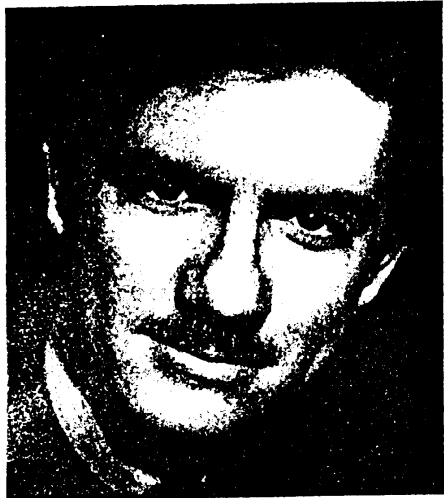


# Strange Music

## The World of Kaikhosru Sorabji

BY MICHAEL HABERMANN



man to explain his fascination with Sorabji, and to discuss his recording project.

Pianist Michael Haberman's recording of the piano music of Kaikhosru Sorabji has recently been released by Elan Recordings. Since Sorabji's music is notorious for its almost impossible virtuosic demands, very few pianists have attempted to tackle it; in addition, for a good many years the composer forbade the performance of his works, until he granted special permission to Michael Haberman. We asked Mr. Haberman

**K**aikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892-1988), the English-Parsee composer, will probably always be remembered for his pursuit of extremes: dazzling difficulties of execution, and works of mammoth dimensions. Equally associated with the composer is the ban he imposed upon the public execution of his works. These are but the external characteristics.

The imaginative coexistence and fascinating interaction of a deluge of rhythms, melodies, harmonies, and textures is simply awe-inspiring. The mood he creates in his music is unique. The Nocturnes explore mystical trance states. His transcriptions bring undeniable grandeur and dignity to their themes. The energetic pieces transfix in their sheer obstinacy and determination, culminating in massive climaxes that engulf the entire arsenal of the piano (and pianist).

Sorabji's piano output is large. A complete list appears in *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, edited by Paul Rapoport (Ashgate, 1992). Bypassing his insurmountably challenging Piano Symphonies, Toccatas, Variations, and the famous *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (1930), I find a number of "shorter" works of great interest. By shorter I mean a composition not exceeding a half hour in length, nor longer than 40 pages. I recorded a number of these for MusicMasters (Musical Heritage Society) some years ago. The fruit of many more years of concentrated work is now presented on Elan CD 82264, recently released. The following is a brief description of the music on the

compact disc.

"*Gulistan*" (*The Rose Garden*)—*Nocturne for Piano* (1940) is essentially post-impressionistic in style. It is a superb, luscious piece featuring slow successions of diatonic chords (generally in broken form) in the lower regions and shimmering chromatic figures in the upper registers. In the midrange we hear hypnotic chant-like melodies. The title *Gulistan* refers to the verse and prose, *The Rose Garden* (1258) by the Sufi Persian poet Saadi (1213-1291).

"*Quaeré reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora*" (Seek the rest of this matter among the things that are more secret) (1940), on the other hand, is a programmatic piece depicting sinister events and a horrific climax. It is based on a ghost story, *Count Magnus*, by M. R. James. Its numerous contrasts form quite an interpretive chal-

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*Music of dazzling difficulties and mammoth size.*

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lenge. One of its themes bears resemblance to the "Dies Irae," a powerful symbolic chant.

*Fantasiottina sul nome illustre dell'egregio poeta Christopher Grieve ossia Hugh M'Diarmid* (1961), is a tiny work which reveals two sides of Sorabji. In the first half we feel the "volcanic" character of the composer. The second part is visionary, and quite soothing as well. Hugh M'Diarmid was a poet and close friend of Sorabji.

*Nocturne, "Djami"* (1928), is a deeply solemn composition that pays homage to Persian poet Nuru'd-Din 'Abdu'r-Rahman Jami (1414-92). It is meant to be played in an intentionally restricted dynamic range throughout (ppp-mp). One critic, stirred to a state of elation by this work, wrote, "*Djami* moves my soul as few other works for piano ever have. It will surely be the state ceremonial music of Heaven once things settle down up there after the last judgment..." I performed *Nocturne: "Djami"* for Sorabji during my meeting with him in August, 1980.

My own *A la maniere de Sorabji: "Au clair de la lune"* was written in 1972 and sent to the composer as an enticement for him to compose in the smaller forms. This he did, but he clumped a hundred of these miniatures to form a work entitled *Frammenti aforistici (Sutras)*; again producing a lengthy composition! ■