

Letter by Natalie Curtis to Ferruccio Busoni (New York, 18 February 1911)

33 West 69.

Feb 18th 1911.

Dear Mr Busoni,

my mother wants me to tell you how glad we should all be if you would consider yourself permanently invited to come to us at any free hour when you have time and care to. Will you not treat us quite informally and telephone any time that it would be possible for you to come, with the assurance that we will always be glad at all times to have you!

Some time ago I left the order with Schirmer to send me your book whenever it was published. I find it difficult to express to you what pleasure (a most inadequate word!) this little volume has given me. I began it late in the evening but could not put it down until I had finished it. How true it is that when a personality is truly focussed, if I may so express it, and sym metrically developed in mind as well as in feeling, the different forms of expression, whether in written or spoken words, or in music or in aught else, reflect the same individual. With lesser or ill-balanced natures this is not so, I think – the different expressions are often illogical contradictions of one another. But with you one sees in what you do (at least in the little that I have been privileged to know of it) both co-relation and sequence. Your book is like your playing – the same largeness of grasp and clarity of thought, the same grace and poetry of imagination, the same reasoning. But it is the content of the book that so particularly stirred me. I devoured it like a hungry person!

– When I was eighteen years old I came for the first time into touch with Eastern music – Hindu and Arabic. It was a mere touch, but the little that I heard made me see that there was a vast horizon beyond the horizon line that had bounded my little musical world. Then I was a great deal amid the solitudes of Nature, where there was no music but Nature's own, with its infinite gradations of sound. And this music of Nature! The sweep of the prairie-grasses, the song of the wind down rocky-passes and in the mountains – how limited are our crude intervals compared with Nature's keyboard! – Of course the years that I spent in the collecting of barbaric music attuned my ears to successions of intervals and rhythmic forms not European. People suggested my harmonizing the Indian melodies – but as I had heard them with only the nature-sounds as background I could only reply that I was wholly inadequate to such a task, as I can not yet conceive what harmonies (the outgrowth of our European tonal system) would fit these melodies.

Some years ago I spent all summer at the World's Fair in St. Louis where there were gathered in the anthropological department several groups of Eastern peoples as well as groups from Africa and the two American continents. The gentleman at the head of the anthropological department gave me a pass to enter the grounds at times when there were no other visitors. I made friends with these strange peoples who taught me some of their songs. I spent all summer – listening. And came home with two notebooks filled with things that were interesting to me though of course worthless for publication because the study could be at best but superficial, in such a short time. But all this made me long for just such a work as yours! You have shown the way, and broken the barriers, and now we can only hope that the exigencies of your public career will yet leave you enough time to carry out what your book prophesies. May you live many, many years to complete this widening of the pathway of the European art of music; for are not you peculiarly fitted by nature for such a work, having so keenly analytical and logical a mind?

It seems to me that I have written a great deal, and a great deal, too, about my small self. – But you will see by this why I am so alertly receptive to the message of your book. If I had had a better, a more complete musical education to start with, I should and if I were free from other duties I should ask you to take me as a pupil in the working out of the new system!

We are looking forward to the Berceuse élégiaque with greatest interest. I hope to hear the rehearsal also on Tuesday morning.

With many greetings from my whole family who know you well from afar.

Sincerely yours

Natalie Curtis.