



JIM AIKIN RECORDS

62 CONTEMPORARY KEYBOARD/MAY 1981

Of Special Interest:

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji

LIKE LEO ORNSTEIN and Conlon Nancarrow, Sorabji is one of the great enigmatic, eccentric figures of twentieth-century classical music. Born in 1892, he was beginning to gain a reputation as a composer in the 1930s, but was also becoming dissatisfied with the treatment his music received at the hands of pianists who weren't ready for its demands. As a result, in 1940 he decreed that henceforth his works were not to be performed by anybody, stating that his music "... is neither intended nor suitable for [the world] under present, or, indeed, any foreseeable conditions." He continued to be active in England as a music critic, and continued also to compose works of enormous complexity and commensurate length.

Sorabji relented in 1975 to the extent of allowing Michael Habermann to perform his piano works, and the present disc, containing Habermann's performances of half a dozen of Sorabji's early pieces, is actually the first recording of the composer's music. From the first notes, one is aware that one is in the presence of an extraordinary musical personality — and aware as well why performers might have trouble realizing Sorabji's intentions. The overwhelming impression is of *turbulence*. Bitonal chords run up the keyboard in sixteenth-notes in one hand while the other hand bounces from thunderous bass notes to the mid-register theme, which again may be stated in full chords.

This sound mass, furthermore, is thickly pedalled so that the sonority builds up to awesome proportions. In his quieter moments, such as "In The Hothouse," Sorabji sounds somewhat like Scriabin, or even like Debussy played with Schoenbergian dissonances. But when things get going, he sounds more like two or three pianists playing Messiaen at the same time.

The recording begins with the "Introito" and "Preludio-Corale" from Sorabji's massive piano masterpiece, *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, a work from 1930 whose twelve movements include a theme with 49 variations and a three-part interlude containing a toccata, an adagio, and a passacaglia with 81 variations. The 252-page score takes three hours to play. Also on the album is a pastiche of the well-known "Habenera" from Bizet's *Carmen*; the melody is quite recognizable throughout, but the harmonic alterations and transcendental passagework transport the tune from Spain to the jungles of Brazil, or maybe one of the planets circling Arcturus.

In spite of Sorabji's misgivings about the reception accorded contemporary music, we hope he lets more of his extravagant and mystifying music be recorded. Granted, it isn't for the many, but the few are definitely ready. Musical Heritage Society (14 Park Rd., Tinton Falls, NJ 07724), MHS 4271.