

EXPLORING MUSIC

A Historical Record

I recall reading two or three years ago about a current American composer of considerable reputation among his peers (said to have particular admiration for his intellectual prowess) who announced that henceforth no one would get to perform his music. As I recall, his stance was occasioned by pique at not having been played enough, or at being undervalued, or treated with insufficient respect, or some such thing. My feeling at the time was, well, that was his business, and--not having suffered the throes of deprivation since--I thought no more about it.

The appearance of this record, however, set me thinking about artists who say to their fellow men, "No, my art is mine and you can't have it." One is inclined to remark, "How childish!," but it seems to me that matter goes beyond childishness: If art is not intended to communicate (communication requiring at least two to qualify), why bother? Oh, I have half a dozen books in my head that I might write, but without which I've decided the world will be just as well off. Yet to go to all the effort to create something and then to tuck it away in a dark closet (where, with a flashlight, the creator can gloat over it at will) strikes me as futile at best and immoral at worst.

A case in point is the man who calls himself Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji. The histories of modern music and of contemporary British music on my shelves ignore him. Forty years ago, when I was on an English music kick, I used to encounter articles by him, and I think I recall seeing a few pieces of daunting piano music, possibly in Chester or Curwen editions. But I doubt that I've been reminded of him since, up to now, no doubt because he is another who decided not to let us hear his music.

I had supposed Sorabji long since dead, but, at least at this writing, he seems to be very much alive at the age of 88, as of Aug. 4, 1980. His given names were originally Leon Dudley and he was born in the London suburb of Chingford. Like Zubin Mehta's, his father was a Parsee (not one who is parsed, but an Indian Zoroastrian); his mother, however, was of mixed Spanish and Sicilian descent. His knowledge of music came, we are told variously, from private training or from his own efforts. He apparently was blessed with remarkable native ability and determination,

for he became an extraordinary composer, a formidable (if somewhat eccentric) critic, and a virtuoso's virtuoso at the keyboard.

In the first quarter of this century he concertized, apparently loathing every moment of it, and his loathing increased with each experience. Eventually he quit. But he went even further: In 1950 he proclaimed that there would be no performances of his music by anybody nowhere and under no circumstances (though he did it in proper grammar). Since not a great deal of his music was available, save in manuscript, this had the effect of pretty much closing it off at the tap.

This fact helps explain why music historians do not write about him, it being difficult to talk about music unavailable to both the ear and the eye. We are told that it is of extraordinary technical difficulty. We are told that it is incredibly complex. We are told that he successfully, and unexpectedly, combines Oriental (Indian) and Occidental tendencies. We are told that many of his works are of mammoth size. We are told that if he has any counterpart at all, it may be Busoni. We know that he has written several symphonies for unorthodox combinations, five concerti for piano and orchestra, five piano sonatas, and such piano works as the enormous *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (apparently a sort of Bachian summation of keyboard possibilities up to 1930), the *Concerto* to be played by me alone, and the *100 Transcendental Studies*.

Well, folks, in his Golden Years Mr. Sorabji seems to have suffered a change of heart. Along came Paris-born Michael Habermann, pupil of Pärt, Somer, and Ponce, among others, and apparently bearded the lion in his den. Sorabji, like a number of prominent critics, was knocked off his pins; he is quoted as saying that Habermann sounds like him (Sorabji) and that, moreover, he has memorized the music--something the composer has never been able to do. He has given Mr. Habermann his blessing and supplied him with pieces not allowed out for half a century, and the results are here. Make no mistake: this is a historical record.

David M. Greene

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Musical Heritage Society

NEW RELEASE

One for the Record Books

PIANO MUSIC BY KAIKHOSRU SHAPURJI SORABJI

Introtio 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).



HABERMANN

Michael Habermann, Piano



SORABJI

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji is one of the most innovative and important composers of the 20th century: truly a legend in his own time. "Who?" you should be muttering to yourself by now. According to Grove's, "His pianoforte writing is such that very few, even among virtuosos, can attempt it, while the music's intellectual qualities demand gifts of interpretation that are even rarer."

But in 1940, Sorabji stated that his music "is neither intended nor suitable for it (the world) under present, or, indeed, any foreseeable conditions, and no performance at all is vastly preferable to an obscene travesty." That ban was in effect until 1975, when Sorabji heard the remarkable pianist Michael Habermann, and enthusiastically granted his permission for Mr. Habermann to perform his works. This is the first recording of Sorabji's works in history.

The first piece on this momentous recording is from his famous work, the *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (1929-30). Its 12 movements include a theme with forty-nine variations, and a three part Interlude containing a Toccata, an Adagio, and a Passacaglia with 81 variations! The 252 page score, weighing four pounds, is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records.

The critics seem to agree with Mr. Sorabji's opinion of Michael Habermann's playing Sorabji: "Admirable, sounds like my own playing." *New York Times*: Mr. Habermann seemed to take the wildest keyboard demands in stride: "High Fidelity Musical America: "downright sensational!"

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