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Busoni's *Elegies* on the Path of Liszt's Late Style

ABSTRACT

Background

The *Elegies* for piano (1908 first version; 1909 second version) fill a special place among the instrumental works by Ferruccio Busoni. The composer declared to have found his entire personality 'at last and for the first time in the *Elegies*' (Busoni 1977, 169). Some of these pieces (six in the first version, seven in the second) were built up from materials that already existed; they all seem to be constructed on the basis of Busoni's theory of 113 scales elaborated and discussed by the composer himself in the *Entwurf einer neuen Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (*Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music*, 1907–1910), an essay in which the composer expresses his concept of absolute music and prefigures the advent of a new harmonic system.

As Beaumont writes, Busoni's *Elegies* are the 'first fruits of Busoni's new insights'; they 'carry on at a point where the later piano works of Liszt left off' (Beaumont 1985, 102 and 105).

Some of Liszt's late pieces (*Nuages gris*, *Bagatelle sans tonalité*, *Unstern*, *La lugubre gondola*, etc.) are the result of new harmonic paths that the composer was theorizing in the Eighties in a treatise on modern harmony (*Sketches for a Harmony of the Future*) and experimenting in several harmonic sketches. Unfortunately both the sketches and the treatise have not survived. We have other sources to know Liszt's thought about harmony, beside his music. In 1860, in a letter to his pupil Ingeborg Stark, Liszt talks about a *Method of Harmony* based on the twelve tones of the tempered system; the twelve notes are divided into two groups that constitute two whole-tone scales. The system has to be completed 'by the admission of quarter and half quarter tones' (La Mara 1893, 363). Liszt was influenced by Fétis' and Weitzmann's theory. *Bagatelle sans tonalité* (1885), for example, is the result of the application of 'ordre omnitonique' by Fétis, that is the Fétis' idea to alter or to modify every note of a chord. The influence on Liszt of the essays *Der übermässige Dreiklang* (*The Augmented Triad*, 1853) and *Der verminderte Septimenakkord* (*The Diminished Seventh Chord*, 1854) by Weitzmann is well-known.

On a new harmonic path is also Busoni's treatise *Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music*. The composer devotes a section to an evaluation of the traditional harmonic system. He underlines the limits of tonality and calls for 'infinite graduations of the octave, for freer use of the established twelve semitones, for divisions of the scale in new ways.' He elaborates a system of 113 scales, later extended to 145 plus two double octave scales, and establishes the identity of major and minor mode by considering them not in opposition but only as a psychological variation. Busoni thinks and realizes polytonal stratifications and searches for

harmonic sequences in continuous transformation. The composer also proposes a division of the whole tone into third- and sixth-tones (Beaumont 1985, 91).

The resemblances between Busoni's work and some outputs of Liszt's final decade are apparent. Some remarks about Liszt's *Nuages gris* and *Unstern*, and Busoni's *Nach der Wendung* (*Elegy* No. 1) exemplify the Lisztian inheritance in Busoni's musical language. *Nuages gris* and *Unstern* are examples of Liszt's late innovative style. Both works project introspection, dream-like impressions. *Nuages gris* begins with a melodic line characterized by a striking tritone; the work carries a G-minor key signature but its persistent presence of the tritone and the conclusive augmented triad create an ambiguous tonal plane. Also *Unstern* begins with a melodic line characterized by a striking tritone in an ambiguous tonality.

The title of Busoni's first elegy *Nach der Wendung* (*After the Turning*) explains the composer's new way of composing; its subtitle *Recueillement* means both an inward process and a synthesis of the previous experiences. The kernel of the piece is the recurring tension between C and F-sharp already realized in the opening four notes and affirmed in the closing bars by the alternating from F-sharp to C major triads over a regularly descending chromatic bass-line. Tritone is the interval that characterizes the theme and the harmonic relations of the work.

In these three works — *Nach der Wendung*, *Nuages gris*, and *Unstern* — the perception of dissonance is subjected to a principle clearly explained by Fétis. The theorist 'recognizes a way to override the force of tonality by cultivating more systematic resources, which he referred to under the terms *uniformity* and *symmetry*' (Cohn 2012, 47). The distinction between consonance and dissonance is destroyed by the symmetry of movement and succession; a sequential construction 'fixes the attention of the mind, which holds on to the form so strongly that any irregularity of tonality is not noticed' (Fétis quoted in Cohn 2012, 47). In the context of *Nuages gris*, *Unstern* and *Nach der Wendung* the dissonance of the diminished fifth no longer requires resolution because its behaviour cannot be distinguished from that of the perfect fifth. In Liszt the dissonance emerges more clearly because of the use of a recitative style; Busoni hides the dissonance in a virtuosic context. Liszt's *Unstern* is an example of an organization based on minimal inflections of notes; this path rules also *Nuages gris* and Busoni's *Nach der Wendung*.

The affinities between the two composers come to light also in the choice of the category 'elegy'. As Liszt, Busoni guides the public into his experimental music by well-known dances Tarantella in *Elegy* No. 2, folk songs *Fenesta che lucive* in *Elegy* No. 2, citations of his works *Turandot* and *Die Brautwahl* in *Elegies* Nos. 4, 5, and 6. In a predictable rhythmic scaffolding, Busoni displays his less conventional tonal language.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The aim of this paper is to analyse Busoni's *Elegies* in order to show the Lisztian inheritance in Busoni's experimental language. The analysis will focus on the *Elegies* Nos. 1 and 6 and on a comparison of these pieces with some of Liszt's late works: *Nuages gris*, *Unstern*, *Csárdás macabre*, *En rêve*, *Recueillement*, *La lugubre gondola*. In this repertoire the prevailing high levels of dissonance and the chromatic slippage undermine the tonal assertion. Both composers search for new scales beyond the tonality and ancient modality. After a brief excursus about some apparent relationship between Liszt's and Busoni's harmonic language, it will propose an analysis of the *Elegie* No. 6 'Erscheinung' based on neo-riemannian theory.

Methods

A discussion of the pieces on the basis of both Busoni's harmonic theory and Liszt's assertions about Fétis's 'ordre omnitonique' will be followed by the application of a neo-riemannian approach. This method is particularly suitable for explaining the ambiguity of key and the exploitation of music language that both composers realize by drifting imperceptibly from one scale to another in washes of pastel colors.

Implications

The resemblances between Busoni's *Elegies* and Liszt's final piano works are not only a clear manifestation of the composers' common desire to exploit the musical language; they also permit to reflect about the implication of the term 'elegy' — many of Liszt's late pieces can be described as 'elegiac' although they are published under different titles. Both composers express 'elegiac' affects in works that call the listener to intense and inward concentration. By means of a research for new musical practices Busoni and Liszt create works of solitariness and contemplation, autobiographical dramas in the stream-of-consciousness style of the twentieth century.

In his *Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music* Busoni quotes some lines from his drama *Der mächtige Zauberer*: 'I wish for the Unknown! What I already know is limitless. I want to go still further'. Busoni searched for a new language 'in which — the composer wrote quoting Hofmannsthal — perhaps I would someday answer to an unknown judge in the grave' (Beaumont 1985, 89).

Keywords

Ferruccio Busoni, Franz Liszt, Chromaticism, Music aesthetics, Polytonality, Modality, Late Style.

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