

Tomasi: Complete Violin Works

Henri Tomasi (1901–1971)

Henri Tomasi is one of the great figures of 20th-century French music. The catalogue of his works, which comprises over a hundred opuses, features many splendid stage and concert scores. His main lyrical works, *Don Juan de Mañara*, *L'Atlantide*, *Sampieru Corsu* and *Le Silence de la mer* have been performed successfully both in France and abroad. His many concertos, performed since their creation by great soloists, are now part of the international repertoire. Tomasi is also the author of two important symphonies and a striking *Requiem for Peace*, as well as numerous pieces of chamber music. The works for violin gathered in this album belong to different periods of the composer's life, from his early youth (*Poème for Violin and Piano*) to his first Parisian successes in the 1930s (*Paghiella*, *Chant hébraïque*, *Tristesse d'Antar*, *Chant corse* and *Capriccio*) and the last stage of his life (*Violin Concerto 'Périple d'Ulysse'*).

In 1927, after distinguished studies at the Paris Conservatory, he simultaneously obtained a unanimous First Prize for conducting and a Grand Prix de Rome for musical composition. From then on, the musician's double career took off. Quickly becoming a recognised conductor, he was called upon to lead major French ensembles, including the National Orchestra, and after 1945, ensembles throughout Europe, such as the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and Opéra de Monte-Carlo. His works, noticed by critics and favorably received by the public, also receive recognition from his peers. In 1952 he won the Grand Prix de la Musique Française (SACEM) and in 1960 the Grand Prix Musical awarded by the city of Paris. The *Capriccio* for violin of the 1930s, which is particularly virtuosic, is heard in extreme contrast with the concerto *Périple d'Ulysse* of the 1960s, which is certainly still virtuosic, but emblematic of the renewal of Tomasi's writing, now turned towards an atonalism that does not renounce lyricism, a cardinal value for him.

This complete set of violin pieces reflects and reveals the mastery of Henri Tomasi's instrumental and orchestral writing. It is the work of one of the major composers of the 20th century.

Frédéric Ducros

COMPLETE VIOLIN WORKS

Although some of Henri Tomasi's works are internationally renowned, his compositions for violin are unknown to the public today. Tomasi's repertoire for violin is nevertheless of importance as this first recording of his complete violin works attests, highlighting the undeniable value and quality of these unfairly neglected works.

Works for Violin and Orchestra

Violin Concerto

'Périple d'Ulysse' ('Ulysses' Journey') (1962)
(Dedicated to Devy Erlih)

Composed in 1962, Tomasi's violin concerto *'Ulysses' Journey* was commissioned and premiered by Devy Erlih, who gave its first performance in

1964 with the National Orchestra of France, conducted by Georges Tzipine. It is inspired by *Naissance de l'Odysée* ("The Birth of the Odyssey"), a novel by the French writer Jean Giono. The incredibly virtuosic violin part, whose expression is at once alluring, tragic and violent, is meant to embody Ulysses himself. The compositional style is lyrical and the structure of the work rhapsodic, illustrating perfectly the journey of the solitary hero confronted by his fate. This concerto is a true instrumental and emotional tour de force pitting the violin against a rich orchestral texture, without ever upsetting the balance of the whole, a technique which Tomasi, a highly skilled orchestrator, has perfected here.

The work comprises four movements. The first movement acts as an introduction, and establishes, from the first few bars, the protean character of the entire work in a rhapsodic style which captures unpredictable changes of mood. It is followed directly by an *Allegro*, just as capricious, but more tormented and tense. The central section of this movement contains a highly virtuosic cadenza on the violin, before a slow passage in which the violin seems to weep over a funereal ostinato of repeated notes played by the trombones over an ominous drum roll. The movement resumes its frantic course to a violent conclusion, as indicated by Tomasi in the score itself. The third movement is a slow *Andante* and is profoundly melancholic. The violin line sings expressively over repeated patterns which ring out like the tolling of bells. At the heart of this movement, the solo instrument seems to cry out its distress, playing with wild vehemence, as the melodic line is given by the woodwind, brass and percussion sections in an orchestration which is reminiscent of Shostakovich. The *Andante* ends as it began – the weeping violin sighing over the repeated motifs of the orchestra, with an increasingly fragmented melodic line which slowly disappears into the most quiet of dynamics. The *Final*, a dazzling bravura piece for orchestra, is a wild and violent *Allegro*, a rush into the abyss which is briefly paused to give way to a violin cadenza with timpani.

As in all of Tomasi's symphonic output, his orchestral scores are carefully chiselled, audacious and brimming with rich colours, putting him amongst the greatest composers.

Capriccio (1931, rev. 1950)

The *Capriccio* for violin and orchestra could in fact be considered Tomasi's first violin concerto. Tomasi composed this work in 1931, 30 years before '*Ulysses' Journey*', when he had already been conducting orchestras for five years. This is reflected in an orchestral composition which is virtuosic and scintillating, and which shows how precocious Tomasi's orchestral writing was. The modal colouring of the work, as well as the handling of timbre and instrumentation, make this a very French-sounding piece, typical of its time. The first movement starts with a disjointed introduction in which the lively and skittish orchestral writing alternates with a more expressive and meditative violin part, before the movement proper starts in a dancing and happy rhythm. Before the end of the *Allegretto*, Tomasi writes a cadenza for the solo violin which seems to anticipate those of the later *Concerto*, which have a similar style and also start with a dialogue between violin and other instruments, here with the horns. The movement concludes with a repeat of the first entry of the violin, before vanishing *pianississimo*. The second movement, *Andante*, is a moment of sheer beauty. One also hears here a hint of the slow movement of *Ulysses* with an orchestral ostinato that underpins a flowing, expressive and mournful violin solo of great emotional intensity. The dazzling *Final*, with its strong rhythmic drive, starts with a whimsical and mischievous bassoon solo. The offbeat accents and rhythmic invention give this movement a verve that transports the listener towards the final coda – a long crescendo in which the hemiolas of the orchestra

struggle against the solo violin, whose melodic line soars seemingly into infinity above the cross-rhythms, the rising intensity finishing in a display of fireworks and stunning brilliance.

This Concerto-Capriccio is a work of great elegance and full of the charm and refinement typical of France of the 1930s, elevated by the poignant slow movement and the dazzling finale.

Chant hébraïque ('Hebrew Song') (1929)

(version for violin and orchestra)

(Dedicated to Léon Zighéra)

The *Hebrew Song*, for violin and orchestra, is a short piece composed in 1929, two years before the *Capriccio*. Despite this, it has such a richness of orchestral colours that it cannot be considered a minor or marginal work. Requiring a large orchestra, it is inspired by the Middle Eastern world so dear to Tomasi's heart. Conjuring up oriental perfumes and inviting its audience on an exotic journey, this expressive piece makes reference to all the typical elements of the Hebrew melody, with its oriental scale and its characteristic augmented second, as well as the improvisatory nature of the violin part, which seems at times to turn on itself like a nostalgic and obsessive lament.

Works for Violin and Piano

Tristesse d'Antar ('Antar's Sorrow') (1931)

(Dedicated to Yves Calvet)

It's in this same inebriating and mesmerising Orient that *Antar's Sorrow* takes place. Antar is the cursed hero of *The Romance of Antar*, a famous 12th-century epic saga situated in Syria, relating the exploits, and in particular the suffering, of a courageous hero with a superhuman strength, born of a dark-skinned Abyssinian slave, having to prove his worth. As in the *Hebrew Song*, Tomasi creates a quasi-cinematographic effect from its very first notes and invites us into an exotic world of heady perfumes and flavours. The violin plays a mournful lament which is carried by successive waves of anguish, giving the piece a particularly poignant expression.

Poème for Violin and Piano (c. 1923)

(Dedicated to Jacques Dordet)

The *Poem*, is, to our knowledge, the first piece that Tomasi wrote for violin. Composed when he was around the age of just 22 years old, it shows how much skill the composer already had in writing for violin and piano, demonstrating a real understanding of drama. The piece, which is structured in arch form, starts and ends in a quasi-pastoral style of tender simplicity, and frames the central section, *con passione*, which has a lyrical theme that carries the listener away in a moment of fervour.

Chant corse ('Corsican Song')

(version for violin and piano) (1932)

The *Corsican Song* is an emblematic composition by Tomasi, which he himself arranged for various instruments (clarinet, horn, cello, oboe, violin, and the version most performed today, alto saxophone). Composed in 1932, contemporary with the *Capriccio* and *Antar's Sorrow*, this song is a homage to Tomasi's Corsican heritage, celebrating the soft and all-encompassing light of the island of Corsica, at the beginning of spring time when the sunlight is warm and gentle. The harmonies in the piano part are, however, less Romantic than those of the *Poem* or *Antar's Sorrow*, and are imbued with a very French style of

modernism, while prefiguring the future compositional and harmonic style of the composer.

Paghiella, Sérénade cypriote ('Corsican Serenade') (1928)
(Dedicated to Zino Francescatti)

Corsica remains in the limelight with *Paghiella*, subtitled *Corsican Serenade*. It was also composed in Tomasi's youth, in 1928, and he dedicated it to his childhood friend, violinist Zino Francescatti. This flamboyant and dazzling virtuosic piece draws upon the style of the *paghjella*, a type of polyphonic Corsican song.

Composed in three sections, in A–B–A form, it alternates a fast-paced *allegretto* in the minor key, both virtuosic and sparkling, with a more declamatory passage coloured by gypsy and even perhaps Spanish elements. The central section starts at a slower tempo, *meno mosso*, in a major key, lyrical and lilting, followed by a sorrowful interlude featuring the expressive plaintiveness of the falling augmented second in the harmonic minor scale, before the joyful return of the fast-paced opening section.

An undeniable homage to the skill of Francescatti, it features many different technical elements which characterise the most virtuosic of pieces: a fast tempo, ricochet, double stops, the melodic line doubled in octaves, trills and, what's more rare, a series of double harmonics (double stops using natural and artificial harmonics), which are one of the most fiendishly difficult techniques to achieve on the violin. The refinement of the violin part, plus the richness and harmonic audacity of the piano part make *Paghiella* one of the greatest pieces of its time, both virtuosic and modern, and striking for its originality.

Stéphanie Moraly

English translation: Emilie Capulet