

Michael Habermann Tunes in to Indian Mystic Sorabji

Look up in the sky, it's a bird, it's a plane, it's Supercomposer. Who? Supercomposer otherwise known as Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, an English-born Indian composer, now in his nineties, is a name that inspires awe and strikes fear into the hearts of pianists everywhere.

Sorabji's music has been described as "greater than a Gothic cathedral,



Michael Habermann

more intricate than a Rubik's cube and rarer than a Mahler concerto." It has also garnered such less than kind adjectives as "tortuous," "wildly improbable" and "impossible to perform" for its lengthy and extremely complex passages.

Until very recently, both the man and his music had remained largely unknown, the result of a ban imposed

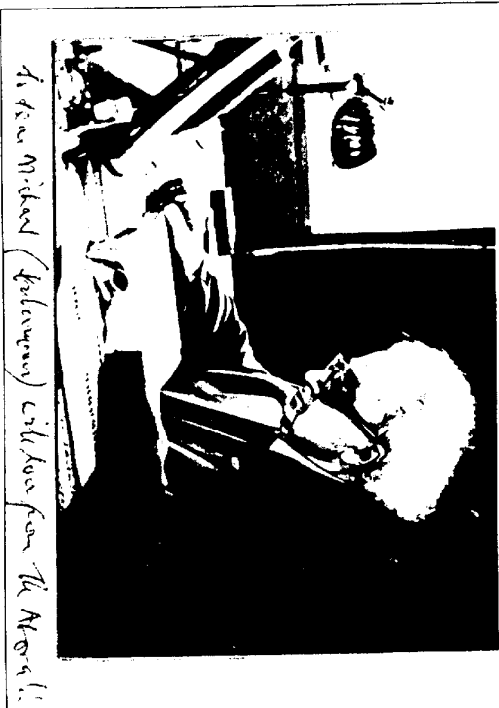
by Sorabji himself in 1940 forbidding all public performances of his works. Then along came a young, Paris-born pianist named Michael Habermann. A student of Fernando Laires, Habermann, who is currently pursuing his doctoral degree at Peabody, stumbled across one of Sorabji's earlier works while living in Mexico City in the early '70's and was, by his own admission, "completely overwhelmed" by it.

"It was impossible difficult," Habermann recalls, "but I became more and more intrigued by it. It's so complex that I would spend many hours on just a couple of measures and it took ages to memorize, which you have to do because you can't possibly read the notes and try to interpret them at the same time."

Habermann became so intrigued by Sorabji that he began to track down other pieces of his music and started a correspondence with the composer. Eventually, Habermann got up the nerve to send Sorabji a tape of himself performing a Sorabji composition.

"I couldn't believe it when I heard from him," Habermann says. But hear from him he did. In fact, Sorabji was so pleased with Habermann's performance that he decided to lift his ban and enthusiastically gave permission for Habermann to perform and record his works.

"You can't imagine how thrilled I was to get his permission," Habermann says. To date, he has recorded two albums of Sorabji's music: *Piano*



Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji gave this signed photo to his interpreter.

Music by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji and the newly-released *Sorabji: Le Jardin Parfumé*, both to very favorable reviews. (Even the usually rasping Sorabji has been quoted as saying that Habermann's performances are "quite admirable... sounds like my own playing.")

Habermann's concert performances of Sorabji's music have met with a similar critical response (adjectives like "impressive," "incredibly tasteful" and "formidable" abound), although many of the same critics find themselves admitting that

they don't fully understand Sorabji's work.

There are no such doubts, however, for Michael Habermann. "I think Sorabji is a wonderful composer," he says without hesitation. "His music is very melodious, the rhythm is varied and the textures unusual. But the music is technically difficult to play and many of the pieces are very, very long."

All of those hours spent memorizing passages from Sorabji's works have paid off, though. Habermann is now regarded by many critics as a pianist to be reckoned with in the future. And Sorabji himself has just dedicated a major piano work to him.

"I am very proud of that," Habermann says modestly. And he should be. As Sorabji himself recently remarked, "I am amazed to learn that Michael memorized my work. I couldn't do that to save my life."