Ferruccio Busoni: “A Musical Ishmael”

By Della Couling

In the 1890s, the relatively small city of Boston (the population was still under half a million) vied with New York as the intellectual and literary center of North America. Many of the most prominent American writers and poets were either born in the Boston area or had set- tled there. Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whittier, and Longfellow, although dead by the time Busonl arrived, lived on in the intellectual atmosphere they had helped to generate, which was further stoked by the presence of Harvard. America’s first university, founded in the seventeenth century, just across the Charles River. The city also attracted the other arts, music in particular, patronized by the wealthy and relatively numerous haute bourgeoisie of the town. The Boston Symphony Orchestra had been founded ten years before, in 1881, by the banker and philanthropist Henry Lee Higginson, one of many valiant and public-minded figures who laid the practical foundations for the cultural life of the United States, realizing how crucial a civilizing role the arts could play in the country. Unlike literature, a plant which had been relatively easy to propagate from English cuttings and, as the above names indicate, was already flourishing, music had as yet proved harder to transfer to American soil. One way around this was to import talent from Europe-or, more specifically, from Germany. As Marc- Andre Roberge has rightly pointed out, “When Busoni arrived in North America in 1891, the German domination of classical music in the United States was still nearly total.” The Boston Symphony Orchestra was therefore anxious to attract top players: in addition to Arthur Nikisch, who had become the conductor of the orchestra two years before, a large proportion of the Boston Symphony Orchestra was of German origin, which was also true of the New York Philharmonic and other important American orchestras of the time. Another recent arrival was the cellist Alwin Schroeder, former member of the Petri Quarter in Leipzig [later member of the BSO and the Kneisel Quartet] and dedicatee of Busoni’s Short Suite for Cello and Piano (BV 215), premiered in Leipzig by Schroeder and the composer. This all boded well for Busoni.

Situated at that time on Franklin Square, at the comer of Newton and James streets, the New England Conservatory, where Busoni was to teach, had been founded in 1867 by another indefatigable promoter of culture, Eben Tourjee (1834-1891), music educator and founder of more than one music school in the United States, and Robert Gold- beck. (Tourjee, who had died in April that year, had been a lifelong active Methodist, which might explain the lemonade.) The conservatory’s director when Busoni arrived was Carl Faelten (1846-1925), a pianist of German extraction who had been teaching in Boston since 1885; he was director from 1890 until 1897.

But the everyday reality of Busoni’s life in Boston was a sharp disappointment to him. He was engaged at the conservatory as a professor of piano and composition in the graduate department. However, as a young institution, the New England Conservatory was still not firmly enough established to be too selective about its pupils. And the Boston Brahmin influence was no match for hardnosed financial calculation of positively Gradgrindian proportions: in their lessons individual piano students were given exactly fifteen minutes teaching each, and cur off practically in mid-bar when their time was up. This sausage machine approach horrified the young idealist. (Just a few years later Sir Henry Wood, having learned of this method of instruction in American institutions, turned down an extremely generous offer to teach singing in the United States.) Also, of Busoni’s eighteen piano pupils, sixteen were female! Busoni’s low opinion of female intelligence, the fact would seem to indicate that piano playing was still principally considered a pursuit for young ladies. Furthermore, not one of his Boston pupils ever had any success then or later on the concert platform, although there must have been such aspirations, whether personal or parental, as some of his students came

from as far afield as Kansas, Tennessee, and Iowa. His annual salary was $3,240, divided over four terms, which was generous for the time.

Busoni had made his New York debut three months after his arrival in the United States, on December 7, 1891, in a joint recital of the Fortnightly Club with a singer identified solely as “Miss Hall.” (This was only three weeks after Ignace Paderewski’s New York debut; the great Polish pianist, some six years Busoni’s senior, did not enjoy success there initially.) But it was only on January 17, 1892, that Busoni finally performed one of his own works in New York, the Concert Piece for Piano and Orchestra (BV 236), the piece with which he had won the Rubinstein Prize. This was at the Music Hall later to become Carnegie Hall), at one of the Sunday concerts organized and conducted by Walter Damrosch (1862-1950). Damrosch, who was also a composer, was born in the German city of Breslau (now Wroclaw, and in Poland); he had emigrated to the United States with his parents and elder brother Frank in 1871.The two brothers and their father were in· credibly active and influential in the U.S. musical scene throughout their lives.

On January 31, 1892, Busoni was in New York again, at the Chamber Music Hall, with Adolf Brodsky, another Leipzig friend, now in New York as leader of the New York Symphony Orchestra. They played Busoni’s Sonata in E Minor for Violin and Piano no. 1 (BY 234), probably composed in Leipzig in 1889. (It was dedicated to Brodsky, who was still in Leipzig at that time, and published by Rohrer in 1891.) There were few other concerts for Busoni outside Boston that first year.

In the Music Hall in Boston, on February 19th, he had the mixed pleasure of hearing excerpts from his ill-fated Symphonic Suite for Orchestra (BV 201), conducted by Nikisch; on April 8th he performed his *Kultaselle*: Ten Short Variations on a Finnish Folk Song for Cello and Piano (BV 237), together with Alwin Schroeder, and four days later, in the conservatory, he played his Violin Sonata No. I, again, with Brodsky.

Busoni held out at the conservatory for only one year, until the summer of 1892, when he resigned, one reason being that he apparently did not get on well with Carl Faelten, the director. The conflicting demands of performance and composition were bad enough, but the third demand on his time of teaching was too much, and so it had to go-even at the expense of a secure income. (He even refused a much more generous teaching offer from the University of Chicago.) Four consecutive years spent teaching the piano in three different music academies had convinced Busoni that he was not cut out for an academic career; for the rest of his life he would continue to teach, both piano and com position, but only informally.

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