



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Rare Book & Manuscript Library

# Tibor Serly Papers, 1905-1992

## MS# 1416

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### **SUMMARY INFORMATION**

#### **Creator**

Barbara Munz, Executrix of the Estate of Tibor Serly

#### **Title and dates:**

Tibor Serly Papers, 1905-1992

#### **Abstract**

This collection contains the personal papers, including musical scores, of the Hungarian-American composer, arranger, and theorist Tibor Serly.

#### **Size**

3.15 linear feet [7 archival document boxes and 1 oversize flat box (# 749)]

#### **Call number**

MS #1416

#### **Location**

Columbia University  
Rare Book and Manuscript Library  
Butler Library, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor  
535 West 114<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10027

#### **Language(s) of material**

English, Hungarian

### History of the Tibor Serly Papers



Tibor Serly was born in Losonc, Hungary on November 25, 1901. He began his musical studies with his father, Lajos Serly, a Hungarian patriot, theatrical composer, and pupil of Liszt. Due to financial hardships, Lajos Serly moved his family in 1905 to New York City, where Tibor spent his childhood. Tibor gained early experience in pit orchestras led by his father until 1922, when he returned to Budapest to attend the Liszt Academy. There, he studied violin with Jenő Hubay, composition with Zoltán Kodály, and orchestration with Leó Weiner, graduating in 1925 with highest honors. During his years in Budapest, Serly also first made the acquaintance of his longtime mentor and friend, Béla Bartók.

Serly returned to the United States upon graduation and held positions as a violinist and violist in leading American orchestras, including the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Eugene Ormandy and the NBC Symphony Orchestra under Arturo Toscanini. He also became close friends with several modernist poets, including William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, Basil Bunting, and most notably Ezra Pound, whom Serly visited frequently at Pound's home in Rapallo, Italy, arranging concerts there. In 1938, Serly retired from performing to focus on composing and teaching.

In 1940, Béla Bartók and his wife emigrated from wartime Hungary to New York. Until Bartók's death in 1944, Serly devoted his energies to providing material and emotional support to the ailing exiled composer. Serly's papers include intimate photographs of Bartók and himself, as well as a home movie of an informal piano performance by Bartók. Serly arranged the *Mikrokosmos* suite for chamber orchestra, orchestrated the *Third Concerto for Piano*, and posthumously completed the master's *Concerto for Viola* from sketches of the work. A talented decipherer and stylist, Serly also reconstructed a duet by Liszt and a section of Schubert's unfinished *Eighth Symphony*.

From the 1930s on, Serly engaged in serious theoretical studies, developing a post-Schoenbergian enharmonic system called "Modus Lascivus," which divides the twelve-tone scale into two segments to create a multimodal chromatic scale system. Serly published two advanced theoretical texts, *A Second Look at Harmony* (1964) and *Modus Lascivus: The Road to Enharmonicism* (1976), and had just completed a third, *The Rhetoric of Melody*, at the time of his death. Serly was also working on both a personal memoir and a biography of Bartók, the unfinished typescripts of which are included in these papers.

Towards the end of his life, Serly relocated with his second wife, the pianist Miriam Molin, to Longview, Washington, where he continued to teach and actively championed modernist music in the Pacific Northwest. At the end of his career, Serly was better known for his famous friends and

collaborators, especially Bartók and Pound, than his own musical and theoretical work, a fact about which he complained bitterly in later correspondence. He was, however, indefatigable in his commitment to both innovation in modern music and preserving the rich musical traditions in which he had played a central role.

Tibor Serly died on October 8, 1978 after being struck by a car on a visit to London. His devoted wife Miriam, who kept his work alive through her performances, compiled the papers in this collection.

### Description

The collection is comprised of the papers in the possession of Serly upon his death in 1978, as well as correspondence related to his career handled by his wife, Miriam Serly, after his death. The content of the papers includes scores, manuscript drafts, correspondence, and other materials related to Serly's career as a composer and writer on music; typescripts, reviews, articles, correspondence, pamphlets, translations, notes, and a 16mm film by and about Béla Bartók; and legal documents, photographs, audio cassette recordings, printed materials, press clippings, certificates, awards, and other memorabilia pertaining to Serly's personal life.

### Arrangement

This collection is arranged into two series:

Series I: Writings and Music by Serly, 1905-1978

Subseries 1: Writings by Serly

Subseries 2: Musical Scores

Series 2: Personal and Business Materials, 1911-1992

Subseries 1: Correspondence

Subseries 2: Business and Publicity Materials

Subseries 3: Memorabilia

Subseries 4: Photographs

#### [Series I: Writings and Music by Serly, 1905-78](#)

Series I includes unpublished drafts of books written by Serly, and musical scores and sketches in his personal collection. The series is arranged into two subseries: Writings by Serly and Musical Scores.

[Subseries 1: Writings by Serly, 1905-1978.](#) Serly spent the better part of his last decade researching and writing a biography of Béla Bartók, a theory text about melody, and a personal memoir, all of which are included here in draft form. The extensive materials for the Bartók biography include: Serly's translations from Hungarian of musical essays written by Bartók; interviews with friends and family of Bartók; and unpublished historical and musicological essays written by Serly about Bartók. The Bartók material also contains the only known copy of a 16mm color home movie, without sound, of an informal performance by Bartók from 1944; with documents and correspondence from the 1970s between Serly and the Bartók estate concerning ownership of the film. Subseries 1 also includes the final draft versions of the unpublished *Rhetoric of Melody*, with voluminous correspondence between Serly and his co-author, Norman Newton, on the development of the text.

[Subseries 2: Musical Scores, 1925-1978.](#) A collection of original scores and arrangements from the entire length of Serly's career. The works include ballets, songs, chamber music, symphonies,

and experimental music, all in different states of completion: parts, conductor scores, revisions, sketches, microfilms, and transparencies. Several pieces also demonstrate Serly's expertise as an arranger, with works by Bartók, Bach, Schubert, and his father, Lajos Serly.

### Series II: Personal and Business Materials, 1911-92

Series II contains business documents, correspondence, a scrapbook, and personal effects of Serly's life and career. The series is arranged into four subseries: Correspondence, Business and Publicity Materials, Memorabilia, and Photographs.

Subseries 1: Correspondence, 1931-1992. Personal and business-related correspondence, mostly from the 1970s, arranged alphabetically. Among the correspondents are Geza Frid, Lawrence Gilman, James Laughlin, and Peter Bartók. Subseries also includes the correspondence of Miriam Serly concerning Serly's career with scholars, publishers, and the Bartók estate through the 1980s; and three folders of reproductions of Serly's brief correspondence with Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, and more extensive correspondence with the music critic Henry Pleasant. These copies were obtained by Serly from other archives.

Subseries 2: Business and Publicity Materials, 1925-1978. Serly thoroughly documented his performing and composing career, best represented in an oversized scrapbook spanning his career, from music school concerts in Budapest from 1925; through his active period in the 1930s and 1940s, playing under Leopold Stokowski, Eugene Ormandy, and Arturo Toscanini; to his later years in the Pacific Northwest. Scrapbook includes an almost complete record in programs of performances of Serly's work, as well as clippings, reviews, and personal letters. Also, provides a record of Bartók's reception in New York during his exile and tributes to him after his death. Other notables in the scrapbook include Kodály, Ezra Pound, and Geza Frid. Subseries 2 also contains a file of newspaper clippings kept by Serly; a collection of clippings about Ezra Pound, mostly from the 1970s; a folder of orchestra programs from Serly's career; and original copyright forms and contracts for his published work.

Subseries 3: Memorabilia, 1911-1978. A small collection of personal items including: certificates, awards, and medals presented to Serly; membership cards; the 1911 naturalization certificate of Lajos Serly and his family; postcards and items collected by Serly in Hungary; and official documents pertaining to Serly's accidental death in London, including his death certificate.

Subseries 4: Photographs, 1935-1978. Two folders of photographs and negatives: the first contains photographs related to Bartók and his family, including several excellent images of casual moments from Bartók's time in America, as well as the last photograph (and negative) of Bartók, standing in front of Columbia University with his family. The second folder includes professional, publicity, and personal photographs, arranged chronologically, of Serly throughout his career, from 1930s orchestra photos through a 1976 trip to Hungary that Serly took with his wife to visit Kodály, and personal photographs of Serly at the end of his life in Longview, Washington.

## ACCESS AND USE

### Access

**This collection is located off-site.** You will need to request this material at least twenty-four (24) hours in advance to use the collection in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library Reading Room. Please consult the Rare Book and Manuscript Library for further information.

This collection has no restrictions.

### **Restrictions on Use and Copyright Information**

Single photocopies may be made for research purposes. Permission to publish material from the collection must be requested from the Curator of Manuscripts, Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML). The RBML grants permission to publish that which it physically owns; the responsibility to secure copyright permission rests with the patron.

### **Other Finding Aids**

The New York Public Library has a related collection of Tibor Serly Papers with an extensive biography and finding aid. See also, Ms Coll Bartók in Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia for related materials.

### **ACQUISITION AND APPRAISAL**

#### **Provenance and Acquisition**

Deed of Gift from Barbara Munz, June 2004.

### **PROCESSING AND OTHER INFORMATION**

#### **Processing Information**

This collection was surveyed by Bridget Lerette and processed by Jude Webre, Columbia '07. Finding aid written by Jude Webre in May 2007.

#### **Descriptive Rules Used**

Finding aid content adheres to that prescribed by *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*.

#### **Encoding**

Finding aid written in English.

#### **Preferred Citation**

Identification of specific item; Date (if known); Tibor Serly Papers, Box and Folder; Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

#### **Subject Headings**

These papers have been indexed in the Columbia University Library online catalog using the following terms. Those seeking related materials should search under these terms.

Bartók, Béla, 1881-1945  
Bartók, Peter, 1924-  
Chamber music--20th century--Scores  
Composers--Hungary--Biography  
Frid, Geza  
Hungarian Americans--Music--History and criticism  
Kodály, Zoltán, 1882-1967

Laughlin, James, 1914-  
Longview (Wash.)--History  
Modernism (Music) United States  
Music Theory--History--20th century  
Orchestral music--20th century--Scores  
Ormandy, Eugene, 1899-1985  
Philadelphia Orchestra  
Pound, Ezra, 1885-1972--Friends and associates

## Box

Series I: Writings and Music by Serly, 1905-1978Subseries 1: Writings by Serly, 1905-1978

- 2 Unfinished Bela Bartok Biography, Drafts and Notes  
Typescript draft (2 folders)  
Original Bartok writings, translated by Serly  
Misc. research notes, interviews, and translations  
Typescript draft essays for biography  
Bartok 16mm home movie, 1944  
Correspondence and contracts related to Bartok film
- 5 *Rhetoric of Melody*, written with Norman Newton, 1976-1978  
Bound final drafts  
Correspondence with Norman Newton and others
- 3 Notes and research
- 3 Other Writings  
*Musings of an Angry Musician*--notes and essays for memoir  
*Modus Lascivus*--notes, drafts, microfilm, publicity  
Miscellaneous program notes for Serly compositions

Subseries 2: Musical Scores, 1925-1978

- 5 Songs--manuscript and printed scores  
"Angie Mimey"  
"Birthday Song"  
"Forest Lullaby"  
"Forget-Me-Not" (Lajos Serly, arr. by Tibor Serly)  
"Lady Alice"  
"Longview Song"  
"The Needle's Eye"  
"Oh, Miss Mary"  
"The Old Man Who Lived in the Wood"  
"The Old Woman and the Preacher"  
"Slave Song"  
"Two Little Sisters"
- 6 Chamber, Orchestral, and Theatrical Works  
*Adagio and Scherzo for Flute Solo*--score  
*American Quodlibet*--score  
*Canonic Prelude for Four Harps*--scores  
*Castout*--ballet score  
*Concerto for Viola and Orchestra*--score  
*Divertimento for Wind Instruments*--parts  
*Five Conso vowels in Modus Lascivus*--notes, parts, score  
*Five Pieces for Trombone and Piano*--parts  
*Five Pieces for Violin and Piano*--parts  
*40 Etudes*--score  
*Fughatta for Orchestra*--(Bach, arr. by Serly); manuscript parts and score

Box

**Series I/ Subseries 2 (cont.)**

- 6 *Ghidonis Sonata for Strings*--score, parts  
*Instruments of the Symphony Orchestra*--notes, score, parts,  
 transparencies  
*Into the Heavens (Celestial Music)*--score
- 7 *Menuet in Bi-Modals*--printed score  
*Mischianza*--bound ballet score  
*Modus Lascivus*--chart  
*Piano Sonata in Modus Lascivus*--parts  
*The Pleiades*--score  
*Rondo Fantasy in Stringometrics*--score  
*Scherzo*--(Schubert, arr. by Serly); score  
*Sea-side Suite*--scores  
*Sonata in B for Violin and Piano*--photocopied score  
*String Quartet*--parts  
*Suite from Mikrokosmos*--(Bartok, arr. by Serly); parts  
*Symphony in Two Movements*--bound score  
*Tap Dance From Six Dance Designs*--parts  
*Twilight*--score  
*Viola Concerto*--(Bartok, arr. by Serly); microfilm and printed score  
*The Wayworn Traveler*--score, parts  
*Xmas Quodlibet*--score
- 5, 7 Miscellaneous parts and scores--manuscript and printed

**Series II: Personal and Business Materials, 1911-1992**

**Subseries 1: Correspondence, 1931-1992**

- 1 Arranged Correspondence, 1937-1978 (2 folders)  
 Carbons and Photocopies of Replies, 1931-1978  
 Letters by Others, 1936-1985  
 Letters to Miriam Serly, 1979-1992 (2 folders)  
 Serly/Bartók Letters, 1939-1944 (photocopies)  
 Serly/Zoltán Kodály Letters, 1930s-1966 (photocopies)  
 Serly/Henry Pleasant Letters, 1931-1951 (photocopies)  
 Unidentified Correspondence

**Subseries 2: Business and Publicity Materials, 1925-1988**

- FB#749 Scrapbook, 1925-1978  
 4 Copyright Forms and Contracts  
 Orchestra Programs from Serly's Career, 1935-1988  
 Newspaper Clippings about Serly  
 Clippings on Ezra Pound, collected by Serly  
 General business and publicity materials

**Box**

**Series II (cont.)**

**3**

[Subseries 3: Memorabilia, 1911-1978](#)

**4**

[Subseries 4: Photographs, 1935-1978](#)

Photographs related to the Bartók family  
Professional and personal photographs of Serly

Box

Box	Description
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**Series I: Writings and Music by Serly, 1905-1978**

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| 5 | <i>Rhetoric of Melody</i> , written with Norman Newton, 1976-1978<br>Bound final drafts<br>Correspondence with Norman Newton and others  |
| 3 | Notes and research   |
| 3 | Other Writings<br><i>Musings of an Angry Musician</i> --notes and essays for memoir<br><i>Modus Lascivus</i> --notes, drafts, microfilm, publicity<br>Miscellaneous program notes for Serly compositions   |
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| 6 | Chamber, Orchestral, and Theatrical Works<br><i>Adagio and Scherzo for Flute Solo</i> --score<br><i>American Quodlibet</i> --score<br><i>Canonic Prelude for Four Harps</i> --scores<br><i>Castout</i> --ballet score<br><i>Concerto for Viola and Orchestra</i> --score<br><i>Divertimento for Wind Instruments</i> --parts<br><i>Five Consovowels in Modus Lascivus</i> --notes, parts, score<br><i>Five Pieces for Trombone and Piano</i> --parts<br><i>Five Pieces for Violin and Piano</i> --parts<br><i>40 Etudes</i> --score<br><i>Fughatta for Orchestra</i> --(Bach, arr. by Serly); manuscript parts and score |

## Box

Box	Description
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**Series I/ Subseries 2 (cont.)**

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| 6    | <i>Ghidonis Sonata for Strings</i> --score, parts<br><i>Instruments of the Symphony Orchestra</i> --notes, score, parts, transparencies<br><i>Into the Heavens (Celestial Music)</i> --score  |
| 7    | <i>Menuet in Bi-Modals</i> --printed score<br><i>Mischianza</i> --bound ballet score<br><i>Modus Lascivus</i> --chart<br><i>Piano Sonata in Modus Lascivus</i> --parts<br><i>The Pleiades</i> --score<br><i>Rondo Fantasy in Stringometrics</i> --score<br><i>Scherzo</i> --(Schubert, arr. by Serly); score<br><i>Sea-side Suite</i> --scores<br><i>Sonata in B for Violin and Piano</i> --photocopied score<br><i>String Quartet</i> --parts<br><i>Suite from Mikrokosmos</i> --(Bartok, arr. by Serly); parts<br><i>Symphony in Two Movements</i> --bound score<br><i>Tap Dance From Six Dance Designs</i> --parts<br><i>Twilight</i> --score<br><i>Viola Concerto</i> --(Bartok, arr. by Serly); microfilm and printed score<br><i>The Wayworn Traveler</i> --score, parts<br><i>Xmas Quodlibet</i> --score |
| 5, 7 | Miscellaneous parts and scores--manuscript and printed  |

**Series II: Personal and Business Materials, 1911-1992**

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| 1           | Subseries 1: Correspondence, 1931-1992<br>Arranged Correspondence, 1937-1978 (2 folders)<br>Carbons and Photocopies of Replies, 1931-1978<br>Letters by Others, 1936-1985<br>Letters to Miriam Serly, 1979-1992 (2 folders)<br>Serly/Bartók Letters, 1939-1944 (photocopies)<br>Serly/Zoltán Kodály Letters, 1930s-1966 (photocopies)<br>Serly/Henry Pleasant Letters, 1931-1951 (photocopies)<br>Unidentified Correspondence |
| FB#749<br>4 | Subseries 2: Business and Publicity Materials, 1925-1988<br>Scrapbook, 1925-1978<br>Copyright Forms and Contracts<br>Orchestra Programs from Serly's Career, 1935-1988<br>Newspaper Clippings about Serly<br>Clippings on Ezra Pound, collected by Serly<br>General business and publicity materials  |

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**Series II (cont.)**

**3**

Subseries 3: Memorabilia, 1911-1978

**4**

Subseries 4: Photographs, 1935-1978

Photographs related to the Bartók family

Professional and personal photographs of Serly