EVOKING THE MYSTICAL:
THE ESOTERIC LEGACY OF FERRUCCIO BUSONI

Judith Crispin

It was my wish and principle to make the central point of my opera a figure conspicuous and proverbial in history, connected with magic and unsolved riddles. From Zoroaster to Cagliostro these figures form a row of pillars through the course of time…(F. Busoni)¹

For the Italian-born virtuoso pianist and composer Ferruccio Busoni, the act of composing music was literally an occult practice, analogous to the incantations and evocations of ritual magic. There is much to suggest that his knowledge of occult and arcane subjects was at least as extensive as his knowledge of music.

This study will focus on Busoni’s magnum opus – his unfinished opera Doktor Faust, which he had worked on from 1916 until his death in 1924. Busoni had jealously guarded his sketches for Doktor Faust, concealing them even from the students that attended his deathbed. Gottfried Galston records that as he and Busoni’s sons carried the composer’s coffin, Kurt Weill ‘told [him] under oath of absolute secrecy the last thing that was known for certain about the tragic destiny of Doktor Faust. Petri, Jarnach and Weill had searched through the house and checked everything (desk and shelves): Doktor Faust is incomplete!’² Doktor Faust was premiered in Dresden the year after Busoni’s death. The incomplete scenes had been hastily finished by Phillip Jarnach, one of Busoni’s students, at the request of the Busoni family.

Further discussion of the ideas expressed in this study can be found in my book, The Esoteric musical Tradition of Ferruccio Busoni and its Reinvigoration in the Music of Larry Sitsky: The Operas Doktor Faust and The Golem.³

¹ Busoni quoted in Corleonis, Ferruccio Busoni, 109.
² Galston quoted in Levitz, Teaching New Classicality, 286.
³ Crispin, The Esoteric musical Tradition of Ferruccio Busoni.
The Galston-Busoni Archive in Tennessee houses a catalogue of Busoni’s personal library, which was auctioned in 1925. Over 1400 first edition and autographed books are listed, including an impressive array of mystical and religious texts, treatises on magic, collections of fairy-tales, and 23 different versions of the Faust story. Almost forty percent of the library catalogue is devoted to esoteric titles, including some extremely rare editions of occult texts by authors such as Cagliostro, Huysmans, Lavater, Peladan, Saint-Martin and Scott. Busoni’s library evidences a particular interest in the Kabbalah, from which many magical traditions are derived.

In his definitive *History of Magic*, Elphias Levi defines Kabbalah as an oral tradition that also transmits knowledge through symbols encoded within hieratic art:

[Kabbalah was] taken from Chaldea by Abraham, communicated by Joseph to the Egyptian priesthood, ingarnered by Moses, concealed in symbols in the Bible, revealed by the Saviour to St John, and embodied in its fullness in hieratic images, analogous to those of all antiquity…

For Levi, non-verbal symbols provide the degree of discretion necessitated by society’s traditional hostility towards Kabbalah, while also enabling the expression of otherwise ineffable ideas.

Like his contemporary Jean Cocteau, Busoni believed that ‘Art is not a pastime, but a priesthood.’ For him, composition was analogous to a mystical journey where the composer-priest illuminates the path for others. The notion of “musical priest” manifested in Busoni’s artistic practice in two ways: firstly, in the composition of works that may be understood only with the aid of a mystic vision and; secondly, in his acceptance that the average person would be spiritually insufficient for such understanding. This belief was self-fulfilling – an artwork that

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4 The Galston-Busoni Archive is part of the George F. De Vine Music Library at the University of Tennessee. The archive holdings have been catalogued by Pauline Shaw Bayne, see: Bayne, *The Gottfried Galston Music Collection*.

5 Anon., *Max Perl Antiquariat*.

6 Cagliostro’s *Secret Correspondence on the Public and Private life of Conte de Cagliostro*, Huysman’s *La Bas* (which includes the first published full description of a Satanic Black Mass), Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy and Magic: Riflessioni Sopra l’Arte Magica Annichilata*, Peladan’s *Comments on Deviant Magic* (and related texts by the same author), Saint-Martin’s *Natural Table of Relations Which Exist Between God, Man and the Universe*, Scott’s *On Demonology and Witchcraft*.
