

Reprintable only with permission from the author.

Busoni Quartet #2

Ferruccio Busoni defies categorization as much as any figure in the music world of the late 19th century. On the one hand, he was pre-eminent among concert pianists of his time, having a profound influence on following generations; on the other, he was also influential as a composer and composition teacher, including among his many students Edgard Varèse, Percy Grainger and Kurt Weill. An ethnic Italian born in Tuscany, Busoni was ultimately a citizen of the world, living his life in Austria, Finland and the United States before settling in Berlin. And he was at once both more radical and more conservative than the musical establishment of his time: he is famous for his devotion to and study of the work of Bach, but also noted for a manifesto-like essay he wrote in 1907, where he welcomed the coming of a new avant-garde, exhorted his fellow composers to throw out the old laws, and predicted the division of the octave into more than twelve tones. Throughout his life he was a champion of contemporary music.

In the realm of chamber music, Busoni's name is not a common sight. The Second Quartet dates from 1887, when Busoni was 21 and was studying in Leipzig. This is not the work of a torch-bearing ideologist just yet; rather we hear the work of a brilliant young creative mind mulling over several powerful currents from the musical past. The quartet's richly polyphonic textures reflect the composer's deep study of Bach; its driving, indomitable spirit recalls Beethoven in many places; and several more intimate details evoke the work of Schumann, who was the teacher of Karl Reinecke, Busoni's own teacher in Leipzig. At the same time, however, Busoni grapples with the spirit of his own times. He is at ease writing in an extremely chromatic style, foreshadowing the work of younger contemporaries such as Reger and Zemlinsky. Also, like many late-Romantic composers, he unifies the work by having themes from earlier movements reappear in later ones, giving the piece a "cyclical" quality; and by explicitly modeling one movement's tempo upon its predecessor's, in the case of the second and third movements.

The first movement opens with three monolithic chords. What follows is a fairly substantial movement, characterized by rhythmic strength and drive, as well as intricate contrapuntal activity between the voices. The movement is an unmistakable homage to Brahms' First Quartet, recalling not only the meter and textures of that movement but its essentially symphonic scope; however, Busoni injects a certain bravura exuberance into his writing, in preference to Brahms' tighter reasoning. The second movement, an Andante, opens with a simple, almost rustic exchange between the cello and the violins, setting the

stage for a more transparently textured movement. This section is succeeded by a warmer, more chorale-like theme in the lower three instruments, answered in rhapsodic triplets by the first violin. After this is developed, a sudden ominous appearance of the opening melody from the first movement, like a bad memory, halts all progress for an instant; it is only gradually that the music can feel its way back to its own material and come to a conclusion. The third movement, a rapid scherzo, carries more than a hint of the language of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in its d minor octaves and exciting drive. The contrasting Trio section is much more intimate, with a Schumannesque dreaminess, a lovely foil to the lightning of the main section. A slow and somber passage opens the last movement; perhaps we hear another Beethoven homage here, Busoni the student paging through the older composer's opus 18 #6 or opus 135 quartet. The main body of the movement moves to D major, and is jovial and busy, brimming with contrapuntal games. Various barriers confront the music's forward progress late in the movement, including the return of the slow, opening material (again, recalling Beethoven's style), and a fierce attack from the minor theme that opened the first movement; but ultimately a dramatic accelerando overcomes these difficulties, and the movement rockets to a euphoric conclusion.

Note by Misha Amory