

Concert at the Library of Congress--Bela Bartok, piano, and Joseph Szigeti, violin (1940)

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Essay by Elliott Antokoletz (guest post)*



Bela Bartok



Joseph Szigeti

After the death of his mother and the Nazification of Hungary in the late 1930s, Béla Bartók no longer had reason to remain in Europe. His forthcoming concert tour of the United States made his hope for emigration a more viable reality, the first recital being scheduled with violinist Joseph Szigeti for the Library of Congress in Washington on April 13, 1940, under the auspices of the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Festival. In a letter dated April 2, 1940, Bartók informs his Swiss friend, Mrs. Müller-Widman, that he is to arrive in New York on April 11, just two days before what he referred to as his “first and most important recital.” He writes that he is fearful that any delay of the ship will interfere with the concert.

Bartók’s expressed a sense of urgency in anticipation of his departure from Hungary. His desire to emigrate had been evident in the mood of his Sixth String Quartet (1939), with its mixture of sadness (“Mesto”) and sardonic dissonance; it is what was to be the last of his works composed in Europe. Bartók’s apprehension, during this period prior to the concert at the Library of Congress, was a reflection of the broader set of conditions that brought many artistic émigrés to the United States at this crucial moment in history. Szigeti had already taken his final departure from Hungary prior to that of Bartók.

The recording of the performance in Washington by Bartók and Szigeti represents far more than the documentation of just the single musical event itself. The collaboration of these two Hungarian artists at this particular time and place is reflective of a more general convergence of historical, cultural, and personal issues. For one thing, the

event tells us much about the broader flowering of European musical art in the United States after WWII. The emigration during the 1930s of such figures as Schoenberg, Krenek, Stravinsky, and others was followed in the first few months of 1940 by that of Hindemith and Bartók. The impact on the development and dissemination of contemporary musical idioms in America in the decades following the arrivals of all these composers is immeasurable.

On the more personal side, the Washington concert points to one of two critical moments in Bartók's career, each thrusting him onto the international scene. Both moments are integrally related by way of the composition and performance of one of his most modernistic works, the "Second Violin Sonata" (1922). The first critical moment came after the defeat of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of WWI, which led Bartók to embark on an extended international concert career. His participation in the ISCM Festivals since 1922 brought Bartók into contact with the ultra-modernist music of his contemporaries; his own move in this direction beginning precisely with the two "Violin Sonatas." The second critical moment came after the outbreak of WWII, which led him to a new performance venue in the United States that began with the Washington concert in 1940. Thus, while the first critical moment was epitomized by the composition of the "Second Sonata," the second one was epitomized by the performance of the same work at the inaugural Washington recital. In view of the prominent position that Bartók gave to his ultra-modernist "Sonata" on the 1940 Washington recital, it seems ironic that during his remaining American years he was to witness his rejection as a modernist composer in the United States.

The Library of Congress recital also epitomizes Bartók's life-long move toward synthesis of divergent folk- and art-music sources. Many of the basic stylistic aspects of Bartók's compositional evolution are reflected in the choice of works for this recital. Bartók spoke of the influence on his use of form and sonority from Beethoven and Debussy, respectively. His absorption of German and French sources was already manifested in his works prior to WWI. In spite of their contrasting external formal outlines—Bartók's "Second Sonata" in the two-movement form of the Verbunkos, Beethoven's "Kreutzer" "Sonata" in the three-movement form of the Classical tradition—the sonatas of both composers reveal an affinity in their structural fluidity and relentless energy. While the Beethoven is more defined by Classical sectional contrast, the Bartók by a more organic narrative, both reveal a heightened expressive intensity and expansion of instrumental sonority. The juxtaposition of the Debussy and Bartók sonatas on the same program draws our attention to the new timbral and sonic subtleties that have been made possible by these two composers in this otherwise traditional instrumental combination. Furthermore, the affinity between the musical languages of the Debussy and Bartók sonatas permits a degree of synthesis in the programming of the divergent stylistic idioms of the three composers, Beethoven, Debussy, and Bartók. Although the Bartók "Sonata" is more radical than the Debussy in its thematic use of a nondiatonic Romanian folk mode as well as polymodal combinations and more dissonant chromatic compressions, the pentatonic/modal

language of Debussy's harmonic idiom points to their common sources in Eastern European folk music--Debussy by way of the influence of the Russian nationalists.

Synthesis within diversity is also evident on the program in terms of the two Bartók works themselves. The "First Rhapsody" (1928) and the "Second Sonata" (1922) span two extreme phases of Bartók's stylistic evolution, one in which folk elements are most prevalent, the other in which the rhythmic and modal elements of various Eastern European folk sources are absorbed and transformed into Bartók's most modernistic idiom of the 1920s. While the "Rhapsody" of 1928 is prominently based on highly ornamented folk materials that foreshadow Bartók's renewed interest in folk-music settings, his two "Sonatas for Violin and Piano" of 1921-22 were to come closer than any of his other works to a kind of atonal chromaticism and harmonic serialization typical of the expressionistic works of the Schoenberg school. However, Bartók never crossed the threshold into atonality and later stated that he "wanted to show Schoenberg that one can use all twelve tones and still remain tonal" [Yehudi Menuhin, "Unfinished Journey" (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 165]. In his essay, "The Problem of the New Music," Bartók provides a lucid explanation of his musical language at the time of the "Second Sonata": "The music of our times strives decidedly toward atonality. Yet it does not seem to be right to interpret the principle of tonality as the absolute opposite to atonality. The latter is much more the consequence of a gradual development, originating from tonality, absolutely proceeding step by step—without any gaps or violent leaps." Not only is Bartók's statement directly relevant to an understanding of the new level of harmonic dissonance in the "Second Sonata," but the stylistic extremes between the modal tonality of the "First Rhapsody" and the more dissonant idiom of the "Second Sonata" are also bridged by their common structures: both works are divided into the conventional *lassú* (slow "parlando rubato") and *friss* (quick "tempo giusto") of the "Verbunkos" style.

Bartók and Szigeti had performed many concerts together in various cities of Europe as well as New York since the 1920s, but virtually none of them had been recorded. After Bartók's death, Szigeti expressed regret for not having recorded the many concerts given with his colleague and friend. As it turned out, the fortunate documentation that resulted from the ancillary recording of their collaboration in the Washington concert has preserved the multifaceted qualities of a major musical event in the form of a live performance, its preservation due to Harold Spivacke, Director of the Music Division of the Library of Congress. The one other recorded collaboration was the premiere of Bartók's "Contrasts" in 1938 (with Benny Goodman, Szigeti, and Bartók). This recording at the Library of Congress reveals unique interpretative renditions that are no longer typical of performance practice today, either in connection with Bartók's own musical idiom or the two other standard masterpieces by Beethoven and Debussy.

Made possible by the recording of this major musical event, our attention is drawn not only to the personal artistic interpretations of Bartók and Szigeti, but also to a comparison with other performers of that era. Szigeti's personal approach to violin

slides and Bartók's expressive use of rolled (slightly nonsynchronized) chords point to certain performance practices in vogue at the time. While violinists today generally avoid expressive slides in such classical works as the Beethoven "Sonata," or even in more contemporary works as those by Debussy and Bartók, Szigeti's consistent use of descending slides (in contrast to the characteristically ascending slides that are well known in Heifetz's violinistic approach) offers musical insight into structural design and expressive meaning that imbues every phrase. This recorded document also provides insight into musical meaning as elucidated by subtle changes of tempo on the internal levels of each phrase, for instance, in the opening of the Beethoven "Sonata," based on alternating, then overlapping dialogue between the two instruments. Throughout the program, Bartók displays a subtle give-and-take response to Szigeti's phrasal gestures, the interpretative insights of the two artists inviting comparison with more familiar present-day performance conceptions.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.