In sum, this disk has much to recommend it. The ensemble is very well blended throughout, the intonation is immaculate, and there is beautiful playing from all concerned. The C minor Quartet, in particular, is splendidly played, and it is hoped that this recording will do much to raise the piece above its current stature as a rarely performed historical curiosity. At the same time, the reading of the Quintet clearly aspires to a symphonic breadth of a kind that is not always germane to the character of the material and its formal organisation. This is especially problematic in the Finale, the design of which moves away from symphonic teleology, and towards a species of anti-monumentality, in which public, rhetorical gestures are undercut by a highly idiosyncratic formal design. It is possible that Bruckner really was seeking a more private mode of expression in this work, which steered the style nurtured in the symphonies in a more introspective direction.

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Busoni

Lustspiel-Ouvertüre for Orchestra op. 38
Indianische Fantasie for Piano and Orchestra* op. 44
Gesang vom Reigen der Geister op. 47
Die Brautwahl op. 45

Nelson Goerner *pf*,
BBC Philharmonic Orchestra
Neeme Järvi *cond*

Chandos CHAN 10302 (65 minutes: Recorded in 24-bit/96 kHz: DDD), £12.99
Notes and translations included.

This 2005 Chandos release is the second in a series of recordings dedicated to Ferruccio Busoni's orchestral music.[1] Neeme Järvi conducts the BBC Philharmonic, and is joined by pianist Nelson Goerner. The recording opens with the *Lustspiel-Ouvertüre*, described by Calum MacDonald as 'a modern essay in the spirit of Mozart's comic-opera overtures',[2] and which shares with the Overture to the *Marriage of Figaro* the distinction of having been written in a single night. The influence of Mozart is suggested in more than one of the orchestral pieces contained on this disc: it is similarly from the genre of comic-opera that the suite *Die Brautwahl* (The Bridal Choice) is distilled. (The original opera, composed between 1906 and 1911, received only four performances after opening at the Stadtheater, Hamburg, on 13 April, 1912.) It is not unusual to find borrowed materials, or clear stylistic inferences in Busoni's work. This is not to

[1] See also CHAN 9920 (released 2002) including the well known *Berceuse élégiaque* op. 42.

[2] Calum MacDonald, *Booklet Notes*, Chandos CHAN 10302: 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000185 Published online by Cambridge University Press

suggest a lack of originality, but rather the all-round musicianship of a man primarily known for his transcriptions of Bach's keyboard music, and who was also a theorist and critic of various musical styles and epochs: substantial articles on Mozart and Liszt, for example, demonstrate the degree to which he engaged with the musical languages that came to be reflected in his own offerings. In fact, 'it is typical of Busoni as a young man that he chooses to measure Mozart's greatness in terms of versatility. His own versatility as a creative person certainly extended far beyond the world of music.'[3] Academic and poetic works number amongst his achievements. Nevertheless, at the same time as his musical heritage informs his stylistic concerns as a composer, his modernity is no less sincere. His *Outline for a New Musical Aesthetics* (1906) predicts the progress of musical material towards the serial style, and the neutralization of the dissonance that characterizes the diatonic scale. 'I want to attain the unknown!' he exclaims in his poetic work *Der mächtige Zauberer* of 1907.[4]

With the exception of the *Lustspiel-Ouvertüre*, the works on this disc are late ones, and therefore represent a mature style in which Busoni sought to combine his reinterpretation of the classical style with a desire for exploring the new. This conceit is not without its problems, musically speaking. While striving for the ebullience and balanced phrases that characterize the late eighteenth-century at the level of form, the tonal materials used must, if they are to fulfil Busoni's quest to 'attain the unknown', reflect the extended tonality that characterized the most modern European works over a century later. One cannot help feeling that he is not always successful in this endeavour: the thematic, tonal and formal resolution in the *Lustspiel-Ouvertüre* lacks something, insofar as the preparation for the conclusion of the piece – which is heightened by the lively character of the material – never seems properly fulfilled. The last 20 seconds or so seem to be building towards something much more exciting than the final cadence proves to be. In spite of the remote keys explored in the development, the character of the piece in so many of its parameters – thematic structure (the energetic first subject, the lyrical second subject), form, dynamics, orchestration, cadential structure, imitative transitional passages, stepwise movement at points of modulation – is classical. Only occasionally does the tonal landscape remind us that this piece was revised in the twentieth century.[5] The angular fugal passage – especially well executed by Järvi and the orchestra – in the centre of the piece looks forward to the contrapuntal style of post-tonal composers and draws on the composer's relationship to Bach's music, but Busoni is quick to return to the unmistakeably classical sound-world by way of an ascending scale and repeated cadences. Even Mozartean formal proportions – the short development section framed by longer exposition and recapitulation – are observed, then, in this essay in 'effervescent wit'.[6] The orchestra's rendition makes this piece extremely enjoyable throughout, lively but always fantastically precise. Both Järvi – for effecting a large-scale coherence which preserves moments of brilliant agility (flute, for example) – and the individual sections of instruments deserve high praise here: the strings are especially fine.

The next piece on the disc is the more substantial *Indianische Fantasie* (1913–14), played expertly by Nelson Goerner. This work owes its thematic material not to

[3] H.H. Stuckenschmidt, *Ferruccio Busoni*, trans. Sandra Morris (New York: St Martin's Press, 1970): 134.

[4] Ibid.: 133.

[5] The piece was revised in 1904.

[6] MacDonald, *Booklet Notes*: 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000185 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mozart and the eighteenth century, but to borrowed native-American songs.[7] The music is by turns dramatic, lamenting and dance-like, including the 'Redskin' Hopi, Cheyenne, Laguna, Pima and Pasamquoddy songs.[8] By nature, these songs are repetitive, reflecting the oral tradition from which they emerged. This type of repetitiveness goes directly against the 'classical' thematic model in which the themes exposed are ripe with potential for development. Therefore, according to MacDonald, '[Busoni] eschewed the more typical repetitive songs for those with more extended tunes, presenting these in elaborate and colourful pianistic and orchestral textures'.[9] The work is in three continuous movements linked together by piano cadenzas: it is effectively a piano concerto, though the title 'Fantasie' recalls the romantic piano music of Franz Liszt, and in particular the *Hungarian Fantasy*, also scored for piano and orchestra (Liszt was another notable formative influence on Busoni). Once again Busoni's musical language offers a mixed tonal fare, incorporating as it does here the modern style briefly exploited in the *Lustspiel-Ouvertüre*, and the pentatonic inflections of the native-American melodies.

The first section is initially characterized by a pedal-ostinato, until the piano ushers in the fantasy that obfuscates the beat. The metamorphosis of piano themes consolidates the fantasy aspect of the piece, from quasi-Debussyian extended tonality to the native-American pentatonicism that refers back to the very opening orchestral gestures. In fact, the piano solos are the most effective material in the piece: here at least, Busoni's marriage of modern and native-American tonalities is more persuasive. The virtuosity of the work is appreciable, and Goerner is brilliantly dexterous in his interpretation of both the lyrical and the luminous passages.

The second, lyrical, slow section involves the alternation of piano and orchestral textures. In this respect, its texture is most like the classical concerto form, although Busoni's orchestral entries do not effect the same structural force, or 'arrival' as in the classical concerto. In the latter, theme and contrasts of tonality define the form; for Busoni, the thematic material here subverts traditional concepts of development, and there is no comparable tension in the tonal contrasts. At moments, the collision of pentatonic and modernist materials is truly original, and draws one into the 'story' of the work; at others, the native-American themes sound somewhat clichéd (this is particularly true of the orchestral material as the first section progresses). Nevertheless, there are some beautiful orchestral melodies here (or example, at 14:00), with virtuoso piano figuration using the full range of the instrument (Goerner is at his dazzling best here, and in the cadenzas). The speedy transformation from these beautiful themes to previously heard material and back again, is typical of Busoni's strategy here: the difficulty with thematic development is addressed through the transformation from one theme into another as well as restatements in different expressive contexts. The third section is the most highly rhythmicized, but again ends rather disappointingly and unexpectedly. Like the *Lustspiel-Ouvertüre*, though on a grander scale, it builds to a potentially energetic finish (in which both Goerner and the orchestra are exceptionally good), including reminiscences of numerous themes, but indulges in one last piano passage which dissipates much

[7] Busoni was first introduced to these by the dedicatee of the work, the ethnographer Natalie Curtis (also a former pupil).

[8] MacDonald, *Booklet Notes*: 7.

[9] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000185 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the energy that both orchestra and piano have amassed in the preceding minutes.

The *Gesang vom Reigen der Geister*, which follows the *Indianische Fantasie* on the disc, similarly makes use of native-American materials. It is a much shorter piece, and arguably more adroit in its synthesis of tonalities. It is more sombre and reflective than the slightly earlier *Fantasie*, and refers to the Ghost Dance whose suppression led to the massacre at Wounded Knee. The tension is well articulated, sustained and built upon by the orchestra. The winds are extremely impressive in Järvi's interpretation, with some real bite in their timbre. This is Busoni at his most 'modern': there is plenty of chromaticism, which undermines the dissonance–consonance relationships of a more traditional tonal language; furthermore, the ending is the least emphatic – in terms of the orchestral forces used – of those on this disc, and yet is the most successful. The long-held chord at the end of the piece is as effective a conclusion as the end of the *Indianische Fantasie* is uninspired: the tension is brilliantly sustained, and is every bit as convincing as the most excited passages.

The final work is the suite *Die Brautwahl*. The opera itself is 'a fantastic comedy based on a story by E.T.A. Hoffmann … [which] tells a complex story of love and magic'.[10] The opera is stylistically unlike the popular Italian style of the day, and is instead fantastical, with elements of the grotesque. The suite extracted from the opera once again offers plenty of chromaticism frequently intercut with diatonic sonorities. Unlike some of the other pieces here, the lull comes in the middle of the piece: having begun energetically, the central movements occasionally lack the same interest and direction. This is fully restored with the fifth and final movement, which finishes with a real flourish. Järvi takes the piece at quite a pace, ensuring a sense of the whole is maintained even as one is drawn into the detail of individual sections. He masterfully guides the orchestra (the winds and brass excel themselves) through the changing affects from the 'Ghostly', 'Lyrical', 'Mystical', 'Hebraic' and 'Merry' pieces respectively. Even if the suite is occasionally found thematically wanting, the combination of Busoni's orchestration and Järvi's management of it means it is a must for those who enjoy Busoni's music, or for anyone intrigued. In short, I cannot imagine these works being better performed than they are here. Though there are times when one is given the impression that Busoni's ideas, and his experience of a range of music, don't always quite translate into the compositional ingenuity they might have promised, the works are given the very best chance under Järvi's directorship.

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[10] MacDonald, *Booklet Notes*: 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000185 Published online by Cambridge University Press