

SORABJI: *Prelude, Interlude, and Fugue. Valse-Fantaisie: Hommage à Johann Strauss. St. Bertrand de Comminges: "He was laughing in the tower."* Michael Habermann, piano. MUSICAL HERITAGE SOCIETY MHS 7530.

As this is written, the composer Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji has just turned 95. He has written an alarming quantity of works of such length, intricacy, and difficulty that it is unlikely anyone will ever come to terms with his output as a whole. *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (as its title suggests, a Work for the Keyboard, i.e., piano) lasts between about four and four-and-one-half hours. Some of the larger piano works must go for six hours at least. His *Symphonic High Mass*, which I would cherish the opportunity to hear even a part of, is written in a score of about a thousand pages. Very few people have even set eyes upon it.

In the current situation, where "art" often means junky handicrafts at a mediocre fair, kids being forced to bash instruments for which they have no talent, or something substantial costing money better spent on annihilating the planet, what chance is there for Sorabji? His creative period lasted 70 years, he is unquestionably a major intellectual force of this century, and practically no one has ever heard of him. Welcome to the end of the 20th century—a century whose grotesque instability, horror, and nonsense has nonetheless not stopped Sorabji from producing major creations of extraordinary originality and importance throughout most of it. His reputation is that of an oddball or crank, but listen to his music and you will begin to understand both how that reputation may have come about and how misleading it is.

Space does not allow a detailed consideration of his music; I suggest you check *Baker's* or *Crove's* dictionaries for further items to read. Back issues of *Fanfare* contain reviews of the only other records of his music: *Opus Clavicembalisticum* played live by Geoffrey Douglas Mudge (in circumstances which would completely throw off a lesser talent), and two fine records by Michael Habermann (Musicmasters MM 20015 and MM 20019).

Habermann is the only one to continue to record Sorabji and thus make available more and more of his piano music. At the very least this should dispel the notion that Sorabji composed only gigantic works, because Habermann has recorded nothing longer than 22 minutes. But surely he is not the only one who can record this music? And the evidence on his records is that there is music by Sorabji of lesser dimensions but of great attractiveness, color, humor, strength, and depth that cries out to be better known.

The *Prelude-Interlude-Fugue* (1920–22), like all of Sorabji's pieces, is no easy listening, or playing either. The Prelude is a granitic torrent (!) of 16th-notes. The Interlude is a precursor to those beautiful nocturne-rhapsodies like *Le jardin parfumé*, *Jami*, and *Gulistan*, where any attempt to find western musical structures will utterly fail. The Fugue, ostensibly one such structure, is so dense that (one might say) you can't see the trees for the forest: it is virtually impossible to hear this as a fugue. Not Sorabji's best music by any means, but fascinating in every way, especially in light of his other works.

The *Waltz-Fantasy* (1925) is one of those simultaneously loving and deprecating pastiches of which Sorabji wrote several, and of which Habermann has already recorded four sensational examples. This one resembles the lively *Fantaisie espagnole* some, but is both more restricted in style and more elaborate in scope.

If his performance of this work doesn't zing as much as it might, there is no denying Habermann's extraordinary technique and brilliant solutions to some daunting performance problems. His playing of *Prelude-Interlude-Fugue* I would question in some details of tempo and balance, but again there are a mind and body at work in performing this music which are truly remarkable.

The wonderful surprise on this record is the third work, written in 1941. Habermann's notes don't tell you that the title comes from a ghost story by M. R. James called "Canon Albéric's Scrap-Book." Early in the piece one can definitely hear the "thin metallic voice laughing high up in the tower," but more references than that are not important here—the music seems to have little to do with the story in any literal sense. While this piece is not typical of Sorabji, it is a fine one indeed, with some stunning clarity, some simple diatonic harmony even, which increases rather than reduces the sinister aspect! Those who think they know Sorabji from the other records are advised to get this one just for the shock of this piece; likewise for those who may not care for his pastiches, nocturnes, or more "learned" pieces, because this one is none of those. The performance is very convincing.

Although this record was sent to me as Musical Heritage Society MHS 7530, that and the chrome cassette MHC 9530 are items which can be ordered only by mail from the Society. The versions in retail stores are MM 20118 (record), MM 40118 (cassette), and MM 60118 (CD). Total timing is approximately 50 minutes. The LP is well pressed, and the audience for this live recording from 1984 is appropriately enthralled (and silent). Expectedly, the end grooves, while not distorting, cannot handle the dynamics required. The piano used also sounds a bit thin on the top.

In his later years Sorabji used to ask people (only half jokingly, one suspects) when they were going to give him that Bösendorfer he'd always wanted. (He had a magnificent Steinway, but that is another story.) In recognition of his Sorabji recordings, someone ought to give Michael Habermann a Bösendorfer, or any piano he wishes, plus unlimited studio time, to continue this absolutely essential series of records.