

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 23 November 2022
7.30pm

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Kirill Gerstein piano

Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924)

Sonatina seconda K259 (1912)

Nach der Wendung from *Elegien* K249 (1907)

Sonatina No. 6 super *Carmen* K284 (1920)

Berceuse K252 (1909)

Toccata K287 (1921)

I. Preludio • II. Fantasia • III. Ciaccona

Interval

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Etudes d'exécution transcendante S139 (pub. 1852)

Preludio • Molto vivace • Paysage • Mazeppa •

Feux follets • Vision • Eroica • Wilde Jagd •

Ricordanza • Allegro agitato molto •

Harmonies du soir • Chasse-neige

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‘Truly Bach is the Alpha of pianoforte composition and Liszt the Omega’. — Busoni, 1900ⁱ

Initially ambivalent toward the music of **Liszt, Busoni** eventually became one of Liszt’s greatest admirers and promoters. He described his evolving attitudes in a letter to his wife in 1907: ‘Liszt I misunderstood at first, then I adored him, and then quietly admired Him’.ⁱⁱ Adolf Mirus, editor of the *Weimarische Zeitung*, also drew connections between Liszt and Busoni, when he stated in 1901 that ‘the musical sun, which set at Liszt’s death, shines again through Busoni’.ⁱⁱⁱ At that time, Busoni was not only Liszt’s successor in leading piano masterclasses for the Grand Duke Carl Alexander of Weimar in 1900 and 1901, but was also engaged in creating an edition of the piano works of Liszt. And while Liszt’s influence was evident in Busoni’s approach to piano pedagogy, it also extended to his use of sonorities and color at the piano. In addition, it had a profound and lasting impact on his compositional style that extended tonal possibilities and blended abstract ideas and musical tones.

Connections between Liszt’s *Etudes d’exécution transcendante* S139 and Busoni’s piano compositions are recognizable, even if Busoni went beyond Liszt’s chromaticism to experiment with bitonality, metatonicity and polyharmony. Busoni emulated Liszt’s use of thematic transformation, formal expansion, harmonic richness and timbral colour. In addition, he was inspired by Liszt’s exploration of ways music could express extra-musical ideas without explicit mimesis or narrative. It is noteworthy that most of Liszt’s *Etudes d’exécution transcendante* contain descriptive titles. In the 1852 version, only two pieces lacked titles (Nos. 2 and 10). To these two pieces, Busoni added his own descriptors in his edition, *Fusées* (‘Rockets’) and *Appassionata*, respectively.^{iv} Liszt’s Etude No. 5 in B flat, *Feux Follets* (‘Will-o’-the-wisp’), for instance, illustrates some of the features Busoni admired in Liszt’s writing, as fleet, virtuosic and chromatic figural passagework and scales flit up and down the piano, thereby revealing diverse harmonic and timbral colours, and without an explicit narrative.

Beginning with his collection of *Elegien* K249, Busoni struck out on a new compositional path that displays indebtedness to Liszt. The title of Busoni’s first elegy, *Nach der Wendung*, signifies his awareness of a personal compositional change in style. Busoni wrote: ‘The Elegies signify a milestone in my development. Almost a transformation.’^v Subtle shades of harmonic colour in through-composed form vascillate between C and F sharp over a descending chromatic bass line. The final elegy, the *Berceuse* K252, which is a lullaby,

contains gentle arpeggiated left-hand figures that support a slowly moving theme in F major. The piece gradually expands harmonically to feature bitonal and polyharmonic progressions that were part of Busoni’s vision of the future of music. These harmonic experiments reached new levels in the *Sonatina seconda* K259. Busoni described the piece as ‘senza tonalità’. It also contains extended sections without notated barlines, thereby exhibiting metric freedom too. The through-composed forms of some of the *Elegien* are augmented in the score of the *Sonatina seconda*, which sounds like a free-form fantasia comprised of ever changing textures and harmonic colours.

If Liszt was a master of virtuosity in his etudes and opera fantasies, Busoni’s own *Sonatina* No. 6 super *Carmen* K284 is decidedly more mystical and subdued. After preparing a critical-instructive edition of Liszt’s Fantasy on themes from *Don Giovanni* in 1917, Busoni started composing his own opera fantasy based on themes from Bizet’s opera, while drawing explicit connections between the two pieces in the preface to the edition.^{vi} Busoni pieced together various themes from *Carmen*, starting with the flamboyant market scene from act IV coupled with the fate theme, and the ending, unconventionally, expires quietly, as dark and brooding descending chromatic scales vacillate between F sharp major and A minor.

Poetic characteristics became less pronounced in the compositions Busoni wrote at the end of his career, as he leaned increasingly toward greater abstractness. This is evident in his *Toccata* K287, a multi-movement work with evident ties to another of Busoni’s compositional models, Bach. The *Toccata* is as reflective as it is forward looking. The *Preludio* quotes from one of Busoni’s earlier operas, *Die Brautwahl*, while the tripartite *Fantasia* is a shimmering exploration of chromaticism that, in certain sections, resembles a chromatic Bachian invention. The piece ends with a set of variations on a bass line featuring a sarabande rhythm that brings to mind Bach’s famous violin *Chaconne* from the Partita No. 2 BWV1004. The final variations, though, hint once again at Liszt’s influence through virtuosic broken chords and octave passagework. The *Toccata* is thus a piece with a foundation in Bach, even as its textures and colours were also informed by Liszt. Its overall unrelenting and stark affect, however, was characteristic of Busoni’s own age, as he sought to reconcile the musical genealogy of past and present into an unbroken circle.

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ⁱ Busoni, ‘Biographical and Critical Study Drawn up as a Foundation to the Proposed Collected Edition of Liszt’s Pianoforte Works’ [1900], in *The Essence and Oneness of Music*, trans. Rosamond Ley (London: Rockliff, 1957), 144.

ⁱⁱ Busoni, letter of 2 August 1907 to his wife, in Busoni, *Letters to his Wife* [1938], trans. Rosamond Ley (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 211.

ⁱⁱⁱ Adolf Mirus, ‘Die Meisterschule von Busoni zu Weimar’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 97 (1901): 464. Translation Mine.

^{iv} Liszt, *Complete Etudes for Solo Piano*. Series 1: Including the Transcendental Etudes, ed. Ferruccio Busoni [1911] (New York: Dover, 1988), x.

^v Busoni, letter of 7 May, 1908 to Robert Freund, in *Ferruccio Busoni: Selected Letters*, ed. and trans. Antony Beaumont (New York: Columbia, 1987), 88.

^{vi} Busoni, ed., *Reminiscences de ‘Don Juan’*, S. 418, by Liszt (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1918).