

Becoming Bach, Blaspheming Bach: Kinesthetic Knowledge and Embodied Music Theory in Ysaÿe's "Obsession" for Solo Violin

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This essay explores kinesthetic musical knowledge: what can it tell us about the music, the performer, or the composer? In discussing my own experience of performing "Obsession," the first movement of violinist-composer Eugène Ysaÿe's Sonata No. 2 for Solo Violin, op. 27 (1923), I'll articulate some of the observations I made while learning to play it. These insights in turn inflect and clarify my relationship with Bach, whose violin music is the object of Ysaÿe's obsession. In the course of practicing and performing "Obsession," I have developed a reading of this piece as depicting not only Ysaÿe's purported obsession with Bach, but also his possession by (a demonic) Bach. Some aspects of my interpretation are readily audible, while others stem from my physical knowledge of the music. An embodied analysis such as I undertake here may uncover musical meanings apparent only to the performer, demonstrating that "the score is not the work to a performer; nor is the score-made-sound the work: the work includes the performer's mobilizing of previously studied skills so as to embody, to make real, to make sounding, a set of relationships that are only partly relationships among sounds" (Cusick 1994:18).

Many feminist scholars have observed that the body is too often written out of the academic study of music. For instance, Philip Bohlman sees this erasure writ large in musicology's disinclination to study dance (1993:431). Suzanne Cusick's critique of mainstream musicological practice aims to rehabilitate "the inextricable presence of the body in music—a presence both musicology's and music theory's focus on the intentions and the texts of the composers scrupulously denies" (1994:15). Feeling that she is not meant to speak as a performer when teaching musicology, she has written of her efforts to resolve this apparent disjunction: "as a performer, I act on and with what we ordinarily call music with my body; as a musicologist I have been formed to act on (and with?) what we ordinarily call music with my mind, and only with my mind" (9). Recognizing in the act of music-making a resolution of this apparent mind/body split, Cusick argues for a more embodied analytical practice, calling for a "theory of musical bodies" (18). Elisabeth Le Guin has demonstrated the historical and interpretive insights that can be gained from such an embodied analytical practice,

using her own performing body to explore the music and life of Boccherini (2002; 2006). Her methodology, which she calls “carnal musicology,” links her experience as a performer to the eighteenth-century notion of *sensibilité* and shows how knowledge originating in her sensate body can motivate an interpretation of a piece.

In the past two decades music scholars using feminist and queer theories have focused attention on musical bodies in their analysis and criticism. Relating performative knowledge of a piece to aspects of the music’s structure is one such approach. A more common feminist methodology seeks connections between personal identity (the composer’s or the performer’s), and musical structures and/or performance. We can fuse these approaches by thinking about how subjectivity might be inscribed upon a music-making body. For instance, in studying vocal performativity, Cusick (1999) considers how our voices embody (perform) our gender, sex, ethnicity, etc. She hears in the timbre of Eddie Vedder’s singing an assertion of his heterosexual male American subjectivity. His characteristic snarl, suggesting tightly constricted throat muscles, demonstrates his resistance to the discipline of song by physically limiting culture’s penetration into the innermost spaces of his body; context for this analysis includes her observation that singing is a normative behavior in our culture for women but not for men. In another example of work that connects music and identity through the music-making body, Philip Brett relates Schubert’s presumed homosexuality to the composer’s four-hand piano music. For Brett, who speaks here from the piano bench, the four-hand genre itself, the activity of playing these pieces, and various musical details all evoke homosocial/homoerotic modes of being. “Through the device of describing a performative moment from the inside, I think I can get at certain aspects of meaning without attributing them to some higher power . . . I attempt to engage with [the past] in some sort of dialogue—by imagining it in this instance as personified in the man of feeling, a historical friend, recognizable in the notes and gestures, with whom I can maintain a conversation even as I acknowledge I am talking to myself” (1997:171). A feminist musicological practice may thus negotiate cultural as well as identity politics, illuminating not only aspects of musical poiesis (whether composition or performance), but also the musician’s lived experience.¹ Following in this tradition, my analysis of “Obsession” considers how my prior physical knowledge of Bach’s violin music lends nuance to how I perceive Ysaÿe’s “obsessed” subjectivity instantiated in this piece.

My discussion of “Obsession” will unfold around two main topics. The first is the object of obsession: Bach’s music. By what traits do we recognize it, and how has it been woven into the fabric of Ysaÿe’s music? The second is the obsessed persona: the violinist. This nexus of ideas includes the possessed violin virtuoso, the devil-violin trope, and the rock star fantasy

“Obsession” affords me when I perform it. I hope also to demonstrate “that analyses benefit from the overt representation of the analyst in the text” (Guck 1994:29).

Quoting Bach

Violinists in the world of Western classical music always seem to be practicing Bach, a generalization rooted in my lifelong interactions with other performers. We study his six unaccompanied sonatas and partitas throughout our lives, at least from the time we begin formal training at a high level. The solo Bach repertory forms “the core of a violinist’s life,” according to Joseph Szigeti (Parikian 1979:1003), and these pieces have been part of the standard pedagogy for more than one hundred and fifty years (Menuhin and Primrose 1976:227). Because these pieces are unaccompanied, they require nothing and no one except the violinist, which sets them apart from much other violin music. Like most other violinists, when I perform these pieces, I always play from memory, which is another special feature of my relationship to this repertory. It becomes etched into our flesh, musically speaking, and Bach is an important part of how we come to know our instrument and how we learn our craft. Despite differences in playing style, and despite each violinist favoring various movements, this is a body of music that deeply connects us. It is also the most widely shared music of the solo violin repertory, played by more of us than ever undertake serious study of any other major unaccompanied work.

Ysaÿe (1858–1931) was a legendary violinist, a conductor, and a composer, who in the early 1920s wrote his own set of six sonatas for solo violin, each dedicated to a younger violinist. These pieces reflect various early twentieth-century aesthetics, particularly in their harmonic originality and exploration of new instrumental techniques, while also displaying strong connections to Bach’s archetypes in their overall form. The second sonata, dedicated to Jacques Thibaud, is the only one to quote Bach, and it does so only in its opening movement, entitled “Obsession.” A state of being obsessed with Bach (instead of, for instance, the piece being heard as homage or requiem) is communicated not only by the movement’s title and by its explicit quotations of Bach’s own solo violin music, but also by its general mania.² This manic affect is created through elements including the piece’s feverish tempo (and eventual *accelerando*), its generous use of accents, and its angular melodic chromaticism rife with augmented and diminished intervals; it is further crystallized in several interpolations of the *Dies Irae* melody. These passages enhance the piece’s quality of demonical madness, whereby obsession intensifies into demonic possession. Though the title “Obsession” refers only to the first movement, the *Dies Irae* binds

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Example 1: The openings of Bach's E-Major Prelude, BWV 1006, and Ysaÿe's "Obsession."

The image displays two musical staves in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 3/4 time signature. The top staff is labeled "Bach, mm. 1-4" and shows the beginning of the E-Major Prelude. The bottom staff is labeled "Ysaÿe, mm. 1-5" and shows the beginning of "Obsession". A bracket labeled "shared contour:" with a zigzag line above it spans the first few measures of both staves, indicating a melodic similarity. The Ysaÿe staff includes dynamic markings: *p* *leggiero* and *ff* *brutalemt*. A horizontal line below the Ysaÿe staff is labeled "Ysaÿe's response".

together the second sonata as a whole, recurring in its second and fourth movements.

Ysaÿe's relationship to music was shaped by his experience as both a violinist and a composer. In thinking about how his solo violin music reflects Bach's influence, I'm reminded of hearing Augusta Read Thomas speak about the compositional process and her own musical influences (2003). She described her own compositions as definitely "well heard," meaning that every moment of her own music gets crafted very deliberately, for she literally dances and sings every phrase, and in other ways feels out each and every sound, rhythm, and gesture in the creative process. She connected this description with the claim that she had "thoroughly digested Stravinsky." Citing Stravinsky as a major influence suggests that she processed his music in a similarly performative way: singing it, dancing it, playing it at the keyboard or on other instruments, transcribing passages from memory or from repeated listenings, conducting along with recordings, etc. Thomas's visceral phrase "digesting Stravinsky" has stuck with me because it resonates with the relationship I hear between Bach and Ysaÿe. As we will see, the movement entitled "Obsession" shows us that Ysaÿe "thoroughly digested" Bach. To put it another way, we could say that "Obsession" speaks Bach's language: specifically, it speaks the language of Bach's E-Major Prelude for solo violin. Ysaÿe is so "fluent" that he seems to be having trouble generating original musical statements, as if he feels unable to escape the enormity of Bach's influence and musical prowess. Let's examine some of the specifics conveying this drama in the music.

Bach's Prelude opens his E-Major Partita, BWV 1006 (see example 1, top staff). Once begun, the prelude maintains a perpetual flow of sixteenth notes until the end. "Obsession" is also a first movement, and it also flows along in sixteenth notes almost the entire time, although initially our attention is drawn to a much more blatant likeness between the two pieces. Ysaÿe begins by quoting the opening of Bach's Prelude (see example 1, bottom staff). But he breaks it off abruptly, and after a dramatic silence, something new crashes in. Do we hear m. 3 as a continuation of the earlier

Example 2: Comparison of Ysaÿe, mm. 31–32 and Bach, mm. 29–30.

The image displays two musical staves. The upper staff is labeled 'Ysaÿe' and shows a single line of sixteenth notes in 2/4 time, starting with a half note G4 followed by eighth notes. The lower staff is labeled 'Bach' and shows a single line of sixteenth notes in 3/4 time, starting with a half note G4 followed by eighth notes. Both pieces are in E major.

line? The second entrance, labeled on example 1 as “Ysaÿe’s response,” seems torn between taking up Bach’s statement and emphatically rebutting it. In Ysaÿe’s response, I’m still playing a single line of sixteenths, but now the music is crazed and aggressive: this entrance is marked *fortissimo* and *brutalement*, and Ysaÿe demands even more drama by giving accents to the first seven notes. Answering Bach’s major-mode joyfulness with minor-mode storminess, these measures seem to contradict the Bach quote. Also, Bach’s first three notes [E-D#-E] are echoed by [F-E-F] in Ysaÿe’s response: this “wrong note” echo is a semitone off, sounding a “mistuned” unison or octave. And yet we can also hear that this echo exactly mimics the shape of Bach’s melodic incipit: in both of Ysaÿe’s initiating gestures ([E-D#-E] in m. 1, and [F-E-F] in m. 3) the pitch dips a semitone, then returns. Furthermore, if we overlay the Bach directly onto the opening measures of “Obsession,” as if the Prelude is humming along in Ysaÿe’s ears in real time as he composes, we can hear the noisy violence of m. 3’s eruption as his attempt to literally drown out Bach’s line, while yet the entire “response” reinscribes Bach’s distinctive zig zag contour.

Overall, the opening suggests Ysaÿe is trying hard, but failing, to wrestle the musical line away from the specter of Bach. “Specter” seems a particularly apt word, for the Bach quotation is a ghostly rendition of its original self: Ysaÿe strips it of the vivacity Bach gave it, by instructing the performer to play it *leggiero* and *piano*. Most violinists play the opening of “Obsession” at the tip of the bow with a very delicate sound, like a whisper, whereas we tend to open the Bach Prelude with a joyous full sound made in the lower half of the bow. By beginning a movement entitled “Obsession” with such a subdued incarnation of this particular quote, Ysaÿe’s piece suggests that he can’t shake Bach’s Prelude loose from his mind—or perhaps from his fingers—as he endeavors to compose his own solo violin music. The image of him composing with violin in hand is very strongly implied in these opening phrases. Throughout the piece we repeatedly encounter this single idea: an obvious quote from the Prelude is stated and then abruptly truncated, leading to an explosive response. These quotations present the *first* and most obvious aspect of Ysaÿe’s obsession with Bach’s E-Major Prelude.

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Example 3: Comparison of Ysaÿe, mm. 11–16 and Bach, mm. 109–12 (graphic reduction).

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'Ysaÿe' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Bach'. Both staves are in treble clef. The Ysaÿe staff shows a sequence of notes with vertical lines connecting them, illustrating a specific rhythmic or melodic pattern. The Bach staff shows a similar sequence of notes, also with vertical lines connecting them, for comparison.

Quotations of the Prelude seem to recur even when Ysaÿe modulates to keys that Bach never visited, such as a C-major passage we hear toward the middle of “Obsession” (see example 2). Although for most listeners its counterfeit nature is completely undetectable, the Ysaÿe passage shown in example 2 is in fact found nowhere in the E-Major Prelude. Its inspiration is a passage like the one shown beneath it, or potentially any of several other moments in the Prelude where we hear this distinctive climbing triadic figure (four other times: mm. 33–34 and 90–91 in C# major, mm. 79–80 in A major, and mm. 83–84 in B minor). Fictional Bach quotes, like the transposed material shown in example 2, present us with a *second* indication of Ysaÿe’s obsession: it’s as if his hands, or his ears, inevitably find Bach no matter where he tries to take the music tonally. As one who is also somewhat obsessed with Bach’s solo violin music, I recognize these fictive quotes as further evidence of Ysaÿe’s torment. The piece hits a deep nerve for me as a performing violinist, because I too have Bach on the brain, and Bach in my hands.

Right after the juxtapositions between the Bach and Ysaÿe voices at the opening of “Obsession,” the music arrives in A minor and finally settles in for a long stretch without further interruptions. If the opening suggested the two composers wrestling for control of the music, then whose will dominates during this more continuous A-minor section? In the music shown on the top staff of example 3, I hear a hybrid compositional voice. Whereas “Obsession” opened with alternating segments that established two distinct musical voices, clearly separated by silences, now the two composers seem to be sharing the same sixteenth note line: two spirits occupying the same musical flesh. Although Bach’s presence in this part of the piece has become much less explicit, perhaps his influence does not diminish in scope. Rather than being focused into a direct quotation, which we might easily hear and identify, the traces of Bach now become more diffused and submerged.

Ysaÿe’s A-minor passage involves a repeated series of two-note slurs. These are all string-crossing slurs, and they bring out a scalar eighth note line from within the sixteenth note texture, which I’ve shown by the eighth

Example 4: Bach, Allegro from A-Minor Sonata, BWV 1003, m. 1.



note stems extending down beneath the staff. The first two measures are soon repeated a fifth higher. Practicing this passage evokes in my muscle memory a similar situation from the middle of Bach's Prelude, shown on the bottom staff of example 3. The Bach passage is built upon an analogous structural configuration: it too uses a series of string-crossing slurs to bring out a scalar eighth-note melody against running sixteenthths, and it too is promptly sequenced at the fifth.

The traces of Bach illuminated in example 3 are relatively difficult to hear. They reside in my muscle memory, which is to say that this Ysaÿe passage *feels* like Bach much more than it sounds like Bach. Music theorists often proceed by listening closely and focusing on something they're hearing, or by looking closely at the score. Yet I came to understand how Ysaÿe continues to weave the Prelude into this section of his piece not through attentive listening, nor through score study, but through practicing and playing the Ysaÿe, and through having practiced and played a lot of Bach—in other words, through my physical, bodily knowledge of producing this music.

In practicing “Obsession,” I also found that other features of this same passage evoke a very different solo Bach movement, namely the final Allegro from Bach's A-Minor Sonata, BWV 1003 (see example 4). Bach's A-Minor Allegro shares its key with “Obsession,” which means that it's positioned very similarly on the violin, and the defiant character of this mainly sixteenth-note movement lies closer to the mood of “Obsession” than does the jubilation of the E-Major Prelude. Although these connections between “Obsession” and Bach's A-Minor Allegro are quite subtle, I do feel primed as a performer-analyst (or violinist-detective) to sense the Allegro lurking in the background of “Obsession,” and when I play Ysaÿe's A-minor passage (the top staff of example 3), I've come to hear traces of Bach's Allegro bleeding through into the music. While the E-Major Prelude quotations (both literal and invented) in “Obsession” make blatant references to Bach, Ysaÿe only hints at the A-Minor Allegro. Its phantom presence in “Obsession,” along with the particular string-crossing choreography detailed in example 3, together reveal a *third* aspect in our account of the obsession plaguing Ysaÿe: he has layered mere traces of Bach into the musical texture—traces drawn from more than one Bach movement. These partial layers of Bach provoke thoughts of Ysaÿe as craftsman, weaving his musical tapestry, his sixteenth note fabric frayed and worn, perhaps even ripped in frustration at the beginning of “Obsession.” It seems as though Bach were showing through

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the metaphorical holes in the musical cloth, holes we can also understand as a metaphor for Ysaÿe's fraying sanity as he struggles for compositional control.

To summarize: Bach's presence permeates several aspects of Ysaÿe's piece. The juxtapositions at the beginning establish two personalities who might control the music. With the arrival of the A-minor passage at m. 11, musical characteristics of each composer start to become overlaid upon one another, meshing together into a hybrid voice which remains the site of subliminal struggle for musical control. Although Ysaÿe temporarily suppresses the most blatant signs of Bach's influence by moving past the literal quotations, I've argued that Bach now begins to inflect the music in more subtle ways, which due to the title "Obsession," I take to represent a more insidious state of affairs. Let us say that Ysaÿe is caught in a psycho-musical hall of mirrors that reflect something of Bach at him no matter where he turns. In fact, not only are real and fictional Bach passages woven throughout "Obsession," but its final notes quote the transposed ending of Bach's Prelude: Ysaÿe's piece is literally bounded by the very music which is driving him (it?) mad.

It's enough to make anyone feel like they were possessed. Let's consider the state of obsession from this angle: who or what might be possessed? Perhaps it is Ysaÿe the composer who is possessed, driven mad by Bach and feeling unable to fully assert his own unique musical voice. Or maybe the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, and it's Ysaÿe the violinist who is possessed, his fingers betraying his intentions, his hands displaying a will of their own as they continually drift toward playing Bach. Any instrumentalist can confirm that our hands develop their own ways of knowing, as we internalize characteristic gestures and configurations over a lifetime of learning to play music. A third possibility is that the violin itself is possessed and is controlling the player: perhaps it is the violin that wants to be playing Bach, because it's always meant to be playing Bach, just as Jack Nicholson's character in the film *The Shining* (1980) "is and has always been" the caretaker of the Overlook Hotel. Certainly Bach's towering legacy affords us any of these possibilities. Part of the analytical fun is that the piece invites us to construe Ysaÿe's obsession as potentially embodying any of these more demonic musical dispositions.

Quoting the Devil

A preoccupation of many classical violinists is lineage: with whom did *you* study? Part of my connection with "Obsession" stems from my having fallen in love with it when I first heard it played by my colleague and friend Adelaide Baughman, who studied it with William Preucil, who studied it with the great violinist and pedagogue Josef Gingold, who in turn studied it with Ysaÿe

himself. Baughman proudly referred to herself once as a “great-grand-pupil of Ysaÿe.” These are the stories we tell ourselves that help us understand where we come from. The generational historiography isn’t just snobbery (though that element exists too) but also accounts for styles, methods, and traditions. Ysaÿe himself, for instance, “considered textual fidelity secondary to interpretative greatness. To take liberties meant to bring music to life” (Schwarz 1987:291). His playing was known for its rich expressivity and liberal use of rubato; his contemporaries emphasized his stylistic originality and his “free and often willful interpretation” (286). Though I daresay I lack “interpretative greatness,” I do bring a personal imprint to my performances of “Obsession”: this is one of those pieces that let me fulfill my rock star fantasies when I play it. It’s noisy, stompy (“*brutalement*”), and thrillingly exhibitionistic in its virtuosic theatricality—in a word, it *rocks*.

In my mind this fantasy also connects me with the most notorious violinist of all, Nicolò Paganini: “at the end of his concerts the public was raving, weeping, shouting, scrambling” (Joachim 1932:1082). Credited with consolidating and substantially advancing instrumental technique,³ Paganini’s playing was so unusual and so superior that it was thought to be supernatural, leading to the popular conviction that he was in league with the devil, if not actually the devil incarnate (Kawabata 2007). His deliberately theatrical performances, his infamously “cadaverous” physique clad all in black (Schwarz 1987:180), and the wild rumors circulating about him then and now—such as those concerning his violent criminal history, and those recounting him playing so wildly that each string snapped one by one until he was left with only the G string and still not missing a note—are the stuff of rock legend, linking him with latter-day virtuosos like Eddie van Halen.⁴

In Paganini we find perhaps the most well-known instance of the phenomenon linking violin and devil. A historical survey of music incorporating this trope would include Tartini’s G-Minor Violin Sonata (“Devil’s Trill”), Saint-Saëns’s *Danse Macabre* with its mistuned violin (the E string is tuned down a semitone, making a “diabolical” tritone sound between the open A and E strings), and Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du Soldat*, among many others. The trope’s continued relevance today is indicated by Australian composer Rohan Stevenson’s recent violin concerto entitled “Devil,” the heavy metal trio Devil in the Kitchen, fronted by electric fiddle, and the Grammy-winning song “Devil Went Down to Georgia,” in which the Charlie Daniels Band presents a Faustian tale of the devil gambling with the fiddler for his soul. For most of the other pieces and performers mentioned above, the devil is understood not as separate from the violinist, but as encompassed within her, a force possessing the player and/or the violin and/or the music itself.

The figure of the demonically possessed violinist brings us finally to the other material quoted in “Obsession”: the *Dies Irae*. This distinctive

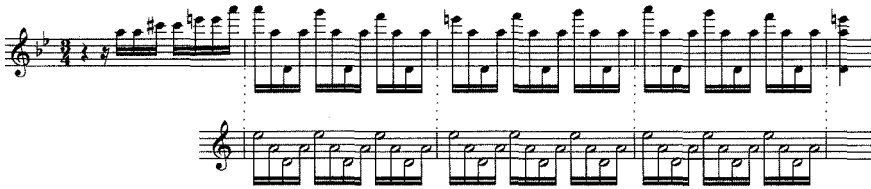
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Example 5: Bariolage in Bach, E-Major Prelude, mm. 17–19.

tune originated in the plainchant tradition of medieval monks. Its fearsome text, dealing with death and the Day of Judgment, soon became a standard element of the requiem mass. In the nineteenth century, the *Dies Irae* began accumulating a rich symbolism for Romantic composers, beginning with Berlioz's use of the melody in 1830 for his "Dream of a Witches' Sabbath" from the *Symphonie fantastique*. The tune soon accrued "connotations of malevolence, devilry and witchcraft" which are not found in the original poem (Boyd 1968:348). These enduring associations are illustrated by its presence in films like *The Shining* and *The Omen* (1976), both of which center on a character who is demonically possessed. Saint-Saëns's violin showpiece *Danse Macabre*, mentioned above, also quotes the *Dies Irae* tune. It seems likely that this piece would have been in Ysaÿe's performing repertory, for he was friends with Saint-Saëns, having performed the elder composer's *Rondo Capriccioso* at his own Paris debut in 1885 (Schwarz 1987:281).

In order to most fully appreciate the *Dies Irae* settings in "Obsession," however, we must return to Bach's E-Major Prelude. Early in the Prelude we come to a remarkable passage. The excerpt on the top staff of example 5 begins the most tightly patterned chunk of the whole Prelude, where Bach sustains a kind of trance-like arpeggio state over twelve measures. The vibrancy of the open E string pedal point (shown by Bach with upward stems) is a constant presence gleaming brightly, and no doubt the passage sounds very distinctive. What I wish to focus on, however, is again not the aural but the physical aspect: how it feels very distinctive to play this passage, specifically in my right arm. The bottom staff of example 5 shows the perpetually repeated string-crossing sequence entailed by the passage, a kind of "figure eight" motion of the bow among the upper three strings. One must spend a fair amount of time mastering this bow choreography, which is an example of bariolage, a common Baroque bowing technique of patterned string crossings which rapidly juxtapose open strings with stopped pitches and static pitches with moving pitches. This particular passage is tricky enough to merit practicing it "hands separately," thus I actually practiced something like the bottom staff of example 5. Eventually this once-awkward bowing becomes smooth and automatic.

Example 6: Vivaldi, Presto from Summer Concerto, mm. 40–43.



Example 7: Ysaÿe, “Obsession,” mm. 20–21, the first Dies Irae.



Other composers have also recognized its inherent potential for drama: bariolage offers maximal reverberation by incorporating open strings, while the flurry of right arm commotion in this particular type provides visual theatrics too. For instance, Vivaldi exploits it wonderfully in the *Four Seasons*, when the soloist enters the last movement of the Summer Concerto with thrilling drama as shown on example 6. (Note that Vivaldi uses the same three strings as Bach [E, A, D], but makes D rather than E the open-string pedal.) Yet like many violinists, I encountered this particular three-string bowing pattern for the first time when studying Bach’s E-Major Prelude. For me, performing this particular bariolage bowing retains a strong, if subconscious, kinesthetic association with playing Bach. I’ve introduced it at some length because Ysaÿe incorporates it to great effect in “Obsession”: he uses the same bariolage, complete with Bach’s open E-string pedal, to set the Dies Irae (see example 7). To many listeners that passage won’t particularly evoke Bach, for Bach never quoted the Dies Irae. But I think violinists will perceive the connection on some level: it is not only enfolded into our muscle memory, but there is also a prominent visual association between the two passages, due to the distinctive way the bowing is notated by both composers. This is seen by comparing the reversed stems separating out Ysaÿe’s Dies Irae melody on example 7 with the reversed stems separating out Bach’s pedal point on example 5.

As this is only the first of several times the Dies Irae sounds in this piece, we might say that it too gets treated as an object of obsession, serving as a second *idée fixe* if we think of “explicit Bach quotations” as the first. The Dies Irae interpolations are thus a *fourth* manifestation of Ysaÿe’s obsession with Bach. However, they also afford us the chance to reassess the psychological power dynamics we hear expressed by this music. Most obviously, the

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Example 8: Ysaÿe, “Obsession,” mm. 64–69, the climax.

The image displays a musical score for three staves, likely representing the violin part of Ysaÿe's "Obsession" (mm. 64–69). The top staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). Above the first few notes, there are rhythmic markings: a square followed by a vertical line, repeated three times. The text "bariolage bowing" is written to the right of the first staff. The second and third staves continue the melodic line, with various fingerings (0, 1, 2) indicated above the notes. The music consists of rapid sixteenth-note passages, characteristic of the bariolage technique.

presence of the *Dies Irae* testifies to the intensity of Ysaÿe’s obsession—I hear it as invoking the “demon Bach” driving him mad. But by crafting this blatant devil music in a piece that speaks so much with Bach’s voice, Ysaÿe also manages to suggest that Bach himself is somehow responsible for this music, and this is brought home for violinists when we play the *Dies Irae* with bariolage evoking Bach’s *Prelude*. The *Dies Irae* can thus be heard as embodying an extraordinary flip of the entire question of possession and control. So far we’ve understood Bach to be showing up in Ysaÿe’s music, but now the illusion may be that Ysaÿe—perhaps in league with the devil—is controlling Bach’s music, that Ysaÿe is causing Bach to write this tune, and thereby linking Bach with the devil in an exquisite blasphemy. In the *Dies Irae* passage shown on example 7, we might imagine Ysaÿe as a looming puppet master making a Bach marionette dance with the devil.

The intensification of musical energy toward the climax of “Obsession” also raises the psychological stakes. Out of the climactic pyrotechnics flows the *Dies Irae* in canon, as the tune is interlaced with its own echo an octave higher (see example 8). In a compositional and violinistic *tour de force* which seems desperate to out-compose Bach, Ysaÿe weaves the two canonic *Dies Irae* voices around two different E pedals simultaneously: an open E string pedal, and a fingered E pedal played on the A string. This prestidigitation grants tone-color variety to the E pedals, adding timbral nuance and friction to the whole passage. Example 8 provides the fingerings Ysaÿe has indicated to the violinist, dictating the same bariolage required by Bach’s *Prelude*. As before, Ysaÿe’s use of this bariolage to deliver the *Dies Irae* both sustains and subverts Bach’s influence over the music. As the performer I can revel in this ambiguity, for my body is symbolically divided: as my right arm dances to the E-Major *Prelude* via the three-string bariolage, my left hand

Example 9: Comparison of Bach, E-Major Prelude, mm. 17–19 and Ysaÿe, “Obsession,” mm. 20–21.

sings the *Dies Irae*. In crafting this passage, Ysaÿe became both possessed and possessor, exalting Bach while damning him, and my act of performance weaves it all together.

I am absolutely complicit in this reading, for unless I actively perceive something Bachish about this bowing, I probably won't experience the *Dies Irae* as an equivocation of power; but hear it instead as another straightforward marker of Ysaÿe's torment or feeling of doom. A comparison of my relationship toward each composer raises a similar point. The relationship I enact toward Ysaÿe in this piece is very much one of humility and respect, as I follow his close markings of the score to the best of my ability, having spent many hours learning to play his piece. On the other hand, although in general I too worship Bach, the relationship I enact toward him while playing "Obsession" is heavily mediated by Ysaÿe. So when the Bach quotes are broken off suddenly and inspire such theatrical rage; and in the general manic hysteria of the movement itself; and in the repeated association with the devil—in all of these things, the piece affords me a significantly different mode of enjoying Bach than I'm used to. It's quite *irreverent*, and I believe the irreverence of "Obsession" toward Bach as musical god, Bach as authority figure, is another important component of its rock-star vibe.

My analysis concludes with brief reference to the claim that playing rock music backwards reveals satanic messages.⁵ Example 9 contrasts Bach's pedal point passage (from example 5) with one of Ysaÿe's *Dies Irae* passages (from

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example 7). Notice that Bach's bariolage, with down bows on the A string and up bows on the E and D strings, is actually reversed in the *Dies Irae*. In learning to play "Obsession," I needed to subtly re-coordinate that which was internalized in learning to play the E-Major Prelude. The *Dies Irae*'s bowing—which makes me invert Bach's bariolage—thus allows the contemporary performer to search for the devil in this "backwards music."

Concluding Remarks

This essay links my authorial voice to my bodily experience, articulating an interpretation of Ysaÿe's "Obsession" based on insights gleaned primarily through my kinesthetic knowledge of this music. The act of playing "Obsession" opens the music to me beyond what I can hear in it, and certainly beyond what I can see in the score. My embodied musical experience also speaks to my participation in a particular community, in this case getting me to think about musical knowledge that only violinists (and other performers) can access.

An important parallel between analysis and performance, which draws me very deeply to both undertakings, is that both involve building an intimate relationship with a piece and essentially internalizing it, "making it mine."⁶ Yet analysis and performance have typically tended toward different ways of expressing this intimacy. In an analytical mode, we generally communicate with language, verbalizing and/or writing down our observations. But in a performing mode we usually communicate almost exclusively with and through music, and only infrequently do we verbalize our observations about how the music works or means. Music lessons are one arena in which musicians often merge these two modalities, as teacher and student mold an interpretation of a given piece through both talking and playing. It would seem self-evident that performing and analyzing can be co-creative activities not only in music lessons, but also in the music theory classroom. Unfortunately, the performer's experience, including the vast repository of musical knowledge stored in our hands and bodies, too often remains unprobed in this latter realm of music pedagogy. Yet most theorists teach ear training and vocal skills, and we try to link these things to keyboard fluency; these are all embodied aspects of musical understanding. Building on this everyday discourse, I believe we music theory teachers should be asking our students to engage analytically with music they're already playing, far more often than we currently ask this of them. One of my aims as a feminist music theorist is to practice an embodied musicology, bringing analysis and performance to bear upon one another explicitly in my teaching as well as my scholarship.

Like Thomas, whose compositional process is rooted in a performative relationship with music, Alexandra Pierce performs her analyses into existence through dance and gesture:

For example, if, in doing an analysis of motivic organization, you begin by finding in movement the affective gesture of a main motif (what in theatre would be called its “characterization”), and then test, by moving, whether that affect is present in the myriad guises through which the motif occurs in the piece, you discover yourself decisive and surprisingly selective about which transformations bear genetic relation to the parent motif. (Kielian-Gilbert and Guck 1983–84:607)

Pierce’s description of her approach is found in a collection of letters published in *Perspectives of New Music* in the early 1980s, responding to Marion Guck’s and Marianne Kielian-Gilbert’s invitation to young theorists to voice their thoughts on the discipline: where do you see music theory headed? whose work has inspired you? what’s the relationship between your theoretical/analytical work and your other musical activities? In other words, they offered younger theorists a chance to explicitly situate themselves, not necessarily as experts, as we are used to doing in scholarly publications, but as committed, inquisitive participants.

Notes

1. In a noteworthy effort to move these discussions beyond the metaphorical, Andrew Robbie builds on Cusick’s explorations of how music can be like sex (Cusick 2006), theorizing performances of Sciarrino’s solo instrumental music as enacting erotic relationships between the performer and their instrument. Robbie’s discussion focuses on Sciarrino’s pervasive use of extended instrumental techniques, noting that “the musical fabric consists almost entirely of the physical display of this intimacy” (Robbie 2005:4).
2. “Obsession” presents both an aggressive virtuosity and a markedly hysterical chromaticism each time Ysaÿe “responds” to the provocation of a (tonally straightforward) Bach quote. A feminist music criticism might be interested in probing the politics of gender and sexuality at play in the musical body performing this virtuosic chromaticism.
3. See Schwarz 1987:196–99, for discussion of Paganini’s technical innovations in the categories of *scordatura*, bowings, left-hand pizzicato, harmonics, performing on the G string only, and fingerings.
4. Eddie van Halen’s guitar playing features prominently in Robert Walser’s work on heavy metal music and masculinity. Walser and many rock guitarists credit van Halen with “forg[ing] a new virtuosity” (1992:271), much as Paganini did two centuries before, and both musicians are known for having practiced literally all day long (Walser 271; Joachim 1932:1080). In “Eruption,” one of the most famous of all guitar solos (heard on van Halen’s eponymous 1978 debut album), van Halen’s early training as a violinist is evident when he riffs on Kreutzer’s Etude No. 2, the most clichéd of violin etudes, in premiering the tapping technique he is widely credited with inventing.

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5. See Vokey and Read 1985:1231–32, for a brief outline of the moral panic these claims originally engendered, and see Jeff Milner’s website for musical examples played forward and backward at <http://jeffmilner.com/backmasking.htm> (accessed November 9, 2008).

6. See also Marion Guck’s discussion of musical intimacy: “I’ve tried to articulate pleasures, simple pleasures, I take in the work . . . I know it through touch as well as sound—I know how it moves from moving it” (1997:348).

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