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RECORDING OF SPECIAL MERIT

SORABJI: *In the Hothouse; Fantaisie Espagnole; Toccata; Pastiche on "Habanera" from Bizet's "Carmen"; Fragment; Introito and Preludio-Corale from "Opus Clavicembalisticum."* Michael Haberman (piano). MUSICMASTERS MM 20015 \$8.98.

Performance: **Fantastic**

Recording: **Very good**

The music of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, born in England in 1892 to a Parsi father

and a mother of Spanish-Sicilian background, was more talked about than played in the Twenties when he moved in the company of Peter Warlock and Bernard van Dieren and wrote scathing essays denouncing the British musical establishment of the day. Its obscurity became more pronounced after 1936 when he forbade all public performances though he had by then completed the monumental (248-page) and legendary *Opus Clavicembalisticum* for solo piano. I have long had in my library, alongside Van Dieren's musical essays, Sorabji's equally choice collection, *Mi Contra Fa—The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician*. But until I received this album I had never heard a note of his music, though

Sorabji relented in 1976 and allowed pianists Yonty Soloman and Michael Haberman to perform and record his works.

What I hear in the sampling on this disc from Musicmasters—the over-the-counter arm of the Musical Heritage Society—is by turns absorbing and vastly entertaining. A flippant way to convey an impression of it might be: take some Liszt, Busoni, Scriabin, Satie, and Ives; shake well before using. The Busoni influence seems profound in the opening of the *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, and I find that I want to hear more—the whole thing, in fact. *In the Hothouse* amounts to an early (1918) post-Impressionist essay but with a fascinating end combining augmented fourths with pandiatonic elements. The 1920 toccata is a kind of *moto perpetuo* study with whole-tone aspects and fleeting bits of jazz that's almost Ivesian in ambience. *Fragment* (1926, revised 1937) is somewhat on the cryptic side—an essay in fanciful polyphony. *Fantaisie Espagnole* (1919) has certain Satie-like aspects with a touch of music-hall style here and there and wonderful use of consecutive fourths and fifths. The pastiche on the Habanera from *Carmen* is a truly hilarious takeoff, the famous piece as it might be heard in a hashish smoker's fantasies.

Much of this music is difficult and highly virtuosic, pianistic extravaganzas that would make even a Leopold Godowsky green with envy. Along with this, however, is total command of musical craft. Whether one cares aesthetically for the manner in which Sorabji employs his craft is a matter of taste. Personally, I found this first sampling both pleasingly varied and absorbing, Michael Haberman's performance fully up to its exacting demands, and the recording job altogether first-rate. And I do want to hear more!

D.H.