

No less symbolic of the extraordinary changes being wrought upon the musical landscape by the expanding CD repertoire is the lightning trajectory of the late Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji from the most *outré* of fringe interests to the centre-stage attention crystallized through John Ogdon's recent performances, and now recording, of his synoptic transcendental pianotechnicon, the *Opus Clavicembalisticum*. (The achievement acquires added poignancy, even as I write this section, from the news of Ogdon's death at the tragically early age of 52).

Uncertainty subsists in many minds (it does in mine) as to the ultimate significance of Sorabji's music. But of his utterly individual sound-world and magically deliquescent piano textures there can be no question. That was already clear from the three LP recitals by Michael Habermann released in recent years: the ASV issue listed above, compiled from two of them, forms an excellent introduction to this strange musical mind, ranging from two hilariously overblown 'take-offs' of familiar repertoire standards, through the gripping *Prelude, Interlude and Fugue* (1920) which neatly encapsulates Sorabji's spiky, barline-ignoring contrapuntal vein, to the two gorgeous oriental nocturnes. With repeated hearings, *Le Jardin Parfumé* (1923) has come to sound like at least a minor classic of its time, and the later (and darker) *Djami* (1928) is even finer; enwrapped in hedonistic harmonic sensation, luminously textured and decorated to the nth degree, these pieces seem a precise musical correlative of Sufi mysticism. Certainly - the mark of powerful and original music - they effortlessly impose their own time-scale on the listener. Sorabji's penchant for very long movements goes with a tapestry-weaver's ability to fill every moment with myriad and curious detail. *Djami's* 22 minutes of very slow rhapsody fly by.

Even the 128 minutes taken by the First Organ Symphony (1923) - a work I would never have dreamed I'd hear performed - seems to be over in about 40: the music, in its Brobdignabian deliberation and Lilliputian eye for fine detail, completely re-orders one's sense of time. The Continuum discs of the Symphony, an astonishing achievement by the young Kevin Bowyer, capture an immense range of sound, including some of the most shattering climaxes ever demanded of an organ. Yet the fundamental impression left by the work is remote, meditative. Sorabji's anticipations of Messiaen are even more striking when heard through organ sonority - listen to the slow, quiet, and very beautiful music that opens the second movement as an immediate presage of *Le Banquet Celeste*.

Although the Symphony's overall form is clear enough - a huge passacaglia with 81*

* In his sleeve-note, Alistair Hinton notes that this is 'curiously, the same number' as in the Passacaglia of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*. As far as I can make out from work-lists and such unpublished scores as I have seen, all of Sorabji's variation-movements involve (by intention, at least) squared numbers - 49, 64, 81, or 100 variations. Clearly much work remains to be done on the significance of such numerology.

variations, a gigantic double fugue, and a massive fantasia-like 'toccata-cadenza' on the themes of the preceding movements climaxing in a stupendous invocation of the BACH motif - the impression, after several hearings, remains aloof, hieratic, elusive. One accepts with somewhat stupefied anticipation the news that Bowyer is preparing performing editions of the immeasurably vaster Second and Third Organ Symphonies for future recordings.

The central paradox in Sorabji's music is surely that this self-evident master of oriental extravagance, of wayward, improvisatory arabesque and fioriture, should have so obsessively cultivated the strictest Western contrapuntal forms, passacaglia and fugue. Doubtless to provide a strong structural foundation and give the music 'backbone': yet his passacaglia and fugue themes, in themselves often arcanelly extended and anonymous in outline, seem deliberately to run counter to that intent. Nevertheless the fugues especially, despite their mind-numbing durations (the third and fourth ones in *Opus Clavicembalisticum* are well over half an hour each), are curiously devoid of episode, being spun almost continuously out of groups of entries and inversions, retrogrades, and combinations with subordinate subjects.

Indeed it is OC, with its monster fugues and total duration (on the Altarus recording) of almost exactly four and three-quarter hours, that engenders the greatest doubts. It's by no means clear how the 'serious listeners' Sorabji requested are in fact meant to listen to such a work; and if the idea is that they should follow it with rapt attention (score reading certainly helps), it is equally unclear whether the music finally justifies the demand. From moment to moment certainly; but overall ...? At all events the work remains a staggering and unavoidable pianistic phenomenon, and if any interpreter could silence one's doubts, it would be Ogdon. That they are not quite silenced must be laid at Sorabji's door, not his. It is a sign of our curious times that this is not OC's first complete recording (indeed for the first movement it is the third, as Michael Habermann included that on his first LP). Geoffrey Douglas Madge's heroic LP account was of course a recording of a live performance (reviewed in *Tempo* 142); I did not have it available for comparison, but from my recollections of it the Ogdon studio performance is in a different league altogether. By no means everything corresponds precisely with the score (in a work of these dimensions and demands that would surely be an impossible

SORABJI: *Le Jardin Parfumé, Prelude, Interlude and Fugue; Nocturne (Djami); Pastiche on Rimsky-Korsakov's Hindu Merchant's Song; Pastiche on Chopin's Minute Waltz*. Michael Habermann (pno). ASV CD AMM 159.

SORABJI: Organ Symphony No.1. Kevin Bowyer (Organ of St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol). Continuum CCD 1001/2 (2 CDs) (Distributor: Harmonia Mundi).

SORABJI: *Opus Clavicembalisticum*. John Ogdon (pno). Altarus AIR-CD-9075 (4 CDs) (Distributor: Harmonia Mundi).

hope), and doubtless exceptions could be taken to tempi and modes of interpretation. But an *interpretation* it manifestly is, and one that accumulates its own authority and displays a (literally!) tireless enthusiasm from first to last. It is also a feat of pianism so astonishing that it beggars any attempt at description. Ogdon's pedalling alone - so vital to the rendering of Sorabji's multi-layered keyboard textures - would demand a substantial essay.

Altarus already have a long list of fine piano recordings to their name; sheerly as a vivid and natural rendering of piano tone this is probably the best, though the instrument itself occasionally (eg. in the Theme with 49 Variations) shows signs of stress, as well it might. The set is also most impressively produced, a stout box cunningly imitating the external appearance of OC's printed score, and containing a lavish 56 page booklet with some historic photographs and the first publications of Sorabji's own 'Shortform-Analysis' of the work, Ronald Stevenson's extended analysis, and John Ogdon's essay 'Kaikhosru Sorabji and Hermann Melville'. The latter two items were written many years ago for a proposed symposium with the work's dedicatee, Hugh MacDiarmid, who also features in several of the photographs.

Altogether a handsome presentation for a release whose historic importance is likely to become ever clearer with the passage of time. I am writing this the day after the utterly unexpected announcement of John Ogdon's death, and constrained by a distinct sense of loss, though I personally knew him only slightly. All I can say is, thank God that Altarus had the guts and gumption to record him in OC and the Busoni *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* in time, capturing him at his prime in works with which he will forever be associated, in recordings which will endure as signal events in the history of pianism. The sheer quality of mastery is probably more readily apparent in the *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*, since OC by its very nature imposes different, unfamiliar standards of competence and communicability; yet perhaps more than any of Ogdon's other achievements in the recorded repertoire, these extraordinary discs of Busoni and Sorabji constitute his most fitting monument.

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