

Busoni and Bach's Chaconne in the Nineteenth Century

[This short paper was given at the *Ninth Conference on Nineteenth Century Music*, held at Nottingham in 1996. It grew out of the research I undertook during the preparation of my edition of Busoni's piano transcription of Bach's Chaconne (London: Peters Edition, 1997).]

In 1935, in the preface to his orchestral version of the Chaconne from Bach's Second Partita for unaccompanied violin (BWV1004), Alfredo Casella acknowledged that he had adopted a structural modification first employed by Busoni – a varied repeat of one of the variations – but added

I have to confess that Busoni's famous pianoforte transcription does not have my unconditional admiration, quite the opposite.

Casella was not the last to have reservations about Busoni's 'arrangement' for piano solo, and he was certainly not the first. One of the earliest was, perhaps surprisingly, the dedicatee, the pianist, composer and fellow Bach-arranger, Eugene d'Albert. Busoni had no very high opinion of d'Albert's own music, but he did admire his piano playing, and the dedication of the Chaconne transcription was clearly an expression of that esteem. The work was published in late 1892 or early 1893 but it took d'Albert over a year to respond to the dedication. On 30 March 1894 he finally wrote to Busoni from Milan:

I played through your arrangement immediately on receipt, and it pleased me greatly, though, I must confess to you, not as much as your arrangement of the E \flat major Fugue.[[1](#)] I think the Chaconne won't tolerate an arrangement for two hands. In my opinion the only solution is to be found in the Brahms arrangement for the left hand alone. Any other adaptation must be necessarily too modern and I find this to be the case with your arrangement. It's something else to arrange an organ fugue –

but a piece written for violin alone, conceived within the compass of the violin-clef, definitely loses by the introduction of basses and, for example, broken octave passages. This is my very humble opinion ...[2]

Nearly two months later Busoni addressed these observations in a draft response to d'Albert. Whether these counter-arguments were ever included in a finished letter is not known, but they were elaborated in a passage in his essay *Von der Übertragung Bach'scher Orgelwerke auf das Pianoforte* that appeared as the first appendix to his edition of *Das wohltemperirte Klavier*: [3]

In his transcriptions of the Preludes and Fugues in D, E \flat and E minor the editor has devoted much care to registration, and he refers to them as a collection of examples of this method. The piano transcription of the Chaconne for violin by the same master may be included in the series, in as much as the editor has in both cases treated tonal effects in an organistic sense. This procedure, which has been variously attacked, finds its justification chiefly in the meaningful content which cannot attain complete expression through the violin, and also in the example set by Bach in the characteristic organ transcription of his violin fugue in G minor. [4]

So Busoni imagined an organ transcription by Bach, and transcribed that for piano.

The purpose of this paper is not to give an detailed account of Busoni's manipulations of the original, nor to address directly the aesthetic and critical issues they raise, but rather to relate Busoni's version to the surprisingly extensive tradition of such arrangements, and a contemporary interpretative approach to the original version. As far as the arrangements are concerned, these have been chronicled in an article by Georg Feder [5] and I will not attempt anything like such a comprehensive survey: this account is limited to edited highlights.

Bach's works for unaccompanied violin had circulated in manuscript copies in the 18th century, and it was not until 1802 that the first printed editions were published

simultaneously in Paris and Bonn by Decombe and Simrock. The latter was reissued ca. 1825 in altered form, but it was probably not until the 1840s that the Chaconne began to assume a canonic status within the violin repertory. The crucial moment in that stage in its history was reported by Schumann in both the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* and in the *Allgemeine Zeitung* for 1 March 1840. The event he refers to was one of a series of evening chamber concerts given in Leipzig during the 1839–40 season, and this particular occasion included performances of movements from Bach's works for unaccompanied violin, played by the leader of the Gewandhaus orchestra, Ferdinand David. In the *Allgemeine Zeitung* Schumann wrote:

David played the Chaconne by J.S. Bach, a piece from those sonatas for violin solo for which someone once asserted, wrongly, 'it is impossible to conceive an additional part',[6] a view that Mendelssohn-Bartholdy disproved in the best way, in that he accompanied it at the piano so wonderfully that the old, eternal cantor seemed to take a hand in it. That Bach himself thought of his piece like this or similarly, is perhaps possible ... but he certainly never heard it in such perfection or masterly simplicity.[7]

According to Ferdinand Hiller, Mendelssohn accompanied 'frei am Klavier',[8] but in 1847 Cranz published an accompanied version of the Chaconne by Mendelssohn: to what extent this corresponds to the version heard in 1840 is not clear, but, Mendelssohn's example was to be followed by a number of other composers.