

Peabody News

Michael Habermann's CD of Sorabji's Music Receives Major Media Acclaim

The gate at the castle in Dorset had a sign on it: "Visitors Unwelcome. Roman Catholic Nuns in Full Habit May Enter Without An Appointment." Not calculated to put a caller at ease, and by all accounts Kaikhosru Sorabji did not have many callers. His is not a name terribly well-known in the music world, but Peabody alum (DMA '85) and faculty member Michael Habermann may change that. He has recently issued a recording of the music of Sorabji on Elan Records. It has received major media attention, including high praise from Joseph McLellan in the *Washington Post*, who called Habermann "the definitive interpreter of [Sorabji's] music." Other reviews have been just as enthusiastic: *Fanfare* called the recording "... assured ... a god-send ... Habermann [has] performed miracles ... Get this recording;" the *Musical Times* noted "the near-miraculous playing of Michael Habermann," and Stephen Wigler in the *Sun* said, "The composer was and is lucky to have such an interpreter. Habermann makes Sorabji's fiendishly difficult music ... sound extravagantly beautiful ... these piano pieces should be investigated by listeners ... who enjoy hearing impossible-to-play pieces mastered so brilliantly as they are here."

"Sorabji was very nice to me when I met him and played for him, but he was not that easy to get along with. He had his opinions," said Habermann. Those opinions included early enthusiasms, unfashionable in the 1930s, for Mahler and Szymanowski. The pianist came across Sorabji's music "completely by accident, in a Mexico City bookstore. I'd never seen anything like it; it was very different in style and layout. There's a lot going on, lots of difficult rhythms and textures." Sorabji's rather forbidding-looking music (written on as many as seven staves) is as challenging conceptually as technically. Using Western harmonies as a basis, Sorabji included asymmetrical Eastern melodic and rhythmic styles, creating an enormously intricate yet stable mode of expression.

Habermann seems unfazed by this. "It's like any other music: if you can play the notes, that's one thing, but without understanding, you don't have your performance together yet." Sorabji, who died in 1988, seemed uninterested in having pianists play the music, or even in having anyone understand what he was trying to do. He expressly banned all perfor-



mances of his music in 1936, only relaxing this stance after correspondence and a meeting with Habermann in the 1970s. Habermann noted that such self-imposed isolation allowed Sorabji to develop undisturbed, but it also kept him from valuable feedback that might have permitted more performances. Like Charles Ives, Sorabji was well-enough off that he could take this position, but also like Ives, he paid the price of near-oblivion.

Sorabji was born in 1892 of a Spanish-Sicilian mother and a Parsi father. He was rather touchy on the point; Nicolas Slonimsky, on referring to him in *Baker's Biographical Dictionary* as an Indian, received a thundering response: "Do not dare to call me an Indian! We are Parsi, followers of Zarathustra." Such exactitude did not extend to all aspects of his life, though. He carefully concealed the fact that his birth name was really Leon Dudley Sorabji. Eric Blom warned Slonimsky about this in no uncertain terms. "If you value your life I would not advise you to put it in print, for I fear that if you do he would take the next plane to America and assassinate you personally." Fortunately, Michael Habermann didn't meet that fate.