



Music

By Stephen Kenamer

Pianist Michael Habermann
(Woman's Club
(University of Richmond))

Every score composed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji and published after 1936 carries this warning: "All rights including that of performance reserved for all countries by the composer."

Note the wording carefully. It amounts to a complete ban on public performances by anyone other than Sorabji himself. And Sorabji does not deign to play in public.

Enter Michael Habermann. While living in Mexico several years ago the gifted American pianist liked to frequent a British bookstore. One day, browsing among the books on photography, he happened to notice a score by Sorabji. The music was transcendently difficult to play, but the price—\$1—was right.

Notes, Notes, Notes

Habermann fooled around with the piece, believing at first that it might be literally impossible to play. Sorabji never uses one note where a dozen or two will serve just as well.

Soon, however, almost in spite of himself, Habermann was hooked. He began to memorize a couple of measures at a time. Meanwhile he obtained additional Sorabji scores. And he began to learn something about the enigmatic composer.

Sorabji was born in England in 1892, the son of a Parsee father and a Spanish-Sicilian mother. He was an early disciple of Ferruccio Busoni, the Italian composer and pianist who also had a tendency toward the mystically monumental.

In 1936 a hapless virtuoso attempted a public performance of one of Sorabji's more modest

efforts — a movement only 45 minutes long — and required twice that amount of time to deliver its thousands of notes. Sorabji heard about it and issued his unusual ban.

Sent a Tape

More than 40 years passed before Habermann shyly initiated a correspondence with the fiercely independent composer. Sorabji showed little inclination to answer questions about himself. But when he heard a tape of Habermann playing his pieces, he was astonished at the young American's keyboard prowess. In fact, he bestowed his bless-

ing upon the first public performance in four decades.

Friday night at the Woman's Club Habermann played a recital that included Sorabji's "Perfumed Garden" as well as formidable works by Casella, Busoni and Ponce. An unfortunate conflict with a Smetana Trio concert limited the size of his audience and prevented me from hearing him.

However, on Saturday morning I attended his lecture on Sorabji and his music at the University of Richmond, sponsored by the Richmond Music Teachers Association and the Musicians Club. His numerous demonstrations at the keyboard more than justified Sorabji's confidence in him.

Habermann's remarks did not — could not — resolve the enigma of Sorabji's personality, although a few quotes from the composer's writings helped to round out a portrait of a highly cultured, educated and disdainfully aristocratic non-conformist. They did help to categorize the music.

Sorabji writes in two veins — super-impressionistic and super-contrapuntal. In either he scatters notes about by the galaxy, but the impressionistic style is atmospheric and rhythmically amorphous while the contrapuntal style is vigorous and pulsating. I much preferred the latter.

Summing up Sorabji, and Habermann playing Sorabji, is hard to do. Do you have the feeling it could only have happened in the 20th century?