



# A TITAN ABROAD

As a pianist and composer, Ferruccio Busoni bestrode the musical world like a Colossus. Yet he baffled many, and eluded more. *Jeremy Siepmann* joins seven eminent advocates to explore the challenges he posed



THE PANEL (clockwise from top left): Peter Donohoe, Carlo Grante, Wolf Harden, Garrick Ohlsson, Jeni Slotchiver, Murray McLachlan and Marc-André Hamelin

PETER DONOHOE © SUSSIE AHLBURG

**JEREMY SIEPMANN:** Though he was one of the most celebrated figures of his day, Busoni's star, amazingly, is still in the ascendant. Gathered here to discuss him are some of his foremost – and most authoritative – champions, from the UK (Peter Donohoe, Murray McLachlan), the US (Garrick Ohlsson, Jeni Slotchiver), Germany (Wolf Harden), Italy (Carlo Grante) and Canada (Marc-André Hamelin). Wolf Harden has recorded the complete piano works, Jeni Slotchiver is well on her way to doing likewise, and Carlo Grante and Murray McLachlan play most if not all of the repertoire. What, then, attracts them so to Busoni (and while we're at it, how did they get hooked)?

**JENI SLOTCHIVER:** As a young musician I was stunned by the exquisite pianistic writing, the strands of hauntingly familiar melodies, woven ghostlike throughout the stream-of-consciousness texture, the wealth of harmonic colour, the textural variety, and the magical effects when fingers took to keyboard. The writing was definitely 20<sup>th</sup> century, the emancipation of the dissonance was obvious, but here was a master contrapuntist as well.

**WOLF HARDEN:** It happened for me when I was 16 and studying the arrangement of the Bach Chaconne. And I too was deeply impressed. I became curious about this composer-pianist-teacher-reader-writer-painter. Today I'm still fascinated by the *vitality* of his music, the outstanding *seriousness* of every note he composed (nothing, even in the early pieces, is written just to impress), and by his personal life. In music, I'm fascinated by what he did as a teacher (his *Klavierübung* should be a must in every music school) and as a conductor. And last but not least, I'm fascinated by the personality of the man, as I've learned it from the biographies and his letters: the man who loved to laugh (many people described him as 'Homerian'), who couldn't live without a big city and big dogs – most photos of him feature a (*very* big) dog!

**GARRICK OHLSSON:** For as long as I can remember, I've been infused with the lore and music of Busoni. I never had any idea that this was unusual. By the age of 12, I'd played the Christmas Sonatina and was learning Bach from Busoni editions. At 13, I began to study at Juilliard with the eminent Sascha Gorodnitzki, who informed me that the Busoni-ised opening

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of Bach's C minor Partita was completely unacceptable to 1963 jury sensibilities. However, he did have me learn the Liszt-Busoni *Campanella* that year. I played the Second Sonatina in 1966. And that same year I heard the Cleveland Orchestra with George Szell and pianist Pietro Scarpini at Carnegie Hall giving what may have been the New York premiere of the Busoni Concerto. I was completely knocked out by the more-than-Tchaikovsky first entrance of the piano and the ensuing virtuosity, beauty and over-the-top grandeur.

**MURRAY McLACHLAN:** His music has everything – and all presented with white-hot integrity, nobility and truth. There's nothing of the charlatan here, never

century piano music. He talked to me a lot about the works and writings of Busoni, and I became fascinated by the man and his music. But I can't say I was exactly hooked. We ended up deciding that I would play the Elegies, and I've continued to try to like them ever since. It was the Piano Concerto, though, that fired my enthusiasm most of all, and still does. But I think we're going to be talking about that later, so I won't say any more about that just yet.

**JS:** How would you describe his piano music to someone who didn't know it?

**SLOTCHIVER:** I rather like his own description, from 1922: 'My style takes everyone aback. Too young for the old,

use of harmonic language: key structure and the symbolism therein, combined with his technique of free polyphony and free tonality; the seventh is his use of borrowed fragments; and the last is his inventive use of the pedals. Busoni conceals his methods of transformation. This is an important aspect of the piano writing. The compositions sound timeless and the metamorphosis is invisible – startlingly so. We're often not sure how a beautiful melody has become transformed through an extreme range of moods, and now presents a completely different emotional experience. On the subject of free polyphony, his harmony can sound very traditional and at the same time it disarms us by defining the term 'other-worldly'. This also accounts for the feeling of timelessness and formlessness in his compositions.

**HARDEN:** Like Liszt, Busoni was one of the most intelligent and successful of all piano composers: everything he wrote for the piano fits the instrument – even the transcriptions of his own works (the chamber orchestra version of the Berceuse is incredible; full of beautiful colours and touching chords. But even on the piano, it remains fascinating music). Today, most people who speak about Busoni are thinking of the later Busoni, after the 'turning' marked by the Elegies and the Second Violin Sonata. I think this isn't helpful to an understanding of the whole Busoni. Liszt was a huge influence on the young Busoni, but more important was the influence of Brahms and, of course, Bach and Mozart. Busoni didn't regard composition as a fixed statement – even the writing of notes, after all, is a transcription of ideas. *That's* why there wasn't so much difference, for him, between his 'original' works, his Bach (and other) arrangements, and the transcriptions of his own works. To get an impression of this, I suggest everyone study the Fantasia on JS Bach, an amazing hybrid between the Bach cantatas and Busoni's own expression. This is one of the most heartbreaking pieces of music I know.

**McLACHLAN:** You can forget about classifications as we think of them for all other composers. You have to take transcriptions, performance editions, 'original compositions' variations and even



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anything pretentious. Just beautiful music, all the more passionate and exciting for avoiding the musical equivalent of instant gratification. It's music that continues to touch you, to stretch the imagination, take you to spiritual and emotional heights that are all the more elated for not having *appeared* to be there at all on first, second or even third re-hearings.

**PETER DONOHOE:** I first came across Busoni's music in the late 1970s when I was approached by a University of Birmingham lecturer – John CG Waterhouse – to prepare a recital programme based on Italian 20th-

insufficiently mindless for the young, it constitutes a clear-cut chapter in the disorder of our times. It will hold its own better, therefore, with subsequently fluctuating later generations?

**JS:** I like that too. But how would you describe it?

**SLOTCHIVER:** I generally describe eight traits. The first three are Busoni's compositional triumvirate, Bach-Mozart-Liszt; the fourth is his preoccupation with bells; the fifth covers the pre-eminence he gives to long lyrical lines; the sixth is his

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descriptions of Busoni's own performances as being one and the same thing – part of the 'oneness of music.' He wanted music to rise above egotistical classification and pigeonholing. What you get with Busoni is similar to the visions Faust conjures up in the Parma scene of *Doktor Faust*; the image of Beethoven, Mozart, Liszt or Bach will be there, but it will also have the features of Busoni. He seems to have taken the whole universe of music and used his chief vehicle of expression, the piano, as a means of exploring it.

**OHLSSON:** As some colleagues have pointed out, with Busoni's name on a programme, you never know what style or musical language to expect. It could be anything from a transcription/arrangement to neoclassicism to full-blown Romantic to atonality. Also, Busoni, for all his demonic pianism, didn't play or compose to the gallery. He was too advanced, too patrician and 'artistic' to write applause lines. Sometimes the public doesn't know what to make of his enigmatic music, with its seriousness and frequent soft endings.

**JS: Why does he remain so little known?**

**SLOTCHIVER:** I think it bothers a lot of people that Busoni didn't belong to any school or movement, hence the misconception that he had 'no discernable style.' He was the first formidable 20th-century composer to inherit *all* styles. His compositions are a synthesis of past and future – and his incorporation of new experiments often leaves listeners confused.

**HARDEN:** Another problem, perhaps, is the sheer length of some of his compositions: the Piano Concerto is about 75 minutes, the Elegies as a cycle last around 40 minutes, the Fantasia Contrappuntistica 30 minutes plus. On the other hand, many pieces average around 10 minutes or shorter, so who knows.

**McLACHLAN:** He certainly didn't make things easy for himself. He assumes that listeners have an erudition that encompasses knowledge of ETA Hoffmann and Bach's *The Art of Fugue*, and so on. He never compromised. In his enormous struggle to push his proverbial boulder to the top of the

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**MURRAY McLACHLAN**

hill, he spurned any short cuts. For him, art was a quasi-sacred endeavour. If you want to be a Busoni disciple, you need to respect the struggle he went through in order to arrive where he did.

**MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN:** Part of the answer lies in the very peculiar harmonic language he adopted in his later works (which are also his most significant). He was constantly pushing boundaries. This often resulted in uneasy, unusual atmospheres, far from anything that could be reasonably described as being 'in popular taste.' I find no end of fascination in this kind of language, but sometimes it puzzles even me; one example is his *Tanzwalzer*, which I find perfectly charming until the last two pages, which for no apparent reason start exploring rather strange areas which make, to my mind, a disappointing close to an otherwise lovely piece.

**JS: What are the major challenges he poses to the pianist?**

**SLOTCHIVER:** You can't be just a pianist to interpret and perform Busoni. He's constantly asking us to experiment; to orchestrate, to investigate, to colour, to experience. A formidable physical technique is only the beginning. One also needs the visionary capacity to sense and respond to new textures, sonorities and expressive demands. This isn't music for the athlete alone. Quiet and mysterious undulations might pose obvious problems for the hands and arms, but without a vital *imagination*, they can't convey the sheer *beauty* of Busoni's compositions. Besides the obvious physical difficulties, Busoni searched for a pure 'celestial' music, which could convey the feeling-state of the 'essence of music.'

**HARDEN:** Busoni forces the player to extremes in every aspect of pianism. First

of all, you need to be in very good physical condition. At the end of the Toccata's 'Preludio,' for instance, the crossover of the hands spans four octaves. Even with long arms, it's hard to stay in control! And an absolute must is that the hands be well trained in extensions. The chords are often spread very wide (and arpeggiation, especially in the Organ Toccata transcriptions, is strictly forbidden). Most of his compositions are written in a very polyphonic style, so you need great clarity to show the geometry of the music. And as Jeni has said, he was also fascinated by the use of the pedals – all three of course – and indeed, their proper use can be absolutely decisive.

**McLACHLAN:** You need to have enormous hands and great dexterity for most of the major works. You need to hold large structures together, have a huge range of colours and be able to orchestrate as well as to colour. If you play from memory the polyphonic demands can make the task very onerous. You also need great rhythmic discipline, and 'lateral thinking' with regard to choices of fingering. You need to be able to 'compose' within the very sparsely marked scores. Compared with other composers, Busoni often gives fewer indications of dynamics, articulation and so on.

**CARLO GRANTE:** Busoni's piano writing, although 'fitting the hand' very well, actually uses rather few keyboard patterns, though there are many sequences and reiterations. But the latter often span the 12 tones in a peculiar way, covering diverse triadic harmonies (with apparently the same contour throughout) in a short span of time. Often the texture is multi-layered, more in terms of sonic planes than of pure counterpoint, but the music must nevertheless sound crystal-clear and transparent. The performer's task, rather than 'expressing,' is to 'convey' ideas in a

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symbolic manner, capturing the listener's own intuition of what's hidden, or hinted at, in the music.

**JS:** To what extent (and how) did he expand the boundaries of virtuosity?

**McLACHLAN:** In all directions! You only need to look at the (unabbreviated) version of the *Klavierübung* to see this, to see the way in which he takes already existing material and adds additional exercises, new transcriptions and etudes. In terms of arpeggios alone, and his transcendental fingerings, there's so much that's new with Busoni. With the *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*, for instance, we have polyphony as never before. Busoni's late works moved virtuosity forward uniquely, by *compressing* it. In works such as the *Perpetuum Mobile* and the Third Sonata, the athletic prowess is all the more demanding for requiring extreme *economy* of technique.

**SLOTCHIVER:** Absolutely. Perhaps the most essentially challenging aspect for the pianist is the ability to convey a vastly profound state of feeling with very few gestures. With Busoni, light compositions are shadowed, while dark compositions contain some hidden joy or serenity. In these very subtle ways, too, he expanded the boundaries of virtuosity.

**HARDEN:** Busoni came up with an entirely new and individual conception of piano sonority, combining a very 'full handed' texture – like Brahms in his Paganini Variations and Second Piano Concerto – with a Lisztian 'technicolour' including some amazing orchestral effects (the Third Elegy, for example, has a very difficult tremolo which comes close to a perfect illusion of strings and wind). He also demands a perfect feeling for distances: almost always, you have to control the entire keyboard. Sometimes, I think, he really reaches the outer limit of human capabilities on the piano.

**JS:** Could he, among many other things, be described as a master of expressive structure?

**MCLACHLAN:** I think that's a very perceptive way of putting it indeed. It was

his goal. He regarded the free, fantasia sections of Bach's Organ Toccatas as among the greatest moments in all of Bach.

**SLOTCHIVER:** Busoni's architecture had to serve the ideas within. As he matured, the forms became increasingly economical, enabling him to say so much with so little. That's his genius. When he rewrote his Variations on a Chopin Prelude, his main revision was of the form itself. He condensed the material and intensified the contrasts by changing the keys, and altering the hard, formalistic structure.

**GRANTE:** His mastery of form does have those archetypes of theme and section formation typical of the German classical tradition, but some are a direct derivation of Italian opera's sectional organisation of arias, recitatives, and so forth. But Busoni's proportions are often *philosophical*, as perceived subjectively by his inner eye. His own judgement relates more, I think, to conceptual proportions than metrical ones.

**JS:** The most performed and recorded of all his major works is the huge concerto for piano, orchestra and male



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**chorus, which all of you have performed and most of you have recorded. Two questions: how representative is this of Busoni and why, as well as the most played, is it also the most reviled? Even that great Busonian Alfred Brendel has described it as ‘monstrously overwritten.’**

**OHLSSON:** Given what Busoni is trying to achieve in this hyper-late-Romantic, Gurrelieder-Zemlinsky-Mahleresque sprawling work, I have to disagree with our distinguished colleague. Part of the problem might be the gargantuan nature of Busoni, who himself contained worlds, not the least of which is being fully and genuinely both Italian and German in an age much less homogenised than our own. I don't see how he could have written the concerto in a more modestly concise way and still achieved its range and grandeur. The concerto is representative of Busoni the heir of Liszt and the heir of all late Romanticism, especially with reference to the Brahms concertos, particularly No 2, criticised in its own day as being overwritten; too symphonic, too chamber-like and too much of a piano obbligato.

**McLACHLAN:** People complain about the ‘pastiche’ nature of this huge work, but I always remind them to look at the enormous unifying force that is the piano part! It functions not as an egotistical barnstorming device at all, but rather as a latter-day continuo instrument. As it accompanies, comments, fills in and weaves around textures, it presents a voice that's entirely Busoni's. And it stands as a unique testament to his phenomenal understanding of the instrument, and the way in which he could move pianism forward. Look, for instance, among many other things, at the fantastic scale writing; the amazing runs and cascades of colour.

**HAMELIN:** I discovered the concerto in 1983. When I think back, I can easily relive my first impression of the opening tutti and my immediate sense of wonder that this profoundly beautiful music wasn't better known and played more often. Four minutes in, with the piano entrance, I got a partial answer. A later examination of the score – almost unobtainable at

the time – more than demonstrated the Herculean hurdles that pianists are faced with in this vast drama. It's a very mature work, but also the work of a young man, with youthful excesses still notable in the musical discourse. But I deeply loved this monster of a piece, and I simply had to play it. It's been interesting to see how it divides listeners; those who love it place it among the greatest musical creations ever written, while others are apt to ridicule what they see as hyper-bloated indulgence – there's just very little middle ground! I suspect the work has a much better chance of succeeding in the listener's mind if all preconceptions of a piano concerto are set aside. All five movements differ considerably from traditional moulds, structurally speaking, and the addition of a chorus in the last movement, which more often than not causes derision, was to Busoni the only conceivable way to wrap things up in a suitably meaningful way. If the work is listened to with a symphonic perspective rather than that of a concerto, it stands a much better chance and will unobtrusively reveal its many beauties.

**DONOHUE:** It's a fantastically extravagant and all-encompassing work, and I really love playing it. That said, it's not without its longeurs. The third movement is around ten minutes too long for its own good, and I could very happily do without the overblown and over-written central section, which goes nowhere. But that doesn't detract from those uniquely beautiful sections that surround it. The Parsifal-style nature of the first main section (after the long introduction) is one of the most movingly beautiful passages in the entire concerto repertoire. The opening tutti and the coda of the first movement are sublimely moving, the opening piano entrance is quite astonishingly impressive and magisterial, and the development is uniquely electric in its emotional surge and direction. But the only movement about which I have no reservations at all is the extraordinary fourth movement – All'Italiana. Nothing in the piano concerto repertoire comes near it for the controlled building of excitement, the sheer animal uninhibited ludicrousness of it! So, perhaps not the greatest piano concerto of the early 20th

century, but certainly one of its irresistible and stunningly impressive flawed ones.

**JS:** Busoni was a Protean figure: a multi-faceted genius whose achievements regularly produced stunned incredulity. Even the most dispassionate account of him could arouse a measure of suspicion, or at least circumspection. As all our guests have testified, Busoni's artistic integrity was as incorruptible as his artistry was incomparable. Today, appropriately, we've concentrated mainly on his art and influence as a composer – appropriate because this is far and away his greatest legacy. But for many, irrespective of their response to him as a composer, he was also by a wide margin the most transfiguring and illuminating performer they had ever heard. His recordings are few and unrepresentative. The truest clue, however, to the splendour, the nobility, the sheer immensity of his pianism lies not in the paucity of sounds that he left us but in the vast quantity of notes that he wrote. There, and only there, do we find the whole man. ♪

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