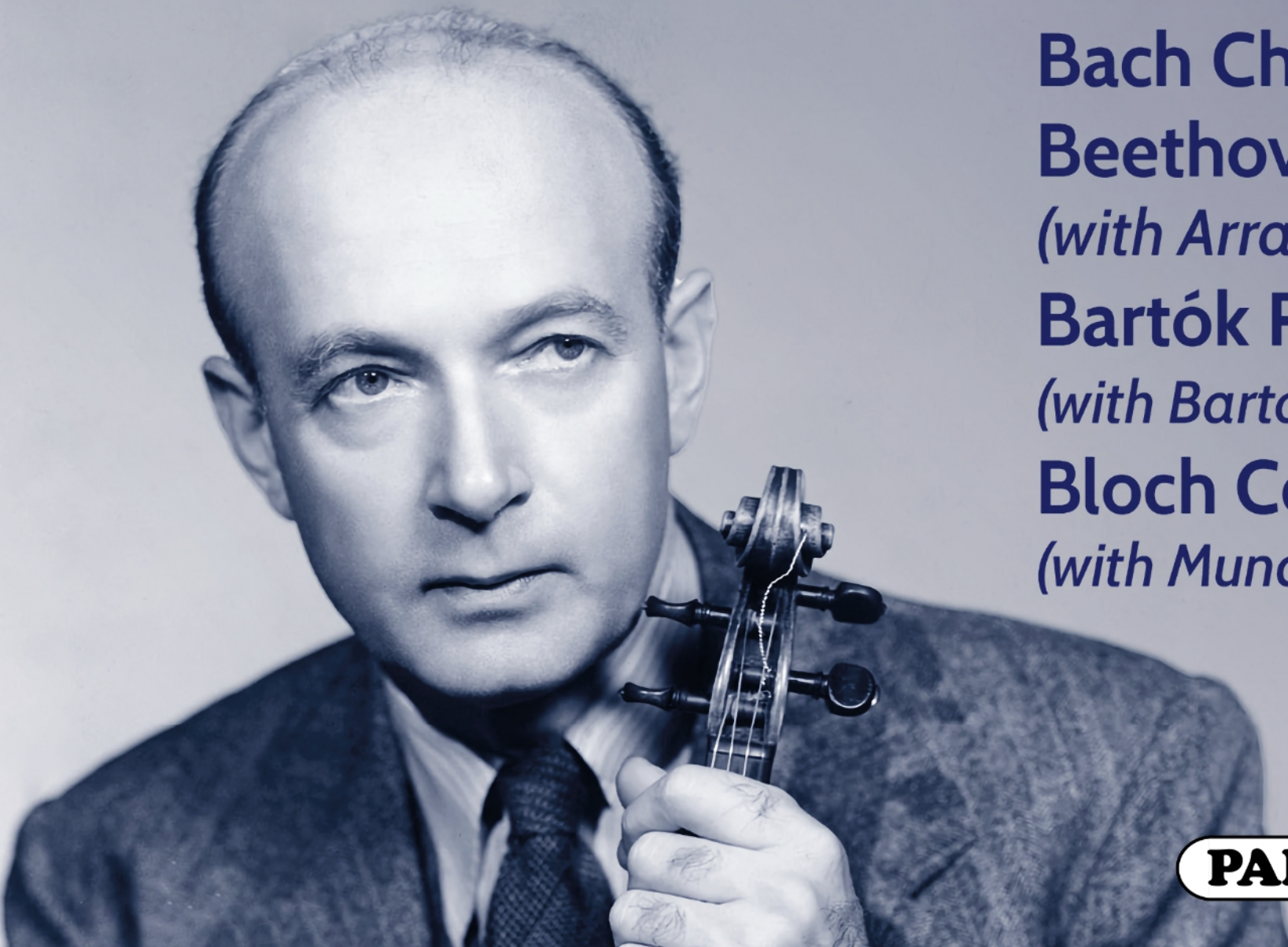


Joseph Szigeti

Famous Recordings



Bach Chaconne
Beethoven Op.23
(with Arrau)

Bartók Rhapsody
(with Bartók)

Bloch Concerto
(with Munch)

PARNASSUS

Joseph Szigeti

Famous Recordings

Johann Sebastian Bach

from *Partita No. 2 for Violin Solo in D Minor, BWV 1004*

- | | | |
|---|----------|-------|
| 1 | Chaconne | 16:14 |
|---|----------|-------|

Ludwig van Beethoven

Violin Sonata No. 4 in A Minor, Op. 23 No. 4

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|------|
| 2 | I. Presto | 5:33 |
| 3 | II. Andante scherzoso piu allegretto | 6:08 |
| 4 | III. Allegro molto | 5:15 |

Claudio Arrau, *piano*

Béla Bartók

Rhapsody for Violin and Piano No. 1, BB 94a

- | | | |
|---|-----------|------|
| 5 | I. Lassu | 4:13 |
| 6 | II. Friss | 5:03 |

Béla Bartók, *piano*

Ernest Bloch

Violin Concerto in A Minor (1938)

- | | | |
|---|-------------------|-------|
| 7 | I. Allegro deciso | 18:08 |
| 8 | II. Andante | 6:10 |
| 9 | III. Deciso | 10:19 |

Orchestre de la Société des concerts du Conservatoire, Paris

Charles Münch, *conductor*

Joseph Szigeti “the scholarly virtuoso” (1892-1973) was born Itizsef Szigeti in Budapest on 5th September 1892, and brought up in the Carpathian area of Hungary at Maramaros-Sziget, from which his family, originally called Singer, took their name. His father led a cafe band, one uncle, (Deszo) had studied with Jenő Hubay and was a leading orchestral player in Paris and New York, even making a few solo records, another was a double-bass-player, and Uncle Bernat gave *Joska*, as he was known to family, friends and his early audiences, his first lessons. From the age of eleven to thirteen Szigeti was under Hubay’s tutelage and he left the Ferenc Liszt Academy in 1905 to make his Berlin and Budapest debuts, quickly hailed by Joachim and Busoni,. As *Szulagi* he played in a Frankfurt circus, then auditioned for Joachim, instinctively deciding not to study with the old man, (although he always had the low bow arm of that school – Joachim had been Hubay’s first major teacher.)

Szigeti made his London debut at the Bechstein (Wigmore) Hall as a thirteen-year-old (the public was told he was twelve). From 1907 he was based in England and his concerto debut was made with the Bach *Concerto in E major* and Tchaikovsky’s *Violin Concerto* with the New Symphony Orchestra under Beecham. While in Britain, until 1913, he toured with Nellie Melba and John McCormack, met Myra Hess and Ferruccio Busoni, gave the first performance of Hamilton Harty’s *D minor Concerto* and made his first records. He used very little vibrato in those days and this was one technique he worked on, during the decade from 1913 when he was off the international stage – he spent much of World War I in Swiss sanatoria with tuberculosis. Hubay equipped his students with a wide vibrato and Szigeti was influenced by this tradition in developing his own sound; he always vibrated rather slowly and this trait could make his legato sound slightly concave. On the other hand, he knew how to intensify the vibrato so as to point up a climax in the music. He was a master of ‘creative tension’. Although a gentle person off stage, he had a reputation for breaking strings when he got carried away. From 1917-24 Szigeti taught in Geneva. In 1922 he played with the Berlin Philharmonic under Fritz Reiner and from 1924 he was a regular

visitor to the Soviet Union and England, but it was his Philadelphia debut in 1925, with the Beethoven *Concerto* conducted by Leopold Stokowski, that sealed his fame. Now known as Joseph to English-speaking audiences, he was a far more cultured artist than the Joska who had left Hubay's class with a tiny repertoire of virtuoso works. Based in Paris with his Russian wife Wanda and their daughter Irene, he was one of the busiest violinists of the interwar years, playing concertos, especially those of Beethoven and Brahms, or appearing in recital with his most frequent piano partner Nikita Magaloff, who married Irene in 1939. In the mid-1920s Szigeti became friendly with Bela Bartók and appeared with him in concert, introducing the *Second Sonata* to New York in December 1927. Szigeti also transcribed seven pieces from Bartók's *For Children*, which they played in recital and recorded as Hungarian Folk Tunes. In 1931 he toured the Far East, causing a sensation in Japan, and in 1933 he appeared on the same bill as Benny Goodman and Fletcher Henderson in America. In 1940 Szigeti emigrated with Wanda to the United States, where he and Bartók gave the recital at the Library of Congress [5.6] and with Benny Goodman performed and recorded Bartók's trio *Contrasts*, which they had already introduced in 1939 with Endre Petri. In 1944, with Claudio Arrau, Szigeti presented the cycle of Beethoven *Violin Sonatas* [2-4] at the Library of Congress. He was the only great violinist of his generation to revive his career after World War II and appeared a number of times with Artur Schnabel. His treatise '*With Strings Attached: Reminiscences and Reflections*' was published in London in 1949. but after 1950 his playing declined. He last appeared in London as a violinist in 1954, breaking a G string at his final concert.

One of the most beloved and influential musical figures of the 20th century. He had introduced and popularised works by many of the significant contemporary composers, among them Prokofiev, Bloch, Casella, Stravinsky, Bartók, Warlock, Martin, Cowell, Ives, Berg, Milhaud and Ravel. From 1917-24 he was head of the *classe de virtuosité* at the Geneva Conservatory. He was one of the first propagandists for the Debussy *Sonata* in the 1920's. (recording it with Andor Földes in

1941). He made concert-going exciting for the serious music-lover who had tired of banal concert- programming. At the same time, his recorded readings of the standard repertory are classics, the unaccompanied sonatas of J.S. Bach [1, Chaconne, from Partita No.2], the sonatas of Mozart, Beethoven etc, and all violinists have benefited from the special insights which Szigeti brought to the literature. After Szigeti it became mandatory that violinists not only 'feel' what they perform, but seek to understand it as well.

He settled in Switzerland in 1960 and died in Lucerne on 20th February 1973, having devoted his last years to competition jury work, writing ('*A Violinist's Notebook*' of 1964 and his study of the Beethoven *Sonatas*) and teaching. Tall, courtly and courteous, Szigeti was '*the thinking man's virtuoso*'. He was adept at flattening his intonation for a more pathetic effect in relaxed or soulful passages, then tightening it for up-tempo or marcato sections; he never tuned sharp to cut through the orchestra. He made a lovely sound but the musical line and rhythmic pulse came first for him; his tone was rarely noticeable for its own sake. His style of playing was old-fashioned, in that he used downward slides which often sat oddly on the contemporary music he played. Yet this portamento helped to give his playing a singing, breathing, easeful quality. He owned two Guarnerius violins, his main concert instrument being the Pietro Guarneri of Mantua formerly played by Henri Petri.

Were it not for Szigeti, we should also have fewer recordings of Bartók and Stravinsky as pianists: both composers were persuaded into the studio by the prospect of working with such a sympathetic musician. Szigeti was the most distinguished of a line of violinists taught by Hubay.

The complete set of Beethoven sonatas for violin and piano preserves historic performances by Joseph Szigeti and Claudio Arrau that otherwise would remain only in the memories of the listeners at the live concerts. It is worth recalling the mood of early 1944, when these concerts took place. All the material and spiritual resources of the Allied world were being called upon in the struggle against the

Third Reich. One spiritual resource was music, and listeners were particularly stirred by Beethoven because of his humanitarian message. Joseph Szigeti and Claudio Arrau offered this complete Beethoven cycle in a series of three recitals at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., which the library recorded for its archives. The recordings were originally released on LPs by Vanguard Classics. **Claudio Arrau** (1903-91) was one of the great pianists of the 20th century, admired for his clear, aristocratic approach to the great classical and romantic works, for his virtuosity, and for his stamina. Arrau, like Szigeti, was a child prodigy.

In the remarkable *fourth sonata, Op.23 in A minor*, Beethoven produced a dazzling experiment. This sonata does not seem to have clicked with posterity to the extent that other contemporary experimental works have done, like the *Sonata quasi una fantasia, Op.27, No. 2 ('Moonlight')*. It has remained a neglected step-child among the 'ten.' The *Sonata Op.24 in F Major, 'Spring'* appeared in the same year, 1801, as Op.23, and gave the public everything it thought it had missed in the predecessor.

– Sidney Finkelstein

In a letter of April 2nd, 1940, Bartók wrote, '*I shall arrive in New York on the 11th; on the 13th is my first (and most important) concert, with Szigeti in Washington. If the ship is delayed it will be too bad for the concert.*' The concert took place as scheduled, on April 13th, 1940, at the Library of Congress, under the auspices of the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Festival. Preserved on acetate discs in the archives of the Library through the foresight of Mr. Harold Spivacke, chief of the Music Division, which confirm the place of Bela Bartók as one of the supreme pianists of the 20th century.

The names of Szigeti and Bartók had been linked for many years prior to 1940. The young Szigeti had heard and revered the controversial Bartók as early as 1903, at the Royal Conservatory in Budapest, but it was not, wrote Szigeti, '*until the twenties that his Second Sonata and some transcriptions I had made of piano pieces of his, as well as his Rhapsody No. 1 (which he dedicated to me as a token of friendship),*

brought us into ever-deepening contact.' From the mid-twenties on, they gave many recitals together –in Budapest, Berlin, London, Oxford, Paris, Rome and New York. They belong to that small band of dedicated musician-performers who revolutionised the interpretive art in the first half of that century by adhering to the seemingly simple principal of playing the masters in accordance with performing practice of their own time. And they built fascinating concert programs, which disregarded preconceived notions, which made old music sound freshly written and treated modern works as classics, sweeping away the musical cobwebs of decades, revealing many new masterpieces which are now firmly in the standard repertory.

They were both very much part of the Hungarian intelligentsia (despite their international reputations and far-flung musical interests) and deeply concerned about the repressive regime of Admiral Horthy and the advance of German and Italian fascism. Bartók forbade the broadcast of his works from stations in, or beamed to, the latter two nations in the 1930's; Szigeti refused to appear in Germany after 1932. Bartók and Szigeti at that time gave up their membership in the Austrian 'Authors and Composers Society' and entrusted the British 'Performing Rights Society' with their interests. And shortly prior to our 1940 concert, when the Hungarian alliance with Germany was all but complete, both of them decided upon emigration as a necessary protest. Szigeti left Europe at the end of 1939 (Bartók was present at his Farewell Concert, which included Bartók's *Portrait, Op.5*). And Bartók, after the German-Austrian 'Anschluss,' began making his plans to leave before Hungarian surrender to what he called the 'bandits and assassins.'

The Washington recital, then, must have had a special aura for these uprooted Hungarian musicians. Szigeti writes of this period that it '*now seems like nothing so much as the mere minutes between prologue and play. These months were like the moments the hushed audience spends under dimming lights in the theatre tensely waiting the parting of the curtains*' And he speaks of '*the torturing uncertainty about one's own kin in Europe, about one's home and belongings, all at the mercy of*

the invading oppressor...' Bartók also stresses 'uncertainty' in his letters of this period. Following the recital, he remained in the United States until May 18th, then returned to Hungary to settle his affairs, planning that 'in October at the latest I may return to a 'free' country.' On the 8th of October he gave his own Farewell Concert in Budapest, and departed. 'Properly speaking,' he wrote, 'this journey is a leap from uncertainty to safe unbearableness... But we could not do otherwise; the question is not at all Muss es sein? for es muss sein.'

The story of Bartók's five years in the United States (he called it 'my exile') is well known. It was perhaps not as wholly tragic as some would have it, for these were the years of the Concerto for Orchestra and the Piano Concerto No.3. But they were difficult years, for this most modest of contemporary geniuses, and were lightened considerably by the friendship and generosity of Szigeti. Bartók's biographer, Halsey Stevens, details Szigeti's help in collecting funds for the impoverished composer, and, more important, his working to obtain commissions, among them the Koussevitzky commission for the Concerto for Orchestra (as he had earlier, in 1938, persuaded his friend, Benny Goodman, to commission Bartók's Contrasts for piano, violin and clarinet.) Bartók was told nothing of these acts, to prevent his interpreting them as forms of charity. Theirs was not a 'distant' friendship, a merely formal relationship between compatriots and colleagues. Agatha Fassett's book of reminiscence tells of Bartók's excitement and pleasure on finding an attractive apartment in New York. Turning to his wife, Ditta, he asked, 'Do we still have the orange squeezer that Joska [Szigeti] sent us?' Bartók died in New York, September 26, 1945.

Bartók's pianistic gifts were also well-known during his life-time. He gave recitals and performed with major orchestras in all of the leading cities of Europe, the Soviet Union and the United States, and received the acclaim of the master musicians of his time. Busoni, Godowsky and Kreisler recognized his talent while he was still in his early twenties. Since his death, criticism has tended to concentrate almost exclusively on his compositions. Even during his lifetime, his position as a composer tended to obscure his stature as an instrumentalist. This recording has a special significance, therefore, in documenting Bartók's piano artistry and

creative approach to the performer's role. And far beyond the great intrinsic quality of the performances, is the value of having a master composer's view of his work.

Bartók had composed two *Rhapsodies* for violin and piano in 1928, after his return from the United States. The ***Rhapsody No.1*** is in two sections: It is an idealized Hungarian folk dance, which proceeds through the usual dance figures and their embellishments to a furious and frenzied culmination. Bartók was to make use of folk dance as a basis for musical form on other occasions as well, most notably in the first movement of the 1938 *Violin Concerto*. For a violinist, the work calls for a mastery of the intricacies of modern music and of violin technique and especially the nuances of bow-arm control, of which Szigeti was so extraordinary an innovator. And, writing in 1928 Hugo Leichtentritt commented: '*The proper way to play these rhapsodic fantasies can hardly be transmitted by the printed notes. In fact only musicians of Eastern descent know how to make these florid figures live.*' In '*A Violinist's Notebook*' (1964) Szigeti gives an important rectification of tempo in the *First Rhapsody*).

– Maynard Solomon

Ernest Bloch's *Violin Concerto* was written for Szigeti and he debuted it in December 1938 with the Dimitri Mitropoulos / Cleveland Orchestra when it revealed flavours of both Native American and Eastern European music. He played it later in Bloch's home of Geneva, Switzerland and made live recordings with Beecham and the London Philharmonic Orchestra in March 1939 for the UK premiere, followed by the Dutch premiere, he recorded it with Willem Mengelberg and the Concertgebouw Orchestra, in that November. This (studio) version followed the Paris premiere, featuring Charles Munch as conductor. It is one of the best recordings of Szigeti himself, while Munch, as a former violinist himself, was an ideal accompanist. Bloch had not played the violin for many years – after studying with Ysaye – had taken up violin again while writing the *Concerto* so as to render an authentic violin part. He was most concerned that the soloist should not pull the music about too much, and in Szigeti he found his ideal vehicle.

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① recorded 18 & 20 October 1955 at Columbia Records 30th Street Studio, New York • Original issue: 1956, in Bach Guild BG-627~29

Producer: Seymour Solomon • Engineer: uncredited

②-④ recorded in 1944 at the Library of Congress, Washington DC • Original issue: 1964, in Vanguard VRS-1109~12

⑤-⑥ recorded 13 April, 1940 at the Library of Congress, Washington DC • Original issue: 1971, in Vanguard SRV-304~05

⑦-⑨ recorded 22-23 March 1939 in Paris • Original issue: 1939, as Columbia (UK) LX 819~22

Producer and engineer information for ②-⑨ unavailable

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