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| Sorabji, Kaikhosru Shapurji (1892-1988) |
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| Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji was an English composer, pianist, music critic, and writer about music mainly associated with large-scale works for the piano lasting several hours and requiring virtuosity and stamina well beyond anything in the standard repertoire. He also wrote songs, chamber and orchestral works, piano concertos, and symphonies for organ. Most of his works are characterized by a highly ornamented impressionistic style and formal structures like variations and fugues, and rely on an individual style derived from his self-study of the music of composers whose music he championed all his life (Liszt, Alkan, Busoni, Medtner, Godowsky, Reger, Skryabin, Szymanowski). |
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Educated privately by tutors and without any formal music schooling other than brief studies with an obscure musician named Charles Trew, he began composing in 1914, around which time he changed his first names from Leon Dudley to Kaikhosru Shapurji after joining the Parsi community. His father set up a trust fund when he left wife and son to return to his business in India after a few years; this enabled them to live without being gainfully employed. He also covered the costs of publishing fourteen of his son’s works between 1921 and 1931, most of which baffled the critics. Between 1924 and 1949, as a music critic for *The New Age* and *The New English Weekly*, two newspapers promoting guild socialism, he contributed (without payment) some six hundred concert reviews (and later of broadcasts and records) in which he praised his favourite composers without end and lashed out at those he disliked; he also published two books of essays.  A self-taught pianist, Sorabji was able to give (very problematic) readings of his works, more specifically the first performances of eight of them between 1920 and 1936, at which time an unsatisfactory rendering by someone else of the first part of his *Opus clavicembalisticum* led him to object to performances given without his consent. A self-proclaimed misanthropist estranged from English society as a result of his mixed ethnic background and his homosexual orientation, he withdrew at that time from public life to devote himself entirely to his music. He read voraciously on a wide variety of topics and expressed very opinionated views, often on non-musical issues, by means of numerous open letters. He played his music only to selected friends, with whom he entertained an extensive correspondence. In 1951 he left London for the Dorset village of Corfe Castle, where he lived as a recluse in a house he shared with his mother’s godson. He composed his last work in 1984 and died on 15 October 1988 in Winfrith Newburgh, near Dorchester. Works and Style Sorabji’s compositional output comprises 117 works totalling more than eleven thousand manuscript pages; these range from the four *Frammenti aforistici* (1977; 1 p.) to the *Messa grande sinfonica* (1955-61; 1,001 pp.). Next to thirty-three works ranging from one hundred to more than five hundred pages are another thirty-three works shorter than ten pages. More than half of his production is for piano alone, and many works for chamber ensemble or orchestra feature prominent piano parts laid out on systems of three or four staves and sometimes as many as seven. Sorabji often favoured evocative Latin and Italian titles like *Sequentia cyclica super “Dies irae” ex Missa pro defunctis* (1948-49; 335 pp.) and *Villa Tasca: mezzogiorno siciliano — evocazione nostalgica e memoria tanta cara e preziosa del giardino meraviglioso, splendido, tropicale* (1979-80; 47 pp.). A representative large-scale work is the twelve-movement *Opus clavicembalisticum* (1929-30; 253 pp.), which comprises a fifty-five-minute passacaglia and a forty-minute quadruple fugue.  Sorabji did not develop new idioms but extended to extremes of length and complexity those he found in his models; this can also be seen in the dense contrapuntal language consisting of several layers of sound with complex polyrhythms. The music alternates between the freely tonal (non-functional combinations of common chords) and the freely bitonal or atonal. Several works (or sections thereof) show how he translated into music the ornamental luxuriance of Oriental art. Sorabji was also interested in Persian literature, which inspired works like *Nocturne: Jāmī* (1928; 28 pp.) and *Gulistān: Nocturne for Piano* (1940; 28 pp.). His music, written in fair copy at a feverish pace without sketching or revising, often suggests extended improvisations. Compositional logic, in works other than the fugues, results from the constant variation of musical gestures.  **Reception:** Sorabji’s meeting in 1972 with the young Scottish composer Alistair Hinton led him to resume composition, from which he had begun to distance himself in 1962, only to stop completely in 1968. Hinton persuaded him to allow, starting in 1976, performances and recordings by selected pianists. Performances had so far been very scattered, not only for lack of permission, but also because requests were few. Sorabji’s music, for a long time almost unknown due to the rarity of the few published scores and to the existence of all the others only in manuscript form, began to experience wider dissemination when Hinton founded the Sorabji Archive in 1988, making all the music available in the form of photocopies. New engraved editions prepared by performers and musicologists now offer many works in a legible form solving many notational problems.  Sorabji has always suffered from misleading, if not downright false, information about his life, which he himself contributed to propagate. Up to the early 1990s, it was even impossible to have an accurate idea of his compositional output because no complete list existed, and the available ones were fraught with mistakes; several unknown manuscripts were also discovered after his death. Performances and recordings began to multiply, especially starting around the year 2000, particularly thanks to the pianist Jonathan Powell and the Altarus label.  Sorabji knew that he was an outsider, and relished it. He wrote works that were “entirely alien and antipathetic to the fashionable tendencies prompted, publicized and plugged by the various ‘establishments’ revolving around this or that modish composer”. Despite numerous stylistic links to composers then little-known but now recognized as important in twentieth-century music, Sorabji remains apart from the mainstream, and not only as a result of the virtuosity and stamina that his music requires. List of works Fifty-seven works for piano, including five toccatas, six sonatas, seven symphonies, ten multimovement piano works comprising themes and variations, passacaglias, and fugues (these procedures are also used in the toccatas, sonatas, and symphonies), and a set of one hundred *Études transcendantes*  Ten works for piano consisting of transcriptions or arrangements of other composers’ works (Bach, Bizet, Chopin, Ravel, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Richard Strauss)  Three symphonies for organ  Eleven works for piano and orchestra, including *Opusculum clavisymphonicum vel claviorchestrale* (1973-75; 334 pp.)  Seven works for orchestra, with or without voices, including *Symphony [no. 2], “Jāmī”, for Large Orchestra, Wordless Chorus, and Baritone Solo* (1942-51; 824 pp.) and *Messa grande sinfonica* for eight vocal soloists, two choirs, and orchestra (1955-61; 1001 pp.)  Seven works for chamber ensemble, including two quintets for piano and strings and two works with voices  Nineteen songs or sets of songs, including several on texts by Baudelaire and Verlaine, and one with organ accompaniment  One work for carillon and one work (not extant) for unknown forces |
| Further reading:  (Owen)  (Rapoport)  (Roberge, Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji: Musikmanuskripte)  (Roberge, Sorabji Resource Site)  (Roberge, Sorabji Resource Site)  (K. S. Sorabji)  (K. S. Sorabji)  (The Sorabji Archive) |