

HARRY

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Michael Habermann: THE UNKNOWN GENIUS OF HAMILTON

The only person allowed to perform the piano works of one of the world's greatest composers...and why you've never heard of him. **Tom D'Antoni**

I first heard Michael Habermann play the piano through my bedroom wall. My next door neighbor, a med student named Hector, decided that he wanted to learn how to play the piano. No, he decided he wanted to be a concert pianist.

He put his piano in the room that was right next to my bedroom.

I would lie there at night and listen to Hector play the same passage over and over and over and over for hours at a time...badly. I could have gone next door (as a real adult would) and said, "Hector, you're really bothering us with the practicing, could we work something out?"

Naw, I beat on the wall. It was after a long time of it, you know.

And then one day I heard this playing. It wasn't Hector. It must be angels, I thought. I grew to look forward to this person's playing. I would hang around the bedroom waiting for it.

One day, a few weeks later, there was a knock on the door. It was Hector and another man. It became obvious that Hector had told him I had beaten on the wall.

The man says hello, "I hope we're not disturbing you playing the piano." hands me a record, and introduces himself as Michael Habermann.

Hector eventually moved out and for a brief period, until he moved upstairs, I got to hear Michael play a lot. It turns out that Michael Habermann was the first and only person to be allowed to play the works of a composer that you've never heard of.

How could you have heard of him...he never allowed his works to be performed, until he heard Michael Habermann play them.

Michael lives in Hamilton (that's NEBO, son, NEBO) He and I talked.

TOM: Why did you knock on my door that day?

MICHAEL: Well, I wanted to introduce myself. I was wondering if I was disturbing you.

TOM: No, no...it was wonderful. Whenever Hector would play I would flee the apartment, but when you played I stayed in the bedroom the whole time.

MICHAEL: Well, I somehow thought you were going to mistake me for Hector and shoot me.

TOM: Who was this composer Sorabji and please say and spell his entire name.

MICHAEL: Kaikosru Shaurji Sorabji. In my opinion, he was a marvelous, marvelous composer who was of Indian and English lineage. He was born in 1892 or maybe 1894, nobody really knows. He apparently misled biographers. He really was a personal secluded type of individual. He really didn't want to divulge too many facts about himself.

He had this Eastern education. His mother was Spanish and Sicilian and his father was Parsi. He had a very Eastern outlook on life.

He composed like a wild man until he died. There are hundreds of pages of music yet to be discovered.

TOM: Where does he fit in to what most of us call "classical" music?

MICHAEL: Once becomes familiar to the listener, he basically fits in between Ravel, Debussy and Schoenberg. He's an odd mixture of styles. But there definitely is a very unique touch to his music. I would call him a neo-impressionist with a little bit of counterpoint and a whole bunch of other things mixed in.

TOM: Why wouldn't he let his music be performed?

MICHAEL: It all stems from a performance that he heard of one of his pieces that was to take about two hours and took six hours, and he was so absolutely disgruntled....

TOM: Did the guy keep going back and starting over?

MICHAEL: No. The guy couldn't handle it, and was going very very very slowly.

TOM: When did this happen?

MICHAEL: In the late 20s, early 30s.

TOM: And he wrote for 40, 50, 60 more years?

MICHAEL: Yep.

TOM: And none of it has been performed, except by you.

MICHAEL: Exactly.

TOM: Why you?

MICHAEL: Well, I had the time and patience to put up with all the difficulties in the piano music and was fortunate to run into some of the piano music in Mexico City.

I was living in Mexico in the sixties and I was exploring a bookstore, and lo and behold there was this incredible piece of music...I mean it was staggering. I mean it looked so difficult. I thought, "This is for a player piano!" So I figured I could take on the challenge.

I think that's one of the reasons. I was just stubborn, and I decided to stick with it.

TOM: How did you get to record it? Did you have to sit there and play it for him?

MICHAEL: Yes, yes.

TOM: What was that like?

MICHAEL: I was a little nervous.

TOM: What was his house like?

MICHAEL: It looked like a museum. All these rare books and gorgeous furniture. He was independently wealthy. He lived the life of luxury. He had two phenomenal pianos. It was an experience not to be forgotten.

TOM: What did you call him when you met him?

MICHAEL: (laughs) Mr. Sorabji. (more laughs) And he said, "No, no, no, no, no. Call me Kaikosru.

TOM: How old were you?

MICHAEL: I discovered the music when I was seventeen. Oh, let's see...I was twenty-seven. Ten years later.

TOM: How much more of his work had you found by then?

MICHAEL: I had access to everything I wanted by that point. I had written to him. We had a correspondence going. I had sent him a tape.

TOM: But why you? And please don't be modest.

MICHAEL: I think he had faith and confidence that I could do the job. It's as simple as that.

TOM: How many recordings have you done?

MICHAEL: Right now there are three, and I'm working on two more right now. I've been working on them for several years.

TOM: Why does it take so long?

MICHAEL: Normally piano music is written on two staves. A staff is a system of five lines and spaces, and there's one for the right hand and one for the left hand. A couple notes on the right hand a couple notes on the left hand. Generally the notes are played together, or they're played by the right hand or by the left hand.

In Sorabji's case, the starting point is three staves. It's different from a transcendental etude by Liszt or some monstrously difficult piece by Tchaikovsky. You've got three staves as a bare minimum.

You've got to decide which hand or combination of hands is going to play the middle staff. That's just the starting point. Sometimes you have four staves, so you have two entirely different things to do with the left hand at the same time. So you're jumping around the piano a lot.

TOM: How do you do it?

MICHAEL: I start off very slowly and carefully. Sometimes a beat at a time. A beat at a time. And I build from there.

It really takes a lot of patience and a willingness to sacrifice a lot of things.

TOM: Like what?

MICHAEL: Like the standard repertoire. Instead of playing a bunch of other composers, I have to say no to that because I know if I do that I'm not going to be able to accomplish what I need to accomplish. It's either/or.

TOM: What a commitment.

MICHAEL: It's a big commitment. Sometimes I have doubts. I think, "What am I doing?" (laughs)

TOM: And it's not something you're going to get rich off of.

MICHAEL: No, no. I guess I'm kind of looney. I guess when I saw this music something clicked inside of me.

TOM: At seventeen.

MICHAEL: Yes, and I thought this is what I've got to do. It almost became a sense of mission.

TOM: So here sits the only person authorized to perform and record his music. And you're living in Hamilton.

MICHAEL: I teach.

TOM: What kind of teaching?

"I was exploring a bookstore in Mexico...there was this incredible piece of music... I mean it was staggering. I thought, 'This is for a player piano!'"

MICHAEL: I teach music, music theory, music history.

TOM: To...

MICHAEL: College students. Peabody, Morgan, Essex, private students, play in church.. I'm part-time all over the place.

TOM: Don't you think you should have the Sorabji chair in some university and just teach this?

MICHAEL: I think that once the music becomes more familiar with a larger group of people, it'll settle in pianist's ears and then somehow the fingers will...it's a little like setting the world record for the hundred yard dash. At some point in time it was impossible to do it in under ten seconds. Once you know that you can break the barrier, you find a whole bunch of people doing it.



Photo: Andrew Patilla

