

Piano Music by Sorabji - Michael Habermann, pianist  
Musical Heritage Society 4271

Kaikosru Sorabji, like some mythical chimaera, has lurked in the shadows of 20th century music. This fabulous composer, now perhaps 89 years old (he is secretive about everything, even his birth date and place), son of a Parsi father and a Spanish-Sicilian mother, has lived as a recluse, publishing little of his gargantuan music and, until recently, forbidding performances of it. His two books of essays, Around Music (1932) and Mi Contra Fa - the Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician (1947), written in bejewelled prose and teeming with poisonous irony and bellicose prejudice, reveal an awesome knowledge of music. These have long been unavailable; some enterprising publisher should be urged to reprint them. Sorabji's 248-page Opus Clavicembalisticum, which was printed in 1930 at the composer's expense, has been whispered about as a piano work of cosmic, impossible difficulty for performer and listener.

In England the South African pianist Yonty Solomon has been given the composer's blessing and has, since 1976, faithfully performed Sorabji's music, and now in North America Michael Habermann has been similarly blessed and has become an official Sorabji specialist. Habermann's first recording of a sampling of the piano music is now available on the Musical Heritage label; it contains a snippet of the Opus Clavicembalisticum and some smaller pieces.

Greatest interest centers on the excerpts from the Opus Clavicembalisticum, the first two of the twelve parts, 15 pages of the whole. Presumably Habermann is involved in a recording of the entire work, an event eagerly awaited. He has the equipment and the dedication for this giant undertaking. The two extracts are only previews; the effect of the 3-hour colossus must be a great ritual experience comparable to and magnifying the impact of a complete performance of the Art of Fugue or Liszt's Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses or Messiaen's Vingt Regards. Sorabji is a dedicated Busoni-ite; he played for Busoni and may have studied with him, and Busoni's Fantasia Contrappuntistica is the model for the Opus Clavicembalisticum, whose core is four fugues, the last a quadruple one. I can hardly imagine listening to, much less playing, this final fugue, a 42-page monster employing every conceivable contrapuntal device and with the instruction to the pianist "affrettare poco a poco quasi impercettibilmente fino alla stretta." Unhappily, Sorabji's harmony, while similar to Busoni's mixing of triads, is soft-edged and directionless, maddeningly dependent on parallelism, and his rhythms, which look so frightening in the score, are basically conventional and, especially in the fugues, square. Happily for the performer, the writings fits the hand, and like Messiaen's piano writing, once a pattern is established it is used repetitively, and so the Opus Clavicembalisticum is a possible work. Superhuman stamina is its special requisite, and playing through it can be a rewarding tactile, if not aural, experience.

The other works on their disc are of varying quality. I liked particularly the early In the Hothouse (1918), a lovely sensuous

evocation in the manner of Szymanowski's Métopes of three years earlier. The Pastiche on the Habanera from Carmen (1922) is great fun, and Habermann plays it with exactly the right velvety tone and exactly the right clarity and balance. The Toccata of 1920 is negligible. Perhaps here a sharper sound and a more daring tempo would help. The Fragment (1926, revised 1937) is of interest for its somewhat more cutting dissonance. The Fantaisie Espagnole (1919) is flaccid and overlong, a catalogue of conventional Liszt-ian difficulties. Instead of wasting his energies and his gifts on this meretricious stuff Michael Habermann should get on with the task of recording the Opus Clavicembalisticum and then on to the five Sonatas, the 100 Transcendental Studies, or the Concerto per Suonare da me solo, e senza Orchestra, per Divertisi.

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(Editor's note: This first recording in history of composer Sorabji's music was made by ALS member Michael Habermann. Michael is completing his doctorate at Peabody Conservatory under the direction of ALS president Fernando Laires. I hope all ALS members will make a special effort to secure this recording and support Michael's superb efforts. Let's hope this is only the first of a series of Sorabji's recordings for Michael.)