

Biography of violinist is exhaustive, exhausting

By Ifan Payne

contributing reviewer

Ysaye, by Lev Ginsburg, edited by H.R. Axelrod, translated by X.M. Danko (572 pages; Paganiniana; \$20)

Ysaye is in many ways an extraordinary book about an extraordinary man. In the second half of the last century and the first half of this one, the Belgian-born Eugene Ysaye was widely considered to be the greatest violinist of his day.

Taught by several important teachers, Wieniawski and Vieuxtemps among them, Ysaye in turn taught some students who became notable virtuosos and teachers: Mathieu Crickboom, Joseph Gingold, William Primrose and Louis Persinger, to name a few.

Ysaye was a composer, though other than a performance here and there of his solo violin sonatas, few of his works remain in the concert repertoire. He also was a conductor of note: From 1918 to

1922, he led the Cincinnati Symphony as its permanent conductor.

In the opening years of this century, Ysaye bestrode the musical world, an intimate of royalty, generals and the greatest musicians of the time. As a violinist, he probably was at his peak during the first decade of the century. Thereafter, poor health took a gradual toll on his solo performances. He died in Brussels in 1931.

Ysaye falls into two parts. The first half concentrates on the violinist's life and seems to be based on mostly American sources. The second half is an evaluation of his art and his music, and seems to be based on mostly Russian sources.

The strength of the book is the enormous amount of material that is presented, especially the more than 200 illustrations and reproductions of newspaper articles. The weakness of the book is its sloppy editing, poor index and

often confusing typographical layout. The discographies in the appendix are not well developed.

It is a curious lapse that neither the author nor the editor of Ysaye chose to deal with the recorded evidence of his playing. All his recordings are easily contained on one LP. A disc of his performances is available on Rococo Records, and a new issue is due out soon on the Masters of the Bow series from Discopaedia Records.

Another weakness of the book is that the reader is told neither the nature of the illness that affected Ysaye's hands—clearly a traumatic event for a concert violinist—nor the cause of his death.

Reading Ysaye is like going through an attic full of cultural artifacts and memorabilia. It's frustrating and tiring, but also fascinating and rewarding as the reader picks over the debris of a rich musical life.