

BUSONI—THEN AND NOW

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EARLY in the twenties, a group of pupils of Franz Schreker, then newly appointed director and chief teacher of composition at the State Academy of Music in Berlin, began to attend the famous round table gatherings held almost daily after lunch in Ferruccio Busoni's house. One day, the host brought their presence to the attention of his guests: "What an alert group of youngsters these pupils of Schreker are! And they come to see me. Do you think my students would ever go to see Schreker?" Naturally we young fellows swallowed the compliment with satisfaction, duly noting that it was not meant to flatter our teacher.

This was not only a typical Busoni pin-prick, beautifully planned and administered: it also made clear what importance he attributed to himself as an influence. He, it implied, was the one to be listened to for enlightenment on the future of art, the higher significance of trends of the period.

Busoni was well aware that he was far more than a pianist of world fame, and even more than a creative musician. He was a philosopher forging new principles and doctrines. At his afternoon meetings, musicians were in a minority. Painters, writers, poets, architects, scientists and a large number of miscellaneous intellectuals were all attracted by the fireworks of his fascinating soliloquy which would go on for an hour or more, before he retired ceremoniously to the inner sanctum, obviously to attend to his creative work proper. The irresistible charm of Busoni's personality was due in part to composite traits which seemed at variance with each other. Although he constantly held forth against the monstrosities of Germanic thought, he was no less German than Nietzsche who had done likewise. On the other hand, his manifest pleasure in ceremonial display revealed him clearly as the Mediterranean that he was by birth, making a picturesque impression in the shabby, matter-of-fact atmosphere of post-war Germany. Although everything about Busoni seemed excitingly avant-garde — a huge and somewhat alarming futurist painting covered one of his walls almost completely, as if to dispel any doubts in this respect — one felt at times that one was in the company of a Venetian grandee who



FERRUCCIO BUSONI
from the drawing in
The Albertina, Vienna
by MAXIMILIAN MOPP

had miraculously survived from Casanova's days. And there was a Hogarthian touch in the slightly studied carelessness of the living room and in the amazing array of human curiosities that hovered moth-like around the strong light that emanated from Busoni's fiery spirit.

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The main theme of Busoni's preaching has become, in some form or other, the creed of the vast majority of contemporary musicians. Yet most of them know little about the originator of their gospel, because his doctrine has taken on a significance quite different from what he had expected. The keynote of his esthetic discourse was neo-classicism, and neo-classicism, in many disguises and ramifications, certainly dominates today's musical landscape. When Busoni expounded his idea of the "new classicism" (Neue Klassizität), he was actuated by a passionate aversion to the exuberant romanticism of the late nineteenth century. He found biting words for Wagner's pompous nebulosity, his lack of balance, shape and poise; he never tired of warning his disciples against indulgence in the over-expressive style. The monument which he chose to set up against the invasion of post-romantic vagueness was Mozart. Clarity of design, incisiveness of thought, economy of resources, these were the principles to which he wanted zealous adherence.

This attitude represented a reaction against even his own past. Busoni had studied in Austria and Germany in the "darkest" period of rampant romanticism; his earlier compositions clearly show traces of this influence. Later, through Verdi's *Falstaff*, he discovered his own "Italian-ness" and tried hard to revitalize in himself those qualities he believed to be typically Latin. He did not seem to realize how genuinely romantic was this nostalgia for lost values, but it is quite characteristic that Busoni's only attempt to settle in Italy was brief and distinctly unsuccessful. Despite his advocacy of Latin clarity and his criticism of Teutonic obtuseness, he remained definitely at home in Germany where everybody expected an outstanding, original spirit to be in permanent and articulate opposition to something.

Insofar as Busoni's late compositions can be considered practical demonstrations of neo-classicism, as he conceived it, they appear to be based on a very sophisticated regression to certain classicist gestures which at times have the character of carefully contrived replicas of bygone styles. Busoni, as a composer, was not blessed with a spontaneously streaming, rich and immediate creative vein. This explains why the example that he set was soon forgotten, although the principle which animated his later writings was adopted – probably unconsciously – by another composer of infinitely greater vitality, Igor Stravinsky. The neo-classicist practice of

both men has clearly surrealistic traits; the classical figures they conjured up seem ghosts walking about in what must be, to them, incomprehensible surroundings. The classical elements are not taken at their face value. They are treated rather like excavated fragments, used with quotation marks, set in strange and startling proximity to heterogeneous materials. Incidentally, surrealism in music is much more characteristic of the very latest phase of romanticism than of more recent phenomena. It can be found in Mahler, who was a contemporary of Busoni.

Among Busoni's prose papers there is a very brief essay which illustrates, perhaps more clearly than many of his compositions, what he meant by neo-classicism. It is an elaborate description of a cigar box, couched in Goethe's Sunday best and presented as a paradigm of the new spirit. There is a sovereign disregard for the subject-matter whose apparent futility is ennobled and made worthy of literary immortality by supreme refinement of treatment, a treatment of serene dignity, Olympian poise and complete absence of emotionalism. Busoni here approaches the literary realm over which Thomas Mann is now uncontested ruler.

From this angle, Busoni's neo-classic practice, appears a very complex phenomenon, a sort of "second simplicity," fraught with hidden meanings and literary allusions. It comes far short of revealing that primitive structure which his theory suggested to some of his followers. Towards the end of his life, he seemed to care little about consistently composing within the neo-classicist doctrine. His unfinished opera, *Doktor Faustus*, is the dignified, independent utterance of a great artist, free from the bonds of esthetic speculation. Unfortunately, it too suffers from that lack of vitality which has served as an internal check upon Busoni's creative power.

Busoni's doctrine, through its spectacular realization in Stravinsky, has acquired a unique ascendancy over generations of post-war composers, but in a sense quite different from what is indicated in Busoni's own late compositions. The general decline of intellectual capacity which characterizes the period between the two wars, as we can clearly see today, has induced countless artists to follow the line of least resistance and to embrace neo-classicism as a method permitting them to use conventional clichés with impunity. Thus we are largely left with regression, without even the doubtful benefit of sophistication, as neo-classicism deteriorates into primitivism, pure and simple.

As for Busoni, who had a brilliant mind, of extraordinary intellectual voltage, it is fitting that he should be little known at present, lest he be quoted as the originator of a way of thinking which, against his will, has become a vehicle of reaction.