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| Busoni, Ferruccio (1866-1924) |
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| Ferruccio Busoni was an Italian composer, pianist, transcriber, editor, and writer on music who spent most of his career in Germany. A child prodigy who started composing at the age of seven and completed his formal music studies at fifteen, he became of one the most important pianists of his time, well known for his transcriptions of organ works by Bach, and a highly respected, if rather rarely played, composer. His writings on music, in some of which he longed for an extension of compositional means and resources, positioned him as a progressive thinker and a model for a young generation of composers, including Edgard Varèse and Kurt Weill |
| Ferruccio Busoni was born in Empoli, near Florence, on 1 April 1866, as the only child of the clarinettist Ferdinando Busoni and of the pianist Anna Weiss. After early instruction in piano from his mother and violin lessons, he entered the Vienna Conservatory in 1875; he then studied music theory and composition privately in Graz with Wilhelm Mayer from 1879 to 1881. He had started composing in 1873, in which year he also gave his first recital, eventually becoming one of the major pianists of his time, known for his monumental style and for his championship of Bach, Mozart, and Liszt.  After a series of one or two-year appointments as piano teacher in Helsinki, Moscow, and Boston starting in 1888 and a short period as a free-lance pianist based in New York, Busoni moved to Berlin in 1894, where he taught several private pupils who later made a successful career, for instance Rudolph Ganz, Mark Hambourg, Egon Petri, Eduard Steuermann, and Gino Tagliapietra. He made four concert tours in the United States (1904, 1910, 1911, and 1915) but had to extend the last one for several months because the impending war made it difficult for an Italian to return to Germany. He lived in a self-imposed exile in Zurich between 1915 and 1920, where he gave concerts and master classes in addition to conducting the Tonhalle concerts during one season. He came back to Berlin in 1920, where Kurt Weill and Wladimir Vogel were among the students of his master class in composition at the Akademie der Künste. A charismatic personality and a highly respected figure in German musical life, he attracted musicians and intellectuals in the open house he held in his apartment. He wrote extensively on music, publishing his collected essays in 1922 under the title *Von der Einheit der Musik*. Busoni, who had given up his concert activities in the same year as a result of health problems, died in Berlin on 27 July 1924 before completing his greatest masterpiece, the opera *Doktor Faust*.  Reception  Until the mid-1960s a secondary figure mostly associated with his transcriptions of organ works by Bach and his successes as a touring virtuoso, Busoni nevertheless enjoyed a cult status that led to an extensive literature, much of it mostly introductory in nature. He made a lasting impact on composers like Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji and Ronald Stevenson, among others, who championed his music and extended his heritage in their own works. It is mostly since the 1980s that his significance, both as a transition figure between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and as a prophetic personality in the history of modern music (as seen in his *Entwurf einer neuen Ästhetik der Tonkunst*), is being increasingly reassessed, as shown in editions of writings and letters, academic publications, and scholarly articles. New editions of several of his early works have also been published during the last two decades, and recordings and concert performances have become quite frequent.  Works and style  Few of Busoni’s works written before the late 1890s (especially those written during childhood) are known through publication and recording; in 1905 he considered the SONATA IN E MINOR FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO [no. 2], BV 244 (1898), to be his opus 1. THE SONATA IN F MINOR, BV 164 (1880), written in the shadow of Brahms, and the 24 Preludes, BV 181 (1881), indebted to Schumann and Chopin, appear as the culmination of his early years. It is with the seventy-minute Concerto for Piano, Orchestra, and Male Chorus, BV 247 (1904), that he concluded his career in the late Romantic style. The *ELEGIES*, BV 249 (1907-8), written at a time when he championed recent music in concerts that he sponsored in Berlin (featuring, among others, Debussy, Bartók, and Sibelius), show him crossing the boundary over to modern music; this was just after he had laid down in writing his forward-looking ideas about the extension of musical means. His life-long preoccupation with the music of Bach, seen previously in his edition of Book 1 of the *WELL-TEMPERED CLAVIER* and his transcriptions of well-known organ works and the Chaconne for violin, is found in the *FANTASIA CONTRAPPUNTISTICA*, BV 256 (1910), which realizes the unfinished fugue from Bach’s *ART OF FUGUE* as part of a massive contrapuntal structure in modern style. Transcription and composition were always intimately intertwined in Busoni’s music; for him, every notation was the transcription of an abstract idea, and a work’s performance was also a transcription. After turning to a dissonant, experimental, style in the *Sonatina seconda*, BV 259 (1912), and the *NOCTURNE SYMPHONIQUE*, BV 262 (1912), he changed in 1915 to a much simpler style resulting from his new ideal of a “Young Classicism”. By this he meant “the mastery, the sifting and the turning into account of all the gains of previous experiments and their inclusion in strong and beautiful forms”. He longed for a “return to melody ... as the ruler of all voices and emotions” and called for a rejection of subjectivity and the “re-conquest of serenity”. From 1916 onwards he was mostly preoccupied with his opera *DOKTOR FAUST*, a synthesis of his mature compositions reworking passages from more than two dozen works dating back to 1912. Left incomplete at the composer’s death, this rarely performed but highly admired work it received its first performance in Dresden in 1925, in a completion by his disciple Philip Jarnach (two recent completions, by Antony Beaumont and Larry Sitsky, respectively, also exist).  The thematic catalogue by Kindermann has numbers for 303 original works and 115 transcriptions (the numbers given below do not match these figures for various reasons having to do in part with multiple versions). The original works consist of stage works (5; including *DOKTOR FAUST*), orchestra (22; including *BERCEUSE ÉLÉGIAQUE*, *TURANDOT SUITE*, and *RONDÒ ARLECCHINESCO*), piano and orchestra (14; including the CONCERTO FOR PIANO, ORCHESTRA, AND MALE CHORUS), voice(s) and orchestra or instrumental ensemble (20), chorus without accompaniment (18), chorus and instruments or orchestra (6), chamber ensemble, (43; including the Sonata in E minor for Violin and Piano [no. 2]), piano (149; including *ELEGIES*, *FANTASY AFTER JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH*, *AN DIE JUGEND*, *FANTASIA CONTRAPPUNTISTICA*, *INDIAN DIARY*, six Sonatinas, and *TOCCATA: PRELUDIO, FANTASIA, CIACONNA*), piano four hands (4), two pianos (5; including the *IMPROVISATION ON THE BACH CHORALE “WIE WOHL IST MIR, O FREUND DER SEELE”*), organ (2), voice and piano (42), unspecified medium (6). The cadenzas, transcriptions, and editions divide into orchestra (5), solo instruments and orchestra (25), chamber ensemble (7), piano solo (80; including cadenzas for piano concertos by Mozart and arrangements of organ works by Bach), two pianos (10), voice and piano (1), unspecified medium (1). Many original works and transcriptions are available online on [IMSLP/Petrucci Music Library](http://imslp.org/wiki/Category:Busoni,_Ferruccio). |
| Further reading:  (Beaumont)  (Couling)  (Dent)  (Roberge)  (Sitsky) |