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Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji

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"Who?" is the usual response when the name Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji is mentioned. I have evoked further surprise by stating that he has yet to be recognized as one of the most creative and prolific piano composers of the 20th century. Recently described as the modern counterpart of those eccentrics Gesualdo, Alkan and Ives, he is a truly unique composer. Sorabji's music has the unity, variety and beauty that is inherent to all great music. The emotional content ranges from stretches of great power to moments of gentle sensuality. It is melodic, structurally cohesive, harmonically purposeful and full of rhythmic vitality and flexibility. Difficult to categorize, nonetheless, his music has a sound and style all of its own. An accurate assessment of his contribution to the piano literature and of his importance as a composer will only be possible when Sorabji's music gets played and recorded more frequently.

If Sorabji is known at all today it is because he has the dubious distinction of being one of the few composers who banned the public performance of his

Born in Paris, pianist Michael Habermann has lived in Canada, Mexico, and the United States. His principal piano studies have been with Carlos Vazquez, Hilde Somer, and Fernando Lares. He holds a Master's Degree in composition from Long Island University and is currently completing his doctoral studies at The Peabody Institute.

Mr. Habermann's musical interests cover a wide variety of repertory, including the works of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji. He is the first pianist to receive Sorabji's permission to perform and record his music. The pianist has presented all-Sorabji programs in this country and abroad in which he included important premieres. He has also been heard in nationwide broadcasts on National Public Radio.

A reissue of several Sorabji piano works edited by Mr. Habermann will appear shortly, published by Music Treasure Publications. A third album of music for piano by Sorabji is forthcoming.

entire output for many years and because his *Opus Clavicembalisticum* won a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for being the longest non-repetitive piano solo in existence.

Sorabji is listed in all the major music dictionaries, but biographical data is scarce. Being reclusive by nature, he has managed to keep the door to his private life shut. He was born near London in 1892 and except for a few trips abroad, has spent most of his life in England. Sorabji's mother was an opera singer of Spanish-Sicilian background. She exerted considerable musical influence upon her son. From earliest infancy he began attending concerts with her. She instilled in him a love of the opera, singers and the art-song, to which later a large portion of his critical writings would be devoted. His father, a wealthy Parsee priest, left his son a substantial inheritance when he died in 1932 so that Sorabji was free to concentrate on composition.

Sorabji was also active as a music critic from 1915-49. He wrote hundreds of articles for various periodicals including: *The New Age*, *The New English Weekly* and *The Musical Times*. From these writings he compiled two books: *Around Music* (1932) and *Mi contra Fa: The Immoralizings of a Machiavellian Musician* (1947). Described as "an opinionated and violent but acute and sensitive critic" (*Thompson's International Encyclopedia*), he often took extreme positions, praising or condemning. He frequently contradicted himself, sometimes completely changing his opinions. His greatest shortcomings as I see it, were his rebellion against "common sense" and his complete self-centeredness. He championed the music of Busoni, Alkan, Medtner, Delius, Mahler and Szymanowski while intensely disliking the music of Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Hindemith and the avant-garde.

While Sorabji was busy making known his opinions just about everything, from abortion to Zen, all the while composing at a furious tempo, he did his own cause a disservice by not recording commercially, not seeking performances by others, and actually preferring that his music not be heard at all. Few of his compositions were published (all are now out of print). Primarily interested in the creative process, he spent little time practicing his music. Still, during the period from 1920-1936 he gave the first performances of several of his compositions. According to some accounts he was a marvelous pianist. But critics complained that there was little connection between what the composer was playing and what was written in the score. A series of private recordings of Sorabji's playing, made in 1962, substantiates this criticism.

In 1936, after what Sorabji considered a particularly poor rendition of a section from one of his larger works, the composer decided that no future performances of

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his music by others would take place without his consent. He wrote: "Why do I neither seek nor encourage performance of my works? It is because they are neither intended nor suitable for it under present, or indeed any foreseeable condition, and no performance is vastly preferable to an obscene travesty." Not until 1976 did he change his mind.

In the past decade there has been growing interest in Sorabji. There have been a number of interesting articles, radio programs, recordings and concert performances of his work, both instrumental and vocal. The unpublished works and over 500 articles that Sorabji wrote for British journals have become available on microfilm. *Around Music*, his first book, was recently reissued and some of his early correspondence has been collected and indexed. A symposium on Sorabji is soon to be published.

I first became acquainted with Sorabji's music in 1967 as I browsed through the music section of a bookstore in Mexico City. Every page in a yellowing copy of *Fantaisie Espagnole* looked unplayable. After some hesitation I purchased it for the grand sum of one dollar. Soon I ordered all the music in print. The scores were very difficult to sightread, and difficult to imagine what they would sound like at the correct tempo. Yet, for all the problems I had learning them and trying to understand the (seemingly) nonsensical and unreasonable things he did musically, I was, in the long run, richly rewarded by the experience. As I became attuned to Sorabji's musical language, I was overwhelmed by its depth, substance and absolute beauty. Later I wrote to Sorabji, and eventually sent him tapes. To my delight he gave me permission to perform and record his music.

Compositional Techniques

Liszt, Busoni, Godowsky and the Impressionists are the sources of Sorabji's piano writing, though his use of the instrument is even *more* elaborate and daring. His piano music is notated on three or more staves in order to facilitate reading, the upper staff to be played an octave higher than written.

Sorabji often used an existing piece as a point of departure for his own flight of fantasy. For instance, Busoni's *Sonatina*, No. 6, based on themes from Bizet's *Carmen*, his edition of Bach's *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* and Busoni's *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* respectively, were sources of inspiration for Sorabji's *Pastiche: Habanera* from Bizet's *Carmen*, his *Concert Transcription of Bach's Chromatic Fantasia and [a] Fugue* and the gigantic *Opus Clavicembalisticum*. More often than not, however, Sorabji's compositions are unique entities. He has stated that his goal was to create music inherently cohesive without recourse to traditional motivic or formal compositional procedures.

He achieves this objective by basing his pieces on "musical gestures" (as opposed to strictly defined themes), which through constant variation and juxtaposition permeate the whole. The form of a piece is a direct outgrowth of the organic development of the basic shapes the composer has chosen to work with.

Sorabji's musical approach varies in accordance with the type of piece he writes with the fugues being, as one would expect, the most cerebral of his conceptions. Consistency of texture, rhythmic drive, counterpoint and the building of climaxes are uppermost in importance. The variation sets are unique in the great diversity of patterns, rhythms, textures and harmonies. The three early *Sonatas* are actually free inventions in which unbridled creative delirium in all musical dimensions almost threaten the unity and coherence. On the lighter side are several compositions that pay tribute to other composers—*Valse-Fantaisie*, homage a Johann Strauss, and *Passeggiata Veneziana* (after Offenbach), and to other countries—*Fantaisie Espagnole* and *Fantasia Ispanica*. Some poke fun at famous tunes—the set of *Pastiches*. In others Spanish and Italian dance rhythms predominate. These are basically tonal pieces overlaid with "waves" of decorative material. Also, he has written several virtuoso transcriptions of works by Bach, Strauss and Ravel. Among his most beautiful works are the nocturnes, extended, meditative, impressionistic pieces—*In the Hothouse*, *Le Jardin Parfumé*, *Nocturne: [Jāmi]*, *Gulistan*. The harmonies are luscious, textures varied and phrases asymmetrical. But above all, the melodic content is truly inspired. Surrounding these sinuous, chant-like melodies are imaginative decorative figurations, pedal points and haunting repetitive patterns that create hypnotic moods.

Sorabji's largest published work (252 pp.) is *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, which was written in 1929-30. In 12 sections, it contains 4 fugues, 2 huge variation sets and a host of other musical forms.

For all the seeming emphasis on technical complexity and fascination with excessiveness, the main impression one gets from *listening* to Sorabji's compositions is that the technical aspects are always subservient to the musical idea.

Michael Habermann has recorded two albums of the music of Sorabji on MusicMasters . . . 20015 and 20019. On side 2 of *The Piano Quarterly's* record he plays *Introito* from *Opus Clavicembalisticum* and an excerpt from *Le Jardin Parfumé*.
