

Structure and Freedom in Music: An Ideological Interpretation of Busoni's Piano Music

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Abstract: Busoni's original music for piano has a unique compositional concept, and he has a rich understanding and unique construction of the techniques and methods of piano performance. Through the study of Busoni's piano music practice and thought, in order to have a more comprehensive and systematic understanding and deeper knowledge of the characteristics of Busoni's piano music as well as the essence and meaning of music, more scholars can gain a deeper understanding of Busoni's music thought and spiritual connotation, and find out the intrinsic roots of his piano music originality, adaptation and performance, especially through the exploration and grasping of the dominant vein and intrinsic mechanism of Busoni's music thought and its laws. In particular, by exploring and grasping the dominant vein of Busoni's musical thought and the inner mechanism and law, it provides a reference for the development of piano music.

Keywords: Piano Music; Busoni; Structural Ideas; Free Thought

1. INTRODUCTION

Busoni thought deeply about the world of music and recorded his musical thoughts in the form of "The Outline of New Music Aesthetics" and "The Nature and Unity of Music" (a collection of 70 articles) (Collins, 2022). Since the literary theories that represent his thoughts are all thoughts and opinions about a specific thing and phenomenon, and his ideas are changing in each period, different writing times sometimes result in inconsistent ideas, that is, there is not only one thought, but always changing before and after (Wang, 2022a). Therefore, Busoni's thinking is complicated, and it is difficult to grasp the idea of Busoni music. It is a big problem for researchers to increase the difficulty in the analysis. The author, through his research, has caught two main veins among his numerous, always mutating, and not particularly well captured ideas, one is the idea of structure and the other is the idea of freedom. How did Busoni distill these two ideas? Busoni was always in search of musical unity in its various roles, he would take a musical idea as the centerpiece and express it in his compositions and his performances, i.e., a design of extreme unity, he was longing for unity in musical expression. It can also be said that the idea of musical unity permeates Busoni's entire way of thinking and being. For example, the unique technical and stylistic characteristics of his

performances must be due to the fact that there is a fixed idea in his mind that guides him, so that his performances show a perfect unity of the inner spirit; at the same time, this fixed idea, which is always emphasized by Busoni's researchers, is the "musical unity" of Busoni's inner mind. This is what Busoni's researchers have been emphasizing as the "unity of music" inherent in Busoni's heart. Through research, the author has discovered two ideas that enable Busoni to realize this unity of thought and expression in his piano music practice: structural thought and free thought (Botstein, 2022).

2. PIANO MUSIC BY BUSONI

2.1 Profile of Busoni

Busoni was a very important Italian composer, pianist, and music theorist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He composed more than 300 works in his life, including more than 100 original piano works, more than 100 adapted piano works, 33 orchestral works, 9 chamber music, 10 songs with piano accompaniment, and 5 operas. Among these works he composed, the number of his original piano works, which numbered more than 100 and had a transcendent quality and highly individualized style, was an important area that represented his musical achievement and was the key to differentiating his music from that of other composers (Wang, 2022b). As an adapted composer, he devoted his life to composing piano adaptations and had a profound study of the works of Bach, Mozart, and Liszt, and his adapted works numbered more than 100, and piano music adaptation became an important part of Busoni's music. As a pianist, he was one of the most distinctive and unique pianists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and he had a wealth of original ideas about piano playing techniques and methods. As a music theorist, he thought deeply about the world of music, leaving a rich theoretical legacy for posterity, and documenting his musical thought in the form of an aesthetic work, *Outline of a New Aesthetics of Music*, a collection of essays, *The Essence and Unity of Music*, and a collection of letters, *Letters to his Wife*, in which his insightful words tell of the balanced relationship between his ideas and the technical details of his work (Howell, 2022).

2.2 Busoni's creative journey

Antony Beaumont, an expert in the study of Busoni, has written in his book *Busoni the Composer*, "Throughout his life, Busoni had a thirst for all kinds of knowledge, such as composition, performance, philosophy,

architecture, painting, religion, and many other things, and it is precisely because of his excessive thirst for knowledge that he possessed an extraordinary ability to explore possibilities, and that has led to his compositional style to go through several different phases"

(1) Early Creation: Busoni began composing at the age of eight and showed great talent for composition. Busoni's father believed that Bach's clear melodic undulations and the unending flow of his music were the most appropriate way to educate his son. His father's philosophy guided Busoni's creative path and direction, and the Baroque and Classical styles became his early favorites, and the balanced beauty of Classical music became a constant pursuit throughout his creative life. In his early piano music, Busoni mostly used the fugue, sonata and concerto genres of the classical period, and showed a strict organization and skilled counterpoint, integrating precise color consciousness and personalized aesthetic interest into his works with clear ideas. As a result, Busoni's early piano music compositions perfectly present the classical characteristics of symmetry and coordination in their overall structure, and have left a deep impression as his distinctive mark (Xu, 2021).

(2) Mid-term Creation: The second period of Busoni's piano work was composed just in time for the turn of the century. During the first decade of the 20th century he entered into an intensive experimental phase of exploring new music, and his compositional style underwent a major transformation. He also invented new notation to demonstrate his different concepts of composition, and the early years of the 20th century were for Busoni a period of exploration of the possibilities of musical composition (Knyt, 2022). In his 1907 book, *Outline of a New Musical Aesthetic*, he set out his theory of new notation (hexameter). He put his new notation into practice in a very timely manner, rewriting Johann Sebastian Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy in D minor* in his new notation. The following two images show Bach's original work (see figure 1) compared to Busoni's new notated version (see figure 2).



Figure 1: Beginning of Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy in D minor*



Figure 2: The beginning of Busoni's Chromatic Fantasy in D minor in new notation

(3)Late Creation: The First World War led to another marked change in Busoni's musical style and creative thinking. After Busoni's experimentation with various styles in the middle of his compositions, he clearly realized the dilemma facing expressionist music; the art of experimental modern music had reached a peak in the past few years, so much so that the current musical situation had been ruined by excessive exaggeration and waste, and Busoni wanted to find a way out for modern art. So he suggested: "It is time to build something that will endure again" (Knytt, 2020). The piano works of this period of his career were increasingly characterized by a new kind of contemplation and classicism, and a conception of what he called "young classicism" gradually developed in his thinking. He advocated a young classicism that had the polyphony of classical music and the melodicism of romantic music. Although there is a conflict between the responsibility for the past and the future, Busoni had the ability to compose in this style, which was felt and which became a model for Busoni's music and art (Wilson, 2020).

3. STRUCTURAL IDEAS IN BUSONI'S PIANO MUSIC

As a composer and performer, Busoni has always had a grasp of the overall structure, both in his compositions and in his performances. The idea of structure in Busoni's music can be said to be deeply buried in his mind, and it is revealed through the creation and performance of musical works in this externalized form.

3.1 Structural Ideas in Creative Writing

According to Busoni, the three aspects of architectural proportions, the aesthetics of architectural structures, and the expression of architectural structures share commonalities with the structure, aesthetics, and

expression of piano musical compositions.

(1) Proportions of the building structure: In his essay "Reflections on the Structural Expression of Art," Busoni attributes the art of architecture to a form, and for a long time in his life he believed that architecture involved mere form. He observed the art of architecture in terms of form and brought this form of architectural art into his musical compositions. He observed that the form of architectural structures centered on the three dimensions of external contours, spatial proportions, and the design of windows and doors, and that these three dimensions were clearly visible in the structural drawings he made for his musical compositions. He believed that the proportions of architectural structures were characterized by intuition, and that architectural structures could give people intuition, and he hoped that the musical works he created could also give listeners an intuitive impression through the drawing of structural diagrams. For example, the structural drawing he designed for the Piano Concerto in 1904 is a metaphor of the three temple-like buildings representing the symbolism of ancient Greece, ancient Egypt and ancient Babylon to the three magnificent main movements of the work (Tarchynska, 2020). The overall silhouette is a symmetrical arch structure, and the proportions of the five partial spaces are quite symmetrical, with doors and windows uniquely designed according to the architectural style. He is pursuing the perfect presentation of structural proportions in every detail (see Figure 1).



Figure 3: Busoni's structural drawing for the Piano Concerto

(2) The Aesthetics of Building Structures: Busoni's fondness for the

structural forms of a particular style of architecture was based, on the one hand, on his personal tastes and preferences, but above all on his identification with the aesthetics of architectural structures. For example, during his tour to the United States in 1910, he saw the building on Broadway in New York City, which was composed of the main body of a cube structure of 20 or so floors in the modern style, together with the Gothic roof with its rich ornamentation, which constituted the complete structure of the building (SHARIKADZE, 2020). Though the building was in one style bearing another, the iron and stone architecture of the modern building being clumsy and unadorned, and the Gothic representing the heavily ornamented style of the European Renaissance, everything was placed with interest, arranged with exquisite neatness, and everything partial was indispensable to the whole. Busoni was inspired by the structural and stylistic contrasts of the building, an aesthetic that he saw as marking the dawn of a new century. He used this structural inspiration to compose his Piano Concerto and Counterpoint Fantasia (Carrasco, 2023). The overall structure of the Piano Concerto is a classical symmetrical structure, but in the middle of the three solemn sections are interspersed with two purely Italian Romantic sections to contrast with it, and this contrast in musical style is similar to the aesthetic contrast in architectural style. The overall structure of Counterpoint Fantasia was designed in accordance with the Gothic architectural style, and he designed the Gothic arched door in it, and finally used his own unique modern harmony as the basis for composing the whole work, the creation of Counterpoint Fantasia embodies the interplay of the two aesthetics. Therefore, the aesthetics of architectural structure in Busoni's ideology directly affects the aesthetics of his music, and he incorporates this structural factor into his compositions, so that the listener can feel the aesthetics of a certain kind of architectural structure encompassed in his music, which explains why he always drew a structural diagram for his large-scale musical works. He believed that the buildings of ancient civilizations and those of medieval Europe were structurally and proportionally perfect. Those buildings provided demonstrable perfection and represented rules that had been fulfilled. He described his music in terms of his favorite buildings in the hope that his music could also give the same impression of perfection as visible architecture.

(3) Expression of the building structure: As a musician, Busoni's study of architecture is not only limited to the proportions and aesthetics of the two arts, music and architecture, but he also believes that there are similarities in the expression of architectural and musical structures: firstly, the reason

why there are different expressions of architecture is related to the architect's design that originates from the mind. Every designer's design comes from his inner thoughts, and different thoughts lead to different architectural expressions. Secondly, structural expression is also influenced by two important factors, namely, time and place, which give architecture and music different expressions, and in this respect, architecture and music share the same characteristics. Thirdly, both architectural and musical expressions need to consider their practicality (Spaić, 2020). To summarize, Busoni's concept of structure stems from his understanding of architectural structure, aesthetics, and expression. He believed that the expression of architecture and the expression of music were mentally connected, and he liked to use architecture to express music because the aesthetics of architecture could contribute to a strong visual effect, and the form of architecture could make the structure, meaning, and beauty of music more intuitively expressed. Busoni believes that architecture can also express the beauty in music, it is an aesthetic form that gives music a more appealing expression.

3.2 Structural ideas in performance

The structural ideas expressed in Busoni's piano performances derive, on the one hand, from his understanding of architectural structures and are expressed in the externalized form of his performances, and on the other hand, from the observations and experiences of critics and audience members of his performances and the conclusions they draw from them.

(1) Structure & Contour: The basic principle in Busoni's piano playing is the clear contouring of the whole stepwise construction of separate and bounded layers. His playing has an unusually precise grasp of the wholeness of the work, an unusually precise drawing of its musical structure, and he plays as if he were sculpting, with each section sounding clearly defined. The treatment of Busoni's playing is very graphic, and he deserves to be called the sculptor of pianists. His picturesque, architecturally exquisite playing can be compared to a painter's painting and is as grand as a Catholic church. Evoking colorful panels, frescoes, and sculptures as if they were carved in marble, Busoni's playing evokes an almost figurative art presence. For example, Busoni's performance of the Wedding, The Contemplative Man, and The Rosary Song from the second collection of Liszt's work, The Traveling Years, Travels in Italy, were all played as if he were sculpting them, and the clear contours of his performance of Liszt's B-minor Sonata seemed as if he were drawing an architectural floor plan (Tsaldarakis, 2021).

(2) Stepped changes in strengths and weaknesses: The first aspect of

Busoni's structural thinking that is manifested in his playing is the control of volume transitions: firstly, in terms of the volume of each syllable, he points out that the increase and decrease of volume must be in a clear form, and that it is necessary to be very careful to equalize the volume, even if one tone is slightly louder than the neighboring one, which can be very jarring. Secondly, in terms of volume between sections, Busoni believed that the stepped principle should be maintained. In Busoni's time, most performers' playing was presented in a salon style, and the audience's ears were used to Hoffmann's musical narrative type of playing and Leschetizky's playing built on rhythm and waves of intensity. Busoni, however, argued against these views. He regarded frivolous and prolonged accelerations and decelerations, sweeping crescendos and decrescendos, surging beginnings and sentimental endings as bad taste in piano playing. As a result, Busoni transformed the waves and arcs of volume into a series of straight lines and angles in his playing.

(3) Consistent Rhythm: The second aspect of Busoni's structural thinking that is specifically expressed in piano playing is the control of rhythm. He suggested that a consistent tempo should be achieved in every section, especially when dealing with the end of a section, and that a strict, decisive tempo should be used. He believed that vague compromises of crescendo or decrescendo were inappropriate, and that in either case meticulous attention should be paid to rhythmic matters. Rhythmic cues that Busoni often marks in his scores include: very precise (*molto misurato*), not free in tempo (*ni licenza alcuna*); clear clauses (*massig bewegt und klar phrasirt*); precise metre (*mit rhythmischem Accent*); even and regular (*mit rhythmischem Accent*). Even and regular (*in gleichmassiger Bewegung*), firmness of rhythm (*mit festem Rhythmus*), rhythmic awareness (*ritmica-mente*), no acceleration (not too fast!) *non accelerando* (*nichteilen!*), no slowing down (not too much dragging!) *non rallentando* (*nicht schleppen!*) and so on. As can be seen, the commands *ma, non* are particularly common, indicating Busoni's clear intention to provoke a polemic against the popular Romantic approach to performance in his time. He rejected choppy, fast and slow playing, insisting on a consistent tempo, as this would allow the overall structure of the work to emerge more three-dimensionally and clearly in the performance (Wilson, 2022). To summarize, Busoni's structural thinking stems from his understanding of architectural structures, and is centered on the idea of grasping the whole of the musical work that he composes and performs, with balance playing an important role in this idea. He has deeply embedded this structural idea in his thinking, and has expressed it through his compositions and

performances.

4. FREE THOUGHT IN BUSONI'S PIANO MUSIC

What exactly is the nature of music? has always been a fundamental question pondered by musicians and philosophers. In his *Outline of a New Aesthetics of Music*, Busoni talks about, "It seems to me that the essence of music is spiritual and immaterial. Music is born freely, and it has a mission to be formed freely" (Dorothy, 2019). Based on this seeing of Busoni about the nature of music, we can find that in his opinion the nature of music is spiritual, it is a product that belongs to the spiritual aspect of man, it is something that is endowed with a certain kind of thought, but man's thought is transient and unfettered, therefore, music is a free thing from its birth, music can express nature and present the spirit of man freely, and it is free by nature.

4.1 The Origins of Free thought

Busoni's vision of the attributes of musical freedom is not unrelated to the German philosophical trends that he espoused, especially Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's voluntarism and the elaboration of their philosophical systems on music, which had a great influence on the formation of Busoni's musical concepts and his perception of the nature of music. Busoni believed that music is born because musicians have the innate talent given to them, coupled with acquired learning and the realization of life on this basis. If we want to discover such music and realize the original realm of music, we must be free from the bondage of worldly things. Nietzsche's ideas are deeply buried in Busoni's personality, forming an invisible part of Busoni's character that surfaces when needed. As Busoni delved deeper into Nietzsche's philosophy as well as the nature of music, he found that Nietzsche's words aptly described his own longing to realize freedom in music, and as a result, he began to have a strong inclination towards Nietzsche's philosophy. Busoni's reverence for freedom can also be seen in his comments on German music, in which he argues that reason and conservatism in German music limit musical freedom, and that people should realize the attributes of musical freedom and give it back. In this view, Busoni again found a match in Nietzsche's remarks, and they were both concerned about the conservative state of German music. Thus, Busoni directly quotes Nietzsche's comments on German music in his *Outline of a New Musical Aesthetics*: "With regard

to German music, I think it is necessary to be vigilant in all respects. It is assumed that if a person loves Germany, he will regard it as a training school for the soul and the emotions, where their greatest potentialities can be realized, as if an unstoppable flood full of magical sunshine poured down on a group of independent and free people. But the conservative German music is destroying their aesthetics and they have to think about the future of their musical salvation, with a deep and powerful sound in their ears, or a more sinister and mysterious music? 'This music does not recede, weaken or die in the view of the blue magnificent sea and the vast sky of the Mediterranean, all German music can bring you this feeling. A good piece of music will place one in the twilight of the desert, its soul as if it were one with the palm trees, capable of intertwining and interlacing with the great, beautiful and lonely predatory beast.'" In this comment on German music, Nietzsche states that German music seems to be a guide for the German soul and emotions, showing the way to the free man and the future of German music. The deep and powerful German music should be realized to its fullest potential, free to express the sea, the sky and the magical sunshine. Busoni firmly believes that music can aggregate dispersion, can express the most peaceful stillness and intense storms, and that even poetic words are not as dematerialized as it is. Music has the highest level one can feel, and the feeling music gives is one that hits everyone's chest with a passion that cannot be relied upon to be defined. Thus, Busoni concludes in his *Outline of a New Musical Aesthetics* that music is born free and is destined to regain its freedom (Busoni & Wang, 2019b).

4.2 Pathways to Freedom

Busoni's two paths to realizing free thought in his practice of piano music composition and performance are: breaking the rules and supporting pure music.

(1) Break the rules: Busoni's path to freedom is to break the rules. Busoni believes that music is the birth of freedom, and it is from this perception of the attributes of freedom in music that he continues to search for ways to present music as free. However, he lived at a time when music had been given too many definitions and laws, and these rules had become the basis for a kind of musical creation. Therefore, he believes that it is these artificially assigned rules for music that limit the original free attributes of music (Busoni & Wang, 2019a). Therefore, Busoni emphasizes that there should be a break with the traditional rules and an exploration of music that is truly free. Music should follow its intrinsic laws and be free

according to its possibilities needs. He began to defend the free liberation of music by calling on composers to liberate themselves from the narrow confines of outdated compositional habits and to try to break through the limitations of some of the existing rules, so that the music that is otherwise free can be presented freely.

(2) Support Pure Music: Busoni believes that pure music better reflects the free attributes of music, so he makes his position in favor of pure music and against title music directly clear in his essay. The pure music that Busoni supports has no poetic title; it is a form, and form plays the most important role here; we would more appropriately describe this music as architectural and symmetrical. It came about through the various creators pouring their spirit and feelings into a form, because this approach was closest to the composer or his time. One equates the spirit, feeling, personality, and era of each composer with symmetrical music because their spirit, feeling, or era cannot be regenerated, and ultimately only the form of the music remains as a sign, creed, and symbol. Composers sought and acquired the form as the best means of conveying their ideas, and when the composer's ideas drifted away, one would find and preserve in his work what he was thinking at the time. In Busoni's view, the essence of music is spiritual, an absolute being, not a representation or description. Music, no matter when and in what form it appears, is just music, and it will not be anything else. Pure music, on the other hand, although it is said to stand out as a form, is the form that can truly bring out the creator's own spirit and feelings, and it is this kind of music that is the best means of describing the essence of music.

5. WHAT BUSONI'S PIANO MUSIC TELLS US ABOUT THE FUTURE OF MUSIC

Busoni's piano music works embody the diversity and innovation of music creation, demonstrating the unique charm and infinite possibilities of piano music. This kind of diversity and innovativeness is an important revelation for future music creation, encouraging musicians to explore new musical forms and ways of expression in their creations. Secondly, Busoni's idea of musical structure also has a profound influence on the future development of music. He emphasized the expressiveness and emotional expression of music and advocated the combination of music with other art forms such as architectural design. This kind of aesthetic thought is of guiding significance to the performance and creation of future music,

encouraging musicians to seek deeper emotional expression and artistic infectiousness in music. In addition, Busoni's piano music has had a significant impact on cross-cultural exchange. His works have absorbed different cultural elements and styles, demonstrating the openness and inclusiveness of piano music. This kind of cross-cultural exchange is important for the future development of music, encouraging musicians to explore different cultural elements and styles in their compositions, and to incorporate "free thinking" in order to create richer and more diverse musical works. In conclusion, Busoni's piano music has an important inspiration and influence on the future development of music, encouraging musicians to explore new musical forms and expressions in their compositions, to pursue deeper emotional expressions and artistic infections, to explore different cultural elements and styles, and to pay attention to the inheritance and development of music.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The reason why the author chooses to study Busoni's piano music is not only because of the discovery that the composer's musical thought has a high social and historical value, but also because of the deep realization that this value is of an extended quality. Through the systematic investigation and study of Busoni's music literature, the author has come up with two ideas related to piano music: structural thought and free thought, which strongly prove that Busoni's thought has very profound connotation and significance, and forms a perfect unity link with his piano music practice. The insights and theories he expounds are those that eschew the world and the boundaries of time, grasping every trend with his transcendent and unwavering musical concepts, which can inspire musicians in their exploration of new musical forms and expressions.

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