

## BOOK



Kaikhosru Sorabji  
aged about forty-  
five. Photo courtesy  
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Archive.

**SORABJI: A CRITICAL CELEBRATION**  
Edited by Paul Rapoport  
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A volume on the lines of *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* was almost inevitable, and its length, an unsurprising 512 pages, is more than just symbolically apt. Yet it remains premature, its proportions misleading. Marc-André Roberge's *Register of Performances* shows that since this music began its definitive emergence in the 1970s with performances by Michael Habermann and Yontq Solomon a few of Sorabji's pieces have been heard quite often. But although two major scores, *Opus Clavicembalisticum* and *Organ Symphony No 1*, were included, only a few pieces have become accessible, and he had a composing life of well over 60 years.

His extreme productivity is not in itself remarkable: consider Vivaldi's several hundred concertos or Alessandro Scarlatti's centuries of cantatas. Yet, while it needs drawing to the attention of pianists and singers that Sorabji did produce short pieces, most of his time was given to the notation of works of scarcely precedented scope. As an almost random example take his 1001-page *Messa Alta Sinfonica* for Eight Vocal Soloists, Two Choirs and Orchestra. For this he recommended that each choir consist of 500 singers — 100 to each part — and that the orchestra have 180 to 200 players with 32-32-24-24-24 strings. Apparently he thought of adding 144 Variations to the *Gloria*, but, with admirable restraint, did not do so.

The weight, density and duration of such pieces, however, form only one aspect of the problem. A few works reached publication early in Sorabji's career, but they are all out of print and had more than a sprinkling of misprints. Most of his flood-tide of music remains in manuscript that draws close to illegibility. Beyond that, what he wrote needs interpretation. As Rapoport explains: in the case of passages with exactly notated complex polyrhythms or in a large number of independent voices "the performer must treat the overall character, mood and sense of a passage as primary and treat more freely some details of notation, otherwise the intent of the music... cannot be conveyed." Equally, some of his orchestral writing "is too dense for too long stretches" and would need much editing if it is ever to be playable.

Sorabji was indifferent to the realities of performance or the problems that executants would have, and wrote — as he apparently spoke — with extreme rapidity. One does wonder if his composing, his actual writing down of the music, was a form of yoga. This is seemingly implied by Kenneth Derus on pages 249-50, yet in phrases so unclear as to suggest deliberate mystification. Whatever Sorabji's motivation, the recopying of a score is an unavoidable preliminary to any thought of performance, and not only because of the handwriting. While preparing *Organ Symphony No 1*, among the few Sorabji works to be printed, Kevin Bowyer, "unearthed well over a thousand errors in the published score." Such undertakings of copying and editing would never be practicable for a publishing house and only a few scholars and intending players can ever be expected to invest the huge quantities of time and effort needed. All this, of course, is additional to the problems of actual performance. Shall we, or our descendants, ever have world enough and time for this Alkan-like recluse?

Obviously the difficulties of writing analytically about Sorabji's compositions almost parallel those of playing them, and, as decades must pass before they are surmounted, this book is premature. It is misproportioned, as also noted above, because if we are concerned with Sorabji at all it is for the sake of his music and to fill so very much space with commentaries on his criticism, letters etc, as this book does, is to put the cart miles before the horse.

Luckily there is some material here which takes a far more profitable direction, above all Habermann's chapter on the piano works. He treats of *Fugues*, *Variation Form*, sections in motonic genre, free *Fantasies*, *Paraphrases* etc before passing on to a special consideration of the *Nocturnes* and a valuable analysis of *Le Jardin Parfumé*. A lot of Sorabji's works "refuse

to yield any definable reasons for their undeniable inner cohesion" yet suitable methods of analysis may emerge in due course, as happened with Scriabin's later music. It might eventually be possible to deal, for example, with what Habermann calls "one of the most perplexing problems facing the analyst of Sorabji's music... the unusual co-existence of both atonal and tonal elements on any one page, with no domination by either." Meanwhile Habermann quotes American reviews — of his own recitals — which put forward several combinations of composers in attempts to suggest the externals of Sorabji's style, but these are mistaken because any outside influences, as I have suggested elsewhere, were swept aside by the explosive development of his creativity in the 1920s. This resulted in music beyond whose spacious proportions and luxuriant textures could occasionally be sensed, despite the virtuosity and the dissonance, a profound inner tranquility.

Many points of musical interest arise from Geoffrey Douglas Madge's conversation with Rapoport about playing *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, and Rapoport's *Detailed Catalogue* marks a decisive advance in the documenting of Sorabji's output. If these three are the parts of the book to which I shall return most often I must place at the other extreme Derus' *To Remember Sorabji's Music*, each page of which has more footnotes than text. From this I, at least, can prise no sense whatever. There is also a *Bibliography*, overloaded with marginal items like *The Well of Loneliness* and Spengler's *Decline of the West*.

With all great piano composers there has been a close relation between their manner of playing and the way they wrote for the instrument. When considering Sorabji's music we are never far from rumours of his supposedly phenomenal powers as an executant. It was assumed that he at least was master of the teeming notes which blacken most pages of his scores, even if they were beyond anyone else. But certain contributors to this *Critical Celebration* have heard some of the tapes Sorabji made, and as a consequence his long-standing pianistic reputation is considerably diminished herein. He might "cover the ground," in his own phrase, but we are told that the results are "runthroughs which only approximate the scores" even that "there is often little resemblance between what is notated and what is played." Sorabji himself acknowledged this, saying in a 1972 letter to a friend "the music as printed embodies my intentions" — except, of course, that only a tiny fraction of it is printed. There are even doubts over his famous 1930 Glasgow performance of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*. Half a century later Madge took four hours, John Ogdon four and three-quarters, and it is hard to believe that much of Sorabji's, done in two and a half, was other than a meaningless blur.

Though he made a few public appearances — the last in 1936 — Sorabji repeatedly said that he advanced no claims as a pianist, and his renown for hyper-virtuosity was presumably argued from the ferocious look of his music on the page. He apparently never practiced after 1939, preferring to give the time to composing — and to writing, for he produced a vast quantity of music journalism and maintained a voluminous correspondence. Was there a significant relationship between the huge outpourings of notes and of words, as claimed by Nazlin Bhimani in a survey of his criticism?

Leave must be taken to doubt it in any positive sense, and Sorabji's writings on music are simply another demonstration of the fact that composers are about as good at criticism as critics are at composition. Like nearly all composers' criticism he tells us more about him than about the subjects allegedly under discussion. He appears to have had time only for music that resembled his own: the luxuriant keyboard textures of Godowsky, for example, and the glowing orchestral colours of middle-period Szymanowski; others with whom he felt a personal affinity included Busoni, Medtner, Delius, Rachmaninov, Debussy and Ravel. Yet he could speak of Mozart's "monomaniacally repetitious chamber clatter" and indeed completely failed to get on the same wavelength as major figures of the past such as Haydn, Schubert, most of Beethoven, as well as Mozart, or with major figures of his own time like Bartók, Stravinsky, Hindemith and most of Schoenberg.

One's objection to Sorabji's violent dismissals of the masters has nothing to do with any departures from convention, although one is persuaded that he espoused such views so loudly and insistently precisely because they did oppose accepted judgements. The point rather is that anyone who writes of "the click-clack symmetries of Brahms" never learnt how to listen to Brahms. This incompetence takes many forms, and the passage quoted by Nazlin Bhimani on van Dieren's *Chinese Symphony* tells us nothing specific about that work at all but consists merely of a frenzied assault on other composers, named and unnamed. A paragraph in praise of Egon Petri's Bach playing is similarly uninformative, amounting to no more than an outburst of unfocused enthusiasm. Equally, and despite his self-conscious rejection of received opinions, many of his views are highly orthodox. His comments on John Cage, for instance, are exactly what might be expected from any blimpish old Colonel.

There is a large element of subjectivity in all criticism in the arts, and rightly, but Sorabji's was out of control and, as with all really bad amateur writing on music, everything polarises around extremes of praise and blame. It is characteristic, too, that while making countless vitriolic attacks on others "his hypersensitivity was hypertuned," we are told, regarding any comments on himself. A few of his self-contradictions are amusing, as when he assures one correspondent that "the really great ones are modest and reticent about their work and in their demeanour" and in another letter boasts that he has "the pride of Satan." But, despite noticeably frequent assertions by this book's contributors about Sorabji's warmth and humanity, his company would surely have become tiresome very soon. Much of his "spontaneous and graceful" wit was evidently on the level of a first-form schoolboy, with

Arthur Bliss renamed "Arthur Piss", Peter Racine Fricker as "Rancid Frickasee" etc' etc.

None of which matters. Overmuch of this *Critical Celebration* is devoted to Sorabji's public and private writings and hence what they reveal had to be dealt with here. But the history of the arts is scarcely a tale of cosy and agreeable people. Echoing Flaubert's dictum that an artist should contrive matters so posterity comes to believe he never existed, Rapoport says "the sooner Sorabji is forgotten the better." Maybe it was easier for unrecognized geniuses like Stendahl, Kleist, Italo Svevo — or Sorabji — to fulfill their tasks because nobody cared except a few close friends. "Failure" and obscurity can be a sort of luck provided they do not kill you before your time. Nobody can say what Sorabji's expectations, if any, were for his music once death at last wrested control of it from him. But we must regret, in Habermann's words, that he "denied himself the opportunity of receiving response from others which ultimately is a vital and nourishing experience for a composer."

Instead he hid his music behind nearly intractable notation and almost impossible demands on performers. Rapoport acknowledges the "irrationality and immaturity" of aspects of Sorabji's behaviour, and we are perhaps faced here by what George Orwell called "that queer byproduct of capitalist democracy, an inferiority complex resulting from a private income." It is impossible to guess how Sorabji's composing might have developed if he had cultivated a sense of the practical realities of performance and so had been able to listen to his pieces in good interpretations by others. Yet it may be significant that — in an almost unheard-of procedure for him — he revised twice his *Fragment for Harold Rutland*, one of the very few items he did hear played by someone else.

MH  
(Max Harrison)