

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji

A Maximalist on Polycarbonate

Stephen Estep

On a freezing day in November, 2014, a dozen hardy souls ventured to a small hall in downtown Chicago and buckled themselves in to hear the Herculean pianist Jonathan Powell perform the eight-hour-long *Sequentia Cyclica super Dies Irae* by the composer Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892–1988). That may sound grueling, but listening to music in that strange temple for so many hours was one of the highlights of my life. If Sorabji's name rings any bells, it's probably because of his *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (O.C. from hence), which lasts a little under five hours. In New York in 2004, I heard that entire work, Donna Amato's amazing performance of Sorabji's Fifth Piano Symphony, Richard Thompson at Irving Plaza, and Mahler's Third Symphony with the New York Philharmonic. When Mahler's Third is the shortest concert you go to in a week, something unusual is going on!

Sorabji's fearsome reputation was long defined by his seclusion, the scope and baffling intricacy of his music, and a misinterpreted "ban" on public performances; debunking *that* half-truth has itself become a cliché. Some time after another pianist mangled the O.C. in 1936, the composer required any public performances to be approved by him first. "No performance at all is vastly preferable to an obscene tragedy," he declared. He soon retired from the stage himself, and later from music criticism; his isolation grew after he left London in the 1950s, and he stopped composing entirely in 1968. At last in the 1970s, pianists began to perform and record his pieces, and a few radio and television specials were made. Alistair Hinton, who now heads the Sorabji Archive (sorabji-archive.co.uk), befriended him in 1972, prompting him to take up the pen again. More recordings followed, including the entire O.C. done five years before his death. Though Sorabji seemed perfectly content composing for his own satisfaction, he must have been happy to spend his twilight knowing that others saw the value of his work.

His virtuosity is in the lineage of Chopin, Liszt, Alkan, Godowsky, and Busoni; he uses nearly every technique known to man and a few known only to gods. Bach's counterpoint and Debussy's harmonic innovations were a strong influence, as were Scriabin, Reger, Delius, and Szymanowski. For form, he often looked back to the Baroque era's chorale preludes, toccatas, pascaglias, and fugues. The ornamentations and improvisations of Eastern music defined his textures (he was born in England to a Zoroastrian Parsi father and an English mother). He's not shy about dissonance, but tonality is always present. Michael Habermann's albums of shorter pieces are the most manageable and affordable introduction to the variety of his work; Naxos reissued them in a three-disc set in 2015. The songs, mostly in French, ca-



pably recorded for Centaur by Elizabeth Farnum, are expressive and quite approachable. For the *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, seek out John Ogdon's vivid performance for Altarus.

This year Piano Classics released Jonathan Powell's outstanding recording of the *Sequentia Cyclica*, and I maintain that it's the best introduction to Sorabji's longer pieces. Since Sorabji usually works without conventional melodies and traditional development, the "Dies Irae" chant provides points of reference among the ornamentations, elongations, manipulations, abstractions, developments, and unravelings. Among the 27 sections are a nearly grotesque Spanish pastiche, a "Quasi Debussy," a pascaglia with 100 variations, and a *Tempo di Valzer* where the theme sheds the vestiges of its origins in the requiem and is transformed into a heady waltz that traverses an entire solar system. The whole thing

finishes with an 80-minute quintuple fugue. A fellow concert-goer in Chicago summed it up well: "It's not like you're listening to a really long piece; it's like you're listening to a normal-length piece in incredible detail." I just wish the physical release weren't spread over seven compact discs; why not offer it as DVD or Blu-Ray audio, maybe even in hi-res? (It could be worse. Sorabji's friends were pushing him to record the O.C. in the 1930s. The number of 78s that would require could be the subject of a comedy sketch.) Powell does hum and groan, but little of that bleeds through. His playing is normally muscular, but he's more sensitive and polished here than I've ever heard him.

Piano Classics also just released the nine-movement *Toccata Seconda*. Pianist Abel Sánchez-Aguilera plays it gracefully and brings an unexpected amount of expression to the fugue (Sorabji's fugues are usually death by eighth notes). While many people won't respond to Sorabji, and many detractors have offered dismissals ranging from the exquisite to the scatological, wrapped up in the dizzying counterpoint and thickets of polyrhythms is a singular musical style that is never cynical or nihilistic, often slyly humorous, sometimes positively steamy, and always transcendently optimistic at heart. And that's more than can be said for a lot of 20th century music. **tas**