



Ferruccio Busoni
Complete Piano Transcriptions after J.S. Bach

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The complete Piano Transcriptions of keyboard music by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Track-list

Disc 1

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|---|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| 1 | Prelude and Fugue in D major, BWV 532, BV B 20 – I. Prelude | 06:23:59 |
| 2 | Prelude and Fugue in D major, BWV 532, BV B 20 – II. Fugue | 09:07:76 |
| 3 | Prelude and Fugue in E flat major, BWV 552, BV B 22 – I. Prelude | 12:59:25 |
| 4 | Prelude and Fugue in E flat major, BWV 552, BV B 22 – II. Fugue | 08:40:83 |
| 5 | Toccata in C major, BWV 564, BV B 29 – I. Preludio, quasi improvvisando | 06:58:81 |
| 6 | Toccata in C major, BWV 564, BV B 29 – II. Intermezzo, Adagio | 06:34:15 |
| 7 | Toccata in C major, BWV 564, BV B 29 – III. Fugue | 06:44:34 |
| 8 | Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV 565, BV B 29 – I. Toccata | 03:10:68 |
| 9 | Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV 565, BV B 29 – II. Fugue | 07:49:26 |

Disc 2

- | | | |
|-------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| 1 | Chaconne from Partita No. 2 for violin in D minor, BWV 1004, BV B 24 | 16:22:71 |
| | Ten Chorale-Preludes: | |
| 2 | – I. Komm, Gott Schoepfer, BWV 667, BV B 27 | 02:46:39 |
| 3 | – II. Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, BWV 645, BV B 27 | 04:43:97 |
| 4 | – III. Num komm' der Heiden Heiland, BWV 659, BV B 27 | 05:37:04 |
| 5 | – IV. Nun freut euch, lieben Christen, BWV 734, BV B 27 | 02:04:54 |
| 6 | – V. Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ, BWV 639, BV B 27 | 03:32:81 |
| 7 | – VI. Herr Gott, nun schliess den Himmel auf, BWV 617, BV B 27 | 02:54:58 |
| 8 | – VIIa. Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verdebt, BWV 637, BV B 27 | 03:03:21 |
| 9 | – VIIb. Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verdebt, BWV 705, BV B 27 | 05:28:84 |
| 10 | – VIII. In dir ist Freude, BWV 615, BV B 27 | 03:20:21 |
| 11 | – IX. Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, BWV 665, BV B 27 | 06:21:73 |
| 12,13 | Prelude and Fugue in E minor, BWV 533, BV B 26 – I. Prelude/II. Fugue | 03:07:38 |
| | | 04:20:43 |

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 Engineer: Alessandro Simonetto

The Bach–Busoni Transcriptions: A Tale of Genius and Destiny.

I was a fresh piano student at the Royal Academy of Music in London when, one fateful morning, the telephone provided a rude awakening; a friend was ordering: «come to the Festival Hall at once! Shura Cherkassky is playing»! My musical erudition was a schetchy affair then, and I had no idea of who Shura Cherkassky was, but my protestations of tiredness and indisposition fell on deaf ears: «come at once! I've got the tickets». It was Sunday, October 13th, 1991: at 3.45 precisely the 82 year old Shura Cherkassky came on stage with his elfine step, sat at the piano, and began playing Bach–Busoni's Chaconne. Six short bars later, a new world opened before my eyes and ears. I had never heard such ravishing sounds come out of a piano, and Shura's delivery was something akin to magic: each and every musical line came forth with inescapable conviction as if guided by a supernatural entity, and the impression was one of blessed sublimity. Transfixed, I wrote Maestro Cherkassky an admiring letter and, to my great fortune and delight, a few months later he become my mentor. Such was my fascination with his playing of the Bach–Busoni Chaconne that I pestered him many times about his mercurial way of performing it. At best, he would say in his typical matter-of-factly style: «yes, it is truly marvellous music» or, if in a particularly helpful mood: «You have to sound like a church organ». As a child I had worn down a couple of LPs of Bach's organ music performed by Dr. Albert Schweitzer and his majestic, profoundly humane performances had left a lasting impression in my mind. It was the combination of Dr. Schweitzer's august approach and Shura's bewitching renditions that spurred my interest and helped to forge my interpretative ideal of the Bach–Busoni transcriptions. Research into the subject highlights a wonderful story that flirts with destiny and genius in equal measure.

Ferruccio Dante Michelangelo Benvenuto Busoni (Empoli, 1866 – Berlin, 1924) was an Italian pianist, composer, thinker, pedagogue, bibliophile and æsthete whose work left a lasting impression in several areas of the music profession. Despite endorsements from none other than Liszt and Rubinstein, he was fundamentally self-taught and cultivated his multifarious activities with unprecedented freedom and liberal thinking. Preoccupied with art as a general sphere of expression and intollerant of dogmatism, he made it his quest to push the boundaries forth in search of an ideal beauty of classical proportions which transcended limitations. As a pianist, he ranked amongst the greatest in history. «His sense of infallibility– wrote Alfredo Casella – merged beautifully with the grandiosity of his style, which in turn did not allow weaknesses. This style was essentially epic, monumental, cyclopic, but also fantastic and surreal». When Busoni played Bach's Well Tempered Clavier in Helsinki, on November 3rd 1888, Adolf Paul famously titled his review «Ein Bach–Spieler von Gottes Gnaden», “A Bach player by the Grace of God”. Now, to be a young pianist who plays “Bach by the grace of God” with an “epic, monumental style” might have been a satisfactory result for many, but not for Ferruccio! He saw his personal success as an inevitable consequence of his destiny, and, generous man that he was, set forth to share his knowledge and vision through a planned mammoth edition of the complete keyboard works of Bach. He moved to Leipzig and found lodgings in the Centralstrasse just in front of the Thomaskirche, where Johann Sebastian Bach had been Kantor. It was here the he heard a performance of

Bach's Prelude and Fugue in D major BWV 532 (presumably played by Carl Hermann Wilhelm Piutti, then the church's principal organist), and «was moved» to transcribe it for the pianoforte. At this time his active repertoire included a number of piano transcriptions of Bach's organ works, notably Tausig's famed arrangement of the Toccata and Fugue in d minor BWV 565, and it is perhaps natural that a young pianist–composer, ambitious and enthusiastic, felt the urge to try his hand at producing his own version of something he admired; he had no idea, I feel sure of it, of the consequences his actions were to have not only on his personal artistic trajectory, but on the very future of the genre. This was the moment in which his preoccupation with the music of Bach “merged beautifully with the grandiosity of his style”: such a complex and challenging ‘transposition’, to use Busoni's own substantive, was a novel affair and showed a pianistic style that was modern and emancipated from the Romantic tradition. Although he respected Bach's text with fidelity, Busoni intervened heavily on the texture of the music and concentrated upon reproducing the sonorities of the organ with a formidable re–disposition of the musical matter throughout the keyboard. The result was shocking, with lines that seemed carved into the finest Carrara marble and highlighted contrasts, heightened the dramatic impact and often called for sophisticate pedal effects. Busoni moved fundamentally along the same path in his transcription of the Prelude and Fugue in E flat major BWV 552. These were the opening and closing numbers of the third volume of Bach's Clavier–Übung, an important collection of Chorale Preludes that Bach himself held in high regards (so much so that he actually published it privately). The Kantor had specified a registration *pro organo pleno*, ‘for full organ’, hinting at the majestic conception of the Prelude and the massive complexion of the triple Fugue. Busoni, with his «epic, monumental, cyclopic » style was in his element recreating on the piano such lush, awesome sonorities, and his transcription is a tour de force both physically and intellectually. The best, however, had yet to come.

Encumbered by financial difficulties, in 1891 Ferruccio accepted the post of Piano Professor at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. In America he toured extensively and eventually produced his most ambitious Bach transcription yet: the mighty Ciaccona from the second Solo Violin Partita BWV 1060. Busoni admitted that he had treated the musical material in much the same way as the organ works, although here he had expanded liberally a whirlwind of contrapunctal ideas that were only hinted at in the original. The effect was orchestral, and when Busoni premiered his transcription of the Chaconne at Boston's Union Hall on January 30th, 1893, public success was unanimous and unequivocal: he had found an ideal balance between old and new, and through his innovative piano writing had created a sublime environment where the transcriber was on a par with the composer. Piano transcriptions in general would never be the same.

Adventurous, bold moves towards the future have always met with a modicum of scepticism, and Busoni's Chaconne was no exception. He had dedicated the work to Eugen d'Albert, the famous Liszt pupil, who showed little enthusiasm for it and claimed that in his opinion the Chaconne could «not tolerate a transcription for two hands» and that it was «too modern». One could not help the feeling that d'Albert nurtured jealousy towards Busoni; he was himself the author of several Bach transcriptions that were steeped in the romantic tradition and shared little of the

Italian's pioneering, modernist approach. D'Albert's complaints, however, prompted Busoni to defend his position. When he licensed his edition of Bach's first volume of the *Wohltemperierte Clavier* in 1894, Busoni completed it with an appendix titled 'On the transcription of Bach's Organ Works for the Pianoforte'. Convinced that the interpretation of Bach's organ pieces on the piano was «essential to a complete pianistic study of Bach», he assembled a full compendium on the subject, outlining in detail his own procedures and offering insights into his reasoning – both technically and artistically. He maintained that «the piano possesses certain characteristics which give it an advantage over the organ: rhythmic precision, emphatic exactness of entrance, greater impetuosity and distinctness in passage-playing, ability of modulating the touch, clearness in involved situations, and, where required, rapidity [...]». The greater disadvantage, however, was to be found in the piano's inability to sustain a note indefinitely as can the organ, although Busoni hinted at mysterious possibilities he could achieve with judicious deployment of the third pedal. He was particularly engrossed in the subject of registration, recreating certain organ effects on the keyboard by means of an adequate imitation of the organ disposition, and offered his transcription of the Prelude and Fugue in e minor BWV 533 as an exemplar of his theories. Many sceptics were silenced.

Back in Europe Busoni expanded on his quest to spread the popularity of Bach's music. He prefaced the 1898 edition of his arrangement of Ten Chorale Preludes with a statement of intentions: he had not wished to display his capabilities as an arranger, but rather «to interest a larger selection of the public in these compositions which are so rich in art, feeling and fantasy». He added a quizzical caveat: these arrangements were «in chamber music style» and only seldom made «great demands upon the technical proficiency of the performer». A cursory look at these scores, at least through the eyes of this writer, could suggest that Busoni was a poor liar!

In 1900 Busoni published his last and grandest work in the field of Bach's transcriptions: the Two Toccatas BWV 564 & 565. These were famous works to start with: the great Toccata, Adagio and Fugue BWV 564 – apparently inspired to Bach by the popularity of the three-part Italian concertos of Vivaldi and Corelli – and that youthful romp, the Toccata and Fugue in d minor BWV 565, which was destined to enter the Pantheon of 'famous tunes' in the Twentieth Century heralding the entrance of Sir Christopher Lee on countless Dracula films! The Toccata, Adagio and Fugue BWV 564 is perhaps the most challenging of these works, presenting the pianist with a full array of technical and interpretative problems, not the least of which are to be found in the middle movement, Adagio. Here a long cantilena has to sustain itself on seemingly endless curves and nuances, daring the very spirit of the pianoforte and testing it to its utmost limits: it is a testament to Busoni's complete command of the instrument, and his lifelong, esoteric flirtation with achieving the impossible.

Busoni was often called "the last Renaissance man". Thanks to his work as editor and transcriber, his name became inextricably linked to that of Bach, to the extent that his widow Gerda was often introduced as "Mrs. Bach-Busoni"! He had both the vision and the fortitude to illuminate the most complex issues with crystalline clarity, and throughout his life endeavoured to share his personal conquests with anyone who would listen. In his seminal *Sketch for a New Aesthetic of Music* he postulated

that «every form of musical notation is in itself a transcription of an abstract idea», and, in another well-known essay, that from Bach he had «learnt that Good and Universal Music remains the same irrespectively of the means by which we make it heard». For the times, these were innovative, visionary precepts indeed. He envisaged all his Bach transcriptions as an advanced school of pianoforte playing, and gave an ascending order of difficulty: Ten Chorale Preludes, Prelude and Fugue in D major, Prelude and Fugue in E flat major, Chaconne, Two Toccatas. This is Music of the highest calibre with soaring, majestic lines that seem to aim straight to the Heavens, poignant moments of the most sublime intimacy, complex, intricate counterpoints that magically blend into one another as if guided by an inexorable destiny. To tackle it through the magnifying lenses of such a piano titan as Ferruccio Busoni is, for me at least, a great privilege and a source of enduring joy.

In a final analysis, in the 1923 epilogue to his Bach edition, he paid a posthumous tribute to his father Ferdinando: «I owe my father the good fortune of having been very severely pushed towards the study of Bach during my early years; this happened at a time during which, in Italy, the Maestro did not enjoy much more credit than Carl Czerny. Which sane instinct should have brought my father, a simple clarinet virtuoso who enjoyed playing Fantasias and Paraphrases on Il Trovatore and the Carnival of Venice, [...] to guess the only right way, it seems to me a mysterious order of destiny». Perhaps so, and the gain is posterity's.

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Vecchiano, November 2013