

The Busoni Centenary Symposium

Busoni and His World

City, University of London

Abstracts in chronological order

Paper session 1: Busoni's transcriptions

Raymond Shon: 'Busoni and re-transcription'

The notion of the Creative Transcriber was used by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji and Marc-André Roberge in their critical commentaries of Leopold Godowsky and Ferruccio Busoni, respectively. In doing so, they proposed that a special class of transcriber can enact as much creativity as a composer. These views have helped to engender appreciation for the various notational types in Busoni's output – such as editions, transcriptions, arrangements, and *Nachdichtungen* – many of which present like so-called 'transcription-compositions'. However, by design, this paradigm of the Creative Transcriber is biased to a latent chronological hierarchy where designations such as 'first', 'original', and 'source' are more readily and empirically verifiable than others such as 'better' or 'creative'. Although such a paradigm seeks to elevate so-called 'creative transcriptions' from the would-be garden variety transcription, paradoxically in doing so it advances an apologist stance for transcriptions.

In this paper, I examine case studies from Busoni's output where the composer consciously and willingly engaged with at least two other authorial voices and co-occupied the same musical space of the musical artwork. In doing so, I argue that Busoni did not prioritise authorial primacy as his main creative preoccupation. I do this by drawing on Busoni's writings as well as using Alfred Gell's theory of 'The Artist's Œuvre as a Distributed Object' as an alternative nonlinear, nonteleological model for a critical analysis of Busoni's works, both composed and transcribed.

Dr Chiara Bertoglio: 'What Counts as Bach-Busoni?'

This paper stems from my experience as a pianist-cum-musicologist who decided to record a CD-box dedicated to 'Bach-Busoni' on the occasion of Busoni's centenary. This collection, consisting of four CDs, was issued in late 2023 by Da Vinci Classics, and comprehends Busoni's original works for solo piano which have a tangible and clear association with Bach (e.g. *Sonatina Brevis*, *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* etc.); his transcriptions and arrangement after organ works; but also works by Bach which were edited by Busoni in such a way that the result can claim originality and artistry in itself (e.g. Goldberg Variations, Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue etc.), some of which had not been previously recorded in Busoni's version.

In this presentation, I will discuss some of the challenges which such an endeavour posed to me, in my double capacity as a musician and as a musicologist. Which works had to be included, or could be included? Where should the line be drawn between original works inspired by Bach, rewritings, arrangements, adaptations, editions? How should incomplete works, or works whose notation is incomplete according to normal standards, be dealt with (e.g. the Etudes on the Preludes from the

Well-Tempered Clavier)? Drawing from my studies, research, and from my experience as a performer, I will argue that Busoni's Bach requires at least as much freedom and creativity as do Bach's original works, and that knowledge of Busoni's *modus operandi* fosters an approach which engages profoundly with the score, while encouraging creative liberty.

Recital

Yipeng Xu, piano

- Bach-Busoni: Chorale prelude on 'Wachtet auf, ruft uns die Stimme' BWV 645
- Glinka-Balakirev: *The Lark*
- Ferruccio Busoni: Elegy no.4, 'Turandots Frauengemach'
- Ludwig van Beethoven: Sonata in E major Op.109
- Franz Liszt: Paganini-Étude no.6
- Bach-Busoni: Chorale prelude on 'In dir ist Freude' BWV 615.

Paper session 2: Compositional aesthetics - Part 1

Fred Scott: 'Busoni and the World Elsewhere: *Doktor Faust* as Neo-Renaissance Drama'

In a letter to his publisher Breitkopf and Härtel, on 27/12/1914 (vol.1, p.732) about his magnum-opus-in-progress, Busoni talks of 'producing a five-act drama in a seven-day period'. A casual remark this may be, but how can it possibly apply to the three-act *Doktor Faust*? This paper will provide reasons for reading an *implied* 5-act play structure along with renaissance-era connotations, despite the more conventional partition of the opera. A strong link between this opera and the final five plays of Shakespeare will be proposed in terms of subject, plot, structure, characterisation and ultimately, genre, demonstrating the link between the late-Renaissance sensibilities of these final Shakespearean plays and their modernist transformation in Busoni's Faust drama. Additionally, I will demonstrate how neo-Renaissance and modernist aesthetics are deeply interlinked through processes of synthesis and syncretism in the opera, not unlike the alchemical speculations of Faust himself. These processes, as well as the 5-act conception, allowed a depth of initial characterisation and subsequent development unavailable to previous opera composers, whose protagonists may appear one-dimensional by comparison. In *Doktor Faust* the connection to Shakespearean precursors is striking as Busoni returns Faust to his renaissance origins and yet also propels us, with Faust, into that state of being aspired to by the Derwisch, a character in Busoni's 1905 Theaterdichtung für Musik; *Der Mächtige Zauberer*; '...ich will das Unbekannte.'

Chuyu Zhang: 'Gebrauchsmusik: A Busonian Legacy?'

Has the name 'Ferruccio Busoni' and the concept 'Gebrauchsmusik' ever been found in the same sentence? Busoni's *l'art pour l'art* stance, as reflected in both his futuristic *Entwurf* of 1907 and his 'Young Classicality' manifesto of 1920, seems to have little in common with the social mission of *Gebrauchsmusik*. But several prominent students in his Berlin masterclass engaged with *Gebrauchsmusik* in one way or another. Kurt Weill joined the socialist *Novembergruppe* in the late 1920s in Berlin to compose for 'the masses', while Robert Blum embarked on a career as a film composer in 1930s Switzerland that brought him national fame. These were very different types of music, aimed at different recipients – in Weimar Germany and Switzerland – whose political and economic circumstances were very different too. But if we consider *Gebrauchsmusik* in more general terms, we find that its varied strands retain their link to the Busonian legacy. For the ideals of both *Gebrauchsmusik* and Busoni's 'Young Classicality' were intrinsically utopian – the former socio-political, the latter aesthetic. This paper will draw on research into the respective careers of Weill and Blum in the context of Busoni's 'Young Classical' ideal to reexamine the notion of *Gebrauchsmusik* through a more critical lens.

Paper session 3: Compositional aesthetics - Part 2

Michael Jones: 'From Bach analysis to new modality: Busoni's 'New Aesthetic' made audible'

'This is Busoni's New Aesthetic made audible!' So said Ronald Stevenson on playing John Foulds' composition *Essays in the Modes* to Malcolm Macdonald in 1975. Foulds had known Busoni from his Manchester days and started these piano solos in 1920, at the same time that Maurice Emmanuel was composing his *Sonatine no.4 en divers modes Hindous*, which he dedicated to Busoni in 1923.

Around the same period, Busoni's 'New Aesthetic' found another archaist expression in the study of Bach's counterpoint, with the encouragement of the theoretician Bernard Ziehn, whom he met in 1910. It was Ziehn who suggested to Busoni 'missing links' in Bach's Art of Fugue, which led to the *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* (started in 1912). Ziehn's influence is also apparent in some pages of Busoni's edition of Bach's WTC II (1915). Intriguingly, Ziehn also included in his final treatise *Canonic Studies* (1912) music examples of 'unthought-of scales', linking traditional counterpoint with new modal thinking. In this talk, dedicated to Ronald Stevenson who produced the first new edition of Ziehn's *Canonic Studies* (1976) as well as an unpublished Busoni biography, I will be exploring these lesser-known facets of the 'New Aesthetic' and how they interlink.

Prof Ian Pace: 'Busoni the Classicist: *Junge Klassizität* and the aesthetic of the late piano music (1920-1924)'

Busoni's letters from 1919 demonstrate some profound anti-German and anti-romantic sentiments, with a special hostility towards the music of Richard Wagner, about whom he had commented before, but not with such vehemence. Believing that 'the moment has arrived to shake off 19th-century Germany', in December of that year he declared his objective to create a *Junge Klassizität*, involving amongst other things 'the definite departure from what is thematic and the return to melody again as the rule of all voices and all emotions (not in the sense of a pleasing motive) and as the bearer of the idea and the begetter of harmony'.

In this paper, I consider briefly these comments of Busoni in the context of those of other contemporaries, including Paul Bekker, Hermann Scherchen, Heinz Tiessen, Alban Berg and Béla Bartók, as well as Erwin Kurth on counterpoint, and the artistic-revolutionary ideals of the Berlin *Novembergruppe*. I also consider how these sentiments related to or marked a shift of emphasis from those in Busoni's *Entwurf einer neuen Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (1907) and the corresponding development of his aesthetic and his increasing focus on the music of J.S. Bach from the 1910s onwards. Then I consider with some analytical details the late piano works from the *Kammer-Fantasie über Carmen* (1920) to the *Prélude et Étude en Arpèges* (1923) to explore what may be defining of Busoni's *Junge Klassizität* period spanning the last five years of his life.

Keynote 1

Prof Paul Fleet: 'How does Busoni's music present itself being both with and after tonality?'

As a PhD scholar I was fascinated by Ferruccio Busoni in his roles as a scholar, educator, pianist, composer, aesthetician; and I was particularly intrigued as to how his music seemed to defy prior tonal and serial analytic methodologies. The problem was not with his music – it clearly made sense on listening – but on the approaches to understanding. In 2009, and in need of an ISBN for job applications, I published my entire PhD thesis titled *Ferruccio Busoni: A Phenomenological Approach to his Music and Aesthetics*. It presented a method of analysis that asked the listener to suspend their prior expectations, took only what was given in the musical experience, and plotted the salient moments of the music onto a two-axis temporality graph to then unpack its melodic, harmonic, and structural forms. Fourteen years later, and with chapters from a like-minded community of scholars, I published *Musics with and after tonality: Mining the Gap*. Developing the position that

music from the turn of Twentieth century could be both with and after tonality without ever being serial, it explored musics that reconstructed the external codes and gestures of Common Practice tonality in new and idiosyncratic ways.

This keynote explores that journey of understanding from ‘convictions long held and slowly matured’, and adopting Busoni’s invitation to ‘follow [him] into the realm of music’, I will be posing the question if that if we ‘[undo] the shackles and throw[n] them away’ how might we understand his music to be metatonal (with and after tonality) in order to reveal its melodic, harmonic, and structural connections. Busoni was not conventional in his pedagogical practice so nor will this keynote. It will transcend from a formal presentation to a curated yet less-formal gathering so that we create a social gathering where we can share thoughts and ideas straight from the presentation, ask analytic questions of his music and approach, and hopefully find a oneness in our engagement with Ferruccio Busoni.

Paper session 4: Busoni’s world

Geoff Thomason: ‘Manchester’s gain, Manchester’s loss: Ferruccio Busoni and Adolph Brodsky’

Ferruccio Busoni first encountered the Russian violinist Adolph Brodsky during the latter’s tenure as Professor at the Leipzig Conservatoire (1883-1891). Busoni played alongside Brodsky in a number of Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts and partnered him in the première of his own first Violin Sonata in 1891. After Brodsky’s move to Manchester in 1895, Busoni was among the group of musicians from his Leipzig period with whom he remained in contact. As Principal of the Royal Manchester College of Music and as a chamber musician Brodsky not only sought to promote Busoni’s music in Manchester but was also keen to invite the composer himself and ensure that the city was included on his UK tours. The Brodsky-Busoni correspondence, now held chiefly at the Royal Northern College of Music and the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, suggest that beneath the friendship between the two musicians was a deeper concern on Brodsky’s part to maintain links with a mainland European tradition from which he was now physically estranged. They also reveal the attempts that Brodsky made to persuade Busoni to take up the position of Professor of Piano at the Royal Manchester College – attempts that ultimately remained unrealised.

Dr Brian Andrew Inglis: ‘Busoni and Sorabji: networked connections; profound responses’

This paper examines the relationship between the work of Ferruccio Busoni and Kaikhosru Sorabji (1892-1988), focusing specifically on connections between Busoni’s *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* (1912) and Sorabji’s *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (1930). Busoni was a significant influence on Sorabji from at least 1919, when he dedicated his Piano Sonata no 1 to him; he also devoted an article to him (1932). In large part Sorabji’s ‘contrapuntal turn’ during the 1920s can be attributed to Busoni; a turn which culminated in his celebrated *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, explicitly based on Busoni’s *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*. Marc-Andre Roberge (1991) has posited a ‘Busoni network’ of composers, pianists and musicologists, with Busoni as pivot, and creative responses to earlier music as a governing concept. Ever a supporter of counter-canons, Sorabji has been identified as a key part of this network. Roberge (1996) even compares Sorabji’s attitude to Busoni to ‘beatification’. This is supported by Sorabji’s conception of music – epitomised by Egon Petri performing Busoni – as a sacred ritual, expounded in ‘Performance versus Celebration’ (1932).

While writing *Opus Clavicembalisticum* Sorabji embarked on a passionate correspondence with Scottish composer and administrator Erik Chisholm, who promoted the work’s premiere by the composer in Glasgow. This provides an emotional counterpoint to the diary-like running commentary Sorabji gave in his letters to Chisholm, offering hermeneutic insights alongside processual genesis. In addition to this (largely unpublished) corpus, I draw on other rich material from Chisholm’s archive relating to the reception of Sorabji’s performance at his Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music, which also featured performances of Busoni’s compositions.

Lecture recital 1

Natalie Tsaldarakis and Panayotis Archontides: ‘*Fantasia Contrappuntistica* BV256b (1922)’

Busoni wrote three versions of the *Fantasia*, including this last version for two-pianos. Entitled *Fantasia Contrappuntistica, Chorale Variations on ‘Ehre Sei Gott in der Höhe’ Followed by a Quadruple Fugue Based on a Fragment by Bach*, this version materialised in 1922, leaving a projected orchestral version only as a wish expressed to his former student and collaborator Egon Petri, himself teacher of Larry Sitsky. The pianists of the Ivory Duo Piano Ensemble (Natalie Tsaldarakis and Panayotis Archontides) will briefly explain the evolution of the work through its versions, and then will discuss its current form, by tracing the melodic material throughout. The recommendations affecting three of the fugues, made by prof. Larry Sitsky in his *The Complete Busoni Vol. I: Busoni and the Piano: The Works, the Writings, and the Recordings*, 2nd ed. (ANU Press, 2023) will also be considered, followed by a complete performance of the work.

Lecture recital 2

Christopher White: ‘Ronald Stevenson and Mahler’

This recital functions as an homage to the great twentieth century British Busonian, my friend and mentor Ronald Stevenson. A tireless advocate of Busoni, as well as the art of transcription more generally, Stevenson has bequeathed a seminal transcriptive and transformative pianistic legacy, deeply lodged in Busoni’s polymathic tradition. With Stevenson, the philosophical urgency of the act of transcription is never below the surface, in indisputable musico-philosophical kinship with Busoni himself.

The opening movement of Mahler’s Tenth Symphony, transcribed by Stevenson, formed the basis of my transcription of the entire symphony, made in 2008. The work itself forms an interesting biographical link with Busoni: he and Mahler travelled from the USA to Europe, on what would be the latter's final voyage, in 1910, with the Tenth Symphony and the *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* in simultaneous development. Imagine the conversations!

The second work under consideration is Stevenson’s great tour de force, the *Prelude, Fugue and Fantasy on themes from Busoni’s Faust*. Championed by Stevenson’s great friend, John Ogdon, the work deftly combines the superficial transcriptive task of presenting the opera’s ‘best tunes’, with a deeper and more restless enquiry into many key works of Busoni’s output, not least the Second Violin Sonata and the Second Sonatina. This unique work therefore invites the listener to ‘access’ Busoni's magnum opus specifically, whilst presenting the composer's own wider context, all filtered through the compositional and pianistic lens of one of his great artistic disciples.

Keynote 2

Prof Erinn Knyt: ‘Encyclopaedic Modernism in the Musical Worlds of Gustav Mahler and Ferruccio Busoni’

Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924) and Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) both studied piano at the Vienna Conservatory from 1875 to 1878 with Julius Epstein, they both lived in Leipzig from 1886-1888, and they both lived close to each other on Fifth Avenue in New York from 1910 to 1911. As they travelled back to Europe together on the S.S. Amerika in April 1911, Busoni composed contrapuntal excerpts to distract the ailing Mahler from his illness. Although from different backgrounds and countries, both also ended up living like exiles in German-speaking countries throughout much of their multi-faceted careers as conductors, pianists, and composers and they collaborated together in concerts. Alma Mahler subsequently selected Busoni to be one of only three trustees of the Gustav

Mahler Foundation fund for the benefit of struggling musicians. Both Mahler and Busoni were also largely forgotten as composers after their deaths, only to receive musical revivals in the 1960s.

Based on correspondence, concert programs and reviews, letters, and other essays, this paper documents the extended friendship of Busoni and Mahler, as well as similarities in their ideas, music, and career trajectories. In particular, it shows parallels in their musical ideals modelled after nature and their idiosyncratic compositional approaches that included a veneration for counterpoint, polystylism, folk music, symphonic writing plus voice, dance rhythms, and the use of non-traditional instruments and timbres. These styles resulted, in part, from similarities in that both experienced rich and multi-faceted influences: both experienced historical shifts as they were suspended between two centuries, both absorbed diverse cultures while residing in multiple countries, and both understood ways of communicating with audiences by juggling vibrant multi-faceted performing and composing careers.

Through analyses of their compositions and writings, the article reveals a shared encyclopaedic modernist approach that reflects their transnational life experiences and that goes beyond experimentation with musical language. These composers represent similar unconventional approaches to early modernism that stand outside of the German continental style, long accepted as standard and characterized by experimentation with the tonal language. These two, instead focused on a historicist modernism tied to musics of the past that nevertheless represented the pluralities of the present and in a metatonal manner. During their careers, both became musical encyclopaedists, assimilating a broad range of late eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth century techniques, along with audible assimilations of a broad array of transnational styles. In the process, the article contributes to recent scholarship that has expanded knowledge about a multiplicity of musical modernisms in the early twentieth century.