

### Ferruccio Busoni Performs Franz Liszt (1905)

Don Juan Reminiscences (Mozart-Liszt), Valse Caprice in A (Donizetti-Liszt), Hungarian March (Schubert-Liszt), Adelaide (Beethoven-Liszt), Rigoletto Paraphrase (Verdi-Liszt), Polonaise No. 2 in E Major (Liszt), Paganini Etude No. 3 "La Campanella" (Paganini-Liszt), Norma Fantasia (Bellini-Liszt). Recorded by the Welte reproducing mechanism (piano roll). Recorded Treasures CD-1.

Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924) is one of the most monumental keyboard figures of all time. Known especially for his performances of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Liszt, Busoni excelled in the massive works of the repertory. Tragically, he recorded only eight sides of short pieces in 1922. Had he lived just a few more years into the electric era, he surely would have committed to disc some of the larger works for which he was so noted. Listening to the sides he did record, currently available on Pearl GEMM 9347, one hears playing remarkable not only for its rhythmic freedom and transcendent technique, but also for its musical coherence. Busoni's playing must have somehow combined the clarity and intellect of Maurizio Pollini with the sonority of Lazar Berman, but even that may not do it justice.

The opportunity to hear more of Busoni's playing, even from piano rolls, is exciting. The reliability of this technology has been debated for many years, and the accuracy of this realization is impossible to say. There is certainly a great deal to admire here. Much of this music is easy to cheapen, but in this case one is consistently impressed by the serious conception of the performer. The *Don Juan Fantasy* and the *Rigoletto Paraphrase* emerge as serious works of art, not as mere technical warhorses. The E Major Polonaise is given with a wonderful rhythmic vitality coupled with a cogent clear sense of rubato. The pianist's feel for rhythmic freedom is truly special; no matter how extreme, his liberties are always coherent. One never has the sensation of anarchy that can be found in the playing of some of his colleagues.

Unfortunately, nagging doubts about the piano rolls arise. Some of the playing on this CD is so amazing as to be unbelievable. This reviewer does not believe that anyone could negotiate the left hand octaves of the *Norma Fantasia* so cleanly at such a tempo, and that is certainly not the only passage where one is highly suspicious. Perhaps these rolls represented an idealized goal for Busoni. At some climactic points, one also senses that the music should reach a higher level of *fortissimo* that is simply not attained. From contemporary reports, this was definitely not a quality lacking in Busoni's playing. Furthermore, in some of the more complicated passage work, melodic material often does not sing out as in the *Adelaide* transcription. This could be an artistic decision, but it is not very satisfying musically.

Sonically, this CD is very enjoyable. A brief profile of Busoni and description of the Welte mechanism are provided. It is also a pleasure to hear several major Liszt works that are very rarely played today. While one may have serious reservations about piano rolls in general, this CD has provided some fascinating listening. *Reviewed by Walter Pate*