

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: The Music of J.S. Bach and the Art of Transcription –
Selected Bach Transcriptions by Pianist-Composers
Ja-Hye Koo, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2012

Dissertation directed by: Professor Larissa Dedova
Piano Division, School of Music

This dissertation is a study of transcriptions by various pianist-composers of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. The purpose of the study is to explore many different examples of this genre, to re-evaluate their significance in the Classical piano repertoire, and to further validate them as one of the main works to be considered in performance settings. Although it is commonly believed that Mendelssohn “revived” Bach as a composer in the nineteenth century, it was rather the tradition of playing his music in modern concert settings with modern instruments that was rediscovered through the nineteenth century composers. Major composers such as Liszt and Brahms have all contributed to this movement by conducting and/ or transcribing his music. This dissertation, however, focuses specifically on pianist-composers after the Liszt generation who have continued in the tradition of transcribing Bach’s music. Works studied include transcriptions by one of the more prominent Bach transcribers, Ferruccio Busoni, as well as other transcriptions by 1) German pianist-composers: Max Reger, Eugen d’Albert; 2)

Russian pianist-composers: Samuil Feinberg, Alexander Siloti, Sergei Rachmaninov; 3) American pianist-composers: Kevine Oldham, Olga Samaroff, Angela Hewitt; 4) British pianist-composers: Myra Hess, Walter Rummel; and 4) Polish pianist-composer: Ignaz Friedman. The types of transcriptions recorded can be divided into two categories: transcriptions of instrumental works (such as organ preludes or violin partita) and transcriptions of vocal works (aria or cantata). The validity of these transcriptions can be firmly founded on the fact that Bach himself was an avid transcriber of other composers' works, as well as his own music. Pieces that are included on these recordings have been chosen after hours of listening and researching at The International Piano Archives of Maryland. This dissertation is documented on two compact discs that were recorded from 2009 to 2012 in Dekelboun Concert Hall at Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center of the University of Maryland. These recordings are housed within the University of Maryland Library System.

The Music of J.S. Bach and the Art of Transcription:

Selected Bach Transcriptions by Pianist-Composers

By

Ja-Hye Koo

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts
2012

Advisory Committee:

Professor Larissa Dedova, Chair

Professor Sung Won Lee

Professor Donald Manildi

Professor Cleveland Page

Professor Mikhail Volchok

Copyright © 2012 Ja-Hye Koo
All rights reserved

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents,

Grace Geum-Soon Koo

And

Simon Pyoung-Hae Koo,

who have supported me and believed in me
throughout my entire musical journey as a pianist.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Appendix.....	1
Program Notes.....	3
Bibliography.....	14

APPENDIX

DISC ONE

Selected Bach Transcriptions by Ferruccio Busoni

- 1. Chaconne from Partita No.2 for Violin, BWV 1004**
- 2. Intermezzo from Toccata in C Major for Organ BWV 564**
- 3. Ten Choral Preludes:**
 1. Komm, Gott, Schöpfer! heiliger Geist, BWV 667
[Come, God Creator]
 2. Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, BWV 645
[Awake, the Voice commands]
 3. Nun komm' der Heiden Heiland, BWV 659
[Now comes the gentiles' Savior]
 4. Nun freut euch, lieben Christen gmein, BWV 734a
[Rejoice, beloved Christians]
 5. Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ, BWV 639
[I call on Thee, Lord Jesus Christ]
 6. Herr Gott, nun schließ den Himmel auf, BWV 617
[Lord God, now open heaven's gate]
 - 7a. Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt, BWV 637
[All is lost through Adam's fall]
 - 7b. Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt, BWV 705
[All is lost through Adam's fall]
 8. In dir ist Freude, BWV 615
[In You is joy]
 9. Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, BWV 665
[Jesus Christ, Our Savior]

DISC TWO

Bach Transcriptions by Various Pianist-Composers

1. **Bach-Hess: Jesus bleibt meine Freude, Choral from BWV 147**
[Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring]
2. **Bach-Oldham: Fugue in G major, BWV 577**
3. **Bach-Feinberg: Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott, BWV 720**
[A Mighty Fortress is our God]
4. **Bach-Siloti: Prelude in B minor, BWV 855a**
5. **Bach-Friedman: Bourrée from Violin Partita in B minor, BWV 1002**
6. **Bach-Reger: Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein, BWV 668**
[When in the Hour of Utmost Need]
7. **Bach-Rachmaninov: Suite from Violin Partita in E major, BWV 1006**
Preludio
Gavotte
Gigue
8. **Bach-Rummel: Die Seele ruht in Jesu Händen, Aria from Cantata BWV 127**
[The Soul Rests in Jesus' Hands]
9. **Bach-Samaroff: Organ Fugue in G minor (The Little), BWV 578**
10. **Bach-Hewitt: Alle Menschen müssen sterben, BWV 643**
[All Men are Mortal]
11. **Bach-d'Albert: Toccata in F major, BWV 540**
12. **Bach-Koo: Erbarm dich mein, O Herre Gott, BWV 721**
[Have mercy on me, Lord my God]

The Music of J.S. Bach and the Art of Transcription

Selected Bach Transcriptions by Pianist-Composers

Although it is commonly believed that Mendelssohn “revived” Bach as a composer in the nineteenth century, it was rather the tradition of playing his music in modern concert settings with modern instruments that was rediscovered. When Mendelssohn performed Bach’s *St. Matthew’s Passion* in 1829, he had a choir of 158 singers and a full-sized modern orchestra. He also made huge cuts, even changing some of the scorings in order to accommodate the medium he was working with. This practice would have created much controversy over ‘authenticity’ in today’s music world, but it has been recorded by Mendelssohn’s sister, Fanny, that there was no complaints from the audience regarding Mendelssohn’s arrangement of *St. Matthew’s Passion* that evening. Instead, she recalls the air of ‘solemn devotion’ that was present among the audience. Remarkable event in its own right, what made this occasion a critical event to remember in the history of music was that it stirred up the heart of the composers in promoting early music in the nineteenth century concert venues. Schumann, Brahms and Liszt were all part of this movement – Brahms conducted several of Bach’s early choral works on stage, transcribed Bach’s Violin Partita No.2 (*Chaconne*) for the left hand for piano; Schumann wrote several Preludes and Fugues for pedal piano; Mendelssohn wrote six Preludes and Fugues for piano.

Franz Liszt, in particular, was a pioneer in transcribing other composers’ works, and it certainly included Bach’s compositions – he transcribed 6 Organ

Prelude and Fugues and 1 Organ Chorale Prelude for the piano. As it was true for the most nineteenth century concert pianists, these transcriptions were produced mainly for his own performance needs. It is interesting how, unlike his paraphrases of operas or transcriptions of other composer's songs and symphonies, these transcriptions of Bach's organ works stay extremely close to the original, lacking extra ornaments and embellishments. Knowing Liszt's ability as a composer and his style of writing, the literal interpretation of Bach's works seems to be on purpose – his aim was not to create his version of the piece, but to simply bring the master's works to the audience in its purest forms which, he probably believed, spoke for themselves.

. After the Liszt generation, his pupil, Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924), became one of the most prominent transcribers of Bach. Born in Italy to a musical family, he was a well-known pianist-composer of the time. His Bach transcriptions, in particular, became very popular and well-received during his day to the point where his wife's last name was once mistaken for Bach-Busoni.

In his essay titled, '*Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music*' written in 1911, he reveals his philosophy behind the art of transcription:

Every notation is, in itself, the transcription of an abstract idea. The instant the pen seizes it, the idea loses its original form. The intention itself of writing down the idea compels a decision on measure and key. The form as well as the musical agency which the composer must also decide upon, further define the means and the limits. It is much the same with man himself. Born naked and without clearly defined aspirations, he decides, or at a given moment is made to decide, upon a career. From the moment of decision, while a good deal that is original and indestructible in the idea or the man may live on, each is reduced to the conformity of classification. The musical idea becomes a sonata or a concerto; the man, a soldier or a priest.'

The spirit of an art-work, the measure of emotion, of humanity, that is in it – these remain unchanged in value through changing years; the form which these three assumed, the manner of their expression, and the flavor of the epoch which gave them birth, are transient, and age rapidly... spirit and emotion retain their essence, in the art-work as in man himself.¹

In Busoni's mind, from the first transcription – conception of a musical idea to writing

¹ Ferruccio Busoni, *Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music*, trans. Theodore Baker (New York: G. Schirmer, 1911), p.2, 85.

down the music – to the second transcription – transcribing for another instrument – was a relatively insignificant step.

Like Liszt, many of his transcriptions were born out of his own performing needs. Busoni's transcriptions, however, were more "original" in his writing than his teacher whose transcriptions were almost note-to-note Bach. Busoni was much more adventurous in transcribing Bach's works, adding octave doublings, register-shifts, added harmonies; making the use of the whole keyboard, and even incorporating the middle pedal (which was a fairly new invention by Steinway in New York at the time). *Chaconne* in D minor from Bach's Violin Partita No.2, BWV 1004, is an excellent example that illustrates this writing style. Octave doublings, sweeping 16th note runs that encompass the whole keyboard, and the generous use of the pedals... however unfaithful he was to the Bach's original version, he nevertheless succeeded in capturing the essence of Bach's vision in Chaconne. In fact, Busoni believed that Bach's conception of this piece was not well-suited for the instrument it was originally written for – it was much grander in conception than what was capable of violin in his opinion. Therefore, it is audible to hear how he made a conscious decision to set aside violinistic timbre when transcribing. It was purely a pianistic writing that emerged more as an adaptation of an original organ work, making it into a unique double-transcription.

Busoni's transcription of Bach's Chorale Preludes, in comparison to his *Chaconne*, remained less extravagant, as they were written for a religious setting. Chorale Preludes were a communal song of faith that played an important part in the Protestant Church Worship. It was a form of confession to God, and when sung by the entire congregation, it provided a powerful healing to church. Angela Hewitt, a Bach enthusiast of today says, "At the center of Bach's musical heritage was the

chorale... It is significant that chorale preludes for organ were among his earliest compositions, and went with him on his deathbed when he is said to have dictated 'Before Thy throne I stand' to a pupil." Busoni's transcriptions of ten of Bach's chorale preludes (he wrote nearly a hundred of them) might seem not as challenging as *Chaconne* in terms of technique at first, but bringing out the different layers of textures (which are often in a trio texture because of the nature of the organ), while beautifully shaping the Cantus Firmus melody in a consistent manner throughout the piece, would be a challenging task for any pianists, both technically and musically. *Nun Komm' der Heiden Heiland*, BWV 659 and *Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ*, BWV 639 are good examples of writing that illustrates this trio texture.

When considering Bach transcriptions, there are two very significant aspects to remember – First is that, keyboard music such as *Well-Tempered Clavier* that are that are frequently played on the piano today are already a transcription from harpsichord and clavichord. The modernized piano that we have today was not invented until around 1820's. Secondly, the validity of transcribing Bach's work is firmly founded on the fact that Bach himself was an avid transcriber of other composer's works as well as his own. Bach often arranged the string music of Vivaldi and Corelli to be played on his harpsichord, and also made use of ideas from other composers such as Dieupart, a much lesser-known figure than himself. The important thing was that Bach was not ashamed of borrowing other composers' materials. Actually, the 'borrowing' was not only practiced by Bach but was a common practice in the Baroque era. Manfred Bukofzer, a German-American musicologist and an author of *The Music in the Baroque Era*, explains why:

Baroque music differs from music of every other sort in its peculiar conception of the very nature of the art. In the Baroque period music is a language of signs, in which every sign has one or more meanings; but these can only reproduce things which are more or less known in advance. Music is thus a mirror, in the sense that man is a reflection of God. But this reflection can make nothing; man is a creature, not creator. The composer does not invent his themes, and lays no

store by originality. The whole emphasis is on the execution and the elaboration. That is why composers borrow their themes so often from other works, and often use the same motifs for quite different purposes.²

A good example of Bach's re-using of his own materials in two different scorings can be found with one of his most famous tune, *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*. Also known as *Sleepers Awake*, this music was first written in the form of a church cantata in 1731 before he transcribed for organ, BWV 645.

When Bach was a great transcriber himself, who is to say others are not allowed to transcribe Bach? Here is a list of just a few pianist-composers who shared in this belief – Leopold Godowsky, Ignaz Friedman, William Murdoch, Eugen d'Albert, Harold Bauer, Wilhelm Kempff, Myra Hess, Percy Grainger, Walter Rummel, Siloti, Rachmaninoff, Samuil Feinberg, Goedicke, Catoire, Kabalevsky, Saint-Saens, Lord Berners, William Walton, Herbert Howells and Harriet Cohen. The list could go on to make a book. In fact, a German scholar named Arthur Schanz has already done the work. He published a book dedicated to listing all the Bach transcriptions for the piano. For those who would like to explore the genre of Bach transcriptions in depth should consult his research and make use of its vast resource.

The other pianist-composers that are included on the dissertation program can be categorized by their nationalities – German, Russian, American, British and Polish. It is important to be pointed out, however, that these nationalistic categorizations are not to be associated with their writing style – it is simply a convenient way to organize the pianist-composers that are included on this dissertation program.

First group is the two German pianist-composers, Max Reger, and Eugen d'Albert. Born in 1873, Max Reger had been known to his colleagues as 'the

² Manfred Bukofzer, "Allegory in Baroque Music," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* Vol. 3, No. 1/2 (Oct., 1939 - Jan., 1940), pp. 1-21.

modern-day Bach' of his time because of his fondness in fugal forms. During his relatively a short life ending at the age of 43, he produced a large output, and they were almost always in abstract forms. *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein* ('When in the Hour of Utmost Need') has the following text:

When in the hour of utmost need
We know not where to look for aid,
When days and nights of anxious thought
Nor help nor counsel yet have brought,
Then this our comfort is alone;
That we may meet before Thy throne,
And cry, O faithful God, to Thee,
For rescue from our misery.

Reger took a similar approach to that of Liszt's, minimally invasive of its original version. The ambiguity in tonality which fluctuates from major to minor throughout the piece seems to reflect the instability of earthly beings and their supplication to God.

Eugen d'Albert is often compared to Busoni for his Bach transcriptions in its scope and scale. He enjoyed an international fame during his lifetime, and Busoni, in fact, dedicated his *Chaconne* to Eugen d'Albert. It has been recorded though, that Busoni's *Chaconne* was met with a long silence by d'Albert upon looking at it. Discouraged from the incidence, Busoni was even more disappointed when d'Albert decided to send a letter a year later, criticizing Busoni's transcription for adding too much to his own material. Although Eugen d'Albert used many of the elements that Busoni had used such as octave doublings, use of the wide range of the keyboard, and generous use of the pedal, one can hear that he focused much more on the clarity of line and harmony than Busoni did. His transcription of Toccata in F Major illustrates these qualities very well. Its scale is as large as Busoni's transcriptions of Bach's toccatas, but they are much more Baroque in terms of harmony and conception. It is significant to note, however, that Busoni's transcriptions are much more popular among pianists today than those of d'Albert or Liszt.

The three Russian pianist-composers on the program include Samuil Feinberg, Alexander Siloti and Sergei Rachminov. The youngest of these three was Samuil Feinberg who was born in Odessa in 1890. Feinberg grew up in Moscow and received his formal training from Alexander Goldenweiser at the Moscow Conservatory. Extremely promising as a concert pianist, he was said to have had the entire 48 Well-Tempered Clavier in his repertoire by the age of 23, presenting all of them in public on two occasions. Feinberg admired Bach's works and was familiar with Busoni's transcriptions of Bach very well (Busoni was already a well-known figure in Moscow by the time Feinberg was born). In fact, Feinberg made a trip to Berlin in 1913 in the hopes of showing his own transcriptions and becoming Busoni's pupil. Unfortunately, Busoni was out of town when Feinberg went to Berlin, and their paths never crossed each other. He transcribed a cycle of thirteen Chorale Preludes during the 1920 and 30s and kept his interest in the art of transcriptions for the remainder of his life. In his book, *Pianism as an Art*, Feinberg writes:

The goal of a transcription is to express the character of the sound of the original by other means while retaining the style of the composition as much as possible. This is impossible to accomplish mechanically. One has to know well the possibilities of his instrument, as well as find creatively the adequate form of presentation and new means of expressions to shed light on the composer's intentions. The new avenue of presentation and expression are needed solely in order to preserve, not break apart the very concept of the work.

His chosen piece on the dissertation program is *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (A Mighty Fortress is Our God). This piece, although not categorized as such, is much like a theme and variation. His transcribing style is marked by spacious and wide use of registers with constant contrasts.

The transcription of Prelude in B minor by Alexander Siloti, and the transcription of Suite from Violin Partita in E Major, BWV 1006 by Sergei Rachmaninov occupy a special place on this dissertation program within along with transcriptions by Busoni. First of all, the choice of keys, (compared to most other

transcriptions that were written in the key of G Major/ minor or F Major/ minor), adds flavor and color to the whole program; secondly, their approach to the transcribing process was much more creative, completely recreating the original work in their own pianistic language. The Prelude in B minor is based on a figuration found in Bach's Little Prelude in B minor in the book dedicated to his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. Siloti's transcription of this piece, especially the tradition of playing it with a quiet repeat, bringing out the hidden melody in the left hand, became popular through Emil Gilel's performance at the Moscow Conservatory in 1977. All three movements of Rachmaninov's transcription of Violin Partita in E Major, BWV 1006, are virtuosic in nature, but *Preludio* in particular could be tricky and challenging for performers with its constant hand crossings at a quick moving tempo.

Kevin Oldham, Olga Samaroff and Angela Hewitt are the three American pianist-composers on the program. Kevin Oldham is a lesser known figure of today, the youngest pianist-composer on my entire program. His Fugue in G Major should really be co-credited to T. Earnest Nichols, an organ student of late Virgil Fox, who frequently played this fugue at his concerts. Oldham was born in 1960 in Kansas City and received his formal musical training from Northwestern University and Juilliard. His ability as a pianist highly considered by many who knew and heard him, it is quite unfortunate that he ended his life prematurely HIV. The Fugue in G Major is a fun piece for the performer and the listener alike, with its bright and cheerful theme set in a 6/8 Gigue rhythm.

Olga Samaroff was a reputable pianist of her time, who later married the conductor Leopold Stokowski and taught at Juilliard. She is famous for having changed her name in order to boost her career. Born in Texas and raised in the United States, her real name was Lucy Hickenlooper, but she changed it to Olga Samaroff

after her agent suggested that her name was too telling of her origin. Samaroff's transcription of 'Little' Organ Fugue in G minor, is voiced for three, and stays close to the original fugue.

Angela Hewitt, briefly mentioned before, is the only living pianist-composer on this program. Her affinity for Bach's music has been shown through her regular inclusion of Bach original works such as *Well-Tempered Clavier* on her concert programs as well as Bach transcriptions. Influenced by her father who was an organist, she was drawn to the organ music of Bach at an early age and transcribed a few on her own. Her transcription of *Alle Menschen müssen sterben*, BWV 643 (All Men are Mortal) is included in her recently published score of Bach transcriptions. The calm acceptance of God's sovereignty as one is reminded of limited nature of mortal beings is well-conveyed in a serene melody and harmony.

The two British pianist-composers on the program are Myra Hess, and Walter Rummel. Myra Hess was the one who transcribed the famous *Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring*. Her transcription of this piece became popular during World War II, when she was invited by a national radio broadcasting company to perform live during lunchtime concerts at to boost the morale of the people. This transcription became her signature piece during and after her lifetime. The music is originally from the last movement of the Cantata No.147 *Herz un Mund und Tat und Leben* ('Heart and Mouth and Deed and Life') where it is sung by the chorus with trumpet doubling the melody. Her transcription stays mostly close to the original with left hand playing the strings and continuo part and right hand playing the triplets in the violin and oboe part.

Walter Rummel, although German by citizen and his preference, he was born and raised in England. A pupil of Leopold Godowsky and a friend of Debussy, he wrote 25 Bach Transcriptions, and all of them reflected his personal faith. What sets

him apart from other pianist-composers' transcriptions is that he focused on transcribing Bach's vocal music rather than instrumental music. The one recorded here is probably the most famous one from his set of transcriptions – *Die Seele ruht in Jesu Händen* ('The Soul Rests in Jesus Hands'). This piece is an aria from Cantata BWV 127 in which Bach's original scoring was for voice and orchestra. Having to condensing a vocal line with 8 or more orchestral lines into two staves, his transcriptions are weaved with elongated arpeggios that span from left to right hand. They are usually thick in texture with much octave doublings, requiring a generous use of the pedal. The slow and never ending nature of the music depict one's sadness in saying good-bye to a loved one.

Lastly, a Polish pianist-composer, Ignaz Friedman's transcription of *Bourrée* from Violin Partita in B Minor, BWV 1002, is a technically challenging piece similar to Rachmaninov's violin partita transcription, where a leaping nature of the melody set with a widely spread out chords require much precision and accuracy from the performer.

In conclusion, there remains a question of what made the music of J. S. Bach so appealing that they were the most to be transcribed by pianist-composers. In Kathron Sturrock's words, "Of all composers, Bach has lent himself most to being transcribed... [because] a deep spirituality lies at the heart of all his works, and this chimed with the spirit of the late nineteenth century, its romantic, almost naïve idealism as yet unshattered by the harshness of global warfare and its attendant brutal realism."

I also believe that it was the Bach's spirituality in music that spoke to these pianists, inspiring them to write transcriptions – earthly sufferings of mankind, one's need for God, divine intervention from God, reunion with God, joy and thanksgiving to His mercy and grace – these are universal themes that all humanity can relate to despite different heritage, language and culture.

As I close, it is my hope and prayer that more pianists would continue to explore and transcribe Bach's works, sharing the beautiful hidden message with more listeners abroad.

(SDG)

Bibliography

Bukofzer, Manfred. "Allegory in Baroque Music." Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes. Vol.3, No. 1/2 (Oct., 1939-Jan, 1940): 1-21.

Busoni, Ferruccio. Sketches of a New Aesthetic of Music. New York: G. Schirmer, 1907.

Carrell, Norman. Bach the Borrower. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1967.

Hewitt, Angela. Program Notes for CD, "Bach Arrangements." Hyperion CDA 67309 (2001).

Macomber, Frank S. Bach's Re-Use of His Own Music: A Study in Transcription. Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1967.

Milne, Hamish. Program Notes for CD, "Bach Piano Transcriptions – 5: Goedicke, Kabalevsky, Catoire, Siloti." Hyperion CDA 67506 (2005).

Parry, Tim. Program Notes for CD, "Bach/Busoni Piano Transcriptions by Kun-Woo Paik." Decca 467 358-2 (2000).

Schanz, Arthur. Johann Sebastian Bach in der Klaviertranskriptionen. Eisenach: K.D. Wagner, 2000.