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**SORABJI:** *Opus Clavicembalisticum: Introito and Preludio-Corale. In the Hothouse. Toccatà. Fantaisie Espagnole. Fragment. Pastiche: "Habanera" from Bizet's Carmen.* Michael Habermann, piano. MUSICAL HERITAGE SOCIETY MHS 4271, produced by Donald Garvelman, \$4.45.

*Kaikhosru Sorabji turns out to be an Indian [sic], quite young. I gave him a letter of introduction for which he asked me. A fine, unusual person, in spite of his ugly music. A primeval forest with many weeds and briars, but strange and voluptuous. . . .*

Busoni, to his wife, 25 November 1919

Ernest Newman, the eminent critic and biographer of Wagner, once publicly expressed polite regret that he lacked opportunities for hearing new works by such unknown and unpublished composers as, say (pulling names from the air), Bernard van Dieren or Kaikhosru Sorabji. In the spring of 1920 he received a visit from a mysterious young Parsi—Sorabji himself—who had come to call his bluff. Newman turned him away indignantly, thereby initiating a controversy which would enliven English musical journalism for the remainder of the year. Sorabji, it happened, was an intimate of the circle gathered around van Dieren which included Cecil Gray, Peter Warlock, and, later, Constant Lambert—*good Europeans* all. Each enjoyed a wide culture and the happy gift of being equally articulate



SORABJI IN 1977

in words or music, and all addressed themselves to the stylistic fragmentation which was beginning to characterize postwar music. Warlock, who had just begun his brief tenure as editor of *The Sackbut*, pursued the fray with furious *brio*—" . . . Mr. Newman must have been an enthusiast himself once upon a time—for surely no one who was born into this world plain Master Roberts would re-christen himself 'earnest new man' unless he thought he was one. . . ." More entertaining than illuminating, these exchanges nevertheless served notice that serious music lacking a label (e.g., Twelve-tone, Expressionist, Gebrauchsmusik), political alignment, or well-placed friends was in danger of losing its audience, going underground and becoming at last a purely spiritual exercise. And that, of course, is what happened: van Dieren—a figure comparable in stature to Berg—died in 1936 with by far the greater body of his work in manuscript (where, unfortunately, it remains); Gray, an ambitious composer whose opera *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* ranks with the best of Tippett, died without publishing a note; while Sorabji, who is still composing, ceased to publish after 1931.

Needless to say, this first commercial recording of Sorabji's music is of considerable interest and possesses as well the free-market virtue of placing the music directly and with the least commotion in the hands of those interested. When I took up Sorabji several years ago one began tracking down scores through out-of-print dealers—only to find them unplayable by even the ordinarily well-equipped musician. Scalpers were offering badly dubbed tapes of Donald Garvelman's 1970 broadcast on Sorabji—which included tapes of the composer performing several of his works—for \$150 or more. For awhile there was talk of placing copies of the Sorabji tapes in "key archives" (for whose delectation, one wonders?). Now that the obvious course has been taken, what have we?

First and last, pianism of the utmost elaboration in which the accommodation of 10 fingers to the keyboard is taken to its limit: Chopin and Liszt have been easily digested, Alkan (with his often perverse humor) taken in stride, and the more recondite reaches of Godowsky and Busoni mined with alacrity. An interest in exotic meters, inherited from Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit* through the distorting lens of Szymanowski's *Masques*, while the insouciant *Toccata* (1920) is etched in the steely-clean staccato of much neoclassical writing. In short, it is a virtuoso's virtuoso—and a fascinating, original mind—at work sorting through the varieties of modern musical experience. In this pilgrimage Sorabji has taken Busoni for his guide, and, like Busoni, his view is not exclusive but synoptic.

Reviewing a Busoni recital in *The Sackbut* for March 1921 Sorabji wrote, "[Busoni's] *Fantasia da Camera* on *Carmen* is a necromantic modern development of the operatic fantasia so superbly initiated by Liszt—and *what* a development! The vulgar commonplace Bizet tunes lose all their own identity, although not rhythmically distorted, and are for the time being 'controlled' by Busoni in a way that recalls the control of a psychic sensitive by some powerful discarnate personality pouring its will down through the medium." And he gloats that "It was amusing to feel the audience at the Wigmore a little horrified and frightened by something the like of which they had certainly never known before." When Sorabji attempted something similar the following year in his *Pastiche on the "Habanera" from Carmen* the result was revealing: perhaps the readiest way to grasp an unfamiliar idiom is to hear what it does to familiar material and the surreal cascades which overtake the "Habanera" must be heard to be believed.

This in some measure prepares us for the prolix utterance of the *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (1929-30) which is modeled after Busoni's *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*. Busoni begins from the final uncompleted fugue of Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, prefacing it with a chorale and garnishing it with variations and a cadenza in the course of which he completes Bach's fugue four times, presenting as he goes an exhilarating and uniquely expressive review of contrapuntal technique from Bach's time to his own, circa 1918. Busoni's transfiguration of Bach is the direct counterpart to Joyce's transmogrification of Homer in *Ulysses*. In both works a signal item of past art has been re-created as an historical

compendium and a prophetic fiat. While the *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* is music's *Ulysses*, the *Opus Clavicembalisticum* is its *Finnegans Wake*. Sorabji has alchemized the stylistic oddments with which he merely played before into an idiom rich and strange, compounded of every conceivable pianistic figure, comprehensive of the full range of Western music and wedded (from a spiritual as well as a stylistic need) to the contemplative, wailing melismas of Eastern and East Indian music. Where Busoni's piece is a model of concision, lasting a little over 20 minutes and making merely heroic demands on performers and audience, the *Opus Clavicembalisticum* is said to play two-and-a-half hours, sprawling in dimensions which may only be termed *cosmic* and which presuppose a pianistic superman as executant. Unfortunately, this recording gives us only the first two sections—some 13 minutes—stopping just short of the first fugue and leaving us on the threshold of Sorabji's maturity, the work of his last half-century.

Sorabji assumes that nothing is impossible and in Habermann's hands what is, at the mildest, wildly improbable becomes fluent, persuasive, and magnificent. In this overloaded writing he makes everything sound—a stupendous achievement—by deploying an incisive staccato against pedal-held sonority, though at the cost of replacing color with a certain platinum monotony. The recorded sound is close and clean, and MHS' production, for once, is a pleasure from beginning to end. The album cover reproduces a manuscript page, with the music running over four staves, against a photograph of the composer roughly contemporary with the pieces on disc. And notes by Sorabji's friend, Donald Garvelman, are informed and concise. My pressing was flawless.

Certainly this is an epoch-making release: one hopes that it will also prove to have been pathbreaking, that is, that MHS will offer us more Sorabji. And more Habermann.

A. C.

\* \* \*

This first recording of any music by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji is an astonishing issue which is at least 50 years overdue, for Sorabji himself could have recorded his piano works any time from about 1930 on. The reasons why he should have but hasn't are a large part of his life story.

Yet "life story" is not quite the correct term. For Sorabji is an intensely private individual who has kept details of his own life to himself. Reasoning that it is nobody's business when and where he was born, he gives out no information on the subject, but used to go as far as providing deliberately misleading dates and places to what he called "lexicographical *canaille*" ("riffraff"). He is usually considered to have been born in 1892, and has lived in England nearly all his life. He studied music privately, and before the First World War, he was familiar with the music of Bartók, Kodály, Busoni, Strauss, Debussy, Ravel, Delius, Scriabin, and Schoenberg. There weren't many in England who knew as much then as Sorabji did about contemporary music and musical life.

His first compositions came in 1915, songs which he now regards with scorn. A year or so later he completed a piano concerto (the first of about nine compositions for piano and orchestra), and in 1917 wrote the first of his over 50 pieces for solo piano. He played a few times in public from about 1920 to 1936, always (as far as I can tell) his own piano music which, as early as the mid-1920s, had become so long, so difficult, and so different from things by nearly anyone else that very few people could understand it. It was the lack of understanding on the part of the public, resulting possibly from poor performances of his music by others, which was responsible in part for Sorabji ceasing to perform in public after December 16, 1936. The world lost something precious that day: my own research on Sorabji suggests he was indeed a masterly pianist whose technical abilities were staggering. By his own admission, though, he never liked to practice and has had a "pathological aversion" to audiences: that, too, undoubtedly led to his withdrawal. The whole routine of concert life was never for him.

But the withdrawal went further than his ceasing to perform. For years Sorabji let it be known that he did not want his music played in public by anyone else either. The music's demonic technical demands and its profuse ornamentation, textural complexity, and (at times) nonwestern aesthetic were likely a good part of what made it, as far as Sorabji was concerned, "neither intended for, nor suitable for [performance] under present, or indeed any foreseeable conditions." Recent writers, including myself, have suggested that Sorabji placed an outright ban on public performance of his music, possibly as early as 1936. But there was no public statement to this effect and no recall of copies of his 14 published works; in fact Sorabji continued to encourage a few pianists such as Egon Petri in their interest in his music. The unofficial ban was there, to be sure, but public performances by others under ideal circumstances probably remained a remote possibility to him.

Sorabji's near-total retreat into privacy did not deter him from writing music. Except for a few years around 1970, he has composed steadily from 1915 to the present. Most of his music remains in manuscript, and most of his major works are of such huge size and scope that they may well never be heard. One engaging explanation of why he has written music which defies nearly all attempts to come to grips with it is written by Sorabji himself:

Why do I write as I do? Why did (and do) the artists-craftsmen of Iran, India, China, Byzantine-Arabic Sicily (in the first and last of which are my own ancestral roots) produce the sort of elaborate highly wrought work they did? That was their way. It is also mine. If you don't like it, because it isn't the present-day done thing, that is too bad, but not for *me*, who couldn't care less. In fact, to me your disapproval is an indirect compliment and much less an insult than your applause, when I consider some of your idols.

Doubtless you are by now forming some idea of Sorabji's character. He can certainly be violent in his scathing denunciations of people and music he considers beneath him, but he is equally forceful (and sincere!) in his praise, for example of certain composers who have also been "outsiders:" Mahler, Rachmaninoff, Szymanowski, van Dieren, Alkan, and especially Busoni all come to mind. Space limitations here preclude further illustration from Sorabji's extensive critical writings, but like his music they are infinitely resourceful, vividly detailed, and overwhelming in their structural power.

And so to the present record, which incidentally has Sorabji's full blessing. It has two drawbacks. The first is nobody's fault, and that is that the essential Sorabji, represented by complete two-or-three-hour piano experiences like *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, *Sonata No. 5*, *Sequentia Cyclica*, or *Symphony No. 2*, is not what Michael Habermann is offering here. Of course not. Someday maybe we will get that, but it must be realized that the pieces recorded here, while stylistically typical of Sorabji's music to 1930 and a magnificent introduction to him, are just that: an introduction.

The second drawback concerns the Musical Heritage Society itself. Its mail-order business leaves much to be desired. I have never heard so many complaints about a record company's operations. I myself am still waiting for a replacement of a record which arrived last October three months late and *in pieces*. I also recall MHS telling me it did not carry Arthur Farwell's Piano Quintet—when that work was sitting in its own recent catalog. I hear that it even stated this Sorabji record was "out of stock" about a month after it was issued and long before this review was written. Let us hope that its reputation will improve when its records are sold in retail stores.

And now for the good news. The music on this record is wonderful and the performances stupendous unto the uncanny.

Several different characteristics of Sorabji's music are represented, from delicate, dream-like music (influenced somewhat by Scriabin and Ravel) to music of such dynamism and sweep, such intricacy and color, that it defies description almost as much as it

does performance. Included here are two "take-offs," one on the *Habanera* from *Carmen*, the other on different aspects of Spanish music. Are these take-offs just funny or do they show more reverent attitudes towards their sources? Listen and decide for yourselves . . .

For listening is what all this music demands. Lots of people have offhandedly flipped through one or two of the few published Sorabji scores and pronounced them unplayable and their creator a crackpot. The joke is now on them.

It remains to say that the sound of this record is acceptable (volume level is a little low, brightness could be greater), and the surfaces fine. Donald Garvelmann's jacket notes are as good a written introduction to Sorabji as one can find.

Don't pass this one up, even if you have to try hard to get it. Sorabji, in my opinion, has written piano music as important as any from this century. It's too bad that he never became a performer of his own music and never made records. But if he had done all that, maybe he would never have written the music he did. That would have been an even greater tragedy.

P. R.

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