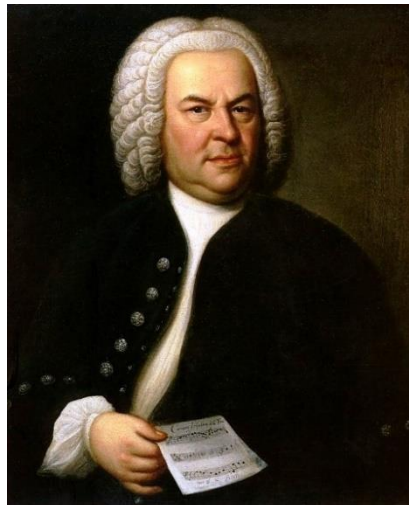


Johann Sebastian Bach: *Sonata in E Major for Violin and Harpsichord, BWV 1016*

Certainly Bach (1685-1750) needs no explanation; his is a household name. Whether you know him through singing his chorales, studying his solo instrumental works, or hearing his cantatas on stage, our modern world has not once lost sight of Bach and his music. Indeed, his music has so definitively shaped the entire western art music tradition that even works by Belá Bartók and George Crumb owe their very form and structure to his contrapuntal techniques. Bach is thus firmly enshrined at the head of the western art music canon, and his music has also been the *fons et origo* of the study of western music theory. This is not to say that the omnipresence of his musical style diminishes his artistry in any way, but rather an acknowledgement that Bach's music has been so foundational to our entire conception of "classical music" that we cannot help but see the influence of his compositional techniques on common practice style and counterpoint as we know it today.

His *Sonata in E Major for Violin and Harpsichord* can thus be seen as a microcosm of this concert's program. Within it, we are exposed to the techniques and styles that led to the creation of the three other works programmed today, from the sardonic irreverence of Poulenc to the melting lyricism of Ysaÿe and the fiery passion of Lekeu, all three of these composers owe the foundations of their musical style to Bach. This is why all Bach's solo works are an essential pedagogical tool for all instrumentalists – it defines how we think of the ebb and flow of music in the western art tradition.

The *Sonata* unfolds in four movements, beginning with the *Adagio*, where a violin constantly plays around the primary theme, taking it on a journey through different keys before finally arriving back at E Major in Bach's classic *prélude* style. The second movement, *Allegro*, is a classic dance movement, and it is here that we realize that Bach wrote this piece not for two, but for three contrapuntally independent voices: the violin, the harpsichord's left hand, and their right hand. The third movement, *Adagio ma non tanto*, is a breathless aria where the violin takes center stage to sing out above the harpsichord's accompanimental figures. Finally, the fourth movement, *Allegro*, is a dizzying rondo, with the theme taken through variation after variation before finally arriving back at its starting point.



Bach: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Francis Poulenc: *Sonata for Violin and Piano*

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) was a Parisian composer whose works can best be characterized as *avant garde*. A generation later than the great Romantics of the nineteenth century, Poulenc was ready to move on from the unabashed lyricism of Ysaÿe and his contemporaries to something more introspective and mindful of the world in which he lived. Drawing influences from very different sources, Poulenc enjoyed most music of Debussy, Schubert, and Stravinsky. He was even associated with the leading poetic movements of his time, and composed music to set the poems of Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob, Paul Éluard, and Louis Aragon, and their musico-poetic legacy lives on today as one of the greatest mysteries of the early twentieth-century French art world.

A pianist first and foremost (his greatest mentor was the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes), Poulenc allows the piano to shine through with a greater independence of voice in this work than do Ysaÿe and Lekeu in their respective works, not unlike the multi-voice counterpoint that Bach gave the harpsichordist in his sonata. Indeed, Poulenc here allows the piano to drive forward the motivic development independently of the violin, and sometimes instead of it, allowing both partners an equal chance to control the ebb and flow of the music. Poulenc's music has sometimes been described as "irreverent," a label that fits his music perfectly – for he neither cares to dive into the dense counterpoint of his predecessors, nor indulge in their lyricism. Having never formally studied music academically, Poulenc's compositions bring with them a sense of fresh ideas and verve.

The *Sonata* begins with a fiery opening movement: *Allegro con fuoco*. A far cry from the haunting melodies of *Rève d'enfant*, this is a dazzling show of virtuosity and dialogic interaction between the violin and piano. In the following movement, the *Intermezzo*, Poulenc writes a cryptically odd direction at the beginning, *très lent et calme (commencer très sensiblement plus lent qu'au numéro 1)*: 'very slow and calm (begin very sensitively more slowly than the first movement).' This is all well and good, until we realize that the first movement was *Allegro con fuoco* – there is certainly no way a trained instrumentalist would begin a movement marked *très lent* faster than one marked *Allegro*. Yet his subtitle betrays more than a lack of confidence in his performers – it shows his irreverence for the form and tradition of the music preceding him. No one would question a slow movement succeeding a fast one in sonata-allegro form, yet Poulenc simultaneously draws on the trope while distancing himself from it – as if there was a question of the slow movement proceeding faster in the first place. The final movement, *Presto tragico*, is yet another play on performance directions. What is a tragic *Presto*? Most glibly, it can only be a tragedy for the players, who are forced to play yet another virtuosic movement that capriciously flits from one theme to the next in an extremely fast tempo! Jokes aside, Poulenc likely intended this directive to give this final movement a bit of gravitas (though the music itself is truly light and fleeting). Be what it may, we see Poulenc the jokester shining through the rigidities of the sonata form and neo-Romantic aesthetics to indulge in a few pranks with his performers; an irreverent man indeed!

Eugène Ysaÿe: *Rève d'enfant*

Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931) was one of the most influential violinists of the Franco-Belgian School of violin playing. One of the greatest virtuosi of recent history, Ysaÿe as a pedagogue influenced nearly all major schools of violin technique now extant in the United States, particularly with his emphasis on a smooth, buttery tone propelled from the forearm (rather than the wrist or entire arm) and made possible by making imperceptible the changes between up and down bow strokes – key characteristics of violin technique emphasized by teachers across the country today. Indeed, most violinists studying at major conservatories today can trace their pedagogical lineage back to Ysaÿe!

Ysaÿe spent a great deal of his professional career at the Brussels Conservatoire, and in 1918 he was appointed the music director of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. As a founding member of the Ysaÿe Quartet, he premiered the now-staple Debussy String Quartet, and as a virtuoso violinist, he was the dedicatee of César Franck's *Violin Sonata*, Ernest Chausson's *Poème*, and Guillaume Lekeu's *Violin Sonata*. Best known for the exquisite sound he was able to draw from his violin, his motto was to play "Nothing which wouldn't have for goal emotion, poetry, heart."

His meditative *Rève d'enfant* is a showcase of the violin's ability to sing. It is a *Child's dream*, full of nostalgia, not unlike Robert Schumann's *Kinderszenen* (Scenes from Childhood) for the piano. From beginning to end, the violin flows in musical time, and seems never to stop – a true testament to the performer's ability to sustain their tone. *Rève d'enfant* is thus the perfect piece by which Ysaÿe could show off his singular playing style, in which one note flows seamlessly into the next.



Poulenc: *Wikimedia Commons*



Ysaÿe: *Wikimedia Commons*

Guillaume Lekeu: *Violin Sonata in G Major*

« *Bien plus, ce sera bizarre, détraqué, horrible, tout ce qu'on voudra ; mais du moins, ce sera original.* »

'What's more, it will be bizarre, off-the-rails, horrible, what have you; but at least, it will be original.'

-Guillaume Lekeu, 1887

Guillaume Lekeu (1870-1894) was one of the great minds of the musical world taken from us at an all-too-young age at only 24 years old. Born in Heusy, Belgium, he moved to Poitiers, France with his family at age 9. Lekeu studied music composition privately with some of the leading names of Europe, including César Franck and Vincent d'Indy who both taught at the Conservatoire de Paris, and he was awarded second place at the Belgian *Prix de Rome* in 1891 for his cantata *Andromède*. Lekeu's musical influences ranged from the Wagner operas performed at Bayreuth to Beethoven to his own mentor, César Franck, and we see traces of them all lingering in the formative work that was his *Violin Sonata in G Major*.

His *Violin Sonata* was commissioned by none other than Eugène Ysaÿe in 1892 and stands as one of his best-known works today. The *Sonata* itself is often characterized by its insistence on the same primary theme throughout all the movements, a compositional feature Lekeu inherited from his teacher, Franck. Perhaps one might even imagine the theme as a sort of Wagnerian *leitmotif*, signaling the constant presence of some imagined character conjured by the violin's music. This *Sonata* has even been conjectured to be the inspiration for Marcel Proust's imagined *Vinteuil Sonata*, a piece of music which continually repeats its primary theme, and which becomes for the protagonist Swann a sort of "earworm" that comes to represent his beloved Odette in its endless repetitions.

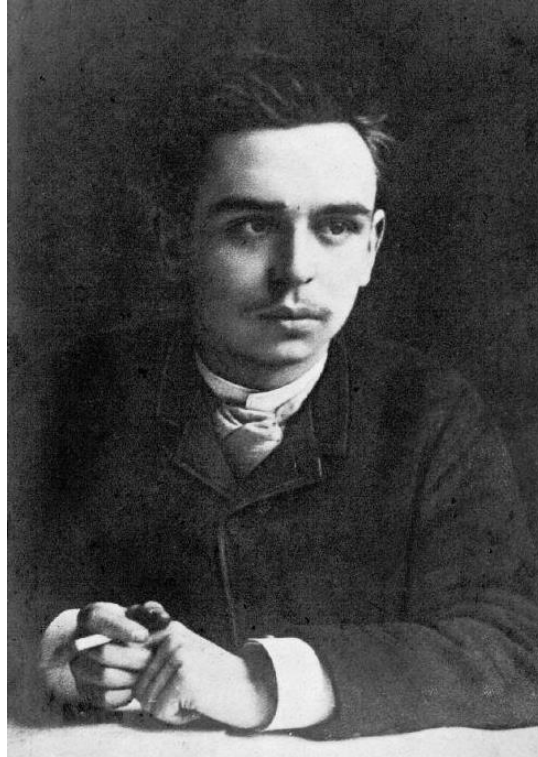
Lekeu, a young man full of the passion of life, let it be known in no uncertain terms that fire and ardor were the keys to his *Violin Sonata*. He qualifies each movement's performance direction with the adverb *très*, be it moderate, slow, or fast. The first movement, *Très modéré* ('Very moderate') opens with a rhapsodic theme in the violin, then moves onto a lyrical dialogue between the two performers, the piano and the violin. Halfway through, the music shifts into a dance, wherein the piano keeps up the dance rhythm while the violin slows down its melodic pace to become even more expressive. Fiery outbursts erupt occasionally, punctuating the overarching *chanté* texture of the movement. Lekeu was right to insist upon the moderation of our passions, for it could so easily erupt into an *Allegro appassionato* should the mood take the performers.

The second movement, *Très lent* ('Very slow') is by contrast an unabashed celebration of the violinist's capacity for lyricism, a true ode to Ysaÿe's forte. Here, Lekeu let Ysaÿe show off the chocolatey tone of his violin technique but gave frequent directions to play passage high up on the string, preventing the sound from blossoming too much. This movement is an exercise in control, a struggle for power between the composer and the performer played out over violin fingerings. The piano, though often given an accompanimental role in Lekeu's *Sonata*, is allowed to 'sing' out in the very last bars, with the direction *chanté* inscribed above their final gesture.

The third movement, *Très animé* ('Very lively') is where Lekeu takes his earworm theme, breaks it into pieces, and then puts it back together again. The textures in this movement frequently give the violin center stage while the piano plays second fiddle on a nimble ostinato rhythm. Nonetheless, the piano must work equally as hard as the violin – the part is not forgiving or easy by any means. In the middle of the movement, Lekeu presents once again the primary theme from the first movement, this time in E

major. A series of short *vif* passages lead us back to the fervor of the coda. Therein, we relish in Guillaume Lekeu's preferred mode of expression: boundless lyricism in the violin brought back to Earth by an energetic backdrop in the piano.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Lekeu: *Wikimedia Commons*