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The unplayable music and the man who plays it

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In the south of England, there resides a little-known composer who writes piano music of such complexity that few pianists attempt to play it.

Moreover, Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji once forbade any public performances of his works, fearing any performance would not meet his standards and would compromise the integrity of his vision.

But in 1976, Michael Habermann, now a doctoral candidate at the Peabody Institute, sent a tape recording of his rendition of a Sorabji piece to the composer, whose reaction was ecstatic. He authorized Habermann to be the first to perform and record his music.

Now, Habermann has recorded two albums and is working on a third, under the Master Works label of the Music Heritage Society.

The music is difficult to describe. It is layer upon layer of melody, interwoven into complex patterns like those of a fine Oriental rug. It is correspondingly complex in coloration and defies categorization by national, period or stylistic influences. It is both tonal and atonal without being dominated by either.

It requires intense concentration on the part of the listener, but with repeated hearings its elements begin to fall into place, although there remains a degree of frus-

tration. Melodies appear for brief periods, then are replaced by others that may or may not show up again. In the meantime, there are constant accretions of harmony.

Always of an otherworldly, mystic nature, Sorabji's music shows strong influences of Franz Liszt—"in the difficulty of the music," says Habermann—Ravel, Debussy and Busoni. It is strongly impressionistic, but melodic.

A look at a typical Sorabji manuscript (most of his music is available only in that form) is cause for wonderment. It is three and sometimes four staves deep, decked with bewildering figurations requiring cross-overs of the hands that would make performance a task for two pianists, let alone one.

Habermann, 33, concedes it is next to impossible to perform directly from the score. Instead, he must slowly learn the music piecemeal, studying and memorizing its patterns before performing it as a whole.

The process can take a year or more, and the magnitude of the task is further amplified by the fact that one of the works runs to a length of 3½ hours, probably setting a world record.

"It takes a lot of patience," says Habermann. "You name the technical problem and it is there. The combinations of rhythms, for instance, are very treacherous."

"Sometimes the notes are between the lines and the spaces," he jokes. "Sorabji specifies quite clearly in his music what he wants, but he's much more interested in the composing than in the performance of it."

Sorabji was born Leon Dudley in Chingford, England, Aug. 14, 1892, the son of a Spanish-Sicilian mother and a Parsi (an eastern religion) father, and has been a life-long resident of England. Aside from some early instruction in

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Michael Habermann works on Sorabji's astonishingly complex piano score.

See MUSIC, B3, Col. 5

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B 3

MUSIC, From B1
counterpoint and harmony, he was for the most part self-taught. A talented pianist, he played some concerts in London and on the continent, but developed an early distaste for performing and quit.

He became a music critic and wrote for such British publications as the *Musical Times*, *New Age* and *New English Weekly*, and his writing has been described as biting but witty.

Living quietly in his rural English home, Sorabji has continued to compose his all-but-unplayable piano music. Despite a growing interest in the music among musicologists, he has been indifferent to public opinion.

Yet despite his long ban on public performances, Sorabji was long recognized as a figure of some importance. Major musical reference books, including the "New Grove Dictionary of Music" and the "Oxford Companion to Music," contain entries on the man and his music. He received early praise from Delius, van Dieren, Szymanowski, Tovey and Busoni.

Habermann discovered Sorabji's music in 1968, while living in Mexico City, where his father was a businessman. Browsing through an English music store, he encountered one of Sorabji's earlier works, the "Fantaisie espagnole." Although he did not

purchase it, the music caught his fancy and he later returned and bought it for \$1, as a possible collectors' item.

At home, he tried to play it and soon a mild interest grew into an enthusiasm that led him to purchase and study all of the composer's available works and begin a correspondence with Sorabji.

Habermann was born in Paris of a French mother and American father. After returning to the United States, the family then moved to Canada when Michael was 7 and to Mexico when he was 12. His piano lessons started at the age of 14, reinforced by years of listening to his father's Artur Schnabel records.

Within a year, he decided that he wanted a career as a pianist. He was 18 when he discovered Sorabji. Habermann received much of his musical education in Mexico, where he studied with Carlos Vasquez (pupil of Egon Petri and disciple of Manuel M. Ponce).

His other teachers include Hilde Somer and Fernando Laires, the latter at the Peabody Conservatory of Music. He obtained his master's degree in music at Long Island University.

The subject of his doctoral thesis at the Peabody, as could be expected, will be Sorabji.