

EXPLORING MUSIC

LILLIPUTIANS ON THE KEYBOARD?

Have a class of freshmen who, showing glimmers of what used to be taken for literacy, are absolved from the usually mandatory regimen aiming at mastery of the alphabet, and, accompanied by an adult, are allowed to read real books?

Just now we are blazing our way through the *Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, the 16th-century Florentine goldsmith and sculptor.

The kiddies are wondering whether Bevenuto qualifies as an artist. Their problem is that he made his things to order for money. They would agree that there's no point in being an artist unless you can cash in on it, preferably with a best-seller or a movie contract.

I'm not yet ready to discuss with them the case of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji. Sorabji (some accounts insist that he is listed by the Bureau of Vital Statistics as Leon Dudley) is an artist: a pianist and composer. For 70 years he has written music so difficult that it has baffled most would-be performers of it. He quit playing it or anything else in public before 1930. Ten years later he banned its performance by anyone and retired to, according to him, a Granite Tower, where he keeps cauldrons of oil and lead a-boiling to stare off the outside world. Only in very recent years has he relaxed his performance ban to a small handful of pianists. Michael Habermann being first among them.

Sorabji may qualify as eccentric, but he is certainly not crazy, showing as he does a mind considerably keener than most. And he has quietly and steadily gone on composing: the *New Grove*, published in 1980, lists works completed as recently as 1978. All this raises the question for whom does the serious artist (as distinguished from the talented opportunist) create, and why? Artistry, it seems to me, is a combination of craftsmanship, concentration, energy, and vision. And I suspect that what impels a Sorabji, an extreme case to be sure,

but one apparently uncomplicated by other considerations, is the delight he takes in realizing objectively the last factor through the exercise of the other three.

To talk about Sorabji or his music is not easy. The man, who insists that who and what he is is his own business, does not offer any clues to inquiring reporters. Little of his music has appeared in print. His discography, as far as I am presently aware, amounts to Habermann's three LPs and Geoffrey Douglas Moore's "live" performance of the gigantic *Opus Claustralitium*, allegedly the longest single work ever written for piano. The music—what I have heard of it—might be described as a latter-day development of Liszt, Alkan, and Busoni. It is at base romantic, but dependent on a formidable understanding of counterpoint, and generously seasoned with dissonance. Yet it belongs to no "school," and avoids the modern systems beloved of academics (because they are so "teachable"—you too can be an artist!).

Of the present selection, the *Prelude, Interlude and Fugue* is a huge, abstract, contrapuntal *four de grand*. We are told that *St Bertrand de Comminges*: "He was laughing in the tower" is based on a ghost story. I seem to recall that the author is said to be M. R. James, best known for "The Monkey's Paw," but I find it in none of my collections of scary tales, nor am I able to track down St Bertrand de Comminges, assuming he ever existed. Though the waltz-pulse haunts *Hommage à Johann Strauss*, you will probably be disinclined to whirl your partner around the floor to its strains. From the aural evidence, Mr. Habermann has more arms than Sveta, or else has trained Lilliputians to run about the keyboard in his aid. This you gotta hear!

David M. Greene

48

NEW SELECTION

St Bertrand de Comminges and Other Piano Music

by

KAIKHOSRU SHAPURJI SORABJI

St Bertrand de Comminges: "He was laughing
in the tower" (1941)

Prelude, Interlude and Fugue (1920-22)

Valse-Fantaisie: Hommage à Johann Strauss (1925)



Michael Habermann, *Piano*

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji allows only a few pianists in the entire world to play his music. Michael Habermann is one of them; you will know why once you hear him play the fiendishly difficult works on this new release.

Also Available: Featuring Michael Habermann

MHC 6271M (Cassette); MHS 4271L (LP): Piano Music by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji. Introito and Preludio-Corale from *Opus Claustralitium* (1929-30); In the Hobhouse (1918); Torceta (1920); Fancasie Espagnole (1919); Fragment (1926; rev. 1937); Passtche; Habanera; from Bizet's *Garnier* (1922). (\$5.45)

MHC 6811Z (Cassette); MHS 4811Y (LP): Sorabji: Nocturne (Djāmi); Passtche; Ransky-Korsakoff—Hindu Merchant's Song (*Sadko*); Le Jardin Partume; Poem for Piano; Passtche; Chopin's Valse, Op. 64, No. 1 (\$5.45)

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49