

BUSONI THE MUSICIAN

BY GUIDO GATTI

IT has been said that the death of Ferruccio Busoni deprived us of one of the world's greatest pianists. This judgment is only part of the truth, for although I think Busoni is second to none of the great piano virtuosos from Liszt to Rubinstein, virtuosity was not his chief distinction. He was a composer before he was a pianist, and never ceased his creative activity even in the years of his most intensive concert appearances.

What he asked of the public was to be judged as a complete artistic personality. That unity which in his last years he made the essential attribute of music, he desired them above all to recognize in himself. Pianist, orchestral director, composer, editor, transcriber, judge of aesthetic problems, poet, painter—none of these activities sprang from nor took the form of dilettantism. They were the various aspects of a single aesthetic consciousness, the many expressions of a single countenance.

Certainly Busoni was an exceptional performer-interpreter. His conquest and absolute control of the instrument was so complete that one eventually lost sight of technique. He destroyed the dividing line which, even in the case of the best performers, is perceived between performance and interpretation, between faithful reproduction of the letter of the composition and re-creation of the work of art, the product of the spirit. He overcame all the obstacles of form and mechanics which each composition contains. He sought to divine just what was felt at the moment of creation, and to take account of those additional meanings which the artist had been unable to transfer to the page because of the imperfections of instrument and of notation. Hearing him play, the sensitive critic felt that a sure and powerful intuition had vivified music whose form was rigid and changeless only in appearance.

But however great as an interpreter, he was, let me repeat, no less great as a musician. Busoni had so felicitous and rich a musical

nature that one inevitably turns for a parallel to Mozart. I shall not here attempt a comparison between the two. What I mean to emphasize is that an affinity seems traceable if we discount the cultural accumulations and refinements of aesthetic taste which characterize our era, and think of the *quality* of Busoni's music, of the essence of his creative impulse, of the form his ideas assumed when they were first expressed in music. It is an affinity instinctive at the outset, which gradually becomes more conscious and decided; the mind discerns, justifies, confirms and synthesizes what the spirit has felt. All the works of Busoni, from the *Sonata in E-minor* for the violin to those pages which we know of *Dr. Faust*, show us uninterrupted progress toward what Busoni called "the new classicism." This might be characterized as a return to the Mozartian spirit, to the purifying serenity in the smile of the divine youth, to a more intimate feeling for the essence and unity of music.

Naturally Busoni carefully refrained from preaching a pure and simple return to the forms of the past: he was too wise to attempt one of those archeological exercises that find their apostles in every twilight period of art. To have his eye fixed upon Mozart meant, for Busoni, to build himself a modern style which would have no other function or end than to express purely musical states of soul, withdrawn from sentiment. He did not admit that one kind of music can be distinguished from another according to its purpose.

"Music," he wrote, "remains nothing but music, regardless of the place or form in which we find it." Such a doctrine of the autonomy of music denies all possibility of the collaboration or integration of two arts: specifically, in the case of works composed for the theatre. And because he held this theory regarding the opera, Busoni naturally encountered serious opposition. His essay *On the Opera*, which took the form of a preface to *Dr. Faust*, aroused discussion that was more or less critical but always interesting.

Yet no one can deny that his ideas have perfect coherence. On the one hand he opposed *sensibilismo*, which he considered to be uncontrolled abandonment to the sentimental impulse, and on the other he renounced formulas and thematic developments in favor

of melody freed from the influence of harmony, of melody which by the very energy of its movement might break the resistance of chords and decisively assert its own lines. He thus placed himself among the anti-Wagnerians and at the same time kept aloof from the impressionists, in whom, even more than in Wagner, he felt an abdication of the rights of music. In this respect he was a precursor of the most reasonable and promising aesthetic movements of today.

His music had freed itself from every suggestion of form in the academic sense. His works cannot be explained by commentaries as if they were sermons. They have no titles. All the product of his last years might be assembled under the simple heading: "Music by Ferruccio Busoni."

At times his work is so abstract that it is not characterized by the peculiarities of any particular instrument. His contrapuntal *Fantasy*, based on the last incomplete fugue in Bach's *Art of the Fugue* is published for one and for two pianos, but he himself tells us that he did not write it for any particular instrument, but conceived it merely as music. So indeed it appears to anyone who examines it. And just as the melodic idea is entirely independent of timbre, it is also independent of tonality. At the moment of its creation it very evidently had no connection with any tonality.

For so lively a spirit lazily to adopt a formula, to reproduce continually the same idea, or to stop at the solution of the first problem, meant stagnation and death. I am thinking of that passage in *Le Jardin d'Epicure*, where Anatole France writes: "*Une chose surtout donne de l'attrait à la pensée des hommes: c'est l'inquiétude. Un esprit qui n'est point anxieux m'irrite et m'ennuie.*" To the last day of his life Busoni was concerned with problems of his art. Restless straining toward an ideal did not mean a search for new things at any cost and a systematic rejection of the old, but the attainment of a perfection which he regarded as the completion of his own personality. "He who produces, in art, desires only the completion of the thing he makes. Implicit in his work there is always the idea of a new project; and this, in fact, is what distinguishes production from imitation."