

Busoni Piano Concerto, Op. 39

John Ogdon, piano

Daniell Revenaugh / Royal Philharmonic Orchestra



John Ogdon was born in Mansfield Woodhouse, Nottinghamshire, and attended the Manchester Grammar School, before studying at the Royal Northern College of Music (formerly The Royal Manchester College of Music) between 1953 and 1957, where his fellow students under Richard Hall included Harrison Birtwistle, Alexander Goehr, Elgar Howarth and Peter Maxwell Davies. Together they formed New Music Manchester, a group dedicated to the performances of serial and other modern works. His tutor there was Claud Biggs. As a boy he had studied with Iso Elinson and after leaving college, he further studied with Gordon Green, Denis Matthews, Dame Myra Hess, and Egon Petri—the latter in Basel, Switzerland.

He won first prize at the London Liszt Competition in 1961 and consolidated his growing international reputation by winning another first prize at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1962, jointly with Vladimir Ashkenazy.

Ogdon was able to play most pieces at sight and had committed a huge range of pieces to memory. He intended to record the complete piano works of Sergei Rachmaninoff, a feat which would constitute about 6 full-length CDs, but only recorded about half of them. The recordings were released in 2001. He recorded all ten Scriabin sonatas early in his career. Ogdon was also a formidable exponent of the works of Alkan and Busoni. In more familiar repertoire, he revealed deep musical sensibilities, always buttressed by a colossal technique. He also recorded a number of duo-piano works with his wife, Brenda Lucas, also known as Brenda Lucas Ogdon.

On 2 February 1969, on British television, he gave the first modern performance of Edward Elgar's Concert Allegro, Op. 46. The piece was never published and the manuscript had long been believed lost, but it came to light in 1968. Ogdon and Diana McVeigh developed a performing version of the piece from Elgar's manuscript, which was full of corrections, deletions and additions. Between 1976 and 1980 Ogdon was Professor of Music (Piano) at Indiana University.

His own compositions number more than 200, and include 4 operas, 2 large works for orchestra, 3 cantatas, songs, chamber music, a substantial amount of music for solo piano, and 2 piano concertos, the first of which he recorded. The majority of his music was composed for the piano. These include 50 transcriptions of works by composers as diverse as Stravinsky, Palestrina, Mozart, Satie and Wagner. He also made piano arrangements of songs by Cole Porter, Jerome Kern and George Gershwin and he wrote unaccompanied sonatas for violin, flute and cello. A planned symphony based on the works of Herman Melville, and a comic opera were left unfinished. The original manuscripts of many of John Ogdon's compositions are deposited in the Royal Northern College of Music Library.

The Piano Concerto in C major, Op. 39 (BV 247), by Ferruccio Busoni, is one of the largest works ever written in this genre. The concerto lasts around 70 minutes and is in five movements; in the final movement a male chorus sings words from the final scene of the verse drama *Aladdin* by Adam Oehlenschläger, who also wrote the words of one of the Danish national anthems.

The first performance of the concerto took place in the Beethoven-Saal, Berlin, Germany, on November 10, 1904, at one of Busoni's own concerts of modern music. Busoni was the soloist, with Karl Muck conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and the Choir of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church (Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche). The reviews were decidedly mixed, some being filled with outright hostility or derision. The century following its premiere has seen relatively few performances, owing to the large orchestration, complex musical texture, the use of a male chorus, and the staggering demands put on the soloist.

It seems to have been Beethoven who first included a chorus in a concert-work with piano and orchestra, in his Choral Fantasy, Op. 80, of 1808; since then only a handful of works have been scored for similar forces, including Daniel Steibelt's Piano Concerto No. 8 (first performed March 16, 1820, in Saint Petersburg) and the Piano Concerto No. 6, Op. 192 (1858) by Henri Herz which also have a choral finale.

Busoni intended to dedicate the concerto to his friend William Dayas, but he died in 1903. His daughter Karin Dayas gave the first American performance of the concerto in 1932.

The first movement, marked "Prologo e introito" is a little over fifteen minutes long on average, and is a broad Allegro movement which features a clangorous piano part.

The second movement, a kind of Scherzo, is mostly a light-fingered affair for the piano that makes use of "Italianate" rhythms and melodic material, even if the melodies are more evocative of Italian popular music than actual quotations from indigenous Italian folk music.

The third and longest movement is the "Pezzo serioso", a massive meditation and exploration in four parts in the key of D flat major which has a central climax that is once again pianistically challenging and brilliantly scored for both the piano and the orchestra.

The fourth movement "All' Italiana", is perhaps the most variegated in its use of the orchestra, with a terrifically virtuosic piano part, arguably more difficult than anything that has come before it in the work. There are also two cadenzas to this movement - one, included in the printed score; the other, an insert in the two-piano score that is an amplification of the one printed in the two-piano edition.

The final movement, "Cantico" with male chorus, brings full circle many themes that have been heard earlier in the work. The words sung by the chorus are from the final scene of Oehlenschläger's verse drama *Aladdin*.

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I. Prologo E Introito 16:12

II. Pezzo Giocoso 9:05

III. Pezzo Serioso 20:01

IV. All'Italiana 12:47

V. Cantico Chorus – John Alldis Choir 10:21

Total Time: 1:08:26

Recorded by EMI Records 1963

Recording Supervisor – Suvi Raj Grubb



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admin@highdeftapetransfers.com
or visit our website:
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