

SORABJI: A CRITICAL CELEBRATION, ed. Paul Rapoport. Cambridge: Scolar Press, 1992. 512 pp., \$69.95. "History is not the past, but what we construe as the past." With this bold statement, Paul Rapoport of McMaster University lays the groundwork for both the evaluation of the enigmatic composer Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji and the reevaluation of the history of 20th-century music. A surprisingly large number of composers, far out of the mainstream, are currently undergoing reconsideration—Busoni, Godowsky, Havergal Brian, and Ronald Stevenson, to name but a few. It is possible that there will soon be a shift away from the Schoenberg/Stravinsky axis that has dominated historical thought. As editor, Rapoport has here collected a fine array of scholars, musicians, associates, and friends of Sorabji to shed light on and provide crucial information for a composer who did his best to retire from public view and who may prove to be one of the most vital and important of the neglected and obscure composers of the century.

Sorabji (1892–1988), a British resident of Spanish/Parsi descent, is the stuff of legend. Between the ban on performances that he placed upon his works and the prodigious length (some four hours long and others yet longer) and awesome technical difficulties of the works themselves, mention of Sorabji's name (itself a serious drawback because of pronunciation) could only cause confused, awed, or incredulous looks among one's listeners. To attempt to describe the music was to guarantee disbelief. Most importantly, Sorabji's avowed elitist approach compelled him to compose for only the few musicians possessing phenomenal skills and the rare audiences who might yet view performance as a sacred event to be approached with dedication, complete attention, and open, informed minds. Sorabji was not hopeful for such conditions:

Why do I neither seek nor encourage public performances of my works? Because they are neither intended nor suitable for it under present, or indeed any foreseeable conditions: no performance at all is vastly preferable to an obscene travesty.

The scarcity of information and music available until just recently has made it almost impossible to come to grips with Sorabji as a composer. This book succeeds in providing the necessary framework for the understanding. It is not a biography but a collection of essays, ranging from the philosophical to the scholarly to the plainly appreciative (though hero-worship is fortunately avoided). But the result is not the patchwork that might have been. A firm hand has organized the work with excellent results. Rapoport himself provides an essay

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cast in the form of a dialogue that concentrates on placing Sorabji in a historical and cultural context and attempts to prove that fame and value are not, contrary to the beliefs of our society, synonymous terms.

Alistair Hinton, director of the Sorabji Archive and responsible for Sorabji's musical and literary legacy, provides an essay in part biographical, in part appreciative, and overall vastly informative. Crucially, Hinton explains the lifting of the performance ban—in which he played the most important of roles. For this alone we are in debt to this Scottish composer. His work on behalf of the archive has been extraordinary and it is unlikely that this book would have existed without his devotion and knowledge. (Currently almost all scores—including published editions and manuscript copies—and much literature are available through The Sorabji Archive, Easton Dene, Bailbrook Lane, Bath, Avon BA1 7AA, England.)

Sorabji was also a prolific writer and critic. The essay by Nazlin Bhimani selects from Sorabji's contributions to such journals as *New Age*. His reviews could be vicious or glowing but were always exuberant and potent, based on very clear ideas of musicianship, craftsmanship, and inspiration. Composers who did not meet Sorabji's standards were dealt crushing blows. For example, Gustav Holst was a particular sore point:

Nothing short of the highest possible sources of inspiration do for Mr. Holst—an entire *Cosmos in the Planets*, Vedantic thought in the *Rig Veda Hymn*, and the Apocryphal *New Testament in the Hymn of Jesus*, indeed as they "do for" him in quite another sense by showing his lamentable inability to deal with them or catch a fleeting glimpse of the shadow of a reflection of their greatness.

But it is as a composer that Sorabji must be judged, for all the interest that the biographical and literary material possesses. Recordings are still too few and concentrate mainly on the early piano works, which may or may not represent Sorabji's gifts. Unfortunately, much of the later music remains in manuscript of inspired illegibility, presenting a pressing task: the preparation of scores and parts. In the book's one significant omission, the chief practitioner of this decipherment, the enormously gifted organist Kevin Bowyer, did not contribute an essay on editing Sorabji's manuscripts. Bowyer has undertaken the editing of the organ works and by now possesses more experience than all other editors combined. Furthermore, Sorabji's organ works are among his most important and are neglected in this book.

Yet, while these works are not directly discussed, significant to our understanding of Sorabji's style and method is the contribution of Michael Habermann in his analysis of the piano works, condensed from a doctoral dissertation. Habermann enters into Sorabji's musical labyrinth and leaves a clear trail that his successors are obliged to follow. His analysis is equally pertinent to the organ or symphonic works, though focused on the early *Le Jardin parfumé* for piano. At present, Sorabji must be understood from the perspective of his primary influences—Liszt's brilliant pianism, Busoni's philosophic and otherworldly aesthetic, Godowsky's complexity of texture and multiplicity of inner voices, Szymanowski's mystical utterances, and Scriabin's theosophic investigations of the upper harmonics. If this amalgam seems unusual, it is only because we cannot yet grasp Sorabji's original contribution to these disparate elements. When his later works have been performed, we will be able to judge the success of the synthesis.

In utter divergence of style, perfectly in keeping with Sorabji's intellectual ideals and yet helpful to our understanding of Sorabji's language, is Kenneth Derus's "Perigraph," which is in part philosophic, in part

poetic. The result is a density of language and thought which almost rivals that of Sorabji's music.

If judgment has seemed impossible, it is only because the number of performances, here thoroughly cataloged by Marc-André Roberge, has not yet reached that critical mass necessary to register on the musical profession or listening public. With the recordings, completed and planned, by a host of brilliant musicians such as Marc-André Hamelin, John Ogdon, Ronald Stevenson, Yonty Solomon, Donna Amato, Kevin Bowyer, and Geoffrey Douglas Madge, the situation is indeed changing. Critical mass may soon be reached.

This book, of impeccable scholarship and eminent readability, is a giant step towards the evaluation of Sorabji. Whether he is dis-

covered to be a major figure in music and of equal significance to the accepted masters will depend on the effect of his music on audiences and composers. By choice Sorabji charted a solitary course; only time will reveal if any may follow him.

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