

EXPLORING MUSIC

Compelling Music, Brilliantly Realized

When MHS, three years ago, issued Michael Habermann's first record of piano music by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, its reception was surprising. People from all over responded like members of a lost Sahara caravan to the discovery of a fountain of icy-cold Perrier water. There was a multitude of letters and telegrams and phone calls inquiring hopefully [correct usage] if this was the beginning of an MHS Sorabji series. Given the obscurity of the composer, no one had, of course, thought in any such optimistic terms, and replies were cautiously negative. But now here is what one may think of as vol. II. To Sorabji fans I say, "Make what you will of it."

My puzzlement at the response just described has nothing to do with the quality of the music (fascinating!) or the performance (the man must have six hands!); it has to do with how so many people knew about the composer at all. He has, of course, entries in the scholarly musico-biographical dictionaries, but even those who can afford them don't usually resort to them for casual reading.

He does not appear in such popular dictionaries as the Hughes-Taylor *Music Lovers' Encyclopedia* or *The Britannica Book of Music*. There is no mention of him in such a general music history as Paul Henry Lang's *Music in Western Civilization* or in the more narrowly focused Praeger *Music in the Modern Age* and Joseph Machlis's *Introduction to Contemporary Music*. He is wholly overlooked in the Penguin *British Music in Our Time*.

Five articles appeared on him between 1928 and 1932; after that there was silence for 35 years until the maverick Scots poet Hugh MacDiarmid gave him a chapter in a book of reminiscences, *The Company Five Kept*. Since then one B. Posner has completed a dissertation on Sorabji at Fordham, and P. Rapoport has published (in *Tempo*) a piece on Sorabji and the computer. (Everybody wants a *git inna da act!*)

As I said in my earlier piece, I became dimly aware of Sorabji when, as a retail music salesman 35 years ago, I encountered a few odd-looking published pieces by him. I think I also tried to read some of his musical articles (there are two collections, *Around Music* and *My contra fa!*) but they were over my head then (Becks were on the balcony.)

As a critic, he is reputed to be brilliant; con-

troversial, waspish, and highly opinionated. He typically dedicated his keyboard *Opus Clauicembalisticum* (listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the longest single musical work ever written) to "the everlasting glory of those few men blessed and sanctified in the curses and expletions of those many whose praise is eternal damnation." He numbered himself among them, abandoning his concert career as pearls before swine in his thirties and laying down an interdict against all performance of his music in 1940 — lifted only recently for Michael Habermann and a South African pianist named Yonli Solomon, though he allowed a few private recordings of his own to be aired in the early 1970s. (He will reach his 91st birthday two weeks from the time I write this.)

In one of the few mentions of him in recent books, Peter J. Pite (*The English Musical Renaissance*), likening him to Bernard van Dieren, says: "So eccentric and flamboyant are these two personalities, and so aggressive their approach to all things musical, that they have been consigned to a sort of limbo, with their music as good as dead and only the ghosts of their polemics squeaking and gibbering at posterity. This is a pity, since they both wrote much interesting music."

On the skimpy evidence at hand, one replies "indeed so!" One need listen only to the brief Chopin and Rimsky "pastiche" to get a notion of the man's extraordinary musical mind: wisps of familiar themes appear and disappear like the glints of a gold thread woven into some incredibly rich fabric. (Godowsky's famous transmutations of Chopin aren't a patch on Sorabji's.)

The two longer pieces reflect the composer's "Orientalism." (His father came from India; English vital statistics show the child to have been christened "Leon Dudley.") This is, however, not the shiny exoticism fashionable a century ago in France and Russia. The title piece, for example (named after the erotic classic by Sheikh Nefzawi, ca. 1400), constantly unfolds (plianissimo) in delicate tendrils and arabesques. In the *Nocturne*, as annotator David Garvelmann points out, there are sometimes five different things going on in as many registers of the piano. This is compelling music, brilliantly realized.

David M. Greene

ALSO AVAILABLE

MHS 4271L PIANO MUSIC BY KAIKHOSRU SHAPURJI SORABJI. In the *Hobson, Jobson* and *Pauline Corne* from *Opus Clauicembalisticum* (1929-1930). *Fantasia Espagnole*, *Toccata*, *Pastiche "Habenera"* from *Hubert* (Comment, Fragment Habermann, Piano)

NEW RELEASE

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KAIKHOSRU SHAPURJI SORABJI

Nocturne: (Djâmî): Pastiche: Rimsky-Korsakoff — Hindu Merchant's Song (Sadko): *Le Jardin Parfumé*. Poem for Piano; Pastiche: Chopin's Valse, Op. 64, No. 1.



KAIKHOSRU SHAPURJI SORABJI

Michael Habermann, Piano

The Society's first recording of music by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (MHS 4271L, MHC 6271MI) made quite a splash among music lovers, critics, and reviewers everywhere. Of this new world-premiere recording, *Le Jardin parfumé* (*The Perfumed Garden*) Paul Rapoport of *Fanfare* said, "I called the playing on the first record 'stupendous unto the uncanny.' These performances go beyond that.... This record is a spectacular achievement!" The title piece comes from a famous exotic book written between 1394 and 1433 by the Sheikh Nefzawi. Its subtle, shifting shades produce a trance-like, dreamy, exotic feeling. Critic Hugh Reed called *Le jardin parfumé* "the expression of a rare and significant poetic image."

Sorabji's piano-solo transcriptions display great ingenuity and imagination. The "pastiche" on Chopin's Waltz is the ultimate in keyboard transformations of this piece.

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