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Chapter 1
Lucien Louis Capet (1873-1928)

Biographical Excerpts

Capet has been written about in a number of publications. Before addressing the full story of his life, it might be interesting to the reader to peruse various anecdotal excerpts from sources that are in current circulation. As both Biga and Robert have indicated in their writings,⁶ Capet had a multifaceted life. He was a soloist, a pedagogue, a quartet leader, a composer, a literary writer, an editor, and a philosopher. He also premiered works of other composers. The following cameo excerpts from literature give us a glimpse of the character and attributes of Lucien Louis Capet.

Strength of Character

Carl Flesch, *Memoires*, 91.

By the time he was fifteen he had to maintain himself by playing in bistros and cafés. ...when he was twenty years old and he had to look after the entire family of his girl friend, who to help with

⁶ Frédéric Biga, *Le Maître de l'Archet: Réflexion sur l'Apport Pédagogique de Lucien Capet*. Thesis (Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris, 1994).

Antoine Robert, *Lucien Capet 1873-1928 Interprète et Pédagogue*. Master's Thesis (Université de Paris-Sarbonne, 1994).

their living expenses also took boarders for the midday meal. Once as we were going home after a rehearsal he invited me to try the good plain food in his 'family' . . . and for six months I was Capet's lodger.

Later on our friendship underwent a severe trial, when he beat me in my second competitive examination. But I must have felt genuinely drawn to him, for our relations continued as before.

Carl Flesch, *Memoires*, 101-102.

Next morning, I had already calmed down sufficiently to consider my rank as second best out of thirty-five contestants not so very disgraceful after all. The prospect of presenting myself to my parents as a defeated candidate, however, was intolerable, and I played with the idea of not going home at all during the summer vacation. But I lacked the means to spend all this time in France. In this dilemma I decided to ask my friend and rival Capet for advice. 'Nothing simpler,' he commented. 'I have just received an offer to play in the best café in Limoges. But you can imagine,' said the newly-crowned prize-winner with naïve self-assurance, 'that in my present position it is impossible for me to continue along these lines. If you like, you can have the job at any time.' . . . [Flesch said] 'Yes, but don't you think it rather degrading for me to pursue such an occupation?' [Capet answered] 'What of it? - You needn't tell anyone. Besides, it only lasts two months.' I did not take long to think it over and signed the contract put before me.⁷

Lucien Capet, *Espérances*, 62.

To ask God to help us to realize a desire which is ours personally, is not a prayer; ask Him for others! . . . And overall, accept with joy and appreciation this that He has sent us, particularly that which seems painful, for of individual pain is born consideration, from consideration is born meditation, from meditation is born the benefits of understanding, and from understanding is born happiness for others.⁸

⁷ Due to no family support Capet had no income except from engagements such as these in the summer months whereas Flesch received a regular student pension from his parents. In such light, the circumstance may seem a little different.

⁸ Trans. by Kelley Johnson.

The Performer

Joseph Szigeti, *On the Violin*, 20.

Ysaÿe, Thibaud, Capet have all been members of an orchestra in their youth. I sometimes regretted having refused offers from Franz Schalk of the Vienna State Opera and Music Academy and from other institutions when I looked back upon the early stages of my development after I had reached the supposedly ripe age of forty or so.⁹

Yehudi Menuhin, *Unfinished Journey*, 320-321.

When I was first in Paris, in 1926-27, I attended a concert by the Capet Quartet, whose devotion to correctness led them to play without vibrato. To play without vibrato is an excellent check upon one's intonation and useful therefore in testing an ensemble's accuracy, but so intolerable did my ears find it in performance that I left the hall (I have regretted my flight ever since: the Capet Quartet were superb musicians from whom I could have learned much).

Boris Schwarz, *Great Masters of the Violin*, 372.

Such stretches of *senza vibrato* playing were actually rare; and I did hear the Capet Quartet give "vibrant" performances of the Romantic Repertoire.

. . . The secret of the Capet Quartet was that each member had fully absorbed Capet's technical and musical approach. Their unanimity of technique, sound, and musical concept was unsurpassed. They spoke through one voice—that of Capet. As soon as he died, the Quartet fell apart, thought the second violinist, the excellent Maurice Hewitt, tried to keep the tradition alive.

Carl Flesch, *Memoires*, 93.

⁹ Szigeti also reference Capet's editions of the Bach unaccompanied Sonatas and Partitas in his thorough analysis of the interpretation of those works in chapters 18 and 19.

From the outset, Capet loved quartet playing. The ‘Société des derneirs quatuors de Beethoven,’ which was founded in the 1850s by Capet’s teacher, Maurin, was later taken over by the Franco-Italian Geloso, with Capet as second violin. As a quartet player, then, he rose as it were from the ranks . . .

. . . [Capet Quartet Concert in] Berlin in 1912. My overall impression was thoroughly favorable: exact co-ordination, serious interpretation, cultivated technical resources. However, it seemed to me that the artistic personality of the leader did afford a homogeneous picture. It fluctuated between touches of ‘classical’ dryness and an occasional emergence of a somewhat effeminate sweetness. But I admired without reserve the subtlety and tidiness in the solution of bowing problems.

. . . His specialty was Beethoven, whose quartets he played in complete series, especially in France and Holland.

Boris Schwarz, *Great Masters of the Violin*, 370-371.

Moser-Joachim’s alter ego- was somewhat critical of Capet’s musicianship: “Unfortunately, nature had not endowed Capet with the ability to read between the lines in classical music, and so his interpretations lack on the whole the *brio*, despite the most conscientious execution of all details.” Flesch believed that Capet wanted it that way: “His style was deliberate- it conformed to the Romantic concept of German classicism.”

But no such criticism was heard in Paris, where the Capet Quartet was to set standards of excellence valid for an entire generation.

...I came to know Capet in 1926. I heard his Quartet in an all-French program and found the execution, the ensemble technique, and the almost religious devotion