

DLA Doctoral Thesis

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## Joseph Szigeti and Modern Music

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### 1. Background

Joseph Szigeti is one of the most important representatives of the world-famous Hubay School. His art is appreciated in Europe as well as in the United States, where he spent the most active years of his career.

From the 1920s, he started to focus on modern music. He established personal contact with contemporary composers including Bartók, Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Ravel, Busoni, and Szymanowsky. He examined their works and built their compositions for violin in his repertoire. He signed a contract with important record companies such as Columbia, Mercury, Vanguard or Phillips. Due to his records until the 1960s, he counts as one of the most productive artist of his time. Many works of the composers mentioned above became important parts of violin repertoire because of his contribution.

There are not many publications about the oeuvre of Szigeti so far. I mostly had access to English articles and lexicons about the activity of professional violinists. These include the following:

Dufour, Peggy (ed.): *Tribute to Szigeti*. New York: Peggy Dufour, 1986.

Schwarz, Boris: *Great Masters of the Violin from Corelli and Vivaldi to Stern, Zukerman and Perlman*. London: St Edmundsbury Press, Robert Hale, 1984.

Steinhardt, Arnold: „Joseph Szigeti. Violin visionary”,

Keynote 9. 1982. 14–19.

Campbell, Margaret: *Die großen Geiger. Eine Geschichte des Violinspiels von Antonio Vivaldi bis Pinchas Zukerman*. Königstein: Athenäum Verlag, 1982. Angolul: *The Great Violinists*. Isabella Nadolny, Jutta Kühn-Rechenmacher, Eleonore Meyer-Grünwald (transl.). London: Granada, 1980. Applebaum, Samuel: *Így játszanak ők. Beszélgetések világhírű hegedűművészekkel. 1972-1981. Szigeti József*. Fülep Tamás (transl.). Budapest: Polifon, 1991. 33–41.

Some publications have mentioned his relationship with Bartók before. From these, I looked at the following:

Somfai László: „Bartók and Szigeti”, *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, XXXIII/128. (Winter 1992): 157–163.

Szabó Balázs: „»És Szigeti másképp játszik...« Bartók 2. hegedű-zongoraszonátájának 1940-es lemezfelvételéről”. *Magyar Zene*, L/2. (May 2012): 210–216.

Vikárius László: „Hasonlóságok és Kontrasztok – Bartók Ravel-hommage-a?”. In: Gupcsó Ágnes (ed.): *Zenatudományi dolgozatok 1995–1996*. Budapest: MTA Institute of Musicology, 1997. 243-274.

The most manifest way to learn about Szigeti's career is to take a look at his own works:

Szigeti, Joseph: *A Violinist's Notebook*. London: Gerald Duckworth & CO LTD, 1964.

From these, the following books are available in Hungarian: Szigeti József: *Beszélő húrok*. Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1965; *A hegedűről*. Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1974; *Beethoven*

*hegedűművei*. Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1968.

Joseph Szigeti's autobiographical works allow the reader to get a detailed, although not in the least whole image of his life. These writings make it possible to have a glance at the most important stages of Szigeti's life; however, some periods of his lifetime and his illnesses remain obscure. Most of the above listed scientific articles also provide not more than a schematic overview of Szigeti's oeuvre and the circumstances in which his pieces were composed. No scientific research has been published about Szigeti's recordings, friendships with contemporary composers, playing style, and professional value so far.

## 2. Sources

During my research, I managed to get a whole image of Béla Bartók's relationship with József Szigeti due to the available sources in Bartók Archives. Having read Szigeti's unpublished letters and technical ideas written to Bartók, I was able to prove that Szigeti's art of violin playing had an impact on Bartók's works composed for violin (*Rhapsody No. 1, Contrasts, String Quartets No. 3 and 4, Solo Sonata*).

The heritage of Joseph Szigeti, which is a collection of nearly 1000 scores and books, is available at the Research Library of Liszt Academy of Music. These documents provided me with a wide range of sources to present the portrait of Szigeti, who was very keen on modern music.

The Szigeti Discography compiled by David Hall enabled me to examine Joseph Szigeti's recordings of contemporary music at different stages of his life, and to draw conclusions about his repertoire and piano partners. I analysed the characteristic features of his art of violin playing and the necessary tools of playing modern music based on these recordings. Furthermore, on the basis of these recordings, I was able to analyse his mentality and musical individuality.

I was provided with Szigeti's transcriptions and arrangements by the following collections: Eric Wen (ed.): *The Joseph Szigeti Collection. Transcriptions and Arrangements for Violin and Piano*. (New York: Carl Fischer Edition, 2000), and *The Stravinsky Violin Collection. 9 Pieces for Violin and Piano*. (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2007).

### **3. Methodology**

Firstly, I presented the life of Joseph Szigeti. In this part, I also included the fact that he had been considered an infant prodigy and that this lifestyle was quite difficult. My introduction covers his transformation into a mature artist and his first encounter with Vincent d'Indy, Ferruccio Busoni, and Myra Hess. They had a huge impact on Szigeti and it was due to their influence that he later turned to modern music and valuable chamber music.

Secondly, I pointed out his measures about contemporary music, then I wrote in detail about his

cooperation with contemporary composers, particularly with Béla Bartók. I collected Szigeti's and Bartók's joint concerts and recordings. Szigeti recommended Bartók some violin effects which he himself used in his compositions. I illustrated these with scores and musical examples.

To create an image of Szigeti's friendship with contemporary composers as well as his rehearsing and working methods, I took his books mentioned above, the history of his artworks and the biographical circumstances of the composers into consideration. I proved that Szigeti played an important role in popularising many modern pieces for violin (e. g. Prokofiev's Violin Concerto in D major, Busoni's Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 2, Ysaÿe's Solo Sonata No. 1, and Bloch's, Frank Martin's, Casella's and Berg's Violin Concerto).

In conclusion, I summarized the merits of Szigeti, and his impact on the next generation of violinists. Based on his contemporary recordings, I also pointed out the characteristics of his art which made him one of the most important violinists of modern music.

My essay is the first scientific work about Joseph Szigeti's oeuvre in connection with modern music.

### **4. Findings**

The influence of Szigeti's activity is corroborated by many pieces which were composed to him:

Béla Bartók: Rhapsody no. 1, for violin and piano; *Contrasts*, for violin, clarinet, and piano; Eugène Ysaÿe: Sonata for Solo Violin, no. 1; Sergei Prokofiev: Five Melodies, and compositions written by Ernest Bloch, Alfredo Casella, Pál Kadosa, Ferruccio Busoni, Henry Cowell, Ernst Bacon. These compositions, Szigeti's recordings, and his writings inspired me to collect the characteristics of his performing art, which qualified him for the performance of modern music. The compositions mentioned above became important works on the repertoire of the violin due to the successful concerts of Szigeti. His relationship to modern music influenced his art as a whole. His activity in the field of the popularization of the contemporary music is an essential part of his performing art.

## **5. Documentation of the activity relating to the subject matter of the dissertation**

- 8 October 2011. Budapest, Old Music Academy, Chamber Hall  
Programme: Bartók: Rhapsody no. 2, for violin and piano, Prokofiev: Sonata for two violins, with the participation of Sarolta Harsányi- piano, Zsuzsa Laskay, - violin.
- 23 May 2012. Budapest, Nádor Hall  
Programme: Kodály: Duo for violin and violoncello, Shostakovich Trio for violin, violoncello and piano Nr. 2., with the participation of Viktor Juhász, Béla Valkó – violoncello, Camille Jauvion - piano
- 21 June 2012. Russian Cultural Centre, Budapest.  
Programme: Shostakovich: Seven Romances for soprano, violin, violoncello and piano; Trio Nr. 2, with the participation of Andrea Berényi – soprano, Camille Jauvion – piano, Béla Valkó - violoncello
- 28 September 2013. Montpellier, French. Montpellier sur Lez. *Des arpèges et des mots Festival*.  
Programme: Bartók: Rhapsody no. 1, for violin and piano *Andante*, Bartók-Székely: Romanian Folk Dances, Bartók-Szigeti: *Hungarian Folk Songs*, with the participation of Camille Jauvion - piano
- 8 February 2014. Grabels, French: *5e Festival Le piano dans tous ses Éclats*.  
Programme: Debussy: Sonata for violon and piano; Franck: Sonata for violin and piano in A Major, with the participation of Camille Jauvoin – piano
- DVD recording, 14–15 December 2013. Budapest, RAZ Studio.  
Programme: Bartók-Székely: Romanian Folk Dances, with the participation of Camille Jauvion - piano