

Next on

## Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection

Listen to WRTI 90.1 FM Philadelphia or online at [wrti.org](http://wrti.org).

Encore presentations of the entire *Discoveries* series every Wednesday at 7:00 p.m. on WRTI-HD2

---

**Saturday, March 5th, 2011, 5:00-6:00 p.m.**

**Ferruccio Busoni** (1866-1924). Concertino in B-flat for Clarinet and Small Orchestra, Op. 48 (1918). Ludmila Peterková, clarinet, Prague Chamber Philharmonic Orchestra, Jiří Bělohlávek. Supraphon 3348-2031. Tr 5. 10:18

**Ferruccio Busoni**. *Berceuse élégiaque*, “Des Mannes Wiegenlied am Sarge seiner Mutter,” Op. 42 (Elegiac lullaby, Lullaby of a man at his mother's coffin) (1907, orch. 1909). Hong Kong Philharmonic, Samuel Wong. Naxos 555373. Tr 11. 11:16

**Ferruccio Busoni**. Orchestra Suite No. 2, “Geharnischte” (Armored Suite) (1895/1903). Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Esa-Pekka Salonen. YLE 9506 Tr 5-8. 27:37



He was the first to perform all 18 Etudes of Franz Liszt together, the first to play all 24 Chopin Preludes together, and over four nights in Berlin he soloed in 14 concertos with orchestra. Fourteen. They couldn't invent words big enough to describe this new star among pianists, Ferruccio Busoni. Not only star, but they called him sun, giant, and king, tripping over themselves to find superlatives. His octaves were so fast and so even, his passage-work so light, his colors so different, that pianists, stupefied, would rush onstage after his concerts to inspect the piano, so hopeful were they that he had altered it somehow. But no, it was just a piano. No one could believe the magical sonorities he summoned from it, and no one could believe the monumental technique necessary to achieve that.

Nor could anyone believe that he was also a composer.

Busoni was born in Tuscany and raised in the multicultural and somewhat German city of Trieste in what is now northern Italy, but which was then in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father was a clarinet virtuoso, and his mother, a pianist born in Austria. They were working musicians who concertized often, leaving young Ferruccio without formal schooling. But he was gifted in many subjects, including music, and read voraciously. At nine years of age he entered the Vienna Conservatory. Later he moved to Leipzig, where he became friends with Gustav Mahler, and to Helsinki, where he met his wife and also became lifelong friends with Jean Sibelius.

He loved the tradition of Bach, Mozart, and Mendelssohn, but he also loved and wrote about new trends in music. The avant-garde harmonies of the pianist-composer Liszt appealed to him, although those of that other futurist composer—Richard Wagner—did not. Busoni was at the forefront of new musical thinking. His students ranged from Kurt Weill to Edgard Varèse to Percy Grainger, the conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos, and Hollywood's Louis Gruenberg (*All the King's Men*) and Dimitri Tiomkin (*It's a Wonderful Life*, *High Noon*).

His gargantuan Piano Concerto may be the largest such work ever written, at over 70 minutes and with a men's chorus thrown in for good measure (we heard the final two movements on a previous *Discoveries*). His virtuosity at the piano hurt his reputation as a composer, though, and for a long time he was known more for his Bach transcriptions than for his own works. But that is changing.

He wrote the Concertino for Clarinet and Small Orchestra in Switzerland during World War I. The earlier “Armored” Suite is dedicated to Sibelius and other friends from Finland. But a few years later, he found his voice as a composer, with the *Berceuse élégiaque*. He had written it for piano, but was moved to create an orchestral work from it after his mother died. His old friend Mahler premiered it at an all-Italian concert with his orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, in 1911. It was the last concert Mahler ever gave, as he became ill but insisted, against advice, on conducting. He never recovered, dying three months later in Vienna.

Mahler's obituaries hardly mentioned his own compositions, but his fame has changed so much that today some are surprised to learn that he was a world-famous conductor. As we become more familiar with Busoni's music, perhaps someday we'll have to remind people that he also played the piano!

---

Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), Curator of the Fleisher Collection, and [Jack Moore](#), Program Director of [WRTI](#). In *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* we uncover the unknown, rediscover the little-known, and take a fresh look at some of the remarkable treasures housed in the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, at the Parkway Central Library of the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#). The Fleisher Collection is the largest lending library of orchestral performance material in the world. For recording details, please go to our [web page](#). For a detailed list of all our shows, please visit our [archives](#).