

Lifting the Veil of Silence From a Musical Enigma

By ROBERT SHERMAN

What does Michael Habermann have that is shared by no other pianist in the world? The answer is the blessings of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji for public presentation of his keyboard pieces—the first such approval bestowed by the composer in some 40 years. Accordingly, Mr. Habermann will not only play Haydn, Liszt and Chopin at his Carnegie Recital Hall debut Sunday afternoon, but will also give the first authorized American performances of four works by this most enigmatic and, from all accounts, extraordinary composer.

The birth date given for Sorabji in the 1955 edition of Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians is Aug. 14, 1892, but don't count on it. Years ago, the composer stated that he "deprecates morbid curiosity on the subject of age," and added that he had been systematically giving out false information to musicologists seeking biographical data. Grove also lists Sorabji as an Indian, but he was born near London, where he still lives. He does take pride in the fact that his father was a Bombay Parsee, a member of the Zoroastrian sect that fled Persia for India in the seventh and eighth centuries, and his mother was a Spanish-Sicilian singer.

Sorabji's music, and his astonishing virtuoso performances of it, fascinated many important artists in the 1920's and 30's, including John Ireland, Egon Petri, Roger Quilter and Osbert Sitwell, who joined some two dozen of their colleagues in a vain attempt to convince Sorabji to make commercial recordings of his pieces.

Few other pianists could or would attempt the task. Some of Sorabji's pieces run well over 200 pages; some have five, six, even seven parts running together simultaneously in as many rhythms; some have notes sprawled over three, four or five staves; some last two hours and more.

"Even transcendental virtuosos have been known to blanch at the sight of his scores," wrote the British critic



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Clinton Gray-Fisk, and it is generally believed that botched performances by less than transcendental virtuosos caused Sorabji to hand down his categorical ban against further public playings.

What caused him, at the age of 85, to change his mind? Back we go to Mr. Habermann, a young pianist who was living in Mexico when he first saw the score for Sorabji's "Fantaisie Es-pagnole" in an English bookstore.

"It was impossibly difficult," he recalled, "but I became more and more intrigued by it. It's so complex that I would spend many hours on just a couple of measures, and it took ages to memorize, which you have to do because you can't possibly read the notes and try to interpret them at the same time. Nonetheless, it is an amazingly original piece, and soon I began hunting down other ones. Later, I began a correspondence with Sorabji, and eventually I sent him a tape. You can imagine how thrilled I was to get his permission for the performances here."