

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1226

The GREAT VIOLINISTS – Volume IX

JOSEPH (JOSKA) SZIGETI was born in Budapest in 1892, but, after the death of his mother when he was an infant, he was brought up in Máramaros-Sziget, from which the family, originally Singer, derived its Hungarian name. His father led a band of café musicians, one uncle played double-bass, and another, Bernat, started him on the violin, and an aunt played the cimbalom. His talent quickly expressed itself towards music and after attending at a fee-paying music school he transferred to the Academy of Music in Budapest, entering directly into the advanced class of Jenő Hubay, who had previously taught another uncle, Deszö.

Later he came to regard Hubay's teaching as heavily inclined to virtuosity and seriously lacking in musical insight. He was, for example, supposed to play chamber music, but attended only one of David Popper's quartet classes before concentrating on becoming a virtuoso. However, maturer students, such as Telmányi, were very well grounded in their studies by Hubay, Kodály and their colleagues; and in later years, when Hubay himself was head of the Academy, the chamber music classes of Leo Weiner were very important.

The system had evolved to ingratiate itself with parents who desired nothing more than Wunderkinder, preferably with rapidly escalating earning capacity. Surprisingly, in view of the family background, this was precisely the aim of Szigeti's father. Thus, in 1905, in ignorance or careless of the boy's innately reserved nature; at the age of thirteen he was forced on, like a hot house plant. The process, which included playing in a circus, was not successful and left permanent scars.

In Berlin he heard Elman, Kreisler and Ysaÿe, and was heard by Joachim. From the former he learned how small were his attainments thus far, but the offer of the latter to teach him was, though why is unclear, declined. It was at this time that he worked intensively on the Brahms concerto.

Szigeti never was a virtuoso player but he did develop as musician. Comparison with his contemporary and classmate under Hubay, Franz von Vecsey is interesting. Von Vecsey ascended into the very Heavens of whiz-kid playing, but then he was pushed into himself by his experiences in the Austro-Hungarian army during the first World War. He recovered to play to capacity audiences, though less often after his marriage, and he died very young. His playing was of immense technical purity, but was regarded as impersonal or cold. Szigeti, on the other hand, continued to mature as a musician until well after the second World War. There were outmoded features of his technique; he held the arm much closer to the body than is now expected, for example, but his success in placing the bow across three strings in Bach, in which he followed Emil Telmányi, was admired. Curiously, he seemed to develop the 'Hubay vibrato' on his own, long after leaving the

Academy.

The hot-house atmosphere of the Wunderkind had left him ill-equipped in education generally. This he sought earnestly to remedy. His vision, in and outside music, was widened by contact with the likes of Myra Hess, Hamilton Harty and, above all, whilst touring England with Busoni. He must also have learnt much by touring with the likes of Melba and McCormack. It was also in England, around 1907, that he first met Hamilton Harty. He gave his first performance of Busoni's concerto in 1912, the composer conducting, and he was the dedicatee of Harty's concerto.

The virtuoso world was relegated in favour of the works of Bartók, Bloch, Busoni, Dohnányi, Harty, Prokofiev, Stravinsky and Szymanowski. The divide was not only virtuoso/serious music but also old/new; though, obviously, he continued to play serious works of earlier generations, Mozart, Tartini and Viotti, for example.

He took up residence in Switzerland in 1913 on account of tuberculosis, and from 1917 to 1924 he was in charge of the "Class de virtuosité" of Geneva Conservatoire. However, the war confined his activities to the German speaking territories.

Thus not until 1925 did he make his *début* in the United States of America, an appearance which led to a big international career which included China and Japan. Some found his programmes austere or heavy. There was little concession to the prevailing taste for *morceau de salon* and *encore pieces* though, if any resentment remained over what had gone before, when he did unbend, it was often in the direction of pieces by Hubay. Every year he toured the United States and he was amongst the first major artists to appear regularly in post-revolutionary Russia. There were over a dozen tours in the years 1924 to 1937 from which he returned praising progress, reporting better conditions, and castigating those who spoke otherwise.

As has been remarked, Szigeti moved to Switzerland in 1913. From then on his home was generally in that country or in the United States. He died in Lucerne in 1973. His daughter married Nikita Magaloff, who was frequently his piano partner.

Many artists have little time for the gramophone or positively dislike it. Szigeti, however valued highly the facility it offers an artist to inspect his own work.

Boris Schwarz (*Great Masters of the Violin-Fireside-1983*) remarks that "His intonation was exact, his tone chaste and pure, without sensuousness." Eugène Ysaÿe, of an earlier generation, saw him as "at once a virtuoso and a musician... aware of his mission... placing technique at the service of expression."

As a key to his style it may be remarked that in the 1920s he regarded Burmester, Kubelik and Marteau as old-fashioned, and, despite the range of their ages, Elman, Heifetz, Kreisler and Thibaud as contemporary.

In a tribute on the occasion of his seventieth birthday Menuhin referred to Szigeti as "a model of inspiration to his colleagues" and suggested that, coming from Hungary, he was to an extent apart from the main stream, i.e. Russia, and to a certain extent, Western Europe. He admired him as "among the most distinguished intellectuals" and spoke of his penetrating mind. Otto Klemperer regarded him as an extraordinary musician and said that "he represented the standard repertoire in an exemplary fashion, and at the same time furthered all new and seldom played works with real conviction."

Joachim influenced Brahms considerably in the composition of his violin concerto of which he gave the first performance in 1879. It received its première in Spain when it was played by Szigeti in Madrid with Casals conducting.

Ernest Bloch was taken to Ysaÿe with the intention that he become a violinist. Ysaÿe, and later others, divined his creative talent, and advised him to compose. The dedication of the concerto to Szigeti can be seen as a culmination of thirty years of friendship, and dedications of works to him, in addition to those already mentioned, by Bartók and Stravinsky are sufficient testimony to his stature as a musician amongst musicians.

It may be of interest to add a list of students of Hubay, though in some cases "influenced by" might be more correct than "taught by".

Yelley d'Aranyi, Adila d'Aranyi Fachiri, Eddy Brown, Bram Eldering [teacher of Adolf Busch], André Gertler, Steffy Geyer, Emil Hauser, Duci de Kerékjarto, Janos Koncz, Sergei Kotlarsky, Geza de Kresz, Jenő Léner, Johanna Martzy, Eugen Ormandy [he retained an excellent violin technique], Stephan Partos [like Hasid, died very young and may have been similarly gifted], Kalman Reve, Fery Roth, Erna Rubinstein, Emil Telmányi, Zoltán Székely, Laszlo Szentgörgyi, Sandor Vegh, Franz von Vecsey, Robert Virovai, Imre Waldbauer [leader of the Hungarian Quartet], Helen Ware and Edouard de Zathurecky.

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