

COACHING NOTES

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

Violin Sonata, Op. 82

Duration: 24'

I. Allegro

II. Romance - Andante

III. Allegro non troppo

A key word when preparing this sonata is **TIME**. Each era, each composer, has their own relationship with time, how they perceive and relate to time, and how they organize events within time. Does the future influence the present, or the present shape the future? Is the past attached or detached from the present? These concepts shape human culture and music.

Within the music style referred to as Romantic, there is a firm link between future, present, and past. The concept of time and history became an idea of progress, or meaningful continuation, during the nineteenth century. Time was about organic growth, not a simple accumulation of successive moments. Human time is represented and the temporal needs of the musical gesture come before the demands of a ticking clock. That is, time serves the music. Music is not compromised by the urgency of mechanical time. The British pianist and theorist Tobias Matthay (1858-1945) has a wonderful word for the idea of rubato and the expressive use of time: Time inflection. The performer goes beyond reproducing notes 'correctly' and inflects time as an expressive means of conveyance.

To understand the time of music, and to use it as an expressive tool, the performer should also be aware of the different times that occur during a performance. A listener comes to a piece with an open-ended time frame. They may have an idea of how long a piece should last, but their expectations of events within the music is open and created by the performer and the music itself. Listener's Time is not framed by time measurements dictated from outside the music.

The musician knows 'when' the next event 'should be,' and is acutely aware of any temporal shifts. As players develop fine-tuned skills, their ability to hear, think, and react becomes quicker and more acute. A slight alteration is perceivable to a trained musical ear. A player might use rubato and shave a fraction of a second off a note and find this 'noticeable,' whereas a listener, who hopefully isn't following along with an inner clock ticking off real-time, will not register this difference at such a heightened level of perception. Performer's Time is magnified. Also, while musicians experience tempo as passing increments of time units, listeners experience tempo as the frequency of perceivable events. The performer has the task of straddling Listener's Time and Performer's Time, keeping awareness of how events are unfolding within both time frames. Again, use time. It serves the music.

I. Allegro

Two considerations are important at the commencement of this sonata. First, the piece is for violin and piano. Let the two instruments flow together creating a dramatic monologue of one voice. For the pianist, too, their separate lines combine to create one voice. Here as with much of Elgar, a presumed structure of hierarchy between instruments, solo and accompaniment, soprano and tenor, or right hand and left hand, is disregarded. Second, in regards to the tempo choice, consider both parts, piano and violin, when settling on an allegro. I find the violinist's allegro is often much faster than the pianist's allegro. It is the combined voice that seeks an allegro.

With this in mind at the opening of the first movement, if the violinist feels a need for a brisk tempo, one that leaves the pianist scrambling and the *risoluto* lacking weight and determination, I find this symptomatic of a violinist who is giving their own line soloistic priority. If the tempo seems too slow for the violinist, then there is a good chance they are not listening to the piano, or understanding that the parts together make music. A 'long' half-note will seem to need to move ahead to the next event if there is no awareness of what 'else' is happening in the music. Measures 9-12 especially, taken by itself the violin part can seem empty and need moving ahead to maintain excitement and energy. Awareness and conscious coupling of the violin and piano events, however, will allow the performers to meld and direct the musical events together as an exciting whole.

Measures 9-14 and after rehearsal 2, notice the way the musical thought is organized and phrased as quarter-note, rest, eighth-note: the first two notes are a pair. Once the marking simply becomes simile it is easy to let the notes change partners with the eighth-notes, paired to the quarter-note that follows. Note that this pairing transfers on to the piano's statement two before rehearsal 1 and four before rehearsal 3. Why is this important? Phrased in this manner Elgar creates a pairing where the gesture on beats one and two are as leaps and the gesture on beats three and four are stepwise. The play between leap-to-step and step-to-leap plays out in the course of the piece. Here is where we prime the listener's ear for this gesture.

At the third measure after 4, I personally find the D-double-sharp and F-double-sharp quite poignant. As if this little turn-figure barely dares to venture out a half-step further without retreating quickly and apologetically. This gesture leads into the *tranquillo* at rehearsal 5 where Elgar prepares the listener to hear harmonies as color rather than harmonies of directional or tonal pull. The *tranquillo* then creates moments of "non-time" through the violin's meditative reiterations and the piano's color-chords, both demanding no forward motion or resolution. By removing the forward pull of time, each event is heard not as a next and consecutive event, but rather the next now. The contrasts between the robust opening theme and this timeless idea are played out in this first movement.

This *tranquillo* section reflects a philosophy and relationship to time found throughout Elgar's compositions: we can hope for a better future, but without a promise of a better future or an afterlife, humans should have a hearty satisfaction in the now. The now is eternal; it is being, not becoming. The arrival at rehearsal 5, so aptly in C major, has an acceptance of the now and a

sense that the eternal is the now - not some distant place in the future. This is echoed in the closing of Robert Browning's (1812–1889) *Abt Vogler (After He Has Been Extemporizing Upon The Musical Instrument Of His Invention)* of 1864:

Well, it is earth with me; silence resumes her reign:
I will be patient and proud, and soberly acquiesce.
Give me the keys. I feel for the common chord again,
Sliding by semitones till I sink to the minor,—yes,
And I blunt it into a ninth, and I stand on alien ground,
Surveying awhile the heights I rolled from into the deep;
Which, hark, I have dared and done, for my resting-place is found,
The C Major of this life: so, now I will try to sleep.

A click track will certainly destroy the mood here, so learn to feel comfortable going 'off click track' and trusting your inner pulse to keep the music on the roadway while both players give room for a flowing and unfolding of events. The violinist would do well to use slow energy here, i.e. start at the 'back' of the beats, start notes with a vowel sound, rather than consonant; use little or minimal vibrato, slow bow speed, and let notes 'fall backward' rather than lean forward.

With the shifts in register and strings during the *tranquillo*, be aware of how much the inherent energy and projection levels of each note naturally vary. Consciously decide whether this is something to encourage and enhance, or should be smoothed over. In the piano part at the third and fourth measures of rehearsal 5, consider voice leading with the lowest note of the right-hand part (G, F-sharp, E, G) to bring out this inner idea. The pianist could think here of 'releasing' the vibrations from the strings rather than striking the strings.

Decide on the color, lightness, darkness, shine, and opaqueness after rehearsal 6 as the piano part returns at higher tessitura with each entrance. Consider the piano line as becoming more distant as it climbs higher. Only with the *poco marcato* are we abruptly brought back to earth. The piano gradually adds anticipatory rhythms to renew a sense of forward motion. The violinist also noticeably shifts emotion here as the music starts to impatiently desire to go somewhere. In between these assertive figures a few dreamy time-less moments poke through on the *tenutos* from the violinist. After rehearsal 7, on the second beats of the second and fourth measures, and again seven after rehearsal 7, allow freedom of time. Or, better yet, use the time for the music's sake. Give the pianist some meaning to the request *colle parte*. Enjoy the play between the circling, meditative moments and the linear, driven moments; the play between being absorbed in the now, and the pressing forward with expectations of the progress.

II. Romance – Andante

Chamber music is often heard as an intimate conversation between friends. With Elgar however, the players come together to present a performance creating one voice and one story. The three lines, violin and piano left and right hand, flow and blend, presenting a joint monologue to the listener. In this type of framework, the use of time and knowing when to play is a skill that relies on something more than just knowing when the clock or metronome says 'now.' For example at the second measure of 22, the violin entrance appears not when the click track says 'play now,' and not played as a rebuttal or counter statement, but rather the violin's line is a continuation of the thought put forward by the piano. Listen to the piano part, be in the piano part, and then place the violin notes in monologue time.

This type of playing may be quite different from other chamber music where players react to each other. In Elgar's music you react with each other. Pacing and 'time inflection' are major factors in performing his pieces. Also in this second movement, the pianist could experiment with the effect of depressing the damper pedal before the start of the chords.

III. Allegro non troppo

The third movement opens with a beautiful release of atmosphere. Instantly it sets a mood and place. For me this is as stepping out into a field of fresh morning sun and dew. Bring out and blend together the lines which are in parallel thirds, as these convey the pastoral flavor. Choose a tempo that rolls, rather than plods with equal-pulsed eight-notes. Strive for a 'long-foot' opening, stretching from measure one through to the dolce note at the beginning of the third measure. Blend all parts: violin, piano left hand and right hand. For the violinist, try creating character, color, and shape by bow speed and placement, not bow pressure.

At rehearsal 43, I remain uncertain about the decrescendo markings on the first beats. I think they may be accents in pp. An accent in pp is not at all out of place in Elgar's music, and would suit the moment here. Give the possibility some thought. Rehearsal 53 is, of course, a glimpse at the *dolcissimo* from the second movement, as homage to the piece's original dedicatee. The glimpse back is only a view from the now, not a revisiting of the past.

Ideally, the performance of this piece in will not be pre-programmed into concrete, but can be adjusted spontaneously with each new audience and situation. Yes, use portamento, as this is a great device for leading the ear through pitch changes where time and pitch cling together. The piece captures moments of time. Allow the music, the needs of its expressive gestures, to have the time required to make their mark on the listener, and within in Listener's time. Give the music a now.