

- REVIEW -

Kaikhosru Sorabji's Letters to Philip Heseltine (Peter Warlock)

Edited by Brian Inglis and Barry Smith
Routledge, 2020
170 pp.

Writing in 1923, Philip Heseltine declared the Anglo-Indian composer Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892-1988) 'nothing short of a phenomenon in music history'.

Justifying his position in a sentence of mammoth proportion, Heseltine goes on:

... whether his music be thought good or bad it is certainly phenomenal that, in an age of change and disruption when distinctive style is rare and the greater part of the musical output is characterised by tentative experimentalism on the one hand and wholesale plagiarism on the other, a young man who has served no long apprenticeship in musical composition should suddenly present the world with a series of works exhibiting a mature and individual technique and a fully developed and entirely personal style of musical expression.¹

Whatever one's opinion of his music, Sorabji's status as a historical phenomenon could hardly be contested. Works such as his four-hour, fiendishly demanding *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (1929-30) pushed the large-scale piano genre to new technical, physical, and aesthetic limits, exhibiting a level of musical experimentalism unprecedented in early twentieth-century Britain. Moreover, having composed around sixteen thousand pages of music in his lifetime,² his creative output is no less than the scale of his works. Yet Sorabji's interest as a phenomenon of music history in a broader sense stems also from his position as an outsider. Lacking a conservatoire education, mixed race, gay, anti-religious, anti-Conservative, and self-defined 'ultra-modernist', there are few aspects of Sorabji's identity that fail to contradict the status quo of his milieu.

It is important to note that this book does not chronicle an even correspondence between Heseltine and Sorabji. The latter failed to keep Heseltine's letters, and all that remains is a single postcard from Heseltine of twenty-two words (p. 139).

However, the book does include snippets from Heseltine's correspondence with other confidantes, which provides fascinating insights into his changing perception of Sorabji. In the early letters there is bemusement and incredulity at Sorabji's arrogance and aggressive familiarity. Yet the later letters of the 1920s demonstrate an artistic and personal respect for the younger musician. The volume also provides illuminating context to its narrative by interspersing the letters with excerpts from contemporary articles from various newspapers and periodicals.

The thirty-eight letters and postcards by Sorabji to Heseltine represent the main crux of the book. They provide many insights into Sorabji's perception of his own identity from late 1913 up to Heseltine's early death in 1930. They are faithfully reproduced in full for the first time, preserving the author's own idiosyncratic syntax, punctuation, spelling, and grammar.³ The introduction draws out many of the themes engendered in the letters. Sorabji's attitude to his racial identity is especially illuminating. He was proud of his heritage and detested being referred to as a 'British' composer,⁴ but equally used his Western credentials to curb racial discrimination. When told, for instance, by a *Musical Standard* reader that 'being an Oriental' his opinions on Western music were worthless, Sorabji countered that being entirely educated in the West his 'conception of music was also an Occidental one' (p. 57, latter of February 1914). On the other hand, attacking Heseltine's detection of 'Oriental sumptuousness' in Cyril Scott's Piano Sonata, Sorabji insisted 'will you believe it from an Oriental when he tells you there is absolutely nothing Oriental about this work' (p. 73, letter of 14 April 1914). Sorabji goes on to suggest, farfetchedly, that works of a 'genuine Oriental feeling' include Rimsky-Korsakov's *Antar* and Granville Bantock's *Omar Khayyám*. Needless to say, Rimsky-Korsakov's claims to be 'oriental' have been shown to be far from genuine, and he certainly never travelled to the East.⁵ As for Bantock, the dedicated Wagnerian, there is more of *Parsifal* than the exotic East in *Omar Khayyám*.⁶ Sorabji's detection of the Orient in these works were a figment of his imagination, as the orient in music only ever can be.

In terms of Sorabji's homosexuality, Inglis maps this onto the flamboyant and 'camp' register of the composer's prose. While Sorabji's sexuality is clearly evident in the letters (in the later ones most overtly), most problematic is Inglis's assertion

that 'Sorabji may have explored his sexuality *through his compositions* as much as, or instead of, his embodied life' (p. 11) or that his 'sexuality may have been operating through his music as much as, or rather than, through his body' (p. 17). Sorabji never makes such an assertion overt or implicit in his letters, and equating gay composers with gay music may be a *non sequitur*. Admittedly, Sorabji believed that a composer's music was a refraction of their personality, as he opined to Heseltine:

[n]ow in dealing with Music, Musicians and Critics treat everything as though fixed by certain immutable laws and standards entirely ignoring the one great vital factor temperament. It is difference of temperament [that] gives us different kinds of Music from different composers, yet this all-important factor is ignored! (p. 44, letter of 8 December 1913).

Interestingly, in criticising the music of Tchaikovsky it was precisely musical flamboyance that Sorabji so despised. No source available in 1914 could have informed Sorabji of Tchaikovsky's homosexuality even if he had cared enough to seek it out. Nevertheless, he lambastes the 'vile bombast and filthy, flashy, trashy, vulgar, crude, coarse blatancy' of Tchaikovsky's music (p. 53, letter of 3 February 1914). Later, we are told his 'morbid self-pity' ill befits the 'root of the Russian character' (p. 61, letter of March 1914). The macho Rachmaninov is Sorabji's nineteenth-century Russian composer of choice; incidentally, a heterosexual composer (married to his first cousin) as much prone to flamboyance as Tchaikovsky. In attempting to codify gay music, by its 'campness' or otherwise, one invariably falls foul of codifying it against some arbitrary measure of musical heteronormativity.

Another theme that emerges from the letters is Sorabji's fluid religious identity. While he heartily opposed Christianity ('a living lie, a gigantic fraud, and an unspeakable hypocrisy', p. 47, letter of 6 January 1914), he identified variously with Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and the occult. Also drawn out by Inglis is his 'compositional awakening' and 'stylistic construction'; the letters as a whole chart Sorabji's journey from an erudite music enthusiast in the earlier letters to a professional composer in the later ones. Both Heseltine and Sorabji were, as Inglis

suggests, 'brothers-in-arms' in their shared polemical, confrontational, and counter-critical attitudes (pp. 18-19).

No attention is devoted by Inglis to Sorabji's politics, though there is much evidence that the composer was identifying with the left-wing sentiments of artistic circles of the time. Sorabji evidently saw British Conservatism as a resistive force against modern music; in one of his early letters he wrote to Heseltine

I feel very sorry for you in Oxford. You must feel like a fish out of water – musically in that Toriest of Tory towns. My old tutor is an Oxford Man and anything in the least progressive is anathema to him. 'Stagnation' seems to be their motto! (p. 45, letter of 8 December 1913).

In 1915, during the First World War, Sorabji admitted to reading pamphlets published by the Independent Labour Party and was aghast at the 'hideous suffering and mutilation' of war. He goes on: 'to think that it is all for the sake of the skins and pockets of the bloody swines who "run" countries and peoples for their own profit!' (p. 97, letter of 24 August 1915). Inconsistently, however, Sorabji is happier to apply these anti-establishment, anti-elitist sentiments to Germany than to British colonialism in India. While he posits the hope that the 'crushing of Germany' might result in the 'explosion of the myth of German "culture"' (p. 84, letter of 8 September 1914),⁷ in the same letter he states '[w]e [Indians] have always felt, in spite of indignities and clumsiness that England has meant well by us' (p. 86).

The editorial quality of the volume is high. The letters are accompanied with editorial footnotes that provide welcome explanations of many of the people and events in the letters, and the volume is appended by a comprehensive though not overburdened bibliography. It may have been useful to open the book with a brief biography of Sorabji, and readers unfamiliar with the details of his early life would do well to begin with Appendix 3b, which reproduces Heseltine's 1924 biography from *A Dictionary of Modern Music and Musicians*.⁸ But minor quibbles aside, this volume represents a fascinating and valuable contribution to the patchy scholarly literature on Sorabji, as well as providing broader context of musical life in Britain in the early twentieth century. The book's most serious disappointment is its price; the publisher's quoted value of £115 for a book whose main text barely exceeds

150 pages seems unjustifiably high and does Sorabji studies a disservice. One hopes that a more affordable paperback is in the pipeline.

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¹ P[hilip] H[eseltine], 'Music', *Weekly Westminster Gazette*, 13 August 1923, 148-49; repr. in the volume under review, Appendix 3a, 152-53.

² Sean Owen, 'Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji: An Oral Biography', unpublished doctoral dissertation (University of Southampton, 2006), 2.

³ A heavily edited partial selection of the letters has previously been published: Kenneth Derus, 'Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine', in Paul Rapoport (ed.), *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1992), 195-255.

⁴ 'I will not be called a "British" composer. Heart mind body and soul [sic] I am Indian' (p. 99, letter of 11 February 1916).

⁵ See Adalyat Issiyeva, 'Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and His Orient', in Marina Frolova-Walker (ed.), *Rimsky-Korsakov and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 145-66.

⁶ In a later letter, Sorabji declares of *Omar Khayyām* 'It seems steeped in the spirit of our East, which is probably the reason it appeals to me so strongly', p. 57, letter of February 1914.

⁷ Anti-German sentiments, predictably, run throughout the wartime letters. See, for instance, the criticism of German singers for their inferior vocal diction compared with the British, French, and Russians (p. 93-94, letter of 2 March 1915).

⁸ Arthur Eaglefield Hull (ed.), *A Dictionary of Modern Music and Musicians* (London: Dent, 1924), 469. Other useful concise biographies are available from *Grove Music Online* (by Paul Rapoport and Marc-André Roberge) and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. The latter mistakenly claims that Sorabji's mother was 'Spanish-Sicilian', an error peddled by the composer himself, when in fact Sean Owen has proven that she was British. See Owen, 'Sorabji: An Oral Biography', chapter 2, 'Genealogy and Ethnicity'.