

## Ferruccio Busoni and the Pursuit of Modernity

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The pianist/composer and all-around cultural visionary Ferruccio Busoni fills an interesting and unique position in the history of music. He was no doubt one of the most brilliant pianists of all time, but at the same time was also a profoundly deep and progressive thinker. It would be possible to fill volumes with Busoni's ideas on art, culture and music – however, given the mission of the Millennium Arts Society to appreciate and promote progressive talents and ideas, we will focus on Busoni's life-long pursuit of artistic relevance, freshness and modernity.

Of all composers, Beethoven, Liszt and Busoni are probably the most visionary. All three chose to pursue radically altered means of expression in the compositions written at the end of their careers. One need only look at Beethoven's Sonata #31 in A-flat or his String Quartet in A major, Liszt's late piano works (*Nuages Gris*, *La Lugubre Gondola 1 & 2*) or Busoni's *Elegies* or *Sonatinas* to see these forces at work.

Busoni, unique among these three, demonstrated the most intellectual self-consciousness. He was constantly, throughout his life, dedicated to advocating his own conception of what constituted the best and most interesting in art. In this sense he was similar to his contemporaries Schoenberg and Hindemith; witness his book *Sketch of a New Aesthetic for Music*. His own dedication to systemization, however, was far less rigorous in practice than, say, Hindemith. In fact, Busoni went so far as to write:

Never, never, can one set up a rule when it is a question of art. Every stroke of the pen demands its own conditions... In new works one avoids the old mistakes but makes new ones again, because the problem is always changing... With the beginning of every new thing one is timid and awkward again.

In this sense Busoni was at once highly intellectual and also driven by the completely unpredictable nature of inspiration. We believe that this is truly the height of art, when thought and inspiration become one and the same.

Busoni commanded deep admiration from his contemporaries and at the same time was often vilified for his different ideas and for his perceived “desecration” of the music that he performed. Truly, Busoni was not content to simply play the notes in Bach, Liszt or Chopin, to name but a few. He viewed the role of the interpreter as a co-creator, not a lifeless mouthpiece through which the “gospel” of the composer passed. Busoni held to the idea that every time a work is performed it is a *transcription* of the original score. A performance for him was a statement not only of the composer's ideas and intentions but of the performer's as well, who was an equal partner in the music. Today such ideas are widely lambasted as irreverent, and indeed they were considered so even during Busoni's own time. In response to one of his critics, Busoni wrote the following profound argument in his own defense:

You start from false premises in thinking that it is my intention to 'modernize' the works [that I play]. On the contrary, by cleaning them of the dust of tradition, I try to restore their youth, to

present them as they sounded to people at the moment when they first sprang from the head and pen of the composer. [Beethoven's] *Pathétique* was an almost revolutionary sonata in its day, and ought to sound revolutionary. One could never put enough passion into the *Appassionata*, which was the culmination of passionate expression of its epoch. When I play Beethoven, I try to approach the liberty, the nervous energy and the humanity which are the signature of his compositions, in contrast to those of his predecessors. Recalling the character of the man Beethoven and what is related of his own playing, I have built up for myself an ideal which has been wrongly called "modern" and which is really no more than "live."

For us this is the only point that matters in any musical performance – does the music live? That end alone should justify any interpretative means.

Luckily, we as listeners are able to hear Busoni's interpretations for ourselves through newly released compact discs<sup>1</sup> of his performances on reproducing piano. There is truly a vast sense of originality present on these recordings, a grandiosity and a contemporary relevance that is missing in the work of many (if not most) other interpreters. One need only listen to Busoni's unbelievably moving performance of Chopin's B minor Prelude to hear this transporting phenomenon at work. The worst thing that can happen with any art is that it come across as dated, sentimental and quaint. It is easy for anything remotely tonal to sound this way to modern ears, and Chopin's Preludes are nothing is not tonal. Busoni, in part through incredible rhythmic freedom, transcends the notes on the page, the time period in which they were written, and makes us listen to the music as a statement of the human soul. There is little question in our minds that this is what will always remain relevant about music by any great composer, from any period. Human nature remains eternally the same, but the trappings it takes on change from era to era, and even now from decade to decade.

Another interesting facet of Busoni's life is that he did not found a "school" based on his ideas. Liszt had countless students, Schoenberg influenced generations of composers, but Busoni, historically speaking, has fallen by the wayside. This is most likely attributable to the fact that it is very difficult to "follow" a true progressive such as Busoni; going back to the quote above – "the problem is always changing." The act of following is inherently against the approach of seeing things always in a new light. In retrospect it's easy to see that Liszt's followers acted primarily as advocates of Liszt, rather than conquering new terrain. Likewise, Beethoven was revered by legions of composers who quickly realized that through imitation alone they could not recapture the spirit and inspiration of the master. Schoenberg's pupils followed, or elaborated, his system, without developing one of their own. There is nothing exactly wrong with any of this, but these are clearly totally different creative approaches from what Busoni advocated – something which even today has lost none of its progressive fearlessness or contemporary relevance.

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<sup>1</sup> See especially: *Grand Piano: Liszt, Bach/Busoni and Chopin* on Nimbus Records (#8810). Visit Nimbus on the web at <http://www.wyastone.co.uk/nrl/gpiano/8810a.html>.