

Letter by Natalie Curtis to Ferruccio Busoni (New York, 19 March 1911)

33 West 69 New York City.

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My dear Mr Busoni,

your letter interested me deeply – more than this it was to me a positive joy, for I have felt, as you have felt, that all that has been done so far in the development of Indian themes has had in it much of untruth, both artistically and spiritually. Nothing has flowered from a root; nothing has unfolded from within outward. I speak of course, only of these compositions that I know – there may be good things that I have not heard, but all that I have met with has been not at all from the New World but rather a distorted reflex of the Old. How glad I should be if my small researches could be of any service to you! For your letter touches the very heart of the matter. Yet I have thought: must not the artist see the country, the life of the American continent in its deepest and broadest sense – must he not come in touch with what America really is and from what conditions American life has sprung, must he not receive the inspiration of America's vast forests, prairies, mountains and deserts, its prehistoric wildern past, its untouched wilderness – before he can express anything that can really be American? – In time, such expression must spring naturally and involuntarily, I should think, from the land itself. Yet we who are born here were Europeans a generation or so ago (to the aborigenes we are as much – nay, more truly – foreigners than as are the so-called European foreigners to us). But what I mean is this: that few of the European-born musicians who visit us see anything of American life other than the life of our cities, which is, for the most part, moulded on a European model. How often I have wished that they might see these oldest cities in America, the pueblos or towns of the gentle agricultural Indian peoples of New Mexico and Arizona – towns of unknown antiquity and of marvellous interest and charm. There they stand, with all their wealth of picturesque suggestion, – but only a few government officials and a few American tourists and missionaries ever visit them. Of course the towns are inaccessible and the discomforts in some cases are great; but if you return to us another year, let us arrange for you a tour to include New Mexico if this year's tour has not already done so! If you make your personal observations among the tribes – I wish I might be there to help, wherever my small experience could be useful! But these are only impossible wishes.

From what you said last spring of your impressions on travelling across this continent I am sure that your keen sense of truth and your really rare power of true discernment would enable you to penetrate, and deeply feel and clearly understand these phases of American life which might form the stimulens of an art-work broadly expressive of this continent. The great artist does not have to live through things – he has the spirit eye, the inner vision that reveals truth in a momentary glance. Yet it is hard to imagine some experiences, and it is a wonderful experience to live once in the world of Yesterday, in the unbroken stillness of a wilderness untouched as yet by civilization, with only the people of an earlier age for companion.

And this is the heritage (broadly speaking) of all Americans since the landing of the first European vessel. I would not exchange my share of these impressions for anything else that life could offer me, so do I treasure those nights under the stars, those pristine dawns, those long days so close to untamed, unharnassed Nature! And yet how tame, how flat and colorless is our poor attempt at art!

I was much interested in what you said in regard to a dramatic plot. Shall I see you on your return? I hope so. I have long felt that some great artist must focus the gropings toward self-expression in of this land. And Dvořák could not. But your letter is like your book – a few words disclosing a view from the mountain-top! – which reminds me to tell you that your great little book has made many friends –; also, Schirmer has filled one show-window with innumerable copies – a Busoni window! –

I look forward to hearing you on April 5th and to perhaps an hour of talk? – Of plot and many other things; and perhaps you will let me show you some of my Indian relics –

With many
greetings and with
high esteem
I am always your
sincere friend

Natalie Curtis