

## Recital: Habermann Plays Sorabji Piano Works

By DONAL HENAHAN

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji is a half-Indian composer, the son of a Parsi father and a Spanish-Sicilian mother, and something of a mystery man to this generation. Mr. Sorabji, who has lived most of his life in England, is now 84, at which patriarchal age he has withdrawn a 37-year-old ban on the performance of his works. One of them enjoys immortality by being listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest nonrepetitive piano piece (a 252-page, three-hour score weighing four pounds).

That piece, "Opus Clavicembalisticum," did not appear on Michael Habermann's program Sunday evening at Carnegie Recital Hall, but the pianist did unveil four other Sorabji selections, the composer having somehow been persuaded that the world was ready for them at last and that Mr. Habermann was the artist to do justice to their fantastic difficulties. Judgment must be withheld on the first of those propositions, but one could easily believe the second: Mr. Habermann seemed to take the wildest keyboard demands in stride.

Mr. Sorabji's output, published and unpublished, has been prodigious. Because nothing has been heard of it since 1940, however, the listener to this recital had to be careful. One lick of an ice cream cone may suggest that the flavor is wild blueberry, that is, but strata of cantaloupe or butter-scotch may be encountered by further excavation.

All four pieces played by Mr. Haber-

man were dated 1922 or earlier, and they had some features in common. Not only were their technical problems staggering and their length self-defeating, but decoration seemed to be the chief point whether the work at hand was called "Fantasie Espagnole" (1919), "In the Hothouse" (1918), "Pastiche: Habanera from Bizet's 'Carmen'" (1922), or Fugue (circa 1920/22). The suggestion of improvisational fantasy was sometimes appealing enough as that. But what one heard most of the time was salon music draped in dense embroidery.

Reference points? At various times one was reminded of Grandados, Albeniz, Hindemith "Ludis Tonalis"),

Ravel and—probably most significantly—Alkan. The music of Sorabji, with its legend of inaccessibility, is the stuff of which cults are born and bred, and probably not worth much else.

Mr. Habermann's recital, his first in New York, also offered Haydn, Chopin, Liszt and Godowsky's "concert paraphrase" of Strauss's "Artist's Life." The pianist's formidable technique was equal to every extravagant requirement in florid music, though a misjudged tempo made him botch the finale of Haydn's Sonata No. 53 in E minor (the Vienna Urtext numbering). The hall was almost full, suggesting a curiosity about Mr. Sorabji that Mr. Habermann might consider trying to satisfy further at a later date.