournful supplication of a street beggar. A little stream glistens in the back of the garden; as the sun sets, a caged bird sings wistfully, answered by a raspy cuckoo clock on the wall. A mother sings a soft lullaby to her child and its melody mingles with the chirping of the cricket as the child falls asleep, with the moon shining into the windows. The subdued howling of the wind in the chimney is followed by powerful storm in the night, thunderclaps and lightning included; but the storm subsides, and the sun rises majestically as nature awakens to a new, glorious day. A simple tale indeed, but its realization is a stupendous compositional tour-de-force. Coloristically, the score is a treasure-trove, with sonorities ranging from ingeniously imitative to mysteriously suggestive. Structurally, Enescu creates here a vast network of motives, themes, and musical cells that interact on many levels, creating a musical fabric of extraordinary sophistication and richness. A suite only in appearance, the work is actually an immense cyclical arch-like edifice, where themes are gradually introduced, slowly developed and, at the end, combined together in the most unexpected and moving way.

Ilya Poletaev

Axel Strauss



The first German artist ever to win the international Naumburg Violin Award in New York, Axel Strauss made his American debut at the Library of Congress in Washington DC and his New York debut at Alice Tully Hall in 1998. Since then he has given recitals in major North American cities, including Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles and San Francisco. In 2007 he was the violinist in the world première of *Two Awakenings and a Double Lullaby*, written for him by Pulitzer Prize winning composer Aaron Jay Kernis. Axel Strauss has performed as soloist with orchestras in Budapest, Hamburg, New York, Seoul, Shanghai, Bucharest, San Francisco and Cincinnati, among others, and has toured widely throughout the world as a recitalist and chamber musician. He has also served as guest concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic and the Montreal Symphony. In 2013 Axel Strauss was appointed Professor of Violin at the Schulich School of Music at McGill University in Montreal. Prior to that he served as Professor of Violin at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

Ilya Poletaev



Photo: Christian Steiner

Pianist, harpsichordist and fortepianist Ilya Poletaev took First Prize at the 2010 International Johann Sebastian Bach Competition in Leipzig. A prize winner at the 2011 George Enescu competition, he won First Prize at the 2008 XX Concorso Sala Gallo Piano Competition in Monza, Italy, where he also received the Audience, Bach and Orchestra Prizes. A musician with an inquisitive mind, who explores repertoire from the sixteenth to the present century, Poletaev has performed extensively in Europe, Canada, Russia, and the United States both as a soloist, chamber musician, and continuo player. Engagements include appearances at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Klavier-Festival Ruhr, Dresdner Musikfestspiele, Accademia Filarmonica Romana, Philadelphia Kimmel Center, the Weill Hall in Carnegie Hall, Caramoor Festival, Chamber Music Northwest and many other prestigious venues. Between 2009-2014 he was on the roster of Astral Artists in Philadelphia. Born in Moscow, he moved to Israel and then to Canada, where he studied with pianist Marietta Orlov and harpsichordist Colin Tilney. He earned his M.Mus and DMA degrees in piano from Yale studying with Boris Berman, and he served on Yale's faculty between 2005 and 2010. In 2011 he was appointed Professor of Piano at the Schulich School of Music of McGill University.

A prodigious talent as a performer, George Enescu was dubbed “the greatest musical phenomenon since Mozart” by Pablo Casals. His compositions occupy a special place among the vast repertoire of works for violin and piano. Enescu wrote the spirited *First Sonata* aged 16, synthesizing the influence of Beethoven and Brahms into a work with rich, symphonic textures and remarkable polyphonic sophistication. The late *Andantino malinconico* is a haunting musical labyrinth, while the unpublished *Tarantella* is as close as Enescu came to writing a virtuoso violin *morceau*. The first of this two volume set can be found on Naxos 8.572691.

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(1881-1955)

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Violin Sonata No. 1, Op. 2 (1897)	25:35	Impressions d'enfance, Op. 28 (1940)	23:37
❶ I. Allegro vivo –	7:36	❹ Ménétrier	3:57
❷ II. Quasi adagio –	10:27	❺ Vieux mendicant	3:25
❸ III. Allegro	7:32	❻ Ruisselet au fond du jardin	2:51
❹ Ballade, Op. 4a (1895-96)	4:28	❼ L'oiseau en cage et le coucou au mur	2:33
❺ Tarantella (1895)	4:57	❽ Chanson pour bercer	1:50
❻ Aubade (1899/1903)	4:17	❾ Grillon	0:20
❼ Hora Unirii (1917)	1:38	❿ Lune à travers les vitres	2:47
❽ Andantino malinconico (1951)	2:29	⓫ Vent dans la cheminée	0:23
		⓬ Tempête au dehors, dans la nuit	2:00
		⓭ Lever de soleil	3:31

Axel Strauss, Violin • Ilya Poletaev, Piano

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