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Abstract:

### Acoustic Resonances: New Timbres, Sounds, and Colors in the Bach-Busoni Transcriptions

“Colossal,” “monumental,” and “architectural” are common descriptors for Ferruccio Busoni’s performances of Johann Sebastian Bach’s music, which featured use of arm weight, the back, and the whole body. This powerful interpretive style helped fill up the reverberant concert halls built during Busoni’s lifetime.

While resonant sounds, thick chords, emphasis on tone color, and bold dramatic contrasts sounded well within the walls of the large concert halls built in the late nineteenth century, it was harder to effectively project the contrapuntal lines of a Baroque fugue with clarity. It is thus not coincidental that at the same time larger resonant concert halls were being erected, some performers like Busoni also began to modify pieces that were not designed for those halls. Before the invention or widespread use of amplification devices or variable architectural acoustic techniques, such as artificial shells, ceiling panels, or adjustable walls to change the acoustics for different purposes or types of pieces, Busoni adapted the music he played to the acoustic properties in the spaces he performed.

When Busoni created transcriptions and arrangements of the music of Bach, he thus made timbral, registral, and compositional changes. He brought out unexpected colors and he foregrounded lines or phrases through his distinctive play with timbre. Although some of his techniques, such as doublings, were shared by contemporaries, he also made idiosyncratic choices that were informed by the acoustics of the newly emerging concert halls in the late nineteenth century, including a terraced approach to dynamics, registral expansions, and a reworking of form.

By analyzing Busoni’s Bach edition, Bach recordings, transcriptions, and arrangements, as well as consulting concert programs, essays, and letters, some unpublished, my essay not only documents where Busoni performed Bach’s music and the acoustic properties of those spaces, but also the types of modifications he made to the music of Bach in response to those spaces.

Through this case study of Busoni’s interpretations and reworkings of Bach, the essay simultaneously contributes new knowledge about late nineteenth and early twentieth century performance practices of Bach’s music. At the same time, it shows cross disciplinary connections between architecture, acoustics, timbre, and performance practices.