

BUSONI

Music for Two Pianos

Fantasia Contrappuntistica • Improvisation on a Bach Chorale

Allan Schiller and John Humphreys



Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924)

Music for Two Pianos

Ferruccio Busoni was universally regarded as one of the late-Romantic era's most remarkable piano virtuosi, and was undoubtedly one of its most fascinating composers, even if the searching intellectualism of much of his music only slowly won it an audience. Despite a self-conscious quest for compositional originality, Busoni had a keen awareness of the greatness of the Western musical tradition, and his engagement with the music of Bach not only produced some of the finest arrangements of that composer's music for piano, but also stimulated Busoni's own creative imagination in many other ways. As a writer too, he was both thought-provoking and influential. Essays such as *Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music* (1907) not only helped to define his own creative approach, but also laid down a philosophical challenge to his contemporaries. Given his penchant for verbal self-analysis, it is perhaps not surprising that the contents of this disc of his works for two pianos were effectively suggested by the composer himself. All the pieces are based on works by Mozart or Bach, with varying infusions of Busoni himself, ranging from modest alterations in the former to the creation of completely new compositions in the latter.

On finishing the arrangement of Mozart's surprisingly stern and weighty *Fantasie für eine Orgelwalze, K.608*, (Fantasy for a Barrel-Organ), in 1922, Busoni recommended that it could be included as a specific part of a larger programme of his two-piano works. Although the *Fantasy* is effectively an overture in the Italian style, consisting of fast-slow-fast sections, Busoni believed that it should, along with the deliciously sprightly finale of Mozart's *Piano Concerto in F major, K.459*, which he had already arranged for two pianos under the title *Duetto Concertante*, form the central section of a larger and rather unorthodox 'sonata'. The first movement of this sonata would be his *Improvisation on the Bach Chorale 'Wie wohl ist mir, o Freund der Seele'*, completed in 1916. This piece is based upon a set of variations that Busoni had originally

composed as the last movement of his second violin sonata in 1900. As he himself explained in a preface to the work, it had long been his intention to arrange the movement for two pianos, but when he finally came to the task his changed feelings about the music after sixteen years, and the new possibilities and restrictions created by replacing the violin part with one for a second piano resulted in a virtually independent composition, and one that reflected the increasing desire for clarity in his compositional approach.

As the final movement of this notional sonata, Busoni proposed the two-piano version of his magisterial *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*, no doubt thinking of the vast contrapuntal finale of Beethoven's 'Hammerklavier' *Sonata, Op.106*. The *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* is Busoni's most ambitious and hermetic piano work, and as a result tends to dwarf the pieces preceding it, despite its obvious connections with the 'Improvisation' first movement, for it too is based on Bach, and also originally appeared in another format. Busoni had long been fascinated with Bach's last, unfinished, masterpiece *The Art of Fugue*, and in 1910, while sailing to America on board the steamer 'Barbarossa', began a completion of the final, fragmentary fugue, which he eventually finished in New Orleans, in the midst of an American concert-tour. His intention was not to imitate Bach's own style, but rather to complete the piece using the technique of symmetrically invertible counterpoint developed by his friend the theorist Bernhard Ziehn. This allowed the combination of contrapuntal lines without harmonic restriction, and the resulting often dissonant sound is very unlike Bach's carefully-crafted harmonic-contrapuntal idiom. The work, now titled *Grosse Fuge*, was printed in a limited edition of a hundred copies, with a frontispiece depicting a very un-Barbarossa-like galleon with five sails enclosed within a decagon, Busoni's emblem for the form of the piece, which presented five contrapuntal subjects over ten sections.

Soon after finishing the fugue, however, the composer had the idea of lengthening it by including as a prelude a set of chorale variations on 'Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr' ('Honour be to God alone on high'), and this extended version was published later in 1910 as *Fantasia Contrappuntistica, Edizione definitiva* for solo piano. The form now comprised twelve sections: 1. Chorale-Variations 2. Fuga I 3. Fuga II 4. Fuga III 5. Intermezzo 6. Variatio I 7. Variatio II 8. Variatio III 9. Cadenza 10. Fuga IV 11. Chorale 12. Stretta.

Two years later a slightly simplified reworking was published as an *Edizione minore*, also for solo piano, but including a new introduction, a revision of his third *Elegy* for piano, based on the Chorale-Prelude 'Meine Seele bangt und hofft zu Dir' ('My soul fears and trusts in Thee').

Busoni was nevertheless still not finished with what he had come to see as his masterwork for piano. On publishing his edition of Bach in 1920 he included both the *Edizione definitiva* and *Edizione minore* of the *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*, making the former even more definitive (or less, according to your point of view) by revising the last two pages for pianistic

reasons. The idea of making yet another version, this time for two pianos, was also appealing ever more strongly, as the composer had come to realise that the *Fantasia* was 'a disproportionate task for ten fingers, whereas divided between twenty it would be easy and transparent for player and listener alike'. In 1921 he brought this idea to fruition, but what he produced, although based on the *Edizione definitiva*, and following the ground-plan detailed above, also represents something of an amalgamation of the two editions, with a new introduction using both choral preludes, and a new pictorial frontispiece representing the form of the work, this time based not on a galleon, but on the west entrance of the Palace of the Popes at Avignon. This version is indubitably the most satisfying and directly comprehensible of all, even for the vast majority of listeners who have no knowledge of the architecture of Papal palaces, for the writing for two pianos produces an admirable lucidity and balance in the part-writing that allows Busoni's cerebral, yet surprisingly thrilling, counterpoint to stand out in full relief.

Dr Kenneth Hamilton

Allan Schiller

Allan Schiller is one of Britain's best-known pianists. Born in Leeds, he studied at first with Fanny Waterman, making his début at the age of ten in a Mozart concerto with the Hallé Orchestra conducted by Sir John Barbirolli. He later studied with Denis Matthews and became the first British pianist to be awarded a scholarship to study in Moscow with Victor Merzhanov. He has played with every major British orchestra, broadcasts frequently on BBC Radio 3, has performed at the Edinburgh Festival and the BBC Proms, and has made many successful compact disc recordings. Allan Schiller is widely regarded as one of the finest Mozartians of his generation.

John Humphreys

John Humphreys studied at the Royal Academy of Music under John Hunt and Harold Rubens and on an Austrian Government Scholarship in Vienna. He made his Wigmore Hall début in 1972 with Busoni's rarely heard solo version of the *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* and since then has performed extensively throughout Britain and abroad. He is currently Assistant Head of Keyboard Studies at Birmingham Conservatoire and in 1998 was awarded the ARAM from the Royal Academy of Music. He and Allan Schiller have been playing together for thirty years.

"...playing of fastidious poetry and elegance." – *The Daily Telegraph*



John Humphreys (left) and Allan Schiller (right)



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Playing Time
58:04

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Booklet notes in English

Ferruccio Busoni is universally regarded as one of the twentieth century's most remarkable piano virtuosos and important composers. All of the pieces on this recording are based on works by Mozart or Bach, with Busoni's own input ranging from modest alterations to completely new compositions. The disc includes a two-piano version of his most ambitious piano work, the magisterial *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*, which the composer described as 'a disproportionate task for ten fingers, whereas divided between twenty it would be easy and transparent for player and listener alike'.

**Ferruccio
BUSONI**
(1866-1924)

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| 1 | Fantasia Contrappuntistica (1922) | 27:40 |
| 2 | Improvisation on the Bach Chorale
'Wie wohl ist mir, o Freund der Seele' | 14:41 |
| 3 | Fantasia für eine Orgelwalze (Mozart/Busoni) | 8:19 |
| 4 | Duettino Concertante nach Mozart | 7:23 |

Allan Schiller and John Humphreys, Pianos

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Producer: Chris Wines • Engineer: Steve Portnoi • Associate editor: Chris Steward

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(Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome / www.bridgeman.co.uk)