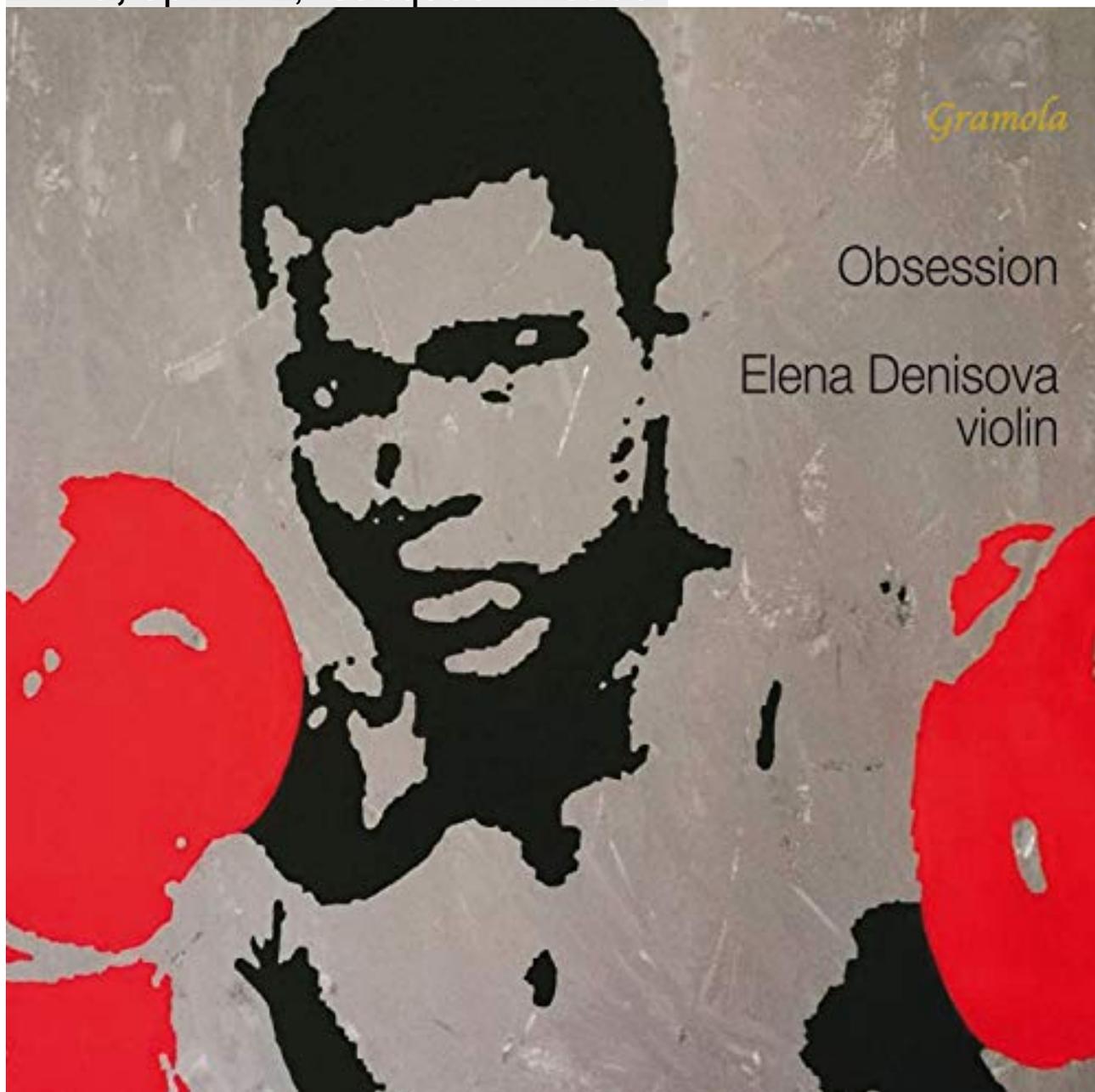


**OBSESSION** • Elena Denisova (vn) • GRAMOLA 99191  
(70:19)

**KREISLER** *Recitative and Scherzo Caprice*, op.

6. **KHANDOSHKIN** Sonatas for Solo Violin, op. 3: No. 1 in  
g; No. 2 in E  $\flat$ ; No. 3 in D. **PAGANINI** Caprices, op. 1: No.  
14 in E  $\flat$ ; No. 24 in a. **YSAË** Sonata for Solo Violin No.  
2 in a, op. 27/2, “Jacques Thibaud”





There is something about the repertory for unaccompanied violin that embodies religious experience. Maybe it's the fact that the violin comes closest of all the instruments to mimicking the human voice. *A cappella* singing, with its concentration on breathing in and out for its phrasing, quite naturally lends itself to Gregorian chant as the funnel for ecstatic emotions. It's no accident that the great Second Solo Sonata of Eugène Ysaÿe weaves the Gregorian *Dies irae* throughout its four movements. The unaccompanied violin actually can exceed the human voice in its emphases and tonal range, creating religious states ranging from the Bacchic to the serene. When Ruggiero Ricci planned to give a New York recital of only unaccompanied works in the 1940s, Mischa Elman told him he was crazy. But it was that recital Ricci credited with re-establishing him in the music business.

Elena Denisova has all the inspiration and technique to pull off an unaccompanied violin recital. She has called her album *Obsession*, after the title of the first movement of Ysaÿe's sonata. The cover photo of Muhammad Ali conveys the focused intensity of what's inside. Denisova was a student of Oleg Kagan, whose live recital of Mozart violin sonatas with Sviatoslav Richter I recommend highly. Denisova shares her teacher's bravura combined with his pinpoint judgment of emotional pressure points. Whether in the Dionysian exhibition of two Paganini caprices, or in the Rococo cathedral paintings of Ivan Khandoshkin's solo sonatas, Denisova is a pure exponent of unaccompanied violin rapture. Call it obsession or religious fervor, this is music-making of a higher calling. The heart of the album is the Three Solo Sonatas, op. 3, of Ivan Khandoshkin. He was the *Kapellmeister* of Catherine the Great's court orchestra, a violinist whose fame spread outside

Russia. While one may assume Khandoshkin was familiar with the unaccompanied sonatas and partitas of J. S. Bach, his own sonatas are purely works of the Enlightenment, revealing the influence of Haydn. The First Sonata opens with a thoughtful March that may owe something to Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ*. The second movement anticipates Paganini in its brightness and daring. Denisova performs it with a mixture of winsomeness and exhilaration. She plays the last movement, a set of variations, with wistful reflection. The Second Sonata is perhaps the most endearing of the three. It evokes the simplicity and gentle bounce of *Ländler*, with Denisova artfully creating a mixture of technical sophistication and emotional naivety. Khandoshkin's Third Sonata is the wildest of the bunch, as much a fantasy as a sonata. Denisova builds palpable excitement here, with playing of genuine bravura. The two Paganini caprices on the album receive thrilling renditions, with rapture at every turn. Fritz Kreisler's rarely heard *Recitative and Scherzo-Caprice* shows that Denisova can reveal a work's architecture while keeping you on the edge of your seat. Ysaÿe's Second Sonata, beginning with its quote of the Preludio of Bach's Third Partita, comes off here as a masterpiece. Denisova's performance really gets under the skin of the piece, with a Berliozian "Danse des ombres" and a "Les furies" that seems inspired by ancient Greek drama. The CD's recorded sound, from two different venues, generally is excellent. Elena Denisova's playing does make this album into an "obsession." Whether divinely or demonically inspired, the music-making here will grip you in ways you never may have thought the solo violin could. Highly recommended.

**Dave Saemann**

This article originally appeared in Issue 43:1 (Sept/Oct 2019) of *Fanfare Magazine*.