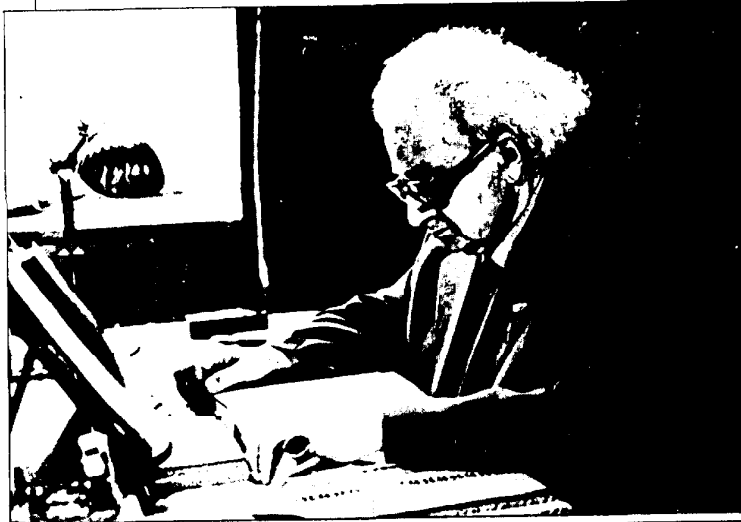


# SORABJI

SOUNDPAGE & SCORE  
THE EXOTIC PIANO  
MASTERPIECES OF  
KAIKHOSRU SHAPURJI  
SORABJI

BY PIANIST  
MICHAEL HABERMANN



At left, composer Kaikhosru Sorabji. Below, pianist/author Michael Habermann holds photocopy of manuscript to Sorabji's "Culistan" Nocturne.



**B**ACK IN 1967, WHILE browsing through a bookstore in Mexico, I came across some music by a composer whose name was both exotic and totally unfamiliar to me. After glancing through the score, I realized that I had stumbled across some of the most complicated—and beautiful—music I had ever seen. It wasn't long before I had bought all of this composer's piano works. The more of them I saw, the more amazed I became that they had been neglected for so long. I reached a decision: Something had to be done to bring the music of this remarkable man, Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, to the prominence it deserves.

With that, my involvement with this repertoire began. I entered into corres-



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pondence with Sorabji and, after working on some of his pieces, I sent him a few tapes of my interpretations of them. These apparently persuaded him to give me permission to perform and record his works. Since then, this has become a major focus of my musical life.

Born in 1892, Sorabji is perhaps best known today as the composer of the longest piano work in the literature, *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (1930). On this month's Soundpage™ you will hear an excerpt from my performance of the "Introito" and "Preludio-Corale," recorded in concert at Midland, Michigan on Oct. 6, 1978. The

first part of this score is shown on page 57.

Naturally, this Soundpage offers only a taste of the work as a whole—the tip of the iceberg. Though he has written even longer and more complex works for orchestra, the dimensions of *Opus Clavicembalisticum* are nonetheless incredible. The piece is 252 pages long; a performance will run for several hours. It makes formidable pianistic demands as well. But once you figure them out, the surprising thing is that it all makes sense, and isn't really that hard to grasp.

In addition to his notoreity as the

*Continued on page 58*

## SORABJI

composer of the *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, Sorabji received attention for banning public performances of his music for more than forty years. More important than all this, though, is the fact that his compositions stand out in the world of music for

their unique and satisfying beauty.

Biographical information is scarce and often inaccurate. It suffices to know that his mother was Spanish-Sicilian and his father a Parsi from Bombay, and that he spent most of his life in England, where he lives today. A music critic for many years, he also wrote two books, *Around Music* (1932) and

*Mi Contra Fa. The Immoralizings Of A Machiavellian Musician* (1947).

Sorabji's essays, like his music, are generally stimulating, entertaining, witty, and informative. He freely expressed his opinions about everything; in praise and in condemnation, he was equally aggressive. Often he contradicted himself, sometimes

Continued from page 57

The musical score consists of several systems of notation. The first system shows a piano texture with a *ppp* dynamic and a *Ral. len. lare* tempo marking. The second system is marked *Presto* and includes a *Quasi mixtura d'organo* instruction. The third system features a *metallico* texture and a *forte e declamato* instruction. The fourth system includes a *dim.* marking. The fifth system is marked *ppp* and includes a *pochissimo* instruction. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings throughout.

completely reversing his viewpoint. Primarily he championed neglected works and composers, though he also complained endlessly about the corruption of audiences, performers, critics, composers, managers, and musical life in general.

It is his music, however, that most fascinates the adventuresome performer. "Not often is one so baffled by the printed page," wrote one observer in a 1921 review of Sorabji's *Sonata No. 1*. "Mr. Sorabji would have done better to publish it straight away as a player-piano roll." The extreme difficulties of sight-reading and deciphering his ideas provoked most critics to immediately dismiss them as the incoherent scrawlings of a musical madman.

Lately, though, opinions seem to be changing. David Hall commented in the Dec. '81 issue of *Stereo Review*, "What I hear . . . 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."

What he borrowed from the Romantic composers in their largest works was a sense of structural/textural complexity, contrapuntal massiveness, and expansiveness. Attuned to the Lisztian tradition of virtuosos piano playing, Sorabji wrote music that makes the utmost technical and musical demands. Likewise, echoes of the Impressionist composers Debussy, Ravel, and Delius make themselves felt in his

fluid, sensuous textures, and in the imaginative, improvisatory, and deceptively effortless quality of his works.

But while Sorabji's music reflects the influence of many of the composers he admired and emulated, it is more than an amalgam of styles. Rather, it synthesizes in a unique way the tendencies of all these styles combined, and forges ahead into hitherto unexplored territories.

Sparseness of texture, economy of means, and brief statement are not characteristic of his work. His goal seems to have been to pack more detail into each composition than the average listener can possibly absorb. Extensive use of counterpoint coupled with abundant decorative flourishes, fluctuations between free atonality and tonality, extreme textural density, asymmetrical prose-like phrase structure, and complicated rhythmic combinations are all present in Sorabji's music. Surprisingly, these intricate details successfully complement the imposing length of the pieces into which they are typically set.

Although dissonance abounds in these works, they contain little of the tension usually associated with highly dissonant music. Essentially conservative, Sorabji did not identify with most twentieth-century developments. In *Mi Conta Fa* [Porcupine, London, 1947], he saw himself as a Romantic, a composer pitted against society, isolated not in an ivory tower, but in a

"Tower of Granite, with plentiful supplies of boiling oil and molten lead handy to tip over the battlements onto the heads of unwanted and uninvited intruders."

The result of all this turgid imagery and complex thought is a piano music that, on first glance, looks impossible to learn. Much of his early work is notated on three or more staves in order to facilitate reading. As the years progressed, his writing grew even more complicated. Several of the later *Piano Symphonies* are four to five hours in duration, yet they maintain interest through successive great peaks of intensity, with huge climactic statements in the concluding sections.

Sorabji's piano work falls into five categories: those of a strictly contrapuntal nature, works in variation form, works which emphasize motoric activity, works such as free fantasies, paraphrases, and shorter items, and nocturnes.

In his contrapuntal music, Sorabji pushes every aspect of counterpoint to its ultimate extreme. Most of the fugues have five different subjects. In the final massive sections, called the *coda-stretta*, all five are played simultaneously. Markings such as *quasi mixtures* suggest that Sorabji might be thinking in terms of the powerful sound of the organ. One wonders whether such grandiosity is possible on the piano, and whether the polyphony can be heard at all when six or seven staves, one above the other, are overloaded with notes, all

## SORABJI

intended to be played with only two hands and pedaled with two feet.

The variation sets fascinate in their diversity of patterns, rhythms, textures, and harmonies. Though lengthy, they are effective, presenting an enormous range of expression in a structured manner, with each idea clearly separated from the next. "Preludio Corale" denotes a freer set of variations, written in the style of a piano transcription of an organ work.

The motoric pieces, including toccatas, preludes, "perpetual motions," fantasias, and cadenzas, generate excitement through their relentless determination and impulsiveness. Most often, they consist of an enormous number of sixteenth-notes pitted against pedal points and declamatory phrases. As in the fugues, the predominant mood is one of obsessive perseverance.

Sorabji's three early *Sonatas* are long, formless, almost experimental, written-out improvisations; they are sonatas only in name. Two programmatic works of a sinister nature, both based on ghost stories, are *Quare Reliqua Hujus Materiel Inter Secretiora* (1940), and *St Bertrand de Comminges: "He was laughing in the tower"* (1941). Prototypes for the one hundred *Transcendental Studies* (1944-49) may be Busoni's *Klavierübung* and Godowsky's *53 Studies On Chopin's*

*Etudes. The Frammenti Aforistici (Sutras)* of 1962 and 1977 are a collection of 103 short pieces, comprising almost a dictionary of the composer's musical vocabulary. Revised several times, *Fragment For Harold Rutland* (1926, rev. 1937), was one of the few of his pieces that Sorabji heard played by someone else; Rutland, an English critic favorably disposed toward Sorabji, was the performer. A much later composition, *Fantasiatina sul nome illustre H. MacDiarmid ossia C. M. Grieve* (1961), resembles it in both length (two pages) and bipartite structure. It is regrettable that Sorabji did not compose many works of such short duration.

The most accessible of his compositions are the parodies, transcriptions, and paraphrases upon well-known themes. Many pianist/composers throughout history have delighted in commenting on and transforming popular melodies into brilliant and entertaining keyboard pieces. Sorabji emulated them by writing several virtuoso arrangements of works by Bach, Ravel, and Strauss. His *Pastiches* (1922), based on Chopin's "Minute Waltz," Bizet's "Habanera" from *Carmen*, and Rimsky-Korsakov's "Song Of India" from *Sadko*, transform the familiar into the bizarre. The Viennese waltz is used as a springboard for his wild improvisations in *Valse-Fantaisie: Hommage à Johann Strauss* (1927) and elsewhere. The Spanish dance rhythms in *Fantaisie Espagnole* (1919) and *Fantasia*

*Ispanica* (1933) show Sorabji's love of Spain.

The nocturnes are soft, dreamy, flowing pieces. They seem to have been written to please, with their enticing melodies and rich harmonies. Surrounding the sinuous melodies are imaginative decorative flourishes, pedal points, and haunting repetitive patterns that create hypnotic moods. Rhythms, melodies, and textures each provide interest in their turns. Only the dynamic level is fixed. *Le Jardin Parfumé* (1923), *Nocturne: (Jami)* (1928), and *Gulistan, Nocturne* (1940) are among the most beautiful of his pieces in this genre.

Sorabji's way of achieving both variety and unity in his work was to base each piece on a number of musical "gestures." Constantly varied, developed, combined, and juxtaposed, these basic ideas are heard over and over again. Gestures differ from themes in that they are defined chiefly by their general outline. Matching pitch sequences or characteristic rhythmic patterns are of less consequence than the overall contour. Their development is governed by the composer's sense of timing and his ideal of constant variation.

Rhythmic flexibility is achieved by changes in the unit of beat itself (from a quarter to a dotted eighth, for instance), frequent division of the beat or half-beat into five or seven parts, and an abundance of tied notes. The variety in rhythm, and not the formal structure of the composition, is probably what accounts for the

## SORABJI

improvisatory, floating feeling of many of Sorabji's works.

Flutter pedalling—quick judicious applications of the sustain pedal—gives Sorabji's piano music the atmospheric quality it needs. The middle pedal helps keep textures clean. Finding the culminating points in each phrase and section gives shape to the music. Emphasizing the melodic aspects of the work and keeping subsidiary material in the background guides the listener through the maze of notes.

These guidelines will prove invaluable in preparing an interpretation of the *Opus Clavicembalisticum*. Perhaps the first order of business, though, is to overcome the psychological shock of confronting a piece of this magnitude. When I first looked at the score, I gave up on the idea of even trying to learn it. I figured it couldn't be done. But I was still curious about how it would sound. Given that, I set out to just learn one phrase at a time until I realized that, little by little, it was pulling together. It took several years, but eventually I did get the whole piece memorized.

The biggest challenge in performing *Opus Clavicembalisticum* involves interpretation, or bringing out the logic of the piece and making it all work musically. The theme stated in the opening section recurs throughout the piece, as does the theme

of the "Preludio-Corale," which comes in about two minutes after the beginning. When working with a framework this large, you can bring out these themes and their development more effectively by expanding your dynamic range, building bigger climaxes than you ordinarily might. For this reason, you might also want to hold back a little bit at the opening.

The rest of *Opus Clavicembalisticum* is a fascinating puzzle. There is a set of 49 variations, a passacaglia with 81 variations, an adagio, a toccata, fugues, and other complex sections. There's a lot of tricky pedaling too; Sorabji writes lots of held notes through busy extended passages, so you rely on the middle pedal quite a bit. At times I have thought it might have been arranged for two pianos, though the rhythmic problems frequently posed in the music are perhaps more easily solved by one pianist working alone.

In the long run, the music is what counts. Though the length and the technical difficulties are interesting in themselves, I don't think I would play this repertoire unless it was musically valuable. These elements are truly subsidiary to the music itself. Sorabji's works have an enticing, mystical, sometimes even a scary quality. As people become more exposed to him, I'm sure that it is for his gifts as a composer, rather than for the prodigious dimensions of his work, that he will be remembered. ■