

Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924) — Sonatina ad usum Infantis Madeline M.* Americanæ, BV. 268 (1915)

I — Molto tranquillo

II — Andantino melancolico

III — Vivace (alla Marcia)

IV — Molto tranquillo

V — Polonaise (un poco cerimonioso)

This sonatina—the third of Busoni’s six sonatinas—was completed during a stay in New York and shows Busoni’s more introverted character in composition. Busoni’s life was full of contradictions; born into a world of full-blooded romanticism, and died in times of the anti-romantic development of neo-classicism in the 20th century. Born as an Italian, yet spent most of his life living in German-speaking countries, and avoiding Italian style compositions; Busoni was one of the greatest pianists of the century—with unrivalled technique and interpretative abilities—yet probed deeply into music’s intellectual content in his scholarly work. Busoni’s contradictions continue in this sonatina. He composed a poised, unhurried sonatina, with light technical challenges, perhaps more suitable for private performance than the concert hall. Busoni wrote to his publisher, Breitkopf & Härtel, expressing that this composition was one of his most loved pieces of this period.

Effectively five miniature pieces, each section contrasts the one preceding it. The first section is the most relaxed of the five and presents the pastoral main theme. The second section is a fugato, a motoric theme with a jaunty dotted rhythm which contrasts with the warmer episodic sections. The third section is a march, here Busoni’s characteristic use of harmony is more evident; while still unprovoking, unrelated harmonies are placed adjacently and present an uneasy effect. The fourth—and shortest—section is an echo from the first part, using the main theme and improvisation like retexturing. The final section is a polonaise, a dance native to Poland. Using the signature polonaise rhythm, Busoni presents a cheerful and warm conclusion to the piece. Also, this section seems to be coloured by a certain American ‘blues’ style, inflected by the land of the piece’s composition. Busoni also used this polonaise in his 1914–16 opera *Arlecchino*.

Titled ‘*ad usum Infantis*’, meaning ‘for the use of a child’, the sonatina was dedicated to eighteen-year-old Madeline Mannheim, a friend of Busoni’s eldest son, Benvenuto. Although designated for children, the meaning is more that the music is to be enjoyed by children, rather than performed by them, as the thirty-nine-year-old Busoni himself presented the piece in his own high-octane concert programmes.

Interestingly, the score bears the designation ‘*pro clavicimbalo composita*’, meaning ‘composed for harpsichord’. The tradition of this piece being played on the harpsichord is rare and exists in only a few recordings.