

Mostly Music spotlights Busoni

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Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924) was a multi-talented musician who worked as a composer, pianist, conductor, writer, editor and teacher. In spite of his wide output and far-ranging musical expertise, he is perhaps most famous for his transcriptions for piano of Bach works. The legend "Bach-Busoni" on musical scores was so well known during his lifetime that on one occasion his wife was introduced to someone as "Mrs. Bach-Busoni."

Last month Mostly Music Chicago hosted an all-Busoni recital for piano here in Hyde Park and called on one of Chicago's Busoni experts to perform. Svetlana Belsky, the coordinator of piano studies at the University of Chicago, has not only steeped herself in the music of Busoni, she is the translator of "Busoni as Pianist" by the influential Russian musicologist Grigori Kogan. Belsky was born in the Soviet Union but emigrated to the United States and so combines two languages and knowledge of two cultures, both useful for bringing Kogan's 1964 work to the attention of English-reading audiences.

Belsky is not only a passionate pianist and scholar, she proved herself to be an engaging speaker too as she introduced Busoni's works to her audience. Her remarks throughout the recital were delivered with both wit and wisdom.

She opened her performance with a dip into the Bach-Busoni treasure trove, starting with the piano transcription of the organ prelude "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme." She let the music unfold in its own time and appeared to take great pleasure in the assertive baseline that at times takes pre-eminent position.

Belsky followed this with Busoni's transcription of the towering Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, BWV 565. It was big and bold music meeting big and bold performance. Her dynamics contributed to the drama and she achieved a notable clarity even in the wildest textures of the music. That she was not overly smooth could be the starting point of debate, but it seems to me that this was a conscious choice not to make the music overly pretty or trivial, and a clear recognition that Bach did not compose the work with the piano in mind. (Nor could he have.)

Belsky selected a couple of Busoni's own original compositions in her recital, starting with two selections from his Six Elegies. "Turandots Frauengemach"

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afforded her the opportunity to display the light and airy side of her abilities, and she dispatched "All'Italia!" with panache.

Belsky described Busoni's Nine Variations on a Prelude by Chopin as the "most original" of his works for piano and she consistently knew how to build to the musical climaxes, as she concluded the work with soaring sound.

The Andantino from Mozart's Piano concerto No. 9 showed off Belsky's more delicate sensibilities as she spun out one memorable Mozartian moment after another.

All the world loves a lover and one opera's greatest lovers, that fiery gypsy Carmen, also got the Busoni treatment. The Chamber-Fantasy on Bizet's "Carmen" is a parlor piece with both power and grace and even one who has heard the musical ideas expressed again and again could not help but feel a new excitement in Busoni's approach. Belsky leapt from one glorious melody to the next with ease, as the dancing, flirting music swirled about the room.

Belsky closed her recital with what she called the greatest of the Bach-Busoni canon, the Chaconne in D Minor from Partita II in D Minor for Violin, BWV 1004. All her muscle was in evidence and she drew from the piano considerable volume. But it was the bell-like tones, which put me in mind of being in a huge cathedral, that was most satisfying. Belsky was perhaps a little heavy with her pedaling, which can of course cover certain sins, but her passion and commitment were clear.

The sitting room of Marianne and Bill Hammett's charming Hyde Park row house was packed that Sunday afternoon, quite a tribute to the pianist and presenters as the recital took place smack-dab at the same time as the Bears-Packers playoff game. Football updates came at the intermission and between the end of the recital and wonderful reception that followed, a few listeners (including your correspondent) occasionally checking their smart phones for silent updates on the game that would send one team home and the other to the Super Bowl.

Most of the folks, as you'd expect, were Bears' fans. Yet they went home happy in spite of their team losing, because they'd tasted a victory of another kind: they had the opportunity to hear a well thought out program performed with flair by a woman who has some claim to call herself Ms. Bach-Busoni.