

SORABJI: "Introito" and "Preludio-Corale" from *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (1929-30); *In the Hothouse* (1918); *Toccata* (1920); *Fantaisie Espagnole* (1919); *Fragment* (1926, rev. 1937); Pastiche: "Habanera" from Bizet's *Carmen* (1922). Michael Habermann, piano. MusicMasters MM 20015. \$8.98.

Grandier than a Gothic cathedral. More intricate than a Rubik's cube. Rarer than a Mahler concerto. It's the music of Supercomposer.

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji would likely agree. Not prone to false modesty, he flatly declared in 1933: "My *Opus Clavicembalisticum* has been described as the greatest and most important work for piano since the *Art of Fugue*, the *Forty-Eight*, or the *Diabelli Variations*, as indeed it is."

Extravagant claims such as these might understandably lead us to dismiss this composer out of hand as a pretentious quack. Yet caution is advised: There is more to Sorabji than what appears on the surface. To begin with, he is not Indian, but rather of Persian and Spanish-Sicilian descent, and was born in 1892 under the Christian name Leon Dudley in England, where he was raised and still lives. Though largely self-taught in music, no one who has heard or studied Sorabji's stupendous scores would be inclined to call him an amateur. As his friend Donald Garvelmann has aptly explained in the informative notes to this important new release: "Large form is achieved by a kind of continuous narrative movement or evolution. Phrases are asymmetrical, textures

polyrhythmic, harmony polychromatic, and an infinite variety is maintained by the avoidance of sequential repetition and by the use of an enormous array of ornamental decoration.... Often the singular effect that the entire keyboard is being put into action at one and the same time is produced."

Sorabji's music possesses a unique sound and character that words can only begin to convey. That said, some further indication of its nature can be provided: It synthesizes Eastern-flavored melodic shapes and rhythms, a Lisztian bril-

liance (but without any flashiness for its own sake), a contrapuntal texture modeled on but far more complex than that of Busoni, who Sorabji greatly admired, and a transcendental mien suggestive of those two composers as well as Alkan and Ives. Mix this with a Scriabinesque febrility and impressionistic aura and you arrive at a potent blend indeed.

Why, then, are Sorabji and his music so neglected? For one thing, the physical demands are so great as to virtually preclude performance. Not only is his piano music staggeringly difficult technically,

but it is of labyrinthine construction and often astonishing length: the *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, of which only a small fraction is presented here, includes a theme with 44 variations and a pascaglia with 81 variations, and runs nearly three hours in some 252 densely packed pages—the longest non-repetitious piano piece known to man. Further, after 1931 Sorabji, for whatever reason, ceased publishing his new music, and by 1950 had retreated into virtual isolation. He continued composing, but stopped writing his provocative musical essays and at least tacitly discouraged public performance of his output.

The unknown generates interest. And so rumors of a great eccentric composer gradually grew to astronomic proportions; pirate tapes of Sorabji's own performances of his music commanded commensurately astronomic prices. At long last, in 1975, Sorabji granted approval to play his scores to Michael Habermann, the pianist heard on this, the first commercial recording of his music. Habermann's interpretations thus have the obvious sanction of the composer (who says of the pianist: "... admirable, sounds like my own playing"), and in fact they appear to be extremely sympathetic and penetrating.

It is a pity that all the Sorabji pieces recorded by MusicMasters date from 1930 or before. How has Sorabji's style changed and matured since? And what of his equally fabled orchestral works? Only their publication and performance can supply the answers.

This is not the time or place to assess Sorabji's ultimate significance. We have before us music of uncommon vision and imagination; that is more than enough for me.

R. D. H.



MM 20015

Sorabji: A Legend in His Own Time

Introito and Preludio-Chorale from "Opus Clavicembalisticum"; *In the Hothouse*; *Toccata*; *Fantaisie Espagnole*; *Fragment*; Pastiche: *Habanera* from Bizet's "Carmen." Michael Habermann, Piano.

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KEYNOTE