

Five Remarkable Talents The Piano Quarterly

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Dickran Atamian, Bradford Gowen, Michael Habermann, André-Michel Schub, and Valerie Tryon are all younger performers whose careers are, to varying degrees, still "on the way up." Even Schub, who with his recent winning of the gold medal in the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition has attracted a large amount of publicity, cannot yet be called a household name. These newest recordings, several of which are debut offerings, are all of great interest and musical merit, and not only give tantalizing glimpses into these artists' potentials, but also raise interesting questions as to possible advantages and pitfalls when choosing what to record. In spite of the dismal present state of the economy, and of the record industry itself, a large number of new recordings continue to pour out each month from record companies both large and small.

A young pianist lucky enough to be making his (or her) first recording has several options in choosing what to play, this depending not only on the whim of the record company itself, but on what the performer views as the best possible way to attract the most favorable attention both from reviewers and the buying public. Many feel the best course is to record music that for one reason or another has novelty appeal. This usually will be repertory that is relatively unfamiliar, be it less popular works by a major composer, or music written by a "lesser light." Today, when entire cycles of major composers' works, often recorded by renowned artists, are common staples of a record company's catalogue, finding desirable unrecorded literature by a Beethoven or a Chopin is virtually impossible. Even exploration into Liszt's music, endless in quantity as it seems, proves increasingly difficult, for here there is much that is of uneven quantity. If he is wise, our hypothetical young recording artist will wish to record something that not only has curiosity value, but also a work that will act as a vehicle for showing off his talents to best advantage. Therefore the music chosen must be of an artistic quality that allows him to do this. The old saying "There are no undiscovered masterpieces" has more than a grain of truth to it.

Michael Habermann has followed the path of "discovering" a composer who not only deserves a

wider hearing, but who also, because of his hitherto bizarre attitudes towards the performance of his own music, is a press agent's dream. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji was born on August 14, 1892 in Chingford, England of Spanish-Sicilian-Parsi Indian descent. Largely self-taught, he, by all accounts, was a highly accomplished pianist in his younger years. By the early 1920s Sorabji was writing compositions of a complexity

(and often of a length) that precluded their being publicly performed or published. His *Opus Clavicembalisticum* a fragment of which is included on Habermann's record, lasts a total of just under three hours, and is listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the longest piece of non-repeating piano music in the world. Sorabji's piano music borders at times on the completely unplayable, and on occasion can take up as many as four staves at a time. To compound the problems of having these works performed, Sorabji, who by all reports remains prickly and acid-tongued in his attitudes to other musicians, critics and audiences, has for over the last three decades banned any public performances of his own music. With these obstacles, it is a miracle anyone has bothered with him at all!

Habermann is not only the first pianist to be given permission by the composer to perform his music, but has also been allowed to give several premieres of Sorabji's more important works. The level of Habermann's playing on this Musical Heritage release belies belief, especially when the listener is able to follow the scores. (Surprisingly enough, one of the largest collections of microfilms of Sorabji's scores, letters, journalistic writings, etc. resides in a private collection in Texas, and was generously made available to this writer.) Not only does Habermann have the seemingly impossible physical facility to play these works, but also the temperament and musical imagination to make the scores come alive. Among the works included is the *Pastiche: "Habanera" from Bizet's Carmen*. Written in 1922, it was inspired by Busoni's more famous *Sonatina* No. 6 which uses similar themes from *Carmen*. Sorabji's score is considerably more complex, yet has an at times humorous, tongue-in-cheek quality, missing from Busoni's surrealistic score. Lest it be assumed that Habermann's miraculous performances are entirely the result of the tape-splicer's art, this reviewer has heard several recorded live concerts of Habermann, among which was a performance of Busoni's monumental *Fantasia Contrapuntistica*, played, I am told, from memory. It leaves no doubt as to Habermann's staggering abilities. Musical Heritage should get that one also on disc.

Other pianists have used off-beat literature to either launch a career, or, as in the case of Raymond Lewenthal, with his crusading for the music of Alkan, to give a career a shot in the arm. The danger of course lies with a performer becoming over-identified with one area of repertory. Sorabji probably will always have a rather limited audience appeal, and Habermann, if he has not done so already, would be wise to begin to apply some part of his incredible musical potential to other more established areas of the literature. Otherwise he may end up playing only to music lovers of the esoteric at small college "festivals."