

Future Perspectives:

A Comparison of Luigi Russolo's *The Art of Noise* and Ferruccio Busoni's *A New Esthetic of Music*

Around the beginning of the 20th century, both Luigi Russolo and Ferruccio Busoni wrote manifestos that prophesied the direction in which they felt music was heading. Russolo believed that noise would be the next big trend in music and to facilitate that, new instruments and techniques would need to be invented. Whereas, Busoni explains in *A new esthetic* that general freedom in form and experimentation with microtonal systems would be the new innovation in music. Despite these differing perspectives both feel that music has been held back through tradition (to a greater or lesser degree) and that music as an art form is in need of radical development and re-evaluating.

Both authors suggest that this radical development is necessary because composers and critics of past times have slowed down the advancement of music. When comparing music with other art forms Busoni describes it as 'a child that has learned to walk but still must be led ... It is unconscious as yet what garb is becoming, of its own advantages, its unawakened capacities.'¹ In other words it is a young and unexplored discipline. He blames this lack of progress on the 'lawgivers'² that hold back innovation through their focus on tradition and limited view of form. Similarly, in *The art of Noise* Russolo discusses the 'sacred', 'inviolable'³ view people have held about music concluding that, 'this hieratic atmosphere was bound to slow down the progress of music, so the other arts forged ahead and bypassed it.'⁴

One of the key differences between the two arguments is their perspective on the role that nature plays in music. In *A new esthetic of Music* Busoni expresses his fundamental beliefs about art and what he feels gives an artwork its value. He explains that it is the imitation of nature and the expression of human feeling which are the central aims of any artwork. In contrast he identifies stylistic aspects as 'transient' and dependant more on the fashion of the day and time of writing. Russolo however implies that it is a *contrast* to nature that causes people to value art. He writes that sound is 'something apart, different from and independent of life,'⁵ and as such it is in contrast with nature. Russolo further suggests that

¹ Ferruccio Busoni *A New Esthetic of Music* (G. Schirmer, 1911).

² Ibid.

³ Luigi Russolo *The Art of Noise* (ubu classics 2004).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

this is the reason why man valued music and its timbres. He also implies this overall point when he discusses the proliferation of noise in our environment (a manmade occurrence) and suggests that this leads to our ears not being satisfied and wanting 'bigger acoustic sensations'.⁶ Overall we can see that Busoni puts art on a path to align with nature whereas Russolo sees art as moving further and further away from nature.

Busoni highlights a number of possible lines of inquiry that musicians could investigate in order to create something new and lasting. His first idea is to allow the musical material a composer comes up with to determine the form of the piece and to ignore past models that composers have used. Secondly, he believes that silence can be music in some settings and consequently it should be investigated. Next he moves on to microtonal composition. He suggests that we shouldn't limit ourselves to only twelve tones as nature has an 'infinite graduation' between tones.⁷ He proposes two systems: third tones and six tones but recognizes the need for a 'careful series of experiments' and training in the development of this technique.⁸ Partly to facilitate accurate playing of microtones, he mentions the invention of electronic instruments. He believes these could be useful in moving music to unexplored places. Modality also interested Busoni. After listing a number of modes all starting on *C* he remarks on the potential he sees in this new system. His final suggestion is to explore the use of the sustain pedal on the piano which he sees as an 'unexhausted'⁹ resource. He feels that the pedal has been used in a narrow-minded way and only to enforce harmonic theory.

Busoni's perspective on noise as music, in contrast to Russolo's, is quite negative. When discussing noise in the context of imitating nature he describes it as a debasement of tone.¹⁰ Talking about these noises used in a representational way, he says that these could be used fleetingly in large scale works but 'taken by themselves are no more to be called music than wax figures may pass for monuments'.¹¹ In effect, he sees noise as a creative dead-end and not a central way to progress.

Russolo on the other hand presents the view that using noise in music is a way of infinitely expanding timbre and developing a new sound world. He values these new noise timbres because of their freshness to our ears and their relation to daily life (since the industrial revolution). He also theorizes on ways of varying the pitch of a noise and possible combinations of noises to produce something appealing. In addition, he says that the noises themselves will suggest new and interesting rhythms to composers. With hindsight, Russolo's most historically prophetic idea in relation to what actually did happen later in music is that we will get sound from 'special mechanisms', which points forward to the development of technology in music (tape, computers etc).

Clearly these two theorists had very different opinions on music and in which direction it was heading. These differences arose perhaps because both writers had very different

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ferruccio Busoni *A New Esthetic of Music* (G. Schirmer, 1911).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

backgrounds in music. Russolo was not primarily a composer but was in fact foremost a visual artist and therefore perhaps saw noise (which is understood for what it is by laymen and musicians alike) as a way forward due to his lack of experience in more technical areas. Busoni's ideas in contrast are very specific and more musical in their bias (micro-tones, modality etc). In addition their fundamental philosophies on art and music are at odds and these differing ideologies impacts on both writers choice of innovations. For instance Russolo's noise idea is moving away from the 'quiet' sounds of nature, whereas Busoni's microtonal idea moves music toward the 'infinite graduation' between tones found abundantly in nature. Although both writers' ideas differed, we can see a lot of their proposed reforms in action today and in recent history.

Bibliography

Busoni, Ferruccio 'A New Esthetic of Music', (G. Schirmer, 1911)

Russolo, Luigi 'The Art of Noise', (ubu classics 2004)