

BUSONI AND THE PIANO

BY

ROBERT ZOCCHI, B.A.(MUS.), GRAD.DIP.MUS.(PERF.)

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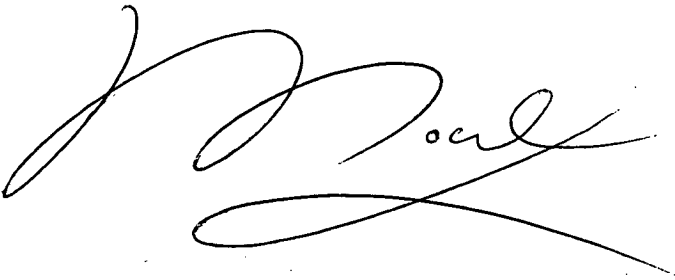
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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'R. Zocchi', with a large, sweeping flourish extending from the bottom.

Robert Zocchi

The candidate wishes to acknowledge the encouragement provided by Professor David Cubbin, Head of the Tasmanian Conservatorium of Music, throughout the two years during which he acted as supervisor for this submission. Grateful thanks also to Mr Peter Clarken, Sub-Dean at the Conservatorium, for reading over the manuscript and making helpful suggestions. Special mention should be made of Valerie Alfonzi of the Australian National Gallery, Canberra, for her proof-reading of the final submission.

This presentation concerns itself with the piano music of Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924). Its aim is to examine this music with a view to determining what constitutes the personal compositional style of Busoni as well as discussing his approach to the piano in his works for and performances on that instrument. Busoni's achievements will be compared with those of Liszt, an important predecessor in the search for a new style of composition early this century. Through further comparisons with his contemporaries in the first quarter of this century, Busoni's place in the history of keyboard music may be assessed.

This presentation will contain a review of Busoni's output of works for the piano. Significant representative works from his mature years as a composer will be selected for detailed discussion in an effort to support statements made about his music generally.

In order to establish a sense of perspective, the broader currents of transition from a nineteenth-century piano style to a twentieth-century one will be discussed and compared with the transition which took place during Busoni's development as a composer. As well as this, the path of music since the death of Busoni will be discussed in the light of his achievements.

## PREFATORY REMARKS

The first few decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a number of new styles and ideals of musical composition. Schoenberg developed an atonal melodic and harmonic language; Stravinsky composed a new music within more familiar tonal and formal boundaries; Debussy explored the possibilities of a music in which sound could exist in its own right without recourse to its traditional structural functions and there were many other new and individual styles, all of which represent a definite break from nineteenth century aesthetics and together make up a fascinating and diverse conglomeration that very much reflects the times in which their composers lived. These times also saw radical developments in keyboard music. While there existed the undeniable influence of some of the compositional styles cited above, it is fair to say that certain developments in keyboard music of those times - as is often the case throughout the history of Western music - are peculiar to the keyboard and, as a result, are worthy of separate study. Composers who devoted themselves almost entirely to keyboard music come to mind easily: Bull, Froberger, Francois Couperin, Domenico Scarlatti, Chopin, Alkan. In the early decades of this century, the major keyboard composers, such as Debussy, Scriabin, Ravel and Bartok were certainly much more than adequate composers in non-keyboard media, in fact, they were often pioneers in orchestral writing, in chamber music and in the theatre. Nonetheless, it seems that the fundamentals of these composers' musical styles can be found in their keyboard works. Most of them are known to have composed their music (even orchestral works and operas) at the keyboard and many of them were good performers on keyboard instruments.

In any attempt at explaining what may be generally considered an early twentieth-century piano style, the name of one very important nineteenth-century pianist-composer will appear again and again - Franz Liszt. It is no exaggeration to say that Liszt is almost single-handedly responsible for the development of the early piano of Beethoven's time into the powerful concert grand that is familiar to modern audiences. His playing demanded instruments of greater power and endurance and with a much wider range of colours than were available in his early years. However, Liszt is much more important as an influence - albeit an almost unacknowledged one - in compositional style. There are very few composers of the early twentieth century who do not owe something to Liszt. The style generally known as "impressionism" - with Debussy and Ravel as chief exponents - clearly appears in numerous works of Liszt, some of which were composed in the first half of the nineteenth century. The "percussive" treatment of the piano that appears in the music of Bartok, Prokofieff, Stravinsky and others has precedents in the works of Liszt. The harmonic daring of a Scriabin or a Schoenberg is well and truly antedated by Liszt's experiments in atonality. Nonetheless, it was rare for these influences to have been acknowledged at all by musicians of the time and the case for Liszt has not gained much more acceptance in the decades since then. Although Liszt had a large retinue of piano students - many of whom went on to achieve great fame as performers - his composition students were generally insignificant minor figures. No one composer took up the thread of his compositional style - reflecting, as it does, virtually all aspects of nineteenth-century music as well as pointing towards

almost all the important styles of the early twentieth century - with the exception of Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924).

If it is granted that Liszt was more than just an extraordinary piano virtuoso, that he could be considered a spokesman for the Romantic era in music and that his compositional output mirrors every style and every influence known to exist at the time, then there must be a strong case for Busoni to be considered his true successor. In no other composer of the early twentieth century is there evident such a diverse range of styles and influences as in Busoni. As a young man, he rapidly absorbed all of the then prevailing styles of composition and his early works show the influence of Brahms and - very surprisingly for the times - J.S. Bach. Just before the turn of the century, Busoni felt that he had discovered the "real" Liszt and became a persuasive champion of that composer's music. Around 1905, a mature and individual style slowly emerged. This new style was a decided reaction against the Romantic aesthetic - in fact, Busoni himself christened his new style "Young Classicism". It has some affinities with the "neo-classicism" practised by Stravinsky and many others but it is unfair to link it solely with neo-classicism, as many critics of Busoni's time tried to do. One could just as easily link Busoni's name with those of Debussy, Schoenberg or Bartok. When one realises that Schoenberg had speculative discussions with Busoni on the question of atonality a few years before the former's Three Pieces, op.11 were published, that Bartok was a guest pupil in one of Busoni's classes or that Varese was inspired by Busoni's theoretical writings, in which the author (in the first decade of this

century!) forecast the eventual existence of electronic music, the questions of priority and influence become treacherous ground for the historian. Busoni's vision was much wider. It transcended regional styles and national boundaries and absorbed all new developments in music while always honouring tradition. It demanded rigorous intellectual discipline and yet admitted that in the final analysis, the most inspired music could not be explained, at least in human terms.

Busoni's best and most important music (apart from his operas) was written for the piano. He was one of the most astonishing pianists of all time, which explains the facility and invention of his writing for the piano. While Busoni's piano music has obvious affinities with that of Debussy, Ravel, Bartok or Stravinsky among others, it is not generally conceded that it has its own individual style. It is the aim of this presentation to define what constitutes the various styles of piano composition in the early part of this century, to examine the contributions of various significant individuals and, against this background, to assess the achievements of Busoni and demonstrate that his style was strongly individual and much more significant to the development of twentieth-century music than has hitherto been generally supposed.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

It could be said that late nineteenth-century pianism was an overgrowth from early nineteenth-century pianism. Beginning with Beethoven's dissatisfaction with the instruments of his own times, there was a trend among composers of the first half of the century to expand the expressive capabilities of the piano. The wider dynamic range and subtle pedal effects required for the music of early Romantics such as Chopin, Schumann and Mendelssohn were revolutionary in their day. However, these composers' music is by no means on the grand scale of the piano works of Liszt, Alkan, Franck or Brahms. The texture of piano music in the second half of the century was generally overcluttered as a result of the desire for greater virtuosity and massive orchestral effects. It is difficult to imagine that further expansion of resources could have taken place without radically altering the nature of the instrument. Certainly, the keyboard synthesizers of modern electronic music have widened the aural experiences of listeners in the twentieth century. However, until the emergence of such sound worlds, the music of the piano was destined to become thinner and clearer in texture. It is probable that this was caused by the strong reaction against the inflated rhetorical gestures and broad, luxurious statements of the Romantic era.

The place of Liszt in the history of nineteenth-century music is extraordinary. As a boy, he met Beethoven and subsequently played important roles as both performer and composer in the emergence of early Romanticism. Under his hands, the piano reached extreme heights of virtuosity and monumentality. Then, while the leading figures of early Romanticism were dying around

the middle of the century, he went on to explore new sonorities and new forms for many decades, leaving others to try to outdo his earlier achievements in virtuosity and grandeur. While composers such as Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Franck expanded the resources of early Romantic pianism within fairly traditional frameworks, Liszt's restless nature compelled him almost single-handedly to discover a totally new style of piano composition in which sparseness of texture and economy of gesture were the norm.

Although it was not at all obvious last century - and little more at the beginning of this century - Liszt was clearly paving the way for the post-1900 composers. The music of these composers - with a few minor exceptions - avoids at all costs the bombast, rhetoric and overstatement of so much nineteenth-century music. It was trimmed of all excesses - sometimes to the extent that every note in a piece had to be regarded as nothing less than essential.

Thus, the turn of the century saw the emergence of numerous composers who, in their individual ways, spoke a fresh, new language. In the field of piano music, Debussy and Ravel discovered new sonorities by extended use of the pedal and an unprecedented indulgence in sonorities which remain static rather than assume functional roles. This style is popularly - although perhaps erroneously - known as "impressionism". In any case, the music of both composers took a gradual turn towards austerity of expression and brittle, reduced textures in their later years. This later style is one of the seeds from which neo-classicism

grew. Stravinsky (before World War Two), Hindemith, Prokofieff, Shostakovich and even the mature Bartok could be considered as neo-classical composers. In general, the piano music of these composers is notable for its clean, brittle textures and reliance on eighteenth-century formal outlines, this latter characteristic being a reaction against what was then seen as the rambling and impulsive forms of Romantic music. On the other hand, the Second Viennese School of composers was discovering an atonal language to replace the long-established major-minor concept. Although such music seems to have been at the opposite pole to that of neo-classical composers, it nevertheless shared with neo-classical music a tendency towards clarity of texture and conciseness of statement. There were also highly individual composers who spoke a new language after the turn of the century. Such a composer was Scriabin, who may be seen as an over-inflated extension of late Romanticism because of his tendency towards overstatement and obsessive indulgence in sensuousness. Nevertheless, his harmonic system was as startlingly revolutionary and as strictly controlled as that of Schoenberg and his music, although giving the impression of haphazard improvisation is, in fact, very tightly and logically constructed. In any case, Scriabin's late works conform with the trend among his contemporaries towards thinner textures and economy of means. Even more stubbornly individual was the American composer, Charles Ives, whose unconventional tone clusters and bizarre polyrhythms defy any attempt at aligning his style with any other of the early twentieth century.

A close examination of the piano music of Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924) reveals a very definite personal style. However, as the many similarities between Busoni's music and that of better known composers may lead many to deny Busoni's individuality as a composer, it is important that an attempt be made to define as precisely as is possible what constitutes Busoni's style. Firstly, the most obvious and fundamental observation should be made - Busoni reacted as strongly as anybody against the excesses of Romanticism. Although there are changes and development of style throughout his mature compositional career, it is never in doubt, from his "impressionistic" phase to his late, severe classicism, that he has turned away from the belief that melody is the leading factor in musical construction;<sup>1</sup> he employed clear yet unconventional forms;<sup>2</sup> he showed a willingness to explore undiscovered harmonies and sonorities while always unobtrusively referring to a tonal centre of some type.<sup>3</sup> His music displays a rare combination of preciseness in construction and elusiveness in expression.<sup>4</sup>

The parallel with Liszt is interesting and important. Many of the above observations on Busoni's style could also be made on Liszt's late piano works. Busoni was one of few composers who made a conscious effort to explore the paths opened by Liszt.<sup>5</sup> Other similarities include their formidable abilities as performers and their untiring searches for the new and undiscovered.

In exactly the same way that the late works of Liszt have not yet achieved wide recognition, the music of Busoni remains neglected. This is most regrettable in view of the fact that one can learn a great deal about early twentieth-century music from it, for Busoni is eclectic in his choice of influences. Purely as a keyboard composer, he deserves to be taken more seriously for his innovations in keyboard technique and sonorities, a direct expansion of the Lisztian model. Therefore, any discussion of post-Lisztian pianism ought to predominantly feature Busoni. Furthermore, elements of many of the major styles of the early years of the century appear in Busoni's music. In some cases, the appearances of such elements in his music predates that in the composers who have become well known as exponents of such styles. For this reason, it is important to realise that Busoni is a vital contributor to early twentieth-century music. It is also possible that he was able to overview his own times in a way that nobody else did. He was, after all, an intelligent artist with wide interests. He never associated himself with any group or school. This enabled him to keep in touch with all developments and all ways of thinking without becoming a slave to any particular one.

In reviewing Busoni's total output of piano compositions, one notices the productiveness and facility of the boy, teenager and young man.<sup>6</sup> If there is a slackening in production in later years, it is only because each work is a result of an effort to concentrate his ideas into clear, compact form. However, even in Busoni's early Brahmsian works, there are hints of what was to come in the form of contrapuntal episodes,

strikingly understated melodies and smooth piano writing. The set of Elegies for piano - dating from the first decade of the century - represents Busoni's very conscious efforts to depart from the old and discover new territory.<sup>7</sup> From 1910 to the end of his life, he composed a series of works which he called "sonatinas", a misleading title in view of the remarkable content of these pieces. The development of his mature style can be seen in these works. It should be noted that after his mammoth Piano Concerto - which takes almost an hour and a half to perform - Busoni did not compose an extended piano piece, with the exception of the Fantasia Contrappuntistica, which, in any case, was considered by its composer as an abstract piece of music not conceived for any instrument in particular.<sup>8</sup>

This presentation will endeavour to explain in some detail what are the elements that make Busoni's style individual and interesting. In doing so, it is to be hoped that an appreciation of Busoni's role in twentieth-century music will be gained. Four representative works from his mature period have been selected for detailed analysis and commentary. The Berceuse (an addition to the Elegies) is the piece that Busoni felt to be the turning point in his compositional career.<sup>9</sup> Its stifled melody, blurred outlines, detached restraint and disturbed undertones left Romanticism far behind. The Sonatina Seconda is undoubtedly Busoni's most experimental and problematic composition for the piano. This piece is close to Schoenberg in its virtual atonality, frenzied gestures and unpredictable form. The Sonatina In Diem Nativitatis Christi MCMXVII (or Christmas Sonatina) represents a severe reversal of the trends exhibited

in the Sonatina Seconda. Melodic invention is refined, formal outlines have a lapidary precision and contrapuntal techniques are even more advanced than previously and also more prominent. The Toccata is perhaps Busoni's crowning achievement in piano music. It is written in his most severe late style, neo-classical in its formal outlines but possessing a ferocious drive and almost morbid intensity.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Busoni is his relevance to modern music and the way in which his compositions, performances and theoretical papers seem to have anticipated much of what goes on in musical life today. In the field of composition, many of his solutions to the problems of new music have been unknowingly taken up by numerous composers since. In the field of performance, many pianists mould their programmes logically and with some historical perspective - a practice virtually begun by Busoni.<sup>10</sup> In the field of theoretical discussion, so many of his predictions regarding the course of future music have already been proved correct. It is to be hoped that this presentation may stimulate some interest in the piano music of Busoni, not merely as a curiosity of the past, but as a vital contributor to the music of both his own times and the present day.

Notes: Chapter One

1. Busoni, Ferruccio, The Essence of Music, New York, Dover, 1965, pp.31-34
2. Busoni, op.cit., pp.17-18
3. Stuckenschmidt, H. H., Ferruccio Busoni, London, Calder and Boyars, 1970, p.103
4. Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music, New York, Dover, 1962, pp.78-80
5. Dent, E. J., Ferruccio Busoni, London, Eulenburg, 1974, pp.150-151
6. Dent, op.cit., Appendix 4 and Busoni, op.cit., pp.77-78
7. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., pp.95-96
8. Busoni, op.cit., pp.47-49
9. Busoni, op.cit., p.49
10. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., pp.67-93

CHAPTER TWO: FROM THE NINETEENTH CENTURY  
TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In order to understand what it is that constitutes the individual style of the piano music of Busoni, it would first of all be necessary to attempt an overview of early twentieth-century piano music. One should try to determine, in rather general terms, an aesthetic of early twentieth-century piano composition, nonetheless keeping in mind that such a formulation can never be applied satisfactorily to all of the styles and individual figures of the period.

It is not as easy to define an aesthetic of the twentieth century as it is to do so for pre-Romantic eras in music. For example, composers in the eighteenth century were perfectly willing to submit to and work within the accepted stylistic conventions of their particular times. When fashions changed in music, the movements toward change were collective, communal and unpretentious. In the twentieth century, the accent is on a search for and highlighting of the individuality of the composer. Musicians of this time are impatient in their search for a new, fresh language and have shown an eagerness to experiment rarely equalled in previous eras. The consequences of this are significant because such attitudes necessarily preclude collective action by composers who are contemporaries of each other. It seems that the more time that passes this century, the more assertively individual such composers try to be and the more estranged they become from each other. On the other hand, if one goes back in time to the nineteenth century, the early attempts at asserting the rights of the composer as an individual to be revered by his age rather than revere it did not prevent many composers from banding together in the cause

of new music and new ideas. It is therefore easier to formulate a definition for a Romantic aesthetic than for an early twentieth-century one. It can be claimed that there was a Romantic movement in music. The use of terms such as "High Romanticism" and "Late Romanticism" to describe and identify particular musical styles is common among musicians. However, the adoption of an equivalent term for the music written in the period 1900-1945 would be a contentious issue among historians. Indeed, it would be difficult to procure an aesthetic manifesto that would even come close to being applicable to all major composers and styles of this period.

The question of a definition of styles assumes importance at the outset of this discussion because of the place of Busoni in the history of music. He began composing at a very early age. However, it should be borne in mind that as late as 1905, Busoni was still composing in terms of a nineteenth-century aesthetic despite his own long-standing disillusionment with that aesthetic.<sup>1</sup> This effectively means that over thirty years of Busoni's compositional life was spent within the ethos of Romanticism. This fact is important in understanding Busoni's development after 1905. Busoni was not an excitable and wayward young man when he discovered his new style. He had consciously sought solutions to the problems of Romantic music for a long period, unlike some other major figures of the early twentieth century who instinctively found their own voices early in their compositional careers. Before examining Busoni's piano music, an attempt should be made to clarify the transition

from nineteenth-century pianism to that of the early twentieth century. It will then be possible to compare this transition with that which took place in Busoni's work.

Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin and Brahms are all names of composers whose influence was felt by the young Busoni and his contemporaries in the late nineteenth century. It was the age of the instrumental virtuoso and so many of the works written for the piano at that time - whether deliberately designed as virtuoso pieces or not - demanded the thorough command of the instrument that an aspiring pianist was expected to possess and display to the full. It is natural that a young composer of the late nineteenth century would model his style on the composers mentioned above. However, it is noteworthy that Busoni became recognised first and foremost as an extraordinary pianist. One must therefore ascribe these early influences in his life not just to the popular fashion of the period but also to the fact that he saturated himself with such music as a performer.<sup>2</sup>

It is fair to suggest that Liszt and Brahms made the most significant and consistent contributions to late Romantic pianism. Many other piano composers of that style owed much to one or other of these two, if not to earlier composers. However, these towering figures of Romantic pianism had very little in common stylistically and aesthetically.

In considering the directions towards which these two composers moved in their music, it is notable that although both had many admirers in succeeding generations, their actual influence

on composers of the early twentieth century is minimal. The rather austere, classical Brahmsian style was imitated by countless minor figures until well into this century although the only truly significant development of this style was by composers such as Reger and Schoenberg, both of whom transplanted the original ideal into a strained chromatic - and in the case of the latter composer, atonal - harmonic environment. As for Liszt, the influence of the purely virtuosic side of his music can be seen in the numerous pianists and pianist-composers of succeeding generations, who relied primarily on display and glitter while - in the case of those who composed - attaining the status of nothing more than salon composers. The other side of Liszt - the side that saw the development of cyclic form and the idea of transformation of themes, the side that stretched chromaticism to such an extent that atonality was approached, the side which conceived hitherto unheard piano sonorities (particularly by the use of the pedal and of both extremes of the keyboard) - was little known or appreciated in both the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The very late piano works of Liszt, that is to say, those of the last ten to fifteen years of his life, have remained virtually unknown until more recent years. These late works are of more than passing interest in this discussion. In them, one can see the seeds of both the destruction of the Romantic era and the dawning of a new one. Their importance as such cannot be overemphasised. In the piano music of very few other nineteenth-century composers can one find such a determined effort to break with the then prevailing fashions. In this

context, one might mention Alkan, with his severe, brittle textures and unexpected jolts in harmony and rhythm, or Faure, whose elegance and reserve - couched within well-known Chopinesque forms such as the nocturne or barcarolle - stood boldly in the face of German Romanticism. Mussorgsky's bare and unconventional piano style is more akin to the twentieth century than to the height of the Romantic era. However, Liszt assumes greater importance than these composers by virtue of the natural and gradual development that is evident in his music of a new style out of his own earlier Romantic one. Here is an example of this development.

While the Sonata in B minor could be considered the pinnacle of the Romantic piano sonata, the later Two Legends belong to a transitional stage of Liszt's career because they display elements of both his "old" and "new" styles - "impressionistic" pedal effects, highly advanced erosion of tonality, and a surprisingly free form coexist (somewhat uncomfortably) with four-square march rhythms, blazing diatonic climaxes and monumental rhetorical gestures. It is only with the bleak, aphoristic late pieces such as En Reve and Nuages Gris that there are very few traces of Romanticism left in Liszt's music. If one were to outline the elements that make up the style of Liszt's late piano works, one would find that many of the descriptions used would be remarkably well suited to music of the early twentieth century.

Major characteristics of the music written after the turn of the century include a blurring, if not total abandonment, of the major-minor harmonic system. This was achieved by various methods - for example, through the use of modal melody and harmony, extended chromaticism leading to atonality and dodecaphony, emphasis on "dissonant" intervals (such as seconds and sevenths) within the diatonic scale, polytonality and "wrong-note" technique (as in Prokofieff). Melodic construction in the early twentieth century tends towards short, clear units rather than broad, searing lines. Meanwhile rhythm seems to take one of two directions - an attempt at eradication of pulse in order to give the effect of freedom of movement (used in different ways by composers as diverse as Debussy and Schoenberg), or the maintenance of strict pulse within a framework of assymetric beat structures (as in Bartok or Stravinsky).

In terms of texture, piano writing is generally thinner in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth. The massive doublings at the octave, third and sixth that are found in so much of the piano music of Brahms are drastically pruned, often leaving single-note and single-line textures. This was particularly popular with neo-classical composers who, by ostensibly modelling their works on pre-Romantic music, overcame the problems inherent in overcluttering the piano with a texture it could no longer support with comfort. The adoption of single-line textures was one of the catalysts for the re-emergence of counter-point as a lively element of keyboard composition this century. The ideals of linear movement and polyphony were very important to many composers of the twentieth century, ranging from the

Second Viennese School of composers and its descendants to those who were more neo-classically inclined, such as Bartok, Stravinsky, Hindemith and Shostakovich. Generally speaking, composers aimed for clarity of texture in piano music, despite the fact that different composers approached this ideal from very different points of view.

One last general consideration in early twentieth-century music is that of form. It does not seem that the composers of piano music at this time aspired to writing overwhelming masterpieces in the manner of Beethoven's Hammerklavier Sonata and the like. Forms used - whether neo-classical or free - were generally small and compressed in this period. The music is often deliberately lacking in the imposing qualities of much nineteenth-century music. For example, Ravel was quite content to express himself in an alarmingly simple way in his Noble and Sentimental Waltzes. The seemingly salon-like appearance of these miniatures conceals the strictest structural workings and the profoundest aesthetic intentions imaginable. Similar comment could be made regarding Bartok's unassuming folk arrangements and folk-inspired music. Many further examples could be cited.

Four of the leading figures in the emergence of twentieth-century piano music were Debussy, Scriabin, Ravel and Bartok. One of the aims of this presentation is to compare the contributions of Busoni to early twentieth-century piano music with the contributions of the above-mentioned composers. It should help advance the case for Busoni if he appears to have made a contribution comparable to the other four. Most importantly,

such a comparison should reveal the individuality of Busoni's style. Awareness of both his individuality and his contribution will make Busoni's true stature in the history of music clearer. Prior to attempting such a judgement, it is appropriate, for the purposes of this discussion, to reflect upon the salient features of the personal styles of Debussy, Scriabin, Ravel and Bartok.

Debussy's best-known contribution to the piano was his use of "impressionistic" effects. These were achieved primarily by his radical treatment of the pedals (Liszt's advances in this field being taken even further). However, it must be remembered that this was merely one aspect of Debussy's piano style - and not necessarily his most individual. Debussy's real significance lies in his abandonment of functional harmony and academic forms. This is particularly interesting when examined with reference to his piano music. The gliding parallel chord progressions, the audacious seconds and sevenths and the unrestrained shifting from one harmony to any other which is aesthetically pleasing to the composer regardless of convention all acquire a remarkable clarity on the piano. The supposed limitations of the instrument with regard to variety of colour are turned to tremendous advantage by Debussy. As for formal considerations, Debussy's intuitive approach to composition necessarily led to his thoughts being concentrated into miniatures simply for the sake of convenience. This tendency towards smaller forms is typical of early twentieth-century music. Finally, one should mention a development in Debussy's late works (such as the Twelve Studies for piano) which is of considerable

importance to subsequent generations of composers. This development is generally considered as neo-classical owing to the clearer forms and more brittle textures of these late works. However, it should be noted that these forms, although clearer, are no less unconventional than before - indeed, they appear even more strikingly unusual as a result of their clarity. Moreover, it could be claimed that the textures of these late works instinctively foreshadow the ideals of total serialism by isolating individual sonorities within a larger complex and giving these sonorities an independent function during the progress of a composition.

Scriabin's name is often linked with that of Debussy when considering the new developments in twentieth-century piano music. One must question this, as the two are worlds apart in aesthetic matters. They agreed that conventional harmonic formulae needed to be superseded by a freer and less inhibited approach to harmonic progression - but that is where the similarities end. While Debussy's approach to harmony remained essentially instinctive, Scriabin sought to replace traditional systems with a highly developed system of his own. Each of his later works is based on a chosen chord which is constantly transposed and manipulated throughout the course of a composition. In many ways, this is similar to Schoenberg's twelve-tone theory (devised a couple of decades later) - particularly as the chords chosen by Scriabin usually include many of the twelve semitones of the chromatic scale and feature tritone and perfect fourth relationships which effectively liquidate any sense of tonality. Structurally, rhythm and time proportions acquire an almost

mathematical importance despite the strong improvisational qualities of much of Scriabin's piano music. This remarkable compromise between strict structural proportion and fleeting improvisational freedom is probably Scriabin's greatest achievement - the more remarkable as the strictness and the freedom are taken to such extremes in his music. His very colourful piano style - deriving from his own nervous and excitable performances - is highly individual and immediately identifiable.

Ravel has been linked with Debussy just as mistakenly as has Scriabin. There is no doubt that Ravel was well versed in the newly discovered techniques of "impressionism" but it is clear from even his earliest works that clarity of line, preciseness of form and elegance of expression were his major aims. To this end, he turned to the eighteenth century for inspiration and models and thus showed himself to be a genuinely neo-classical composer. Sometimes, this is cleverly and deliberately obscured by scintillating bravura pianism (as in Miroirs or Gaspard de la Nuit) while, on other occasions, Ravel will openly parade his indebtedness to the past through specific parodies (such as Le Tombeau de Couperin and the Noble and Sentimental Waltzes). Although Debussy's music could be said to have opened new paths in compositional style this century, Ravel's seems to be a great culminating point to which there is little to add.

Bartok is commonly regarded as initiating the "percussive" approach to the piano. From his recordings of his own music, one realises that this is something of a myth. His approach, far from being percussive, is, if anything, neo-classical.

An unprecedented barrage of rhythmically reiterated seconds and sevenths is probably responsible for the existence of this myth. Non-abandonment of tonality, adherence to traditional forms and crisp, clear piano writing draw Bartok's mature style closer to the neo-classical composers than to any others.

To complete these comments on early twentieth-century pianism, some other individuals ought to be mentioned. There were many neo-classical composers apart from Ravel and Bartok. These composers included Stravinsky, Hindemith, Prokofieff and Shostakovich. Of these, Prokofieff is probably the most significant contributor to twentieth-century pianism. It would be more correct to ascribe the percussive treatment of the piano to Prokofieff, with his fiery and virtuosic style, than to the more intellectually inclined Bartok. Meanwhile, the composers of the Second Viennese School seemed more concerned with discovering a new melodic and harmonic grammar than in exploring the potentials of the piano. Nonetheless, such a radical turn in style could not exclude novel pianistic effects from appearing in their few works for the instrument.

It is interesting to mention Rachmaninoff here. No matter how conservative or Romantically inclined he was, he did not escape the influence of the twentieth century - an indication that there is, perhaps, one large contributing factor in determining compositional style in this period. Certainly, Rachmaninoff's later piano works are more acerbic and astringent in feeling than was the case previously. Meanwhile, the music of Ives - deliberately provocative and ruggedly individual - cannot be considered as anything other than twentieth-century music for

the simple reason that it does not contain even the most remote reference to the nineteenth century. There is no gradual, arduous and thoughtful transition from one style to another in Ives - simply a headlong plunge into a world of confusion, complexity and near-anarchy.

Through this brief review of early twentieth-century piano music, the environment within which Busoni worked has been sketched. There was little recognition of his own achievements as a composer in his own time. This means that the figures mentioned above were little influenced by Busoni. Bearing this in mind, one must now place Busoni's career in the context of early twentieth-century music and evaluate his achievements within that context.

Notes: Chapter Two

1. Dent, E.J., Ferruccio Busoni, London, Eulenburg, 1974, pp.153, 168 and Busoni, Ferruccio, The Essence of Music, New York, Dover, 1965, pp.49-50
2. Dent, op.cit., Appendix 2

### CHAPTER THREE: THE PLACE OF BUSONI

Ferruccio Busoni's early childhood was spent wandering through various Italian provincial towns with his parents, both of whom were musicians. Owing to the carelessness of Busoni's father, Ferdinando, the family was constantly in financial trouble. This necessitated its travels as a group of itinerant musical entertainers. The pressures of such a restless existence were to remain with Ferruccio until he reached his mature years. Most of the music to which the young boy was exposed consisted of empty, virtuosic display pieces - particularly fantasias on popular operas or songs of the day as performed by his father on clarinet. As Ferruccio had very little sound musical training as a child - Ferdinando was by all accounts a badly trained musician himself - it is surprising that by his late teens, he had developed a very thorough knowledge of a great variety of music in addition to having already become an exciting pianist and a prolific composer.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that the early influences on Busoni's piano compositions are the early Romantic salon or salon-oriented composers. The brilliance and lightness of Weber, the smoothness and melodiousness of Mendelssohn and the lyricism and melancholy of Schumann were all quickly and easily absorbed by the young Busoni. In time, the virtuosity and fire of Liszt were also adopted as the young pianist achieved increasing command over his instrument. All of this is perhaps natural to and expected of a budding young pianist-composer who spent his formative years mostly in provincial Italian and Austrian towns in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> However, there are some unusual developments in the young Busoni which point to what came later.

For example, at an astonishingly early age, little Ferruccio developed a passion for the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, frequently performing preludes and fugues from the Well-Tempered Clavier<sup>3</sup> as well as composing his own "preludes and fugues" for piano.<sup>4</sup> The music of Bach was very little respected if known at this time. It therefore seems almost miraculous that Busoni should have begun what turned out to be a lifetime study of and absorption in Bach's music at such an early stage of his development. Other fascinations held by this eager young musician included the music of Mozart, Monteverdi and Palestrina!<sup>5</sup>

Another aspect of Busoni's thinking emerged at this time. Perhaps as a result of his partly German ancestry (on his mother's side), he was frequently torn between the ideals of severity and intellectual control which he found in German music and the bright, uninhibited characteristics of Italian music. Throughout his life, he was a strong critic of both German and Italian music whenever he felt that either one displayed an excess of the characteristics peculiar to it.<sup>6</sup> In his own music, he attempted to merge the two ideals. It is evident that such attempts were being made as early as 1884, when he composed the first version of his Variations and Fugue on Chopin's C minor Prelude. Within the shackles of his towering model, Brahms' Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Handel, Busoni always manages to suggest a brightness and freedom which he attributed to Italy (although more to the Italian Baroque than to Italy's Romantic era<sup>7</sup>). The sheer brilliance and clarity of the writing leave the rather ponderous style of Brahms far behind.

For roughly twenty years prior to 1905, Busoni devoted most of his energies to playing the piano and related activities.<sup>8</sup> During these years, the style and technique of Busoni the pianist matured and he gradually came to be considered one of the greatest in history. It is perhaps not too surprising to find, therefore, that in 1905, Busoni was still frustrated in his search for his own personal style as a composer. Certainly, he did not give up composing in these years of intense activity as a performer. New compositions, and more ambitious ones at that, continued to emanate from him and his style did develop to the extent that it more fully absorbed the contemporary late Romantic influences such as Wagner and Brahms. He began to treat the music of Liszt much more seriously as a performer, although this influence seemed slow in affecting his compositional style.<sup>9</sup>

It could be argued that Busoni was slow to find his individual style as a composer because of his enormous immersion into the music of past composers as a pianist. Busoni made numerous transcriptions of works by other composers (principally Bach) during his years of constant performing as a young man.<sup>10</sup>

Yet he repeatedly expressed his dissatisfaction with his own lack of development as a composer as well as his disillusionment with Romanticism during these times.<sup>11</sup>

The massive Piano Concerto stands out among Busoni's more ambitious projects in the years before 1905 owing to its length, its unusual five-movement structure and its use of a male choir to join soloist and orchestra in the last movement. Busoni desperately wanted to "sum up" his career as a composer to

date in this piece while at the same time suggesting the new directions which he wanted to follow in the immediate future.<sup>12</sup> The Concerto begins like a Brahms symphony. However, as the first movement unfolds, Busoni introduces increasingly more daring harmonic progressions and more agitated melodic figures. The entry of the piano is grand and its subsequent treatment relentlessly virtuosic, although this is not very obvious to the listener as the intricate runs and patterns of the soloist are usually submerged in the massive orchestral textures which tend to dominate the piece. The piano writing owes very much to Liszt and there is an echo of his Faust Symphony in the last movement. However, the most obvious attempts to seek new directions are to be found in the second and fourth movements, which deliberately incorporate "Italian" melodies and rhythms. These movements - notable for their abrasive scoring and caustic wit - sit almost uncomfortably on either side of the Wagnerian third movement.

For all the innovations and excitement of the Piano Concerto, the overall mood is still one of monumentality and grandeur. The design is very reminiscent of Mahler's symphonies. The novelties of the second and fourth movements are not enough to eradicate the spirit of Romanticism that pervades the work as a whole. Busoni makes it clear that he is struggling to escape the influence of German Romanticism in his Concerto. After almost one and a half hours of music, one is not convinced that he has truly won his struggle.

Busoni's real individuality as a composer began to emerge in his Elegies, a set of seven short piano pieces dating from 1907-9. Most of these pieces are either borrowed from or are the germ of other pieces by Busoni. They are more like brief sketches than anything else. There is a strong feeling of exploration if not quite experimentation within them. The second of the set, All'Italia, is derived from the second and fourth movements of the earlier Piano Concerto. However, the piano writing is less forceful and the harmonic innovations more subtle in All'Italia than in the Concerto. Another interesting characteristic of the Elegies is the brevity of each individual piece. For the first time in his career, Busoni is prepared to put forward many interesting ideas in a piece without subjecting them to detailed and exhaustive development. Each of the pieces ends with the feeling that the composer could have considerably elaborated his ideas. In this regard, the third of the set, Meine Seele bangt und hofft zu dir, based on a Bach chorale, is significant in that it was gradually expanded over the years to become the massive Fantasia Contrappuntistica, which is over half an hour long. In Die Nachtlichen and Erscheinung, the fifth and sixth of the Elegies respectively, the writing becomes so chromatic that any sense of tonality is difficult to perceive. Indeed, the chromaticism is so consistent and not tonally oriented that it could be said that Busoni was really working within a primitive form of twelve-tone theory. However, as will be seen again later in his life, Busoni was not prepared to abandon the idea of a tonal centre in his music, no matter how radical his experiments were to become. It is, however, the Berceuse - a late addition to the original set

of only six Elegies - which Busoni felt to be the piece in which he fully expressed his own individuality as a composer for the first time.<sup>13</sup> A detailed discussion of this piece will appear later in this presentation.

Various features of Busoni's newly discovered individual style have been mentioned in discussing his Elegies. The most important distinguishing features of this style - those that make it impossible to mistake works from this period of his life with earlier ones - are his serious efforts to compress the content of his works into shorter spaces, his unwillingness to overstate or overexpand his basic ideas within a work, his extension of chromatic melody and harmony to a point nearing atonality, his seemingly truncated yet finely chiselled melodic lines and the slightly less cluttered texture of the piano writing. On the whole, the Elegies give the impression of great freedom in conception. Their blurred outlines and remote atmosphere give them a rather "impressionistic" feeling. Having reached this stage in his development as a composer, Busoni began to long for a synthesis of these fantastic and even "mystical" elements in his music with some kind of logical and refined approach to form.<sup>14</sup>

In 1910, Busoni composed a piece for piano of approximately ten minutes' duration with the title Sonatina. This is the first of a series of six sonatinas which he composed between the years 1910 and 1920. None of the subsequent sonatinas were longer than the first - indeed, some were considerably shorter. In these works, Busoni gradually merges the inherent

freedom of the style of the Elegies with a very strict - though not at all academic - musical grammar and forms. In addition to the elements mentioned above in describing Busoni's new individual compositional style, one now notices an even clearer and thinner texture, simpler and more precisely defined melodies, a more subtle and telling use of rhythm and a more highly developed contrapuntal sense. This last element is clearly the result of his study of Bach and follows his Fantasia after J. S. Bach and his Fantasia Contrappuntistica, both of which explore many novel contrapuntal - and also harmonic - techniques, using Bach as a springboard. In these two works, Busoni wanted to show that in considering the future of music, composers needed to reassess the potential of counterpoint as a basis for development and innovation. Curiously, in Busoni's music, Bachian models provide the inspiration for polytonal and poly-rhythmic counterpoint, chromatic and atonal development of melodic lines and large, architectonic structures based on cumulative applications of various contrapuntal techniques.

The overall structure of the Sonatina is typical of Busoni's mature style in that it is clear and precise - inspired by eighteenth-century models - but nonetheless unconventional and original, not referring at all to actual eighteenth-century forms. The style initiated by this piece was christened "Young Classicism" by Busoni. In later years, Busoni vehemently denied that his style was at all related to that of the "neo-classicists".<sup>15</sup> At first, this may seem like a very cautious effort on the part of Busoni not to be identified with a particular school of composers for he was very cynical with regard to

prevailing fashions in music.<sup>16</sup> However, the key to this issue has been mentioned above. The forms of Busoni's mature works were spiritually and aesthetically inspired by those of the eighteenth century but Busoni rarely copied such forms to the extent that, for example, Prokofieff did in his Classical Symphony or Stravinsky in Pulcinella.

The second of the series of sonatinas, the Sonatina Seconda, must be considered something of an exception to the general style of the whole set. Certainly, many of the observations made above on Busoni's mature compositional style are applicable to it. However, there are other characteristics which are not typical of any other piano work of Busoni. It is certainly its composer's most daring and experimental piano work in terms of harmonic freedom and formal structure and will be treated in greater detail later in this presentation, together with the Christmas Sonatina - the fourth of the series - which more accurately reflects the increasingly mature and refined style of its composer.

A fitting sequel to the six sonatinas is the Toccata, which first appeared in 1921. It is evident from this powerful work that Busoni's style had settled firmly - so much so that he felt confident in working towards a very ambitious project, his opera Doctor Faust (which remained unfinished when he died). It seems that towards the end of his life, Busoni's music became increasingly morbid, severe and emotionally detached. While all of the elements that were cited earlier as defining Busoni's individual style remain untouched in his last works, there

is an added acerbic quality to the music. The piano is treated in a more brittle manner. Melodies often give way to bustling chromatic or polytonal figurations. Rhythm is now used to create a sensation of almost obsessive forward motion. Curiously enough, amidst this heightened tension, harmonic progressions become more chiselled and indeed simpler - often decidedly triadic, although not tonally conventional. As for formal considerations, traditional outlines seem to be more favoured, variations and scherzo-and-trio forms (as in the 1922 version of the Chopin Variations) or the Baroque chaconne (as in the last section of the Toccata). It is difficult to explain why there are such reversions to traditional thinking in these aspects of Busoni's late works. Busoni was as severely critical of composers who sought innovation and experiment for its own sake as he was of composers who stuck to well tried formulae without ever seeking new ideas.<sup>17</sup> In his mature works, there is often a conscious effort to balance the experimental with the traditional. The Toccata is a very convincing illustration of such a balance and will be discussed in greater depth later in this presentation.

Some general observations have now been made in attempting to define what goes to make up Busoni's individual compositional style. The detailed commentaries upon the Berceuse, Sonatina Seconda, Christmas Sonatina and Toccata which appear below are geared towards providing an even closer insight into this style. However, before dealing with these four works, the music of Busoni needs to be placed within the context of early twentieth-century music. Comparison with his contemporaries -

revealing similarities and, more importantly, differences - is vital in helping to determine Busoni's individual style as well as his contribution to early twentieth-century music.

It is rare to find a totally original composer. All of a composer's ideas, no matter how novel they may appear, must have their roots in some other music. Busoni was never afraid to admit his indebtedness to other composers and did not regard it as a crime if composers borrowed from one another. He maintained that if the borrowing composer is truly individual, then his work cannot be mistaken as that of anyone else.<sup>18</sup> Extreme examples of this could be cited. The "parody mass" composers of the Renaissance quite uninhibitedly took entire works by other composers and fashioned these in their own styles. Closer to our own times, Stravinsky quite unashamedly borrows from other composers - for example, from Tchaikovsky in The Fairy's Kiss. Busoni himself based entire works on pre-existing ones by himself or other composers. The Fantasia Contrappuntistica, based on Bach's Art of Fugue and one of his own Elegies, is an excellent example of this.

Brahms has been mentioned as one of Busoni's early influences in compositional style. Busoni became increasingly critical of Brahms as he grew older.<sup>19</sup> In the first decade of this century, he made an effort to outgrow this influence because he felt it was tying his own style to the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> In looking for composers of the late nineteenth century who may have suggested possible new directions for twentieth-century music, Busoni emphatically rejected Wagner, for whose music

he developed a very intense dislike after the turn of the century.<sup>21</sup> In fact, as time passed, he became more and more cynical about Romanticism generally. Few composers from Beethoven to Richard Strauss seemed to escape his censure. He came to be inspired more by Bach and Mozart than by more recent music.<sup>22</sup> However, there were two late nineteenth-century influences that did fascinate Busoni. He was one of few musicians to take Liszt seriously as a composer and he was deeply moved by the sudden change of style exhibited in Verdi's Falstaff, written when the famous Italian opera composer was a very old man.<sup>23</sup> The Verdi influence is more relevant to Busoni's operas although it does indirectly affect such operatically inspired pieces as the Sonatina Ad Usum Infantis. However, in considering Busoni's piano music, it is worth dwelling on the Liszt influence for a little while.

Busoni was certainly not uncritical of Liszt and his frequent excesses. However, it is clear from various writings of Busoni - as well as his performances as a pianist - in what high regard he held Liszt.<sup>24</sup> Busoni's most frequently performed composer as a pianist was Liszt. His repertoire featured virtually all of Liszt's major piano works as well as some unusual ones which were not at all well known.<sup>25</sup> The few performances that have survived on early acoustic recordings and piano rolls are very different in style to the performances of Liszt by his contemporaries. The Hungarian Rhapsody No.13 is played with a dignity and refinement totally absent from all other known contemporary performances of Liszt. The Paganini transcription, La Campanella, is rendered by Busoni as a delicate

and subtle study in bell sonorities rather than as a virtuoso tour de force, which is the more common treatment of the piece. Even the rather trivial opera fantasies such as that on Verdi's Rigoletto are played with serious intent and sure structural proportions. At no time did Busoni lower the music of Liszt to the level of cheap display for its own sake. A peculiar skill of Busoni was his ability to keep intricate runs and decorative passagework strictly in the background while giving melody full emphasis in matters of shaping and phrasing. In some music of Liszt, this is no mean feat!

Owing to their unavailability in print or their inaccessibility in museums, most of the very late works of Liszt were probably unknown to Busoni, although he did perform such unusual items as Years of Pilgrimage (Third Year) and Der Weihnachtsbaum (both relatively late collections in Liszt's output).<sup>26</sup> It is clear that Busoni saw in Liszt the seed of a style that could truly claim to be new and of the twentieth century. While it could be said that Liszt's late pieces anticipate the considerably later developments of Debussy, Ravel, Scriabin, Bartok, Schoenberg and others, it is Busoni's Elegies that are most like Liszt's late works and most nearly seem to take up the challenges offered by them. One explanation for this is that Liszt and Busoni shared a rather cosmopolitan approach towards European music and were not willing to be tied down by national and regional styles or to follow any particular group's musical manifesto.<sup>27</sup> Liszt's music represents a wide range of interests covering many countries and many styles. In the same way, Busoni could be called a "European" composer

because he does not limit his range of influences to just one country or one style as do, say, Debussy or Schoenberg. It is for this reason that Busoni is a fitting representative of most trends of early twentieth-century music. He could also be considered Liszt's only genuine successor.

In terms of the quality of a finished composition, Busoni could never be considered inferior to any other important composer of the early twentieth century. Formally, his best works have the same refinement as those of Bartok or Stravinsky while his explorations of novel piano sonorities rival those of Debussy or Ravel. Intellectual control over the creative process was something that Busoni was never willing to relinquish but his music is no more "intellectual" than that of Schoenberg, Stravinsky or even Beethoven.

Busoni has had numerous labels attached to him as a composer. The controversy over his alleged neo-classicism has already been mentioned and it cannot be said that he has much in common with the lesser figures of that movement. Another label which was applied to him was that of impressionism - probably the result of his lush writing in the Berceuse Elegiaque for orchestra.<sup>28</sup> Even in this piece, which represents an extreme in his output, the melodic line is always clear while tonal progressions are unambiguous (even during the long stretches of polytonality). Debussy was eager to abandon functional harmony by giving individual chords freedom from their traditional relationships with each other. This led to Debussy's characteristic treatment of chords and sounds for their own sakes. Busoni also wished

to abolish traditional harmonic functions but sought to replace these with new functions of his own invention. Busoni's music lacks the static quality of Debussy's style.

Although he had a certain admiration for both Mahler and Richard Strauss, Busoni rejected their influences as being a new manifestation of Romanticism.<sup>29</sup> His attitude to Schoenberg and his disciples was rather different. Schoenberg showed how far he was prepared to go in the overturning of tradition when he composed his Three Pieces, op.11 for piano. Busoni was deeply affected by the appearance of these revolutionary pieces, which are commonly regarded as the first example of an entire work being governed by the suspension of tonality. He published his own transcription of the second of the three pieces - his attempt at coming to terms with a totally new style.<sup>30</sup>

Busoni did not live to see the twelve-tone compositions of Schoenberg and his followers but was familiar with compositions written in the second decade of this century, which were freely atonal.<sup>31</sup> In his Sonatina Seconda, Busoni virtually reached atonality at roughly the same time as did Schoenberg. However, it is important to point out that Busoni was never content to abandon the principle of a tonal centre in a composition. His later works are usually emphatic in their use of such centres (though never in the traditional major-minor sense). Even in the extreme case of the Sonatina Seconda, there is a barely perceptible tendency to return to the note C at crucial structural moments within the piece. In later years, Busoni revealed

himself to be a little sceptical of Schoenberg's style.<sup>32</sup> It is difficult to guess what his attitude to strict dodecaphonic technique would have been. He probably would have complained that Schoenberg replaced the inhibiting traditional rules with even more inhibiting new ones. For all of his intellectual leanings, Busoni was too imaginative a composer to follow any theoretical treatise which he may have formulated for himself, as did Schoenberg, Hindemith, Messiaen and Boulez at various stages of their careers.

In attempting to find the composer or composers most similar in style to Busoni, one realises the true extent of his individuality because it is most difficult to link his style to that of anyone else. He has not the harmonic and formal abandon of Debussy nor the elegance and poise of Ravel. He rejects the Romantic excesses of Mahler as well as the highly charged atmosphere of Scriabin. He kept an open mind regarding Schoenberg but was not at all convinced that this direction would not run into a dead end.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, he regarded neo-classicism as a naive and retrogressive exercise for composers who needed to lean on past models because they were incapable of creating new yet convincing forms.<sup>34</sup>

Busoni's keyboard style is also highly individual. This is probably the result of his own command of the piano as a performer, something in which he had an advantage over his contemporaries (just as Mahler understood the orchestra more than many other composers because of his talents as a conductor). Busoni systematically outlined his approach to the keyboard in a large

collection of examples, studies and pieces which he called Klavierübung. One could make a separate study of the Klavierübung as it contains fascinating insights into Busoni's solutions of pianistic problems and also reveals how these were related to his compositional process. If one had to sum up the characteristic features of Busoni's piano style, one would mention his orchestral, though not massive, approach to piano sound, his aim for clear textures and finely chiselled lines (even in contrapuntal episodes) and his highly individual method of distributing passages between the two hands, including much crossing over and interweaving in order to achieve a wider variety of sonorities and phrasings.

Notes: Chapter Three

1. Dent, E. J., Ferruccio Busoni, London, Eulenburg, 1974, Chapters 1-4. In particular, pages 36-41 give some details of his work with the noted pedagogue, Dr Wilhelm Mayer, in Graz
2. Dent, op.cit., Appendix 2
3. Ibid
4. Dent, op.cit., p.40
5. Dent, op.cit., pp.38-39, 60-61
6. Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music, New York, Dover, 1962, pp.86-88, 95-97, 99-100 and Dent, op.cit., pp.115-116
7. Ibid
8. Dent, op.cit., Chapters 4-6
9. Dent, op.cit., p.168
10. Dent, op.cit., pp.346-352
11. Busoni, Ferruccio, The Essence of Music, New York, Dover, 1965, pp.17-19, 51-53
12. Busoni, op.cit., pp.49-50
13. Stuckenschmidt, H. H., Ferruccio Busoni, London, Calder and Boyars, 1970, p.53
14. Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music, op.cit., pp.75-80, 100-101
15. Busoni, op.cit., pp.19-23
16. Busoni, op.cit., pp.28-29
17. Busoni, op.cit., p.20 and Dent, op.cit., p.192
18. Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music, op.cit., pp.84-86 and Busoni, op.cit., p.95
19. Dent, op.cit., p.148
20. Ibid
21. Dent, op.cit., pp.280-281
22. Busoni, op.cit., pp.96-128

23. Dent, op.cit., pp.115-116
24. Busoni, op.cit., pp.138-166
25. Dent, op.cit., Appendix 2
26. Dent, op.cit., pp.325-326
27. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., pp.203-213
28. Busoni, op.cit., p.49
29. Dent, op.cit., pp.183, 198-199 and Busoni, op.cit., pp.173-176
30. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., pp.87-88
31. Busoni, op.cit., pp.41-45
32. Ibid
33. Ibid
34. Busoni, op.cit., pp.22-23

## CHAPTER FOUR: BUSONI AT THE PIANO

Busoni gained much of his inspiration for piano composition from characteristics peculiar to that instrument. As is the case in the piano works of such composers as Debussy, Scriabin, Ravel and Bartok, pianistic figurations found in the piano music of Busoni often derive from the natural position of the hands on the keyboard. Such an attitude as this has an important effect on overall compositional structure. The orchestral scores of Stravinsky are often the direct result of keyboard-oriented sketches. The Rite of Spring is an excellent example of this. The approach of Busoni to instrumental layout and its subsequent effect on compositional style is similar to that of Stravinsky in this respect.

In view of the importance that Busoni placed on his own performances as a pianist and, to a lesser degree, as an orchestral conductor, an investigation into these performances may prove not only relevant, but also informative. Unlike most other pianist-composers from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, Busoni very rarely performed his own compositions publicly.<sup>1</sup> He seemed to be committed to the idea that his own compositional style was a natural and logical outgrowth of a whole tradition of music which had been slowly developing over many centuries. The debts to the past are usually clear in his works. If it is granted that the "classics" of his day strongly influenced his own music, then at least some importance must be attached to his attempts at coming to terms with past music through his own performances. The choice of repertoire is important, as is the way in which Busoni ordered his programmes so as to clarify stylistic evolutions and relationships in older music.

Then, of course, the actual interpretations of the music of other composers reveals the opinions that Busoni held. This, in turn, clarifies the struggles and strivings of Busoni the composer towards a piano style which he considered to be ideal and appropriate to his own times.

It should be noted from the outset of this part of the discussion, that throughout his life, Busoni expressed a certain reluctance to become too involved in his activities as a performer.<sup>2</sup>

He was particularly concerned that performing may have wasted energy which he felt he needed for the work most important to him - work on composition. Yet despite numerous threats to abandon his career as a performer - and a highly successful one at that - he was never able to resist a certain attraction he had for playing the piano. His involvement in the classic literature of the keyboard was very intense - whether in eager admiration or devastating criticism. There are important implications in this involvement. It shows, as do many other things, the conflict within Busoni regarding tradition and respect for the past on the one hand and experimentation and pioneering of future styles on the other. In one of his many outbursts against piano playing, he lamented that there was no future for piano composition in his opinion.<sup>3</sup> To some extent, it could be said that his prediction turned out to be correct as there has been a steady decline in the creation of significant piano works in the years since his death.

Very few performers of the time had such a reputation as did Busoni. Universally recognised as one of the great keyboard

performers of all time, his career was, nonetheless, rarely without controversy and criticism. In particular, he was often criticised for his severe, intellectual performance style. Nonetheless, it was precisely such an approach that was responsible for the almost hypnotic effect he was reputed to have had over his audiences. Certainly, the notion that a pianist should seek the acclaim of an audience through facile display and obvious gestures - both visual and aural - was abhorrent to Busoni and it is partly as a result of his strong reaction to the antics of Paderewski, Pachmann and the like that he developed such an austere performance aesthetic. However, the achievement of the ideals of such an aesthetic was not quick or easy. His pianistic career began in a conventional manner and gradually moved further and further away from convention as he grew older.

In view of the type of repertoire which featured in the programmes of the mature Busoni, it is interesting to note that he was performing preludes and fugues of J. S. Bach as well as the Concerto in C minor of Mozart at the age of nine.<sup>4</sup> This is hardly the usual repertoire of an infant performer. In fact, that type of music was almost never performed by anyone in the later part of the nineteenth century. On the whole, Busoni's repertoire was conventional at this time in that it consisted mainly of the standard virtuoso or salon pieces of the day. Busoni also followed the convention of performing some of his own compositions in his programmes. These programmes leaned heavily on Romantic music, although the appearance of Bach's Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue is a slightly unusual departure

from contemporary convention.<sup>5</sup>

By 1881, Beethoven had assumed a considerable importance in Busoni's repertoire. Numerous sonatas of Beethoven had already been performed by the young pianist at this stage, including the intellectually demanding Sonata, op.111. Although Busoni was always critical of several aspects of Beethoven's compositional style, he credited Beethoven with some of the most important innovations in the history of keyboard music, including the use of high, low and widely spaced positions and the novel treatment of the pedals. Busoni was particularly impressed with the transformation of the eighteenth-century Viennese Sonata of Haydn or Mozart into the Hammerklavier Sonata of Beethoven.<sup>6</sup> Busoni's personal contact with Brahms in Vienna increased the young pianist's interest in the music of the older composer.<sup>7</sup> Busoni's respect for the music of Brahms did not last throughout his lifetime, as was the case with the music of Beethoven. In Brahms, Busoni detected a composer unwilling to experiment with or change from a comfortable and established pattern of composing.

In the next few years, Busoni's piano repertoire gradually widened and already began to favour the composers who were to be considered the most important by him. In particular, his Beethoven and Liszt repertoire increased and he also made and performed the first of his now famous - sometimes infamous - transcriptions of organ works by J. S. Bach. A little later, he began work on his edition of the keyboard works of Bach - a highly individual but revealing interpretation of the music of another of his "important" composers.

Around 1893-4, Busoni began to become extremely disillusioned with the life of a virtuoso pianist.<sup>8</sup> His long tours of the United States of America, with their many hours of travelling on top of the very frequent performances, certainly did much to contribute to this state of mind. He was also very annoyed that he was admired exclusively as a virtuoso pianist by most people when he himself felt this part of his activities to be considerably inferior to his work as a composer and theoretician.

In trying to define what constitutes the personal, mature performance style of Busoni, the most important consideration would be that of monumentality. Busoni approached everything he performed from the point of view of grand architecture. His choice of repertoire leaned towards music suitable for this purpose. Among his renowned interpretations were Beethoven's Hammerklavier Sonata and Liszt's Sonata in B minor. However, his penchant for a massive and intellectual style led to bitter criticisms of him when he applied such an aesthetic to miniatures such as Chopin's Preludes, op.28. This interpretation of Chopin would have come as a totally incomprehensible shock to those who saw the music merely as salon miniatures. Busoni believed that the overall architecture was the primary concern of the interpreter and that only after this was understood and decided could there be a careful filling of finer detail. For all of the carefully calculated logic of Busoni's overall designs as a performer, individual phrases are always beautifully chiselled while his control of a large variety of pianistic colours is exceptional, deriving from organ and orchestral textures. Busoni's attempt to make his performances as logical as possible

often resulted in what appeared to his contemporaries as distortions of the music - rubato, thickening of the texture and angular shaping of phrases.

Busoni also had a liking for overcoming great technical hurdles and transforming them into inspired music. This explains his numerous performances of complete cycles of studies such as the Liszt Transcendental Studies and the Chopin Studies, op.10 and Studies, op.25. He was also fond of performing monumental cycles of programmes. He once played six Mozart piano concertos in two concerts. On another occasion, he gave six recitals devoted to the music of Liszt which featured a total of forty-six works.

The link between technique and musicianship in piano playing was stronger in Busoni than in many of his contemporaries. While many teachers then, and still now, approach technique as a separate study to which musicianship is added or superimposed, Busoni maintained that any physical effort or technical device directly mirrors the interpretation or aesthetic characteristic of the music. Busoni insisted on absolute unity of technique and intellect, of the physical and mental, in the preparation of an interpretation.<sup>9</sup> He also believed that technique was not just a matter for the fingers and wrists but that the brain had an important function in organising physical movements and judging distances. He ridiculed pianists who believed that persistent practice alone could solve technical problems when it was clear that the mind would do so more efficiently.<sup>10</sup>

On the interpretative side, Busoni felt that performing well-known masterpieces involved an almost total "re-creation" of the music in his own terms. Music of the past was meaningless to him unless he could adapt it to an aesthetic consistent with his own times and contemporary experience. This explains his "modernisations" of the music of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Chopin. He defended his sometimes notorious Bach transcriptions by saying that all performances of music were, in a sense, "transcriptions" of the originals.<sup>11</sup>

After 1893, Busoni began to think of Liszt much more seriously as a composer than he had done up until then. Although he continued to perform the more popular Liszt works such as opera fantasies, Hungarian Rhapsodies and studies, he also began to include lesser known and more significant compositions in his repertoire. Among these were the Fantasy and Fugue on B.A.C.H., Two Legends and Weinen Klagen Variations.<sup>12</sup>

These peices reveal a more complex and less superficial side of Liszt and, along with numerous other works of this nature, were to be persuasively and almost single-handedly championed by Busoni. In Liszt's music for piano, Busoni admired the orchestral palette achieved through the use of the pedals and the extremes of the keyboard. The aforementioned Two Legends are an extremely good example of this, the first concentrating of the high register of the keyboard while the second concentrates on the lower register. It is known that Busoni preferred to use an abnormally wide stool for sitting at the piano.<sup>13</sup> This enabled him to shift from one extreme of the keyboard to the other at will,

which he claimed made control of playing in the appropriate register much greater. One can imagine how well his theory may have been applied to the Two Legends.

It has been remarked that Busoni's interpretations of the music of Liszt were outstanding for their lack of cheap display. While many of Busoni's contemporaries were making a virtue of the numerous difficult passages to be found in the piano works of Liszt, Busoni would make the same passages sound remarkably easy and uncomplicated. Under Busoni's hands, the myriad scale and arpeggio figurations became a background for what was considered by Busoni to be the most important aspect of Liszt's music - the melody.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in the performance of concertos with orchestra, Busoni seemed to adopt more of a "chamber music" role. Complex virtuoso passages were deliberately subordinated to structurally more important material in the orchestra. In this, Busoni the pianist was very different to his contemporaries.<sup>15</sup> One can imagine such a role being adopted by him in the performance of his massive Piano Concerto, which he probably regarded more as a symphony which included a piano solo "commentary", more of an obbligato than a virtuoso solo part. The fact that the solo part of the Piano Concerto is often extremely difficult to play and is full of numerous technically complex figurations for the pianist to unravel shows just how much control Busoni must have had as a performer, bearing in mind his chamber music attitude to concerto playing.

Around 1909-10, Busoni became acquainted with the first atonal compositions of Schoenberg.<sup>16</sup> He was particularly fascinated

with Schoenberg's Three Pieces, op.11 for piano. Busoni published a curious "concerto-like interpretation" - Busoni's description - of the second of the three pieces. This transcription, never actually performed publicly by Busoni, seems to be, on the one hand, an attempt to come to terms with a new harmonic language which he admired to some extent and, on the other hand, a tacit admission that he felt there were deficiencies in Schoenberg's piano style. While the harmonic discoveries in the original prompt Busoni to make certain octave doublings and displacements in order to clarify the new language to a listener with nineteenth-century ears, there are also changes to the texture which are the result of Busoni's feeling that music written for any instrument should suit that instrument and not be written for it purely as a matter of convenience. Dynamic and expressive indications in the original are simplified in Busoni's transcription. Busoni, unlike Schoenberg, is thinking of effectively and practically communicating ideas to the pianist who will actually perform the music. Bearing in mind Busoni's vast experience as a performer - and also Schoenberg's lack of it (perhaps even disdain for it) - this should not surprise.

Busoni's transcription of Schoenberg highlights a major characteristic of Busoni's approach to keyboard performance. Busoni believed that both technical and interpretative problems could be solved by adapting the music to be performed to the performer's own technique and personality.<sup>17</sup> It is for this reason that Busoni refused to see anything sacred or unalterable in the printed scores of other composers. This explains the large amount of time he was prepared to spend on arrangements and

transcriptions of the music of other composers. On top of all this, it could be said that many of Busoni's performances of other composers' works have become so influenced by his own personality that they are virtually transcriptions themselves. There is almost no real dividing line between an interpretation and a transcription.<sup>18</sup>

As remarked earlier, Busoni rarely performed his own compositions publicly. In this, he differed from other famous pianist-composers of the times, such as Debussy, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Bartok and Prokofieff. It seems as if Busoni considered his recitals as "historical", wishing to present and compare various masterworks from the past. He had made firm decisions about past music - which of it he preferred and which of it he considered relevant to his own times. However, it seems that he considered the music written by composers of his own time - himself included - experimental, and therefore, untried, as it were. Despite the fact that he sympathised with much of this music and always preferred to look towards the future rather than rely on old, outdated formulae for compositional style, he was not prepared to make room for such music in his piano recitals. Considering the opinions he so strongly expressed in his theoretical writings, particularly in his Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music, this seems very puzzling indeed. One can only assume that he felt that contemporary music was, for him, an incomplete experiment and that this must have contradicted his desire to be totally convinced about the superior quality of the music in his recitals. Nonetheless, most of his important compositions for piano received at least one performance from him - usually the premiere

performance.<sup>19</sup> The Piano Concerto was performed by him on numerous occasions<sup>20</sup> (he sometimes conducted it for other pianists).<sup>21</sup>

By the time Busoni had reached maturity and stability as a performing pianist, which is to say roughly after 1895, he had clearly made up his mind who were the composers that meant most to him. He even went so far as to decide which actual pieces by these composers were the most important to him. He remained fairly consistent on these matters up to the end of his life, with the possible exception that he became more critical of many of the items in his repertoire and found performing them more of a chore as he grew older.<sup>22</sup>

From his own statements, it can be ascertained that the composers most important to Busoni as a pianist were Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt.<sup>23</sup> This is also clear from Busoni's programmes.<sup>24</sup> Other composers appear consistently over short periods at various stages of his career. These include Alkan, Franck, Schumann and Weber.<sup>25</sup> Busoni's attitude to the performance of his own works by himself has already been discussed. The many virtuoso display pieces and salon-oriented pieces which he frequently performed in his early years completely disappeared from his repertoire in later life. He did, however, retain numerous opera paraphrases and other transcriptions, especially those by Liszt, in his repertoire, maintaining that their true quality transcended their original purpose. His recordings of such music reveal with just how serious an intent he performed these pieces.

Busoni seemed to consider Bach's works for keyboard as the beginning of a tradition in European music. This is not surprising when one considers the nineteenth century's view of music history. The music of Bach was only just being discovered during Busoni's formative years. Very little was known of music before the time of Bach and it is therefore not surprising that Busoni's historical perspective did not allow him to consider such composers as Frescobaldi, Rameau or Scarlatti as important contributors to the keyboard, despite the fact that he was acquainted with some of the works of these early keyboard composers.<sup>26</sup> The one work of Bach that did most to establish his name in the nineteenth century was the keyboard collection of preludes and fugues known as The Well-Tempered Clavier. Busoni was performing excerpts from this collection at a very early age.<sup>27</sup> His enthusiasm for The Well-Tempered Clavier grew in later years. This is seen particularly in his edition of this collection which he made for the publishers, Breitkopf and Hartel approximately between 1894 and 1915.

Busoni greatly admired the contrapuntal skill of Bach. This not only influenced Busoni's own compositions but also his performance style. His unique ability to articulate and define separate lines in a contrapuntal texture while still making the music flow naturally and freely surely owes a great deal to his frequent performances of the music of Bach. However, these performances, and his ideas about Bach, must appear somewhat dated today in view of advanced scholarship, particularly that on the subject of Baroque music as a whole and of the authentic performance practices of that era. Unlike the majority

of his contemporaries, Busoni was aware of the possibility of authentic performance practices for this music. He deliberately rejected this in order to suit the music to his own personal aesthetic, a process which he considered fundamental to his own performance style and which he applied not just to the music of Bach, but to all of the music which he played.<sup>28</sup>

This explains the numerous Bach transcriptions made - and frequently performed - by him. Sometimes, it is difficult to clearly differentiate between a transcription of a work of Bach by Busoni and an original composition based on Bach by Busoni. Two good examples of this are the Fantasia after J. S. Bach and the Fantasia Contrappuntistica. The most unauthentic and unstylistic aspects of Busoni's Bach performances are their monumentality, grand architectural designs and intellectual severity. Yet, these are the strengths of the performances. They can be appreciated much more if one takes into account Busoni's ideal of transforming the music of others to suit himself and ignores the advances of modern scholarship. One could go so far as to say that the performances are not of music by Bach, but are - as frequently designated in concert programmes - by "Bach-Busoni".

Towards the end of his career, Busoni devoted a considerable amount of time to the performance of piano concertos by Mozart. The clear textures and economy of statement of Mozart's music - in reality, of eighteenth-century music, although Busoni only really appreciated that of Mozart - were most influential in the formulation of Busoni's concept of "Young Classicism". The Mozart piano concertos were somewhat of a "discovery" in

the early years of this century after being neglected throughout the Romantic era. Busoni was one of the first pianists to perform regularly the concertos of Mozart this century. Unfortunately, there are no surviving early acoustic or piano-roll recordings of Mozart by Busoni and it is therefore difficult to state categorically how these performances must have sounded. However, the fact that Busoni contemplated making his own edition of the concertos in association with Egon Petri in 1923<sup>29</sup> suggests that he would have transcribed the solo part to suit his own style much in the manner of his Bach transcriptions. Indeed, Busoni suggested printing the music on three pairs of staves - Petri's reduction of the orchestra, Mozart's original piano solo and Busoni's transcription of the original solo line.<sup>30</sup> The cadenzas which Busoni wrote for many of the concertos he performed were all published by Breitkopf and Hartel and reveal something of his approach to Mozart. Rather than being in the compositional style of Mozart and the eighteenth century, the cadenzas are in the advanced personal compositional style of Busoni himself, with his peculiar harmonic twists and brittle, contrapuntal textures.

Beethoven's piano works featured prominently in Busoni's recitals early in his mature career. Apart from the fact that Busoni recognised the true worth of Beethoven as an innovator in pianistic layout as well as in extending the formal outlines established in the second half of the eighteenth century, it could be said that Busoni performed so much Beethoven in these years because he had decided that he should be a "German" musician. His childhood and teenage years were spent in the relative obscurity

of provincial Italian and Austrian towns. On confronting the strongly established German musical tradition of Leipzig late last century, he seemed overwhelmed and decided that it would be the aesthetic path which he would follow. Later in life, he became increasingly cynical about German music but nevertheless held it in high regard. It is notable that for most of his mature career, his base was always Berlin.

As is the case with his Mozart performances, there are no recordings of Busoni playing a substantial work by Beethoven. He is reputed to have made a piano-roll recording of the Sonata, op.111 but it has not yet been discovered. This means that one must guess how his Beethoven sounded from contemporary accounts of his performances in concert. It appears that the Sonata, op.110, Sonata, op.111 and Hammerklavier Sonata were the pieces favoured by him. He apparently played these pieces with such startling freedom that unsuspecting listeners who were accustomed to conventional interpretations were bewildered or outraged by his unusual style. He was especially free in his treatment of rhythm and of dynamics.<sup>31</sup> He probably would have played the numerous contrapuntal episodes of these late sonatas with a dry clarity of both texture and phrasing. One can guess this from hearing him perform music by other composers. His sense of architecture and logic in the notorious fugue from the Hammerklavier Sonata is evident from the written analysis he made of it (which he included as an appendix to his edition of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier). Busoni was not as fond of Beethoven's "middle period" as he was of the late works. He found the works of this period lacking in subtlety. Nevertheless,

he referred to the Pathetique Sonata as "an almost revolutionary sonata in its own day" which "ought to sound revolutionary". He went on to say that "one could never put enough passion" into the Appassionata Sonata.<sup>32</sup> In the case of Busoni, "revolution" and "passion" were probably translated into even greater distortion of the original.

It seems that anything played by Busoni was considered controversial. His interpretations of Bach and Beethoven certainly infuriated many of his contemporaries but it was his rendering of the music of Chopin that created the most difficulties for his audiences and critics. In Busoni's times, the worth of a pianist was often measured by his or her interpretations of Chopin. Pianists were compared on the basis of their playing of Chopin. The late nineteenth century regarded Chopin as a composer of elegant, refined and restrained music with something of a drawing room atmosphere. The feeling of the music was considered intimate and the form miniaturistic. Against such a background, Busoni's Chopin must have sounded very strange. He refused to allow sentimentality to enter into his Chopin interpretations, preferring to play the music with severity, iron logic and grand architectural design.<sup>33</sup> This approach seems to be at odds with what is known of Chopin's own performances style.

Busoni was very selective when it came to performing music of Chopin. Miniatures such as the numerous waltzes and mazurkas did not interest Busoni at all. He was more tolerant of the ballades and studies but considered the Preludes, op.28 as Chopin's finest achievement.<sup>34</sup> He usually performed this collection of

aphoristic miniatures as a large-scale cycle, thus eliminating any feelings of intimacy an audience may have had during its performance. He regarded the Preludes as prophetic of the future, sometimes stretching chromaticism to its limits within Chopin's tonal language, sometimes compressing ideas into very brief periods of time. Busoni's interpretation of the Preludes took up all of the prophetic elements suggested in Chopin's score and fully realised them in his own advanced pianistic style. The result was far from the relatively facile and shallow readings of Chopin's music offered by famed contemporaries such as Paderewski.<sup>35</sup>

Music of Liszt appeared on Busoni's concert programmes early in his career. However, it was not until around 1890 that Busoni had been converted to take a serious interest in Liszt - by Martin Wegelius, in Finland, of all places!<sup>36</sup> Busoni did not become such an enthusiastic champion of Liszt because of the virtuosity of the latter. As a musician who worked within the rather intense network of German musical activity - an Italian musician, at that - he sensed a certain arrogance and self-satisfaction in the system and felt that there were surely other styles of expression in music which could be valid and convincing. He saw the Latin temperament as a perfect foil to German Romanticism but found very little music which he considered to be of sufficiently high quality in Italy during the nineteenth century. He admired earlier Italian composers such as Cherubini, Rossini and even Bellini. He could sense a fresh voice in the music of Italian composers in the early years of this century. However, he could find no link between the two eras and claimed that Liszt truly fulfilled this role in music history.<sup>37</sup>

Numerous recordings by Busoni of Liszt's music are in existence today, although it is regrettable that these do not include the Sonata in B minor, Two Legends, Weinen Klagen Variations or any pieces from the three collections known as Years of Pilgrimage. These were among the staples of his repertoire and recordings of them would surely have revealed the serious intent of his Liszt interpretations. These qualities can be heard even in his recordings of the comparatively trivial Liszt pieces such as the Polonaise in E major and La Campanella.

The importance of Busoni's interpretations of Liszt to the musical activities of this century cannot be overestimated. Around the turn of the century, it was rare to find pianists who performed music of Liszt venturing beyond popular display pieces such as the Hungarian Rhapsodies and the Liebestraum. Busoni was one of very few pianists to perform the more substantial works such as the Sonata in B minor and the Two Legends regularly. He even performed some later works such as the Trauer-Gondel and Weihnachtsbaum - music which is still little known today.<sup>38</sup>

There is no doubt that the few early acoustic and piano-roll recordings of Busoni's performances which have survived cannot be considered as truly representative of his style. Although it is fortunate that large-scale works such as his own transcriptions of Bach's Chaconne for unaccompanied violin and the Liszt Don Giovanni Fantasy are among the extant piano rolls by Busoni, it should be noted that most of the performances which are available are of short pieces. Busoni did not feel as comfortable

playing short pieces as he did playing the more monumental works of the piano repertoire. For this reason, many important characteristics of his style will not be heard in his recordings. One would really need to hear a Busoni recording of Beethoven's Hammerklavier Sonata or of Liszt's Sonata in B minor in order to gain a better perspective of his style. It should also be mentioned a propos of these - and indeed all - early recordings from the first few decades of this century that the artists who made them probably did not take them as seriously as a performer would take his or her own recordings today. The notion that one's own performances could be preserved for all time was new then and it seems that the performers of those times did not readily adjust to this, preferring the freedom and spontaneity - however outrageous these may have been - of their own efforts in the concert hall. In any case, recording was still an experimental art. Many performers would have gone into the recording studio with the attitude that making recordings was just a joke or an amusing pastime. Finally, in attempting any judgement of the performers of this era on the basis of their recordings, one should not neglect to take into consideration the very primitive methods used to make the recordings and the resultant lack of clarity - especially for modern listeners who are accustomed to the latest technology in sound reproduction.

The nineteenth-century roots of Busoni's performance of Bach's Prelude and Fugue in C major, Well-Tempered Clavier, Book One are very evident in his acoustic recording of it. There is generous use of the pedal in both prelude and fugue, not to mention a liberal approach to rhythm. Busoni's phrasing in

both the prelude and the fugue follows the internal subdivisions in Bach's architecture. In the prelude, such phrases are suggested by a slight colouristic swell with the aid of the pedal followed by a diminuendo to a more dry texture. The famous bass progression from F-sharp to A-flat in the middle of the prelude is highlighted by Busoni's abrupt break between the two harmonies. Meanwhile, in the fugue, Busoni makes all of the contrapuntal lines very clear despite what many would have considered to be an overuse of the pedal. The internal structure of the fugue is underlined by some almost bizarre ritardandos at cadence points. The overall mood of both the prelude and the fugue is one of serenity and simplicity. Both begin and end softly and there is throughout both a total abstinence from dramatic emotional gestures.

In his piano transcription of Bach's organ chorale prelude Nun Freut Euch, Busoni transforms the stately original into a rather ingenious exercise in virtuosity. The transcription is very pianistic and is played that way by Busoni in another acoustic recording. The continuous semiquavers of the top voice are played in a hectic, scurrying fashion seemingly at odds with Bach's original conception. The staccato bass contributes to the nervous excitement of the performance. Amidst all this, Busoni manages to play the actual chorale melody clearly and in a dignified manner - a tribute to his enormous control at the keyboard.

Busoni's piano-roll recording of his own transcription of Bach's Chaconne for violin is one of the very few "monumental" pieces recorded by him which is currently available. This performance

reveals Busoni at his most severe in terms of the utmost intellectual control and logic. His approach to sound in this piece resembles that of an organist manipulating stops in order to gain the finely chiselled colours of the various organ registrations. The three major climaxes in the piece are very carefully calculated and when the peaks of loudness are achieved, there is never any harshness in the tone. It is fascinating to note that despite the very thick, almost Brahmsian texture of the transcription, Busoni makes all of the counterpoint extremely clear to an extent unrivalled by any of his contemporaries. Myriad inner voices are articulated with apparent ease and conviction amidst what for most pianists would be a confusing barrage of chordal progressions.

It seems unusual that Busoni should have made an acoustic recording of his own arrangement of Beethoven's Ecossaises, for this trifle was but a favourite encore piece for his early recitals. The performance is interesting for its very flexible rhythms and unexpected dynamic accents.

Busoni made a piano-roll recording of the complete Twenty-four Preludes, op.28 of Chopin. This recording is best appreciated if listened to in its entirety, despite the fact that separate preludes were often issued to contemporary purchasers of rolls. It seems as if Busoni thought of the famous Raindrop Prelude as the middle peak of the cycle and the Prelude No.24 as the climax of the set towards which he had been aiming throughout his performance. In these terms, the whole cycle does come across as a massive conception, similar to his Beethoven or

Liszt interpretations, although this is probably not what was intended by Chopin at all and certainly not what was expected by contemporary audiences. Just as Busoni went contrary to the then prevailing tradition of not using the pedal in the music of Bach, he used it very sparingly in the Preludes.

The resultant brittle texture (together with his own very angular phrasing) shocked - and continues to shock - many listeners.

Busoni's idiosyncratic method of playing rapid figurations in a crushed, brusque fashion rather than in an even rhythm is particularly evident in the C major, D major, F-sharp minor, G minor and D minor preludes. The massive octave and chordal doublings in the Raindrop Prelude are totally foreign to Chopin's style and terrifyingly fill the then modern grand piano.

Busoni made other recordings of Chopin's music, though none are of the same importance as his roll of the Preludes. His performances of the Etude, op.10 no.5 and Etude, op.25 no.5 reveal his great technical control as well as some eccentricities. The Nocturne, op.15 no.2 is played with some discomfort. The severity and intellectual approach typical of Busoni's style do not seem to suit Chopin's dream vision. Similarly, the Ballade in G minor is not played with the usual tenderness and lyricism associated with it. The grandeur of the popular Polonaise, op.53 is perhaps more suited to Busoni, although his approach, with his tendency to thicken the original texture by making numerous octave and chord doublings, is probably much more massive than was originally intended by Chopin.

Busoni's most convincing recordings are those he made of original compositions or transcriptions by Liszt. This is true regardless of whether the recordings are acoustic ones or piano rolls.

The Polonaise in E major is played with great dignity and at an unusually moderate tempo. Busoni seems determined not to cheapen or vulgarise the music of Liszt and, indeed, the Polonaise sounds very convincing under his fingers. His control over subtle differentiations of sonority in this piece is always evident while the brilliance, rapidity and evenness of his scalic runs are unequalled by any other pianist. His roll performance of Feux Follets reveals exactly the same qualities.

However, it is his performances of various transcriptions of other composers' music by Liszt which show to what extent he was prepared to champion his idol. The opera fantasies - such as those on Mozart's Don Giovanni, Bellini's Norma and Verdi's Rigoletto, are treated symphonically, both in terms of orchestral-style colouring at the keyboard as well as in logical structural organisation. Busoni's feeling for the bel canto style of melody is clearly in evidence here. All of the rich and complex pianistic decoration of these fantasies is executed with the greatest of ease and is completely subordinated to the melody.

There are similarly fine piano-roll recordings of the rarely performed Fantasy on Beethoven's The Ruins of Athens and Valse a Capriccio sur Deux Motifs de Lucia et Parisina based on operas of Donizetti.

Notes: Chapter Four

1. Dent, E. J. Ferruccio Busoni, London, Eulenburg, 1974, pp.317-331
2. Stuckenschmidt, H. H. Ferruccio Busoni, London, Calder and Boyars, 1970, p.67
3. Ibid
4. Dent, op.cit., pp.317-331
5. Ibid
6. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., p.69
7. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., p.70
8. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., p.73
9. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., pp.77-78
10. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., pp.78-81
11. Dent, op.cit., pp.110-111
12. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., pp.83-84
13. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., p.85
14. Dent, op.cit., p.146
15. Dent, op.cit., pp.143-147
16. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., p.87
17. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., p.91
18. Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music, New York, Dover, 1962, pp.84-86
19. Dent, op.cit., pp.317-331
20. Dent, op.cit., pp.217, 255
21. Dent, op.cit., p.190
22. Dent, op.cit., pp.271-272
23. Ibid
24. Dent, op.cit., pp.317-331

25. Ibid
26. Ibid
27. Ibid
28. Dent, op.cit., p.259
29. Dent, op.cit., p.276
30. Ibid
31. Dent, op.cit., pp.260-261
32. Dent, op.cit., pp.110-111
33. Dent, op.cit., p.260
34. Ibid
35. Ibid
36. Dent, op.cit., p.85
37. Dent, op.cit., pp.150-151
38. Dent, op.cit., pp.168-169

## CHAPTER FIVE: DETAILED COMMENTARY UPON SELECTED PIANO WORKS

Throughout the discussion that follows, reference will be made to the numbering of bars, systems and pages as found in the Breitkopf and Hartel editions of the Berceuse, Sonatina Seconda and Christmas Sonatina and in the Universal edition of the Toccata. It is understood that, for example, "4/3/2" signifies "page four, third system, second bar" of the relevant piece.

Berceuse

The Berceuse is the work for solo piano on which the later Berceuse Elegiaque for orchestra was based. Comparing the two versions, it is remarkable to note that although both inhabit the same mood, they appear as two quite different pieces. In the orchestral version, the distinctive timbres of the various instruments inspire Busoni to write extended melodic lines and harmonic sequences which are not found in the piano version. Busoni was careful to write idiomatically for whichever instruments he used and did not believe that a piece of music could be transcribed from one medium to another without a fundamental alteration to the original musical idea.<sup>1</sup> Thus, a lush extended melody on muted violins with delicate accompaniment figures from the lower strings and subtle rhythmic punctuation from winds, brass and harp appears strikingly - at 49/2/2 in the piano version - as a series of chords alternating between the hands with both pedals held continuously. The left pedal provides a muted effect while the right pedal blurs the chords into each other to create polytonality. Needless to say, this effect is peculiar to the piano - just as the corresponding orchestral passage is peculiarly suited to the instruments used there. The Berceuse reveals a highly individual synthesis of styles and ideas. Hazy impressionistic effects are combined with clear melodic lines and a careful, deliberate rhythmic impulse. The passionate and tragic implications of the piece are well concealed beneath a surface of cool restraint - a characteristic of much post-Romantic music.

The piano version begins with three introductory bars which establish F as a tonal centre. It is interesting to note that the corresponding bars in the orchestral version - consisting of complicated syncopations by various instruments on the note F - appear as a simple ascending and descending pattern of eight quavers in the piano version. Busoni asks the pianist to hold down both pedals in imitation of the orchestra. However, the effect is ultimately a purely pianistic one. The main theme of the Berceuse appears at 48/2/1. It is a flowing, understated melody which rises gently and then subsides imperceptibly within the space of only sixteen bars. An F major triad is outlined at the outset. However, any sense of an F major tonality is quickly eroded by the prominence of notes foreign to the expected harmony such as A-flat and E-flat. This happens despite a long, sustained pedal point on F. At 49/2/2, the already cited polytonal passage makes its appearance. It is intriguing from a pianistic and colouristic point of view. However, it is not as difficult to explain harmonically as one would first think. There is a pedal point on C throughout this passage, which - like the first statement of the main theme - is sixteen bars long. A dominant pedal point is implied here after the tonic pedal point of the opening. On closer examination, the harmonic basis of the polytonal sequences are surprisingly simple and diatonic. Groups of tonic, dominant, subdominant and tonic triads follow each other. The "interrupting" harmonies - those which cause the polytonality - are chosen not only for their colouristic effect (in this, Busoni anticipates Debussy's exploration of similar devices in the latter's Preludes, Book Two by some years) but also as a kind of organum

to the basic harmonies, moving as they do, in parallel motion to the "correct" tonal progressions. It therefore seems logical that the following pairs of triads should be used as the general harmonic sequence of this passage - F major/A-flat minor, C major/E-flat minor, B-flat major/F-sharp minor and F major/E-flat major. To go even further, it is tempting to regard the spelling of the A-flat minor chord as "incorrect" and think of it as a G-sharp minor chord instead, in which case the G-sharp and B could be considered as appoggiaturas to the A and C of the basic F major chord. The remaining sets of chords could be interpreted in a similar fashion. At 50/1/3, a harmonically more complex version of the main theme is presented. Now, the pedal point has shifted to E and is placed rather peculiarly in a middle voice. The bass line begins and ends with F but after a striking shift to A at 50/2/2, it descends chromatically to the inevitable tonal centre. This gradual chromatic descent is supported by the melody, which is now presented chordally in the treble. The resulting parallel chromatic gliding of chords is a distinguishing feature of Busoni's individual compositional style. Such a device is to be found frequently in his mature works.

At 51/1/3, there begins what could be considered the second half of the piece. A concluding fragment of the main theme is now taken and expanded in its own right. Phrases become shorter while the mood of the music becomes somewhat restless. Again, Busoni uses the device of parallel chromatic chord progression. This is matched by an appropriate style of melodic construction. At 52/2/1, the music comes to rest on the familiar

F pedal point. Nevertheless, a feeling of doubt continues to the end. At 52/2/3, the melody seems to come to its conclusion on a serene A, only to descend to A flat in order to rightfully complete the melodic pattern that had been set from the beginning (the economy of Busoni's thematic material is extraordinary, the cell used here being of three notes only and comprising a rising tone and a falling semitone). There follows a lugubrious coda which continues to use subtle and ambiguous semitonal shifts before finally coming to rest not on a chord of F (as might have been expected) but on a cadence of G to C in the bass. The major melodic germ of the main theme quietly disintegrates into various syncopated diatonic discords in the bass register of the piano. Busoni was always keen to end his works with unusual cadences (as will be seen in his later compositions).

The overall structure of the Berceuse is simple and most convincing. The two halves of the piece complement each other well without providing too sudden or dramatic a contrast. This was important to Busoni in his search for a style of composition which contained no traces of Romanticism. Quite apart from this, Busoni's individuality becomes evident if one tries to pinpoint the influences on the composer in this piece. A discerning listener could not possibly ascribe the Berceuse to, say, Debussy, whose music is more spontaneously created than is this austere, deliberately proportioned lullaby. Busoni set out to find his own personal style in this piece. Writing in a style which could not be mistaken for that of any other composer, it is evident that he succeeded.

Sonatina Seconda

Of all Busoni's works for piano solo, the Sonatina Seconda would probably be the most difficult for the pianist to perform. There are many reasons for this. It contains many technically difficult passages. However, the greatest problem for the performer in this respect comes about because of the way in which Busoni presents such passages for very brief periods only to discard them for passages with altogether different technical difficulties. Similarly, the music progresses in brief, laconic gestures - all seemingly very different one to another. The performer can never "settle in" to this piece as is often the case in the expansive works of the Romantic piano literature. It is difficult to project a sense of logic to an audience in this restless piece. The icy tranquillity of the Berceuse is often interrupted here by violent incisions and wild surges. This was Busoni's "experimental" piece - something of a reaction to the first atonal and structurally anarchic compositions of Schoenberg - and yet Busoni could not allow himself to abandon his beloved ideals of architectural and formal beauty even in a piece such as this. On close examination, this wild, seemingly improvised composition shows remarkable tightness and refinement of construction.

Busoni's direction at the beginning of the Sonatina Seconda is worth quoting, for it gives a very vivid idea of how he expected the piano piece to be performed - "Il tutto vivace, fantastico, con energia, capriccio e sentimento". There are two main sections - a predominantly fast one followed by a predominantly slow one.

These sections consist of many short gestures which give the outward impression of following each other arbitrarily. the first two notes of the opening - a recitative-like passage which begins in the dark low register of the piano and rises with little apparent effort to middle C - contain the germ of much that is to follow. The C is also important as Busoni returns to this note often, lending a feeling of tonal stability to a work which is harmonically very radical. The accompaniment figure at 3/2/1 (which has C as bass) uses intervals reminiscent of Scriabin's late works - tritones, perfect fourths and a major third on top. Busoni's indication "ondeggiando" ("undulating") is one of many descriptive and unusual Italian directions to be found in the piece. The opening idea is briefly developed above the accompaniment figure but is quickly submerged by the latter in a flourish which extends over the whole range of the keyboard before landing firmly on a double-octave C at 4/2/3. The short march-like theme which appears here is derived from intervals of the earlier accompaniment figure. After a brief introductory flourish, the march rhythms settle. A variant of 4/2/3 is presented at 5/1/1 and considerably developed thereafter - although still within a short space of time. The interval of a seventh predominates. The melodic cell from the very opening of the piece - a major second - now virtually opens its jaw to expand into a seventh. Even the remarkable accompaniment figure of rising major seconds could be seen as a derivative of the major second opening. At 6/1/1, the march theme returns as a chorale with thick bass chords featuring the minor ninth. This theme makes an interesting appearance many years later in Busoni's opera, Doctor Faust. Yet another variation of the

march theme follows - this time with a tremolo accompaniment. 7/1/1 is an example of how Busoni uses the tail of an idea as the starting point of a fresh idea, thus creating the effect of interweaving of ideas and, therefore, stronger structural unity. The pale rising and falling motif grows naturally - and surprisingly - out of 6/4/2 (itself another variant of the march theme). The familiar accompaniment passage from the opening page has returned to give a sense of urgency, expectation and finally, impatience, as a wild cadenza in major seconds - centered on C, be it noted - plunges into a fiercely rhythmic passage (8/3/1) in chords and octaves featuring numerous dissonant minor seconds and ninths. Various snatches of previous <sup>material</sup> material are now heard in a totally different rhythmic context. Although this passage is tonally very unstable, the chromatic ostinato bass always returns to E flat at the beginning of each bar until the very end of the first section where the excitement comes to a very abrupt halt. True to Busoni's penchant for unusual cadences, the bass progression here descends from D-sharp to G. There follows a pause which divides the first and second sections of the piece.

The second section of the Sonatina Seconda begins at 9/3/1 with a startling use of triadic harmonies - startling because there has not been the slightest suggestion of such harmonies in the piece up to this point. This is not to suggest that the harmonies used here are in any way conventional. They form a new chorale-like theme which is constructed entirely from parallel second inversion triads moving chromatically. Parallel chromatic movement of chords has already been noted as a characteristic of Busoni

in the Berceuse. Another feature of Busoni's style emerges in the second half of this work - a strong feeling for contrapuntal writing. The triadic chorale-like theme just mentioned appears as a canon in inversion. This is followed at 9/3/5 by a second theme presented in a more strict linear canon. In sharp contrast to the preceding triadic theme, the harmonic language here is highly chromatic, definitely atonal and well on the way to Schoenberg's ideal of dodecaphony. At 9/4/2, the main body of the second section begins. The material which has just been presented is freely developed - usually in a contrapuntal manner around various accompaniment figures. A third theme makes its initial appearance at 10/2/2. Many diverse and intricate combinations of themes are tried, one of the most adventurous being at 10/3/2, where all three themes appear together in an elaborate weaving around the well established accompaniment figure. The seemingly new figure in the treble at 11/1/1 is, in fact, derived from the two descending semitones of the canonic theme at 9/3/5. More elaborate counterpoint follows while the momentum of the music increases with wide ranging arpeggios in the left hand. Seemingly out of nowhere, the theme from the very opening of the sonatina creeps in from the bass (12/2/2) and it appears that the main thematic material of the second section has been developed and fragmented to the point of exhaustion. The polytonal arpeggios that follow (12/4/1) give an impression of disintegration. The combinations of chords are aurally fascinating - F-sharp major/A minor followed by F major/A-flat minor (parallel chromatic movement once again). The accompaniment figure from 9/4/2 emerges out of this plethora of notes with the greatest subtlety and ease in order to support the dying embers of the main thematic

material of the second section - which is now presented in inversion at all times (13/2/1). At 14/1/1, there is a return to the mood of 9/3/1. The chorale is now presented as a single line in the "tenor" with the easily recognisable triads forming an interlocking and canonic chain that serves as an accompaniment. To complete the most ingenious symmetry of the second section, the canon at 14/3/2 is an inversion of the canon at 9/3/5. The last page of the sonatina is something of a grumpy postscript to all that has preceded it. The music slowly descends as the march theme from the first section of the piece is transformed into a chilly mezzo piano. The final cadence is an afterthought which sounds as if it was almost suppressed (Busoni's marking here is "estinto"), yet it is of great importance as it moves from B to C, quietly establishing C as an unobtrusive tonal centre.

Mention has already been made of the fact that there are many technical difficulties which a pianist must overcome before performing the Sonatina Seconda. This came about not so much as a deliberate attempt on the part of Busoni to write something of transcendental difficulty (as was the case with Ravel in Gaspard de la Nuit) but more as a side effect of Busoni's striving towards a novel harmonic and contrapuntal language. The desire to build chords on fourths rather than thirds results in more awkward stretches for the hands when playing arpeggios (for example, at 4/2/1). The chromaticism of the sonatina often requires the pianist to contract the hand and twist the fingers in an unusual way in order to successfully manoeuvre running figurations such as those at 4/3/1 or 8/1/1. There is a

remarkably advanced passage consisting of rapid consecutive major seconds for the right hand at 5/2/1 ( a comparison with Ravel's roughly contemporaneous Scarbo is interesting) while the ferocious octave passage beginnng at 8/3/1 is made all the more difficult for the performer by the addition of thematically important inner voices which must be brought out clearly by the weaker middle fingers of the right hand. This unusual device reappears occasionally in Busoni's music for the piano and must be seen as an attempt to expand the contrapuntal possibilities of the instrument.

Coming as it does in the middle of what was something of a golden era of piano composition, it would be interesting to compare the Sonatina Seconda with other great works of the period. Debussy never really attempted a composition of such sharp contrasts and restlessness because he was essentially a composer of short pieces. Ravel was never willing to dispense with classical formal outlines in the way that Busoni does in the sonatina. Scriabin's sonatas tend to follow a definite direction from start to finish, making Busoni's sonatina seem spontaneous and anarchic by comparison. The harmonic and formal freedoms of the third of Schoenberg's Three Pieces, op.11 resemble those found in the sonatina but Busoni shows a much greater understanding of the resources of the piano than does Schoenberg, whose writing for the instrument is clumsy and not idiomatic. The more one tries to make comparisons with other composers, the more Busoni's individuality becomes evident.

### Christmas Sonatina

After the wild experimentation of the Sonatina Seconda, it is not too surprising to observe that Busoni returns to greater order and organisation in his subsequent works. The Christmas Sonatina was composed about five years after the Sonatina Seconda and displays an even greater economy of means than does its fiery predecessor. However, the sharp contrasts and restlessness of the earlier work are entirely absent from the later one. The Christmas Sonatina exhibits a greater sense of refinement and serenity than do the first two sonatinas. The priorities here are formal beauty, neat transitions from one section to another, clearer melodic lines and thinner, linear textures. The smoothness of outline disguises the extremely tight construction of the piece. The harmonic idiom is notable for its more obvious tonal language. This is no way to suggest that conventional major/minor systems are used. The presence of many triads - as opposed to chords built on fourths such as have been encountered in the Sonatina Seconda - should not lull the listener into believing that the Christmas Sonatina is any more conventional than its predecessor.

The Christmas Sonatina falls roughly into three sections. The very opening of the work - in a three-part counterpoint - is much simpler and more direct than are the contrapuntal episodes of the Sonatina Seconda. The motif presented at the beginning is important as it recurs often - as a type of ritornello - in varied guises. Although many tonalities seem to be suggested, there is no progression of chords which clearly outlines any

particular one. A lilting accompaniment figure deriving from the bass of the opening theme begins at 2/2/2 and eventually descends a semitone on two occasions - a further example of parallel chromatic movement. Another important motif makes its first appearance at 3/2/1 (the accompanying triplets being derived from the middle voice of the opening). Like the opening motif, this "secondary" motif makes many appearances throughout the sonatina but serves an altogether different purpose to that of the "main" motif. The latter, on its numerous returns, gives a feeling of stability after episodes in which various tonalities and textures are explored while the former is the basis for some interesting and inventive diversions. The return of the main theme at 3/4/6 includes some very subtle chromatic alterations. It is cut short at 4/1/1 by another episode featuring a new rising motif which is related to the opening motif. The main motif quietly returns at 4/5/2, at first tentatively and in augmentation, then in smooth block chords. The music comes to rest at 5/5/7, with the motif from 4/1/1 now rising amidst a flood of pedal. This cadence - on an "unresolved" ninth chord - signals the end of the first section of the sonatina.

The middle section begins with a chant-like series of chords (5/6/1). At 6/1/1, there is a passage consisting of bell-like sonorities based on the same chord series as that of 5/6/1. Busoni's familiar direction to hold down both pedals continuously makes another appearance here. At 6/3/4, the secondary motif appears in a sprightly six-eight time over a crunchy ostinato in the left hand. Intervals of fourths and fifths predominate. The motif is itself gradually transformed into an ostinato from

7/2/3 onwards. At 7/3/4, there is an unusual counterpoint consisting of the ostinato in cross-rhythm against the same motif in augmentation. At 8/1/1, the ostinato gradually slows to form the bass for a reappearance of the bell-like texture of 6/1/1. The middle section closes with the fading away of the bell sonorities.

The third section begins at 8/3/1 with the main motif of the sonatina, which is now presented as a three-part canon and proceeds to be transformed in various ways and through various tonalities before appearing in augmentation against a flowing triplet accompaniment at 9/3/1. There is a slight suggestion of the bell-like texture of the middle section at 9/4/1. The final cadence - always unusual with Busoni - suggests A flat major before moving from a dominant seventh on D to a bare fifth on A. It is not possible for a tonal centre to be designated for the work although the notes A and D are prominent throughout as structural points of reference.

The Christmas Sonatina is an excellent example of Busoni's "Young Classicism" (as opposed to neo-classicism). The piece exhibits a freshness of style and spirit quite foreign to the ideals of Romanticism. Busoni felt that a new aesthetic of composition would be inaugurated in the early twentieth century and that this aesthetic would be close in spirit to that of the eighteenth century. However, he firmly believed that "Young Classicism" should be a new style and not a return to older styles.<sup>2</sup> To Busoni, "classicism" implied clarity and beauty of form, conciseness of structure and restraint from the rhetorical

gestures of Romanticism - all of which are strong characteristics of the Christmas Sonatina. It did not imply that the composer reacting against the nineteenth century needed to fall back on eighteenth-century forms and devices which were, in Busoni's opinion, inappropriate to the language of twentieth-century music. In the Christmas Sonatina, Busoni the composer is seen to be consistent with Busoni the theorist. Although the contrapuntal devices, clear textures, crisp rhythms and economy of means may have been inspired by the eighteenth century, the overall formal structure - divorced as it is from the eighteenth-century ideals of tonal discourse and the structures that result therefrom - has no connection whatsoever with the past. For this reason, the Christmas Sonatina could not be considered neo-classical.

Toccata

The titles of the three movements of the Toccata - Preludio, Fantasia and Ciaccona - correctly suggest that Busoni's inspiration for this extremely difficult piece came from Baroque music. To an extent, the Toccata - with its crisp textures, concise form and indebtedness to Baroque models - is neo-classical. However, Busoni does not attempt to conjure up the atmosphere of past music in the way that Stravinsky does in his Sonata and Serenade for piano. Busoni's Toccata is probably closer to Bartok's mature works in spirit (although it should be noted that Bartok did not begin to write such works until a few years after Busoni's death). Like Busoni in the Toccata, Bartok uses the outlines of eighteenth-century forms as a framework for a rugged musical expression which is diametrically opposed to the restrained poise of even the most intense outpourings of pre-Romantic music.

Unlike the Sonatina Seconda and Christmas Sonatina, the Toccata does have a clear tonal centre - A-flat minor. The first movement begins with triads clearly outlined by a metallic staccato in the high treble. This staccato figuration provides an ostinato for the movement and moves throughout the whole compass of the keyboard. The powerful chordal theme at 1/3/1 remains firmly entrenched in A-flat minor through the use of a melodic minor figure. A modulation does not take place until the very abrupt and blazing C major of 1/5/2. The intrusion of the notes F-sharp, B-flat and D-flat in this passage produces piquant harmonic effects. The movement features a peculiar rhythmic

subtlety - often, one hand plays in six-four time while the other plays in three-two. The main theme is developed from its first appearance and towards the end of three hectic pages, there is an impression that all developmental possibilities have been exhausted. The movement races to a powerful conclusion after 3/4/2 - with A-flat minor always prominent (as it had been since 2/6/2). The unconventional cadence at 3/6/2 implies semitonal shifting of harmonies and actually ends with an unexpected chord of A-flat major.

The second movement - which is very free in construction and spirit - was inspired by the keyboard fantasies of J. S. Bach. Busoni admired the remarkable synthesis of freedom and logic displayed in such works as the Fantasia and Fugue in G minor, BWV 542 for organ and the Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor, BWV 903. Indeed, he believed that much future music would display such a synthesis<sup>3</sup> and, as was often the case, he predicted correctly. True to the spirit of Bach, Busoni shows great invention and imagination in the second movement while at the same time creating a sense of logical flow from one idea to the next. Unlike the first movement, the second has no emphatic tonal centre. Numerous devices which have now become typical of Busoni's individual style appear - the use of triads in unusual and non-functional inversions (4/2/1 to 4/2/3, 7/6/1 to 7/6/2), diatonic melodic progressions with unusual chromatic alterations (4/2/3 to 4/5/1, 7/3/2 to 7/4/2), severe chromatic counterpoint (6/4/1 to 6/5/3, 7/4/2 to 7/5/3). The transition from the second movement to the third beginning at 7/6/2 is masterly. Broken chords outline a series of unrelated

triads until arriving at the "dominant" pedal point on G (9/1/1), when a series of unrelated added sixth chords are piled one on another.

The third movement begins at 9/4/3 with C as a tonal centre and is ruthless in its drive and determination. The "chaconne bass" is eight bars long and consists of a chromatic theme which is developed almost beyond recognition in the subsequent variations. Only the traditional chaconne rhythm remains recognisable - barely so, at times - throughout the movement. A rhythmically important triplet counterpoint appears in the first variation (9/5/5). The chromaticism at 9/6/3 and 9/7/6 erodes the tonality which was so carefully established at the beginning of the movement. The sharp dissonances of the block chords at 9/7/2 lay bare the severe linearity of Busoni's harmonic idiom. From 10/2/4 onwards, any feeling of tonality has been shattered by consistently non-tonal - but nonetheless functional - harmonic progressions. The eight-bar rhythmic bass has also disappeared. The tonal centre of C abruptly returns at 11/2/1. The two variations that follow become increasingly complex contrapuntally. As in the Sonatina Seconda, the pianist is expected to play a contrasting inner voice with the middle fingers of a hand while playing octaves with the same hand. Busoni's clever ability to divide passages between the two hands for greater effectiveness can be seen at 11/6/4. A subdued episode temporarily halts the ferocity of the movement at 13/1/3. There is much intricate and clever crossing, interweaving and stretching of hands in order to achieve the desired texture. There are also subtle changes in pulse which provide a much needed sense of relaxation

before the breakneck conclusion which begins at 14/1/1. Here, technical difficulties are piled on top of each other. Rapid octaves in both hands dominate the texture and the original chaconne motif has been transformed almost beyond recognition. When A-flat replaces C as a pedal point (14/3/3), the expectation is that the piece will end in the A-flat minor tonality of the first movement. However, the end is not a predictable one. True to Busoni's penchant for unusual cadences, the piece ends with the progression D major to A-flat minor.

The Toccata was Busoni's last major work for piano solo. It exhibits all of the intellectual control and aural severity that one would expect of him if one has followed his development as a composer in this presentation. Nonetheless, it would be a most attractive and accessible work for an audience which has adjusted itself to appreciate the music of Bartok, Stravinsky and Prokofieff. It is an unfortunate reflection on modern pianists that music such as this continues to be ignored today.

Notes: Chapter Five

1. Busoni, Ferruccio, The Essence of Music, New York, Dover, 1965, pp.85-95 and Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music, New York, Dover, 1962, pp.84-86
2. Busoni, op.cit., pp.16, 19-23
3. Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music, op.cit., pp.78-80

## CHAPTER SIX: BUSONI AND SUCCEEDING GENERATIONS

Over sixty years have passed since the death of Busoni and it seems that the general musical public is no closer to understanding him and his achievements now than it was during his lifetime. He made a career as a virtuoso concert pianist at a time when it had just become fashionable to do so. This gave him fame as well as some type of financial security throughout his life. However, it is clear from his letters and his writings that this career was an enormous burden on him emotionally and that he regarded performing as a secondary activity which could not touch the heights of his work as a composer. Throughout the last twenty years of his life, he constantly made cynical remarks about playing the piano<sup>1</sup>. Despite such strong feelings, he nonetheless insisted on maintaining a very high standard in his public performances and recordings<sup>2</sup> (unlike his contemporary, Eugen D'Albert, who allowed himself to perform carelessly as he became older and more cynical about his own performing career). Such standards ensured that Busoni's fame as a performer would continue despite his cynicism. It appears that this fame prevented his compositions from being taken very seriously in his lifetime. At that time, any famous pianist who turned to composition was not expected to write music that rose much above the level of salon music. Meanwhile, the important contemporaneous composers of piano music did not attain great fame as pianists. In this climate, it is not surprising that Busoni was regarded only as an outstanding performer. This caused him much frustration as he preferred to think himself as a "total" musician - composing, performing, theoretical writing and teaching forming a united whole within his artistic activities.<sup>3</sup>

The name of Busoni remained a respected one among pianistic circles for many years after his death. Many who heard him play in the early decades of this century had vivid recollections of his mesmeric performances.<sup>4</sup> Although his interpretations were often controversial, he was respected even by those who completely disagreed with his way of playing.<sup>5</sup> A small but dedicated group of disciples maintained a Busoni "tradition" - if there was such a one. Pianists such as Egon Petri, Michael von Zadora, Edward Weiss and Eduard Steuermann performed Busoni's major works for piano and were strongly influenced by their master in their performances of other repertoire. In more recent times, there has been an interest by musicologists as well as by the general musical public in the performance styles of the "old pianists", with numerous acoustic and piano-roll recordings from the early years of the century becoming available. The art of Busoni the pianist has gained some exposure to a new generation as a result of this. However, few pianists active during the past twenty years or so have devoted themselves to attempting considered and authoritative performances of Busoni's compositions. Among these are Gunnar Johansson and Paul Jacobs, while some pianists who have become more renowned for their performances of the standard repertoire - including Alfred Brendel and John Ogdon - have occasionally ventured into Busoni's music. Many of Busoni's theoretical writings were published both during his lifetime and after his death but widespread knowledge of these among musicians is even more limited than is that of his compositions. Some of them would be of interest to pianists as they deal with aspects of technique and aesthetics pertaining to the piano in a highly original way.<sup>6</sup>

In considering the directions taken in music during the years following the death of Busoni, it is interesting to note how his piano music often anticipates some significant later developments. It has been seen how his compositional style is very representative of the early twentieth century as well as why it is original. Comparisons with later - rather than contemporaneous - music are even more fascinating. The increasingly brittle sonorities adopted by Busoni as he developed his own style anticipate those of Bartok, whose mature piano works exhibit ruthless linear textures and sharp, dissonant clashes. Busoni's counterpoint is as transparent and flowing as that of Hindemith and as delicate and refined as that of Dallapiccola. Busoni's call for each new composition to determine its own form regardless of established academic models (as illustrated by the six sonatinas) is echoed - perhaps unknowingly - by Boulez several decades later.<sup>7</sup> A synthesis of improvisational freedom and structural logic such as is demonstrated in many of Busoni's mature piano compositions does not reappear - with the notable exception of Scriabin - until the 1960's (for example, in the works of Stockhausen and Berio).

In this presentation, it has been demonstrated that Busoni wrote a significant number of works for the piano which compare most favourably with those of better known contemporaries in terms of structural logic and refinement. In these works, Busoni's writing for his instrument is always skilful and often ingenious. Many of the pieces are aurally appealing for the listener and physically satisfying for the performer. Misconceptions regarding pianists who compose are no longer relevant today as hardly any renowned pianists are notable composers. In recent years,

there has been a fashion among pianists who may be growing tired of the standard repertoire to search for and perform little-known curiosities from the past in an effort to escape from the routine expected of them. Some of Busoni's works have been performed under these circumstances. Perhaps the time has now arrived for this music to be presented to the general musical public in the same way that the piano works of Debussy, Ravel and Rachmaninoff have been presented for half a century.

Notes: Chapter Six

1. Dent, E. J., Ferruccio Busoni, London, Eulenburg, 1974, pp.256-257 and Stuckenschmidt, H. H., Ferruccio Busoni, London, Calder and Boyars, 1970, p.67
2. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., p. 86
3. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., pp.92-93, 212-213
4. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., pp.74-75, Dent, op.cit., pp.258-261 and Sitwell, Sacheverell, Liszt, New York, Dover, 1967, pp.293-296
5. Stuckenschmidt, op.cit., p.85
6. Busoni, Ferruccio, The Essence of Music, New York, Dover, 1965, pp.79-95
7. Boulez, Pierre, Boulez on Music Today, London, Faber and Faber, 1971, pp.28, 32

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