

# Pianist Belies Appearance

By STEVE ROW

**A-43** Richmond News Leader, Sat., March 29, 1980

Michael Habermann comes onto a recital stage as a slightly built, unassuming-looking music student. But don't let appearances fool you—the power and skill he possesses are more than equal to the rigors of an exhausting program consisting of Ponce, Busoni and the mystical Parsee composer, Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji.

At the end of the program, Habermann comes away only slightly disheveled and with the

## MUSIC REVIEW

full respect of the audience. Last night, a relatively tiny group assembled at the Woman's Club to hear Habermann play eight pieces from the early part of this century.

Habermann's reputation as the only performer "anointed" by Sorabji himself to perform Sorabji's music is more than a gimmick. Habermann seems to have developed an affinity for this difficult, complex, multi-textured music.

He gave the American premiere of Sorabji's 30-minute "Le Jardin Parfume," and the piece is at once a demanding composition for both performer and listener. Filled with swift arpeggios, abrupt shifts in tempi, long runs and gigantic chords, this piece only occasionally reflects Eastern musical influences.

Habermann captured subtle shifts in mood well, moving easily from delicacy to thunder. Despite the length of the piece, it has no melody as such, and the burden on the performer to retain the interest of the audience is great.

The piece is interesting, at times very satisfying, but it is not likely to become a recital standard.

Another Sorabji piece, his "Pastiche" on the "Habanera" from "Carmen," could become a standard. This is a witty collection of eccentric variations on the familiar theme, and Habermann played them all with verve.

The other showcase of the evening was the "Fantasia Contrappuntistica," Ferruccio Busoni's 1910 work that combines all the most demanding features of a Bach and a Liszt keyboard piece.

The piece demanded crisp attack, and some tricky cross-hand playing, and Habermann suffered only a few minor slips.

The real beauties of the recital, however, were Habermann's readings of four pieces by Manuel Ponce. Habermann showed as much affinity toward the works of this composer as he did toward Sorabji, and Ponce showed himself to be perhaps the better composer for piano, with more attention paid to the attributes of the instrument.

Habermann's playing of the elaborately grand "Balada Mexicana," and his remarkable left-hand-only performance of "A Pesor de Todo" in an encore, further endeared him to an audience that was his from the start.

Alfredo Casella's very modern 1916 "Sonatina" was the least attractive piece on the program, with low-yield explosive chords in the left hand substituting sheer volume for intensity and replacing dynamics with pure decibels. This piece came close to being an exercise in wretched excess, but it was the composer's fault, not the performer's.