

THE SUN



March 10, 1996

Baltimore, Maryland

\$1.66

ARTS

SUNDAY

Classical music: Pianist Michael Habermann beautifully performs the long, difficult works of composer Kalkhosru Shapurji Sorabji. [Page 8H]

Classical Sounds

Section H

In Habermann's hands, Sorabji sounds beautiful

By **STEPHEN WIGLER**
SUN MUSIC CRITIC

Kalkhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Works for Piano, performed by Michael Habermann (Elan CD 82284).

The English composer Sorabji (1892-1988), the son of a Spanish-Sicilian mother and a Parsee father, is a singular figure in 20th-century music. He was an important music critic — he was an early adherent of the music of Gustav Mahler — and he was the composer of what are among the longest pieces ever written: One of his piano works, the "Opus clavicembalisticum," takes approximately three hours to perform, and his "Jani" Symphony is 1,000 pages in length.

The music is immensely difficult — it is written on at least three staves and sometimes as many as seven — and has tended to attract pianists, such as the late John Ogdon, with huge techniques and intellects and curiosities that border on the obsessive. In his last years, Sorabji's favorite interpreter was Michael Habermann, a musician who lives in Baltimore and teaches at the Preparatory Division of the Peabody Institute. Habermann seems to have devoted his life to Sorabji's work, and the composer was and is lucky to have such an interpreter. Habermann makes Sorabji's fiendishly difficult music — some of the pieces make the Godowsky paraphrases seem almost like five-finger exercises — sound extravagantly beautiful.

While difficult to play, the works recorded here are by no means forbidding to the listener. "Gulistán" (Persian for "Rose Garden") is a luscious, sumptuously textured 30-minute nocturne that exerts a hypnotic spell. If "Gulis-

Hear the music

To hear Michael Habermann play works by Sorabji, call *Sundial* at (410) 783-1800 and enter the four-digit code 6190. For other local Sundial numbers, see the Sundial directory on Page 2A.

tan" (1940) seduces the listener into a meditative, dream-like trance, the contemporaneous "Quaere reliqua hujus materiel inter secretiora" ("Seek the rest of this matter among the things that are more secret") should wake him up. This 17-minute piece — the Latin title comes from a ghost story by Montague Summers — is filled with jagged accents and frequent cataclysms that come to a terrifying climax.

Sorabji wrote long because he chose to. That such is the case is demonstrated by one piece on Habermann's disc whose playing time of two minutes or so takes only a little longer than it does to pronounce the name of the title, "Fantasietina sul nome illustre dell'egregio poeta Christopher Grieve ossia Hugh M'Diarmid" ("Tiny Little Fantasy on the Illustrious Name of the Distinguished Poet Christopher Grieve, i.e. Hugh M'Diarmid)."

Sorabji was clearly a composer whose music defied performance in a number of ways. (He did not publish any of his music after 1930 and forbade performances of it between 1946-1976.) But these piano pieces should be investigated by listeners with a taste for Szymanowski, Alkan and Scriabin or by those who enjoy hearing impossible-to-play pieces mastered so brilliantly as they are here.