

# Adolf BUSCH

## COMPLETE MUSIC FOR SOLO PIANO

SONATA IN C MINOR, OP. 25

FANTASY IN C MINOR

FOUR INTERMEZZI

SUITE, OP. 60B

AND OTHER WORKS

Jakob Fichert

FIRST RECORDINGS

# ADOLF BUSCH AND THE PIANO

by Jakob Fichert

It's hardly a secret that Adolf Busch (1891–1952) was one of the greatest violinists of the twentieth century. But only specialists, it seems, are aware that he was also a very fine composer, even though these two artistic identities – performer and composer – were of equal importance to him. In recent years some of his chamber works, his organ music and parts of his symphonic *œuvre* have been recorded, allowing some appreciation of his stature as a creative figure. But Busch's music for solo piano has yet to be discovered – only the *Andante espressivo*, BoO<sup>1</sup> 37 [22], has been recorded before now, by Peter Serkin, Busch's grandson, and that in a private recording, not available commercially. This album therefore presents the entirety of Busch's piano output for the first time.

Busch's writing for solo piano forms a kind of huge triptych, with the Sonata in C minor, Op. 25, as its central panel; another major work, a *Fantasia* in C major, BoO 20, was written early in his career; and a later Suite, Op. 60b, dates from the time of his full maturity. Busch also wrote more than a dozen smaller piano pieces, in which he seems to have experimented with various genres in pursuit of the development of his musical language, with four *Intermezzi*, a Scherzo and other character pieces among them. One can hear the influence of Brahms, Mendelssohn, Busoni and – especially – Reger, but with familiarity Busch's style can be heard to be distinctive and personal, displaying a unique and highly expressive world of sound. Throughout his life Busch fought for recognition as a composer, and although his music was published and performed, he was often perceived by the press and fellow musicians as 'the violinist who also wrote music' and not as a composer in his own right – and his principled stand against the Nazis cost him his publisher and his major audiences.

<sup>1</sup> The Busch scholar Dominik Sackmann, following the example of the 'WoO' – Werk ohne Opuszahl – numbers given to the unpublished works of Beethoven and other composers, extended the idea to allocate 'BoO' numbers to those Busch compositions to which no opus number was allocated.

The *Fantasia* in C major, BoO 20 [1], written in 1908 and dedicated to Otto Grüters, his future brother-in-law, is Busch's first documented piano work (the score of an earlier piano sonata of the same year has been lost). The seventeen-year-old composer was a student at the Cologne Conservatoire, where he was taking composition lessons with the conductor Fritz Steinbach. Shortly before writing the *Fantasia*, Busch had made the acquaintance of Max Reger, who later became his mentor and a close friend. It is not known if Reger was aware of Busch's compositions at the time or commented on them in any way, but he was certainly full of admiration for the young man's violin-playing, especially for his rendition of Reger's immensely difficult and complex Violin Concerto.<sup>2</sup> With its intricate textures, expressive details and organistic nature, the *Fantasia* is clearly inspired by Reger's piano-writing. Although from an instrumental viewpoint there is scope for refinement – some passages are rather un pianistic – this work displays remarkable artistic maturity, given that the composer was only seventeen years old. Opening with a slow introduction, which is followed by an energetic and youthful sonata-movement, the *Fantasia* is a daring first step of an exceptionally talented young artist full of imagination and curiosity.

During the next decade Busch's major compositional output was of chamber and symphonic music, but he did write a number of smaller piano works. The *Agitato* in C major, BoO 30 [2], dates from 1909 – and already bears witness to Busch's apparent readiness for the tempo indications of these pieces to serve also as their titles; other composers might have allocated them to existing genres. Although this piece was written only a year after the *Fantasia*, his style had matured significantly. Containing rhapsodic elements, the *Agitato* is a vigorous and highly effective piano piece, possibly influenced by Reger's *Intermezzi*, Op. 45.

In due course Busch himself wrote four *Intermezzi*, beginning also in 1909 with one in B flat major, BoO 73 [3], an introvert piece replete with Brahmsian textures and

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<sup>2</sup> Reger's Concerto was premiered in 1908 by Henri Marteau, to whom the work had also been dedicated. On a visit to Cologne Reger was introduced to the young Busch by his violin professor, Bram Eldering, who proudly told him that his pupil had learnt the very difficult concerto. Not expecting much, Reger was completely taken by Busch's performance and the fact that he knew the piece by heart, since even Marteau used the score in his performance. (cf. Tully Potter, *Adolf Busch: The Life of an Honest Musician*, Vol. 1, 1891–1939, Toccata Press, London, pp. 91–92).

intricate lines. About eight years later he composed another *Intermezzo*, BoO 74, this time in C major [4], and filled with longing and melancholy. Busch's years in Vienna (1912–18) clearly left their mark here: in parts this piece sounds like a slow waltz. Both these *Intermezzi* are dedicated to his wife, Frieda. A third, in A minor, BoO 72 [5], is undated. Like BoO 30, it is marked *Agitato* and shares its contrasting and extrovert character. At times highly expressive, it is another youthful, passionate statement. In spite of the indisputable development of his compositional style, his musical language remains surprisingly conservative, staying strictly within the realm of tonality, and though his harmony would grow more dense, his music remained tonal.

In 1914 Busch made the acquaintance of Dr Wolfgang Römisch, the doctor in charge of a sanatorium in Arosa, Switzerland, and his wife Käthe – a meeting that proved to be of some importance for his piano-writing. An early influence on Busch's attitude to the piano had been the playing of his brother Fritz, later to become a major conductor, in which clarity was a major concern. As with Fritz, Busch's approach was conditioned by pianists of the Clara Schumann school: Lazzaro Uzielli, Carl Friedberg, Leonard Borwick *et al.*; Käthe Römisch, too, had been a pupil of Clara Schumann. After suffering from a serious lung condition, Busch underwent a lengthy treatment under Dr Römisch's supervision. In gratitude for the restoration of his health, he dedicated a piano piece in A minor, BoO 102 [6], written in 1916, to Käthe and his *Three Little Pieces in Old Style*, BoO 48, of 1917 to Römisch. Busch added the title *Intermezzo* to one of the two preserved copies of BoO 102, and it is arguably the most complete and polished composition among the four pieces bearing that title. The three pieces, BoO 48, consisting of an 'Invention' [7], *Andante* [8] and 'Bourrée' [9], are exercises in Baroque style. The dedication reads 'Für meinen lieben Dr Römisch zur Zigarre componiert' (which freely translates as 'written for my dear Dr Römisch to accompany his cigar'), clearly indicating that this little triptych is of a more light-hearted nature. His *Two Canons and a Little Fugue*, BoO 111, of 1916 [10]–[12], were composed for Amadea ('Dea') Gombrich,<sup>3</sup> the little daughter of close family friends; dedicated to a young

<sup>3</sup> Dea Gombrich (1905–94) later became a student of Adolf Busch and a member of The Busch Chamber Players.

learner, these miniatures were composed with obvious pedagogical intention. With its two-part polyphonic texture this further little triptych also serves as an introduction to the contrapuntal style.

The immediate spur to the composition of the Piano Sonata in C minor, Op. 25, was his meeting in Vienna in December 1920 with the seventeen-year-old Rudolf Serkin (1903–91), who came to live with Adolf and Frieda Busch in Berlin – and later in Darmstadt and Basel. Serkin became a more integral part of Busch's family when he married his daughter, Irene, in 1935, and after Busch's death he played a major role in keeping his father-in-law's musical legacy alive, performing his music often. The Sonata was written, in 1922, specifically for Serkin and his advanced virtuoso technique; and as the two men were living under the same roof and giving concerts together every week, it can safely be assumed that Serkin was at least consulted on its playability, if not on its actual structure and thematic content. It was, of course, Serkin who premiered the Sonata, in his debut Berlin recital at the Singakademie on 13 September 1922. Another major influence on Busch's music from this point was Ferruccio Busoni, whom Busch and Serkin got to know in Berlin in the early 1920s and who became an important source of inspiration to both men.

Although the Sonata is Busch's most important work for solo piano, it was rather harshly received after Breitkopf und Härtel published it in 1925. A review by Paul Weiss in the monthly magazine *Die Musik* in January 1929 was typical: he described it as 'illogical and uninteresting', and claimed that the development of its material was unclear and nebulous. The composer Donald Francis Tovey, by contrast, a staunch and faithful admirer of Busch, expressed a high opinion of it in an essay written (in German) for a private concert given in Glasgow in December 1934 by Serkin and Adolf and Herman Busch:

The Piano Sonata Opus 25 is in three movements: a very passionate first movement (with a very beautiful *Cantabile* second theme) [13], a theme with variations [14], and a prelude and fugue [15]. The structure of the theme for the variations – a four-bar phrase (which closes on the dominant), a six-bar phrase (with a half-cadence in the corresponding

minor key), a two-bar phrase and then once again a four-bar (very similar to the first) which closes in the original key, thus 16 bars in all – is retained throughout the variations. The theme and the first four variations form the slow movement, and Variations 5 to 10 the scherzo. Variation No. 10 is a more abundant version of the *Alla polacca* Variation No. 8. The last variation is a repetition of the theme, by which the melody is played in minims instead of crotchets. The fugue begins with an exposition and a statement of two themes (*Allegro risoluto e con brio*). A second fugal exposition on two further themes follows (*Tempo tranquillo*) and after that expositions and combinations of all four themes follow. Towards the end the theme of the variations is also woven into the rich fugue structure.<sup>4</sup>

Unsurprisingly Serkin stood by the Sonata and performed it often. When he played it in London, during a recital in a series of concerts that he and the Busch Quartet presented at the Wigmore Hall in mid-March 1935, the reviewer from *The Times* also struck a complimentary tone:

Of the Sonata's three movements the first, *Allegro*, is least convincing at a first hearing; its divergent moods seem to break away from one another. But the theme with variations which begins as slow movement and leads through strongly contrasted numbers to a final fugue, the theme returning Chorale-wise in combination with the fugue subject in a clamorous climax, is very skilfully handled. It reminds one of Reger in his more euphonious moods.<sup>5</sup>

It was almost twenty years before Busch wrote again for solo piano. In that time, between 1922 and 1941, he used the piano primarily in chamber music, prominently so in the Piano Quintet, Op. 35 (1925), and the Piano Trio, Op. 48 (1931); during this period he also composed his Piano Concerto, Op. 31, premiered in 1924. It was in 1941, two years after moving to America, that Busch wrote his *Allegro bizzarro*, BoO 31 [16],

<sup>4</sup> *Kurze Bemerkungen über die Musik Adolf Buschs*, unpublished essay quoted in Tully Potter, *Adolf Busch: The Life of an Honest Musician*, op. cit., Vol. 2, 1939–52, pp. 1219–20.

<sup>5</sup> *The Times*, 18 March 1935.

a rather quirky and intricate character piece, as the title suggests. This pianistically challenging but rewarding work was dedicated to Serkin. The *Allegro vehemente*, BoO 32 [17], was written in 1946 and dedicated to Frieda, who was terminally ill at the time; she died nine days after she was given the piece. She was a good enough pianist to have accompanied her husband in concert in the early years of their relationship. The outer sections of the *Allegro vehemente*, apparently full of hope and zest for life, are contrasted with a lyrical, Brahmsian middle section. This at times pensive and melancholy piece reflects Busch's mood as he faced his wife's illness and approaching death.

The Suite, Op. 60b,<sup>6</sup> consists of three movements composed independently between 1941 and 1945. No. 1, a 'Song without Words' in F sharp minor, and No. 3, an 'Album Leaf' in B major, are dedicated to Rosalie Leventritt-Berner; No. 2, a Scherzo in A minor, was written (on 22 December 1941: it is the only one of the three to bear a date) for her mother Winnie Leventritt, a close friend and supporter of the arts. Stylistically leaning towards the late Romantic, each conveys a very different character. The 'Song without Words', marked *Andante un poco agitato* [18], is full of melancholy and longing. At the centre, the Scherzo [19] follows traditional ternary form. Starkly contrasting with the preceding movement, it is pianistically virtuosic and witty in character. After its rhythmic complexity, the simple texture and clear melodic line of the 'Album Leaf', marked *Tranquillo e cantabile* [20], come across almost as naïve – although in truth this little piece is full of originality and imagination.

The only other solo-piano works from Busch's later years are two miniatures, each an *Andante*. Written in 1945, the *Andante affettuoso* in F major, BoO 36 [21], was a Christmas present for Frieda – to whom, in fact, he dedicated most of his compositions of that period; like so many of those pieces, it manages to combine a seemingly simplistic outline with harmonic density and textural complexity. The *Andante espressivo* in C sharp minor, BoO 37 [22], was written on 9 June 1952, the very last day of Busch's life, for the approaching birthday of Hedwig, his second wife. But during the day he

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<sup>6</sup> Op. 60a was a collection of eight chorale preludes for organ, published by Schirmer in New York in 1946.

collapsed and died of a heart attack, swiftly and unexpectedly, and so this last piece bears no explicit reference to death or mortality. But its genuine expression and musical integrity – values that seem almost contingent with Busch himself – make this work, concise though it is, a deeply moving if unintended farewell to a difficult but fulfilled life.

**Jakob Fichert** has performed extensively in the UK and abroad and has recorded for Toccata Classics and Naxos, both as a soloist and collaborating artist. Chamber music and the Lied repertoire have always been at the heart of his playing career, and on the concert stage and in the recording studio he has collaborated with such musicians as Simon Desbruslais, Karin de Fleyt, Janet Hilton, Alfia Naqibekova and many others.

Jakob studied at the Musikhochschule Karlsruhe with Wolfgang Manz before undertaking a postgraduate course at the Royal College of Music in London under the tutelage of Yonty Solomon. He also obtained a Masters Degree in Chamber Music, graduating in 2001, after which he was awarded an RCM Junior Fellowship. He has won numerous prizes at international competitions, as both soloist and chamber musician.

Much in demand as a pedagogue, Jakob has given numerous master-classes for conservatoires, universities and specialist music schools in the UK, China and Mexico. He works as an examiner for the ABRSM and holds the position of Principal Lecturer in Piano at Leeds College of Music while also teaching at the Universities of York, Leeds and Hull.

His website can be found at [www.jakobfichert.com](http://www.jakobfichert.com).







Recorded on 22 and 23 July 2015 and 21 January 2016 at the Venue, Leeds College of Music  
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Cover photograph courtesy of The Tully Potter Collection  
Cover design: David M. Baker (david@notneverknow.com)  
Typesetting and lay-out: KerryPress, St Albans

Executive producer: Martin Anderson

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## ADOLF BUSCH Complete Music for Solo Piano

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[1] <i>Fantasia in C major, BoO 20</i> (1908)	8:33
[2] <i>Agitato, BoO 30</i> (1909)	5:22
<b>Four Intermezzi</b>	
[3] <i>Intermezzo in B flat major, BoO 73</i> (1909)	4:17
[4] <i>Intermezzo in C sharp minor, BoO 74</i> (c. 1917)	2:37
[5] <i>Intermezzo in A minor, BoO 72</i> (date unknown)	2:52
[6] <i>Intermezzo in A minor, BoO 102</i> (1916)	5:00
<i>Three Little Pieces in Old Style, BoO 48</i> (1917)	3:32
[7] No. 1 <i>Invention</i>	0:39
[8] No. 2 <i>Andante</i>	1:42
[9] No. 3 <i>Bourrée</i>	1:11
<i>Two Canons and a Little Fugue, BoO 111</i> (1916)	2:23
[10] I <i>Canon 1</i>	0:50
[11] II <i>Fugue</i>	1:03
[12] III <i>Canon 2</i>	0:30
<b>Piano Sonata in C minor, Op. 25</b> (1922)	31:39
[13] I <i>Allegro moderato con passione</i>	10:16
[14] II <i>Andante con variazioni</i>	14:31
[15] III <i>Finale (Introduzione e Fuga)</i>	6:52
[16] <i>Allegro bizzarro, BoO 31</i> (1941)	3:09
[17] <i>Allegro vehemente, BoO 32</i> (1946)	5:33
<b>Suite, Op. 60b</b> (1941–45)	8:53
[18] I <i>Song without Words</i>	3:08
[19] II <i>Scherzo</i>	4:33
[20] III <i>Album Leaf</i>	1:12
[21] <i>Andante affettuoso, BoO 36</i> (1945)	2:03
[22] <i>Andante espressivo, BoO 37</i> (1952)	1:09

**Jakob Fichert, piano**

**TT 87:05**

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