

**K. S. Sorabji on Neglected Works  
Counter-Canon as Cultural Critique**

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

International Centre for Music Studies  
Newcastle University

February 2016



## Abstract

The critical writings of K. S. Sorabji (1892-1988) reveal a preoccupation with neglected works and obscure composers, music and musicians generally rejected upon reception and subsequently denied canonic acceptance. Together these comprise Sorabji's counter-canon, a collection of probing alternatives to the standard repertoire of London's interwar music culture and 'the mass of English "critical" opinion'. To what extent is Sorabji's curation of neglected composers and works an expression of his wilful contrarianism, of his attempt to 'square the critics' circle'? How might we otherwise begin to interpret his counter-canon as a means of cultural critique? This thesis considers both approaches as offering valid perspectives on Sorabji's critical aesthetic. In the first instance, Sorabji's attachment to the neglected is seen as a logical extension of his self-construction as *persona ingratisissima*: we repeatedly witness his identification with other marginalised, outsider figures in music. In the second, the neglected work comes to function as a hermeneutic proxy whereby Sorabji interprets the neglect of any given work as a negative symptom of socio-cultural decline. Both instances highlight Sorabji's critical eccentricity, his writing from a position 'out of the centre'. From this peripheral position his views on such composers as Busoni, Reger, Medtner or Bernard van Dieren – all treated as case studies here – offer sympathetic insight to the historical reception of works which have proven difficult to assimilate into orthodox accounts of music in the early twentieth century. Considered as an isolated and yet coherent body of music sharing a number of similarities, Sorabji's counter-canon of neglected works can be profitably figured in discussions surrounding 'lingering romanticism' (Watkins) and 'ambivalent modernism' (Frisch). As such, Sorabji's writings offer not only a cultural critique of interwar music practices in London, but prompt a revisionist account of the English reception of late-nineteenth-century romanticism and early-twentieth-century modernism.





## **Acknowledgments**

Thanks are owed to:

Professor David Clarke and Dr Ian Biddle for their support and supervision over the course of my studies at Newcastle University. The same goes for Dr Bethany Lowe (once Newcastle, now Plymouth University), who gave much encouragement and advice in the early days.

The Arts and Humanities Research Council of Great Britain for generously funding this project.

Professor J. P. E. Harper-Scott (Royal Holloway) and Dr Paul Attinello (Newcastle) for agreeing to examine the thesis and (surprisingly) passing it subject to mere minor corrections.

Alistair Hinton (The Sorabji Archive) and Professor Marc-André Roberge (Université Laval). It's to my regret that I did not seek their help more often.

Finally, to friends and family.



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# **Introduction**

## **A Hundred Axes to Grind**

### **Sorabji as Eccentric Cultural Critic**

I have never been so disgusted as I am now at the venomous and ignorant articles by that foreigner Sorabji.

J. MCKENZIE, 'Letter to the Editor: Musical Criticism' (1924)<sup>1</sup>

I shall be – I do not doubt – on occasion, coarse, vulgar, crude, venomous, spiteful and a number of other things that no one who tries to get round a critics' circle ought to be. Perhaps I'm trying to do something much worse . . . square . . . or even by-pass it!

SORABJI, *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (1947)<sup>2</sup>

If Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892-1988) is nowadays remembered primarily as a composer, in the first half of the twentieth century he made his name principally as a critic, writing articles and reviews for and open letters to a number of arts and music journals, including *The Sackbut*, *The New Age*, *The New English Weekly*, *The Musical Times*, *Music Review* and *Musical Opinion*. He went on to incorporate the ideas and views expressed in these and other publications into two collections of essays, *Around Music* (1932) and *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (1947).<sup>3</sup> Sorabji's writings throughout reveal a preoccupation with neglected works and obscure composers, music and musicians rejected upon reception and subsequently denied mainstream or canonic acceptance. But the general unpopularity of works by the likes of Busoni, Mahler, Reger, Medtner or Bernard van Dieren on the interwar London stage rarely if ever presented an opportunity for Sorabji either to admit the shortcomings of the music in question or the idiosyncrasies of his own opinion. For Sorabji, neither the music nor composer was at fault; the neglect of some of the works he valued most highly was rather a negative symptom of socio-cultural decline. The present thesis thus reads Sorabji's writings as a form of cultural criticism. By attempting to 'square' or 'bypass' the 'critics' circle' – which is to say, in seeking to circumvent the orthodoxies of taste established by some of London's most influential critics – Sorabji not only engaged in a wilful contrarianism

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<sup>1</sup> J. McKenzie, 'Letter to the Editor: Musical Criticism', *The New Age*, 36/6 (4 December 1924), 71.

<sup>2</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: Porcupine Press, 1947), 15-16.

<sup>3</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music* (London: Unicorn Press, 1932); *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: Porcupine Press, 1947). Sorabji's other writings are compiled in the *Collected Published Writings of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji*, Volume I (Book Chapters, Articles, Essays, Notes and Letters-to-the-Editor) and Volume II (Reviews). All are available from the Sorabji Archive ([www.sorabji-archive.co.uk](http://www.sorabji-archive.co.uk)).

which made the neglected work a point of particular interest, but iconoclastically sought to question the very authority of those institutions and individuals central to the formation of the early twentieth-century canon. The aims of the thesis are to present through Sorabji's writings an alternative reception history of composers and works which have proven difficult to assimilate into orthodox accounts of music in the first half of the twentieth century. Using primary-source evidence to pit Sorabji's views against those of what he identifies as 'the mass of English critical opinion', a context will emerge in which Sorabji's contrarianism is not merely oppositional: considered as an isolated and yet coherent body of music, Sorabji's counter-canon of neglected works can be profitably figured in historiographical discussions surrounding the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth in music, of a 'lingering romanticism' and 'ambivalent modernism'. As such, Sorabji's writings offer not only a cultural critique of interwar music practices in London, but prompt a revisionist account of the reception of late-nineteenth-century romanticism and early twentieth-century modernism.

### Squaring the critics' circle

In *Around Music*, Sorabji outlines the inner mechanism of the 'critics' circle', of how a self-selecting group came to promote the work of one musician over that of another. Here he describes a process of inclusion and, implicitly, exclusion integral to canon formation: 'In London [...] as in other musical centres, there are a series of interlocking concentric rings, movement of one wheel being automatically followed by the movement of others. These rings centre generally upon some composer, or executant, and one of the wheels is as often as not a critic'.<sup>4</sup> Matthew Riley, writing on the practice of criticism in the post-Victorian period, supports Sorabji's claim by noting that leading liberal critics 'were well connected': 'they shared interests and tastes [...], wrote books about one another, dedicated their works to one another, and wrote prefaces to one another's books'.<sup>5</sup> In coordination, this circle of critics was responsible for popularising the notion of an emergent 'English Musical Renaissance', the most persistent and influential trope in Anglocentric (if not more accurately Londoncentric) accounts of British music in the late

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<sup>4</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 169.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Riley, 'Liberal Critics and Modern Music in the Post-Victorian Age', in Matthew Riley (ed.), *British Music and Modernism, 1895-1960* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 15.



nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>6</sup> Not only did renaissance ideology inform the selection of native talent, it also influenced the reception of the same European works Sorabji would come to review in concert and on record. In this regard, Sorabji did not typically share the interests and tastes of his liberal-critical contemporaries – his more often than not ran counter to the consensus. As he declared in *Mi contra fa*, ‘by all the correct canons I am outside the pale’.<sup>7</sup> Sorabji was not so well connected, either – nor did he particularly wish to be. In *Around Music*, he writes that he seeks to be ‘as far as possible free from entangling connections with academies and colleges, those hotbeds of cliques, rings and toadies’.<sup>8</sup> In distancing himself from the activities and interests of the ‘critics’ circle’, Sorabji’s own criticism can be with good reason considered eccentric: he knowingly wrote from a position ‘out of the centre’.

Even so, eccentricity is predicated on a structural relationship between centre and margin, the one being defined and delimited by the other. As Sophie Aymes-Stokes and Laurent Mellet explain, the eccentric’s ‘supposedly erratic logic can only be understood in relation to the system’.<sup>9</sup> Vice versa, Henry Hemming suggests that investigation of ‘the English margins’ grants ‘an understanding of what constituted the English mainstream, in the sense that the centre defines itself in relation to its periphery’.<sup>10</sup> No matter, then, how oblique or tangential some of Sorabji’s comments and views appeared to be, they were always in some often circuitous or roundabout way topical to then-current musical affairs. Relevance was, after all, the primary role and duty of the professional critic. Despite these obligations, the neglected work – by definition hardly topical – was instrumental to Sorabji’s eccentric criticism in its function as a hermeneutic proxy, an absence enabling the interpretation of the present: from the peripheral position of any given piece marginalized or dismissed, Sorabji would typically work his way towards a critique of some of the central institutions and individuals governing the culture of music in London between the wars. For example, the neglect of Mahler’s Eighth Symphony might lead Sorabji to consider the chastening effects of Protestantism on an English audience, the poor broadcast quality of a performance of Szymanowski’s First Violin Concerto to the sins of the BBC, the anonymity of Alkan to a laxity of standards in London conservatoire

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 65.

<sup>8</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 170.

<sup>9</sup> Sophie Aymes-Stokes and Laurent Mellet, ‘Introduction’ to *In and Out: Eccentricity in Britain* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Hemming, *In Search of the English Eccentric* (London: John Murray, 2008), 43.

training, the dismissal of Medtner's 'Night Wind' sonata to the institution of modernism as fashion, the success of Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto at the expense of the Third to the entertainment industry's global campaign of dumbing down, and so on.

For many of Sorabji's readers, this approach was all too likely to lead irretrievably off-topic: 'there is little systematic thinking about music in this book', wrote Wilfrid Mellers in reviewing *Mi contra fa*, 'but rather a journalistic collection of personal opinions'.<sup>11</sup> For others, Sorabji's writings simply gave vent to his manifold frustrations, as Scott Goddard remarked of *Around Music*: 'These are the outspoken comments of a critic with a hundred axes to grind, an activity which he unblushingly pursues without counting the cost'.<sup>12</sup> Or, in the words of Clinton Gray-Fisk, 'Mr. Sorabji is no swordsman and disdains a rapier, but as the tireless wielder of a sledgehammer he is unrivalled'.<sup>13</sup> No doubt this all made for diverting – not to mention divisive – reading. Sorabji's criticism becomes particularly problematic, however, when he uses the neglected work not to take aim at certain powerful institutions and individuals – hegemonies by any other name – but to denounce the intelligence of the general concertgoing populace. He does so by way of appeal to the Darwinian view that 'The Judgment of Posterity' is 'the translation into terms of art of the doctrine of the survival of the fittest'.

But the survival of the fittest is the survival not of one species necessarily being stronger, swifter, more beautiful than another, very possibly the reverse of all these things, but the survival of one most suited to a particular environment or set of circumstances.<sup>14</sup>

Posterity would have to reserve judgment, for Sorabji did not look to the future optimistically:

In the face of the unmistakable evidence that intelligence is everywhere declining [...] there is every reason to suppose that the next generation and the next after that will become progressively worse, and still less competent to pass judgment on our opinions and verdicts than even we ourselves on those of a hundred years ago. The things that will in all probability survive in the esteem of 2027 will not be the 'Mass of Life', the Reger 100<sup>th</sup> Psalm, the Sibelius later symphonies, but the Rhapsody in Blue, Valencia and such.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wilfrid Mellers, 'Reviews of Books: *Mi contra Fa: The Immoralizings* [sic] of a Machiavellian Musician. By Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji', *Music and Letters*, 29/2 (April 1948), 205.

<sup>12</sup> Scott Goddard, 'Around Music. By Kaikhosru Sorabji', *Music and Letters*, 14/3 (July 1933), 287-8.

<sup>13</sup> Clinton Gray-Fisk, 'Sorabji ad infinitum!', *Musical Opinion* (May 1948), 306.

<sup>14</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 127

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

Unremittingly reactionary, Sorabji's writings in many places yearn for a return to the status quo ante. Through this romantic nostalgia, Sorabji presents the neglected work and obscure composer as anachronisms unsuited to early-twentieth-century conditions for reception. He sets out to invert 'the thesis' – most prominently articulated at the time by Ernest Newman – 'that no composer of importance has failed to gain the general recognition of his contemporaries', that 'certain musicians of the present time are not composers of the first importance, since this general recognition has been denied, it is implied, to them'. Comparing an audience of 1820 to one of 1920, and taking into account the 'widely different psychological, cultural and environmental influences' between them, Sorabji concludes that the latter is by far inferior in terms of its appreciative capacity, 'more especially when we bear in mind the progressive besotment it has undergone as a result of mass education, democracy-mongering and all its corollaries of popular press, cinema, broadcasting, and so on'.<sup>16</sup>

#### 'On Neglected Works': an obscure outline of Sorabji's musical 'taste'

Sorabji's February 1924 *Musical Times* article 'On Neglected Works' might serve as a suitable keynote introduction to this eccentric, counter-canonic method of criticism.<sup>17</sup> Its premiss – that 'Masterpieces, it is true, may be always welcome, but not the *same* masterpieces'<sup>18</sup> – is uncontentious. Indeed, it holds perhaps as true today as when Sorabji first wrote it. His comments on, for example, Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto or that of Grieg ('neither of these works is even a minor masterpiece'; the former 'is not a masterpiece at all, but a very ordinary piece of artizan work, long since worn out'<sup>19</sup>) or Dvořák's 'wretched grimcrack [*sic*]' *New World* Symphony<sup>20</sup> highlight just how little the situation has changed in nearly a century. Sorabji's proposed alternatives to these seemingly undisputed 'masterworks' do, however, raise certain questions about popular and unpopular culture, 'light classics' and their tenebrously leaden counterparts. When he suggests, for example, that Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* or Op. 111 sonata replace the *Moonlight*, that Liszt – who 'is known practically by his worst or inferior works'; the truly

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>17</sup> Sorabji, 'On Neglected Works', *The Musical Times*, 65/972 (February 1924), 127-9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 127-8.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 128.

representative numbers are ‘scarcely ever played’ and ‘practically unknown’ – would be better served by the B minor Ballade than the *Liebestraum*, that Sibelius’ Fourth Symphony (‘not a popular success *but* extremely good’) should replace the *Valse triste*, or the Prelude to Act III of Wagner’s *Siegfried* replace the *Tannhäuser* overture, we are given insight to Sorabji’s decentred critical aesthetic.<sup>21</sup> **Table 1** lists the works judged both popular and neglected in Sorabji’s *Musical Times* article. He covers a lot of ground – *terra* alternately *familiaris* and *incognita* – in what is a relatively short, some two-thousand-word piece. The interrelatedness of centre and margin can be inferred from those instances in which canonic composers are named only for Sorabji to exemplify them by what were then (and in many cases still are) considered to be their more obscure works. As this thesis will attempt to demonstrate in passing, the imputed obscurity of some or other neglected work in Sorabji’s counter-canon is often historically and, for that matter, geopolitically specific. These works are often characterised by a degree of complexity unprecedented in that composer’s *oeuvre* and are to be understood as obscure in the extent to which they were both unknown and unknowable to all but a minority of listeners and, more often than not and of necessity, score readers.

**Table 1**  
**Composers and works cited in Sorabji’s ‘On Neglected Works’**  
*The Musical Times*, 65/972 (February 1924), 127-9.

Composer	Popular Works	Neglected Works
<b>Bach</b>	(KSS describes Bach’s Solo Cantatas as concertos for voice and orchestra; in place of performances of these works he cites the popularity of Arthur Bliss’s ‘feeble and furiously puffed “innovations” in this medium (he is almost certainly referring to Bliss’s 1920 Concerto for Wordless tenor voice, piano and strings and/or <i>Rout</i> for wordless soprano and chamber ensemble (later orchestra) also of 1920)  <i>Ave Maria</i> (arr. Gounod-Wood)	Solo Cantatas, e.g., <i>Jauchzet Gott in allen Länden</i> ‘a superb opportunity for pure singing and fine musicianship’  ‘the pure, original’ Bach <i>Ave Maria</i>  Violin concerti
<b>Beethoven</b>	‘such atrocities as <i>In questa tomba</i> and the hideous <i>Adelaide</i> are rammed into our ears at every opportunity. The latter is the stalking horse of every miserable	‘certain of the lesser pianoforte Concertos and Symphonies’

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 127-8.



	<p><i>Mandoline</i> ‘(which they all murder, singing it like a dirge) and occasionally <i>Romance</i>’</p>	<p><i>Preludes</i> (Book 2)</p> <p><i>L’Isle Joyeuse</i></p> <p><i>Pour le Piano</i></p> <p>‘I have not heard certain of the <i>Ariettes Oubliées</i>, the <i>Fetes Galantes</i>, the <i>Chanson de Bilitis</i>, the Baudelaire songs, or the <i>Proses Lyriques</i>, for years. <i>De Reve</i> and <i>De Fleurs</i> (from the <i>Proses Lyriques</i>), two of his greatest songs[...]</p>
<b>Delius</b>	<p><i>Dance Rhapsody</i> (No. 1); <i>Brigg Fair</i> ‘sporadic and regularly execrable performances’</p>	<p><i>Violin Concerto</i></p> <p><i>Mass of Life</i>; <i>Sea-drift</i>; <i>Arabesques</i> ‘works of supreme genius, beauty and power’</p>
<b>Dvořák</b>	<p>‘the wretched grimcrack [<i>sic</i>]’ <i>New World Symphony</i></p>	<p><i>Piano Concerto</i></p> <p>‘And if the treacle eaters must have their dose of soothing syrup, why not Dvořák’s Pianoforte Concerto for once? It looks no worse than the Symphony, and as it has been in cold storage for decades it has not reached the stage of decomposition that the Symphony has attained’</p>
<b>Elgar</b>	<p><i>Land of Hope and Glory, Pomp and Circumstance</i> in G and <i>Cockaigne</i></p>	<p>The Symphonies and <i>Falstaff</i></p>
<b>Grieg</b>	<p><i>Piano Concerto</i></p> <p>‘neither of these works [the Grieg and Tchaikovsky No. 1] is even a minor masterpiece’</p>	
<b>Lalo</b>	<p>‘occasional daring excursions into the’ <i>Violin Concerto</i> (128)</p>	<p>Bach, Brahms, Elgar, Delius Violin Concerti</p>
<b>Liszt</b>	<p>‘known practically by his worst or inferior works’</p> <p>Exception: B minor Sonata</p>	<p><i>Fantasia and Fugue on B A C H</i>; <i>Weinen Klagen Variations</i>; <i>Paganini Etudes</i>; <i>Années de Pèlerinage</i>; <i>Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses</i>: all ‘scarcely ever heard and [...] practically unknown’</p> <p><i>Concerto No. 2 in A major</i> ‘incomparably the finer of the two, is rarely played’</p> <p><i>Dante Symphony</i> ‘scarcely ever [played]’</p> <p><i>Faust Symphony</i> ‘scarcely ever [played]’</p>

		<p>‘certain numbers of the’ <i>Consolations</i> and the <i>Valse Impromptu</i> ‘that no one ever plays’</p> <p>‘the fascinating’ <i>Valse Oubliée</i> ‘the harmonic origins of the later Scriabin [...] that no one ever plays’</p> <p>‘the delicately charming’ <i>Berceuse</i> ‘that no one ever plays’</p> <p><i>Liebestraum</i></p> <p><i>B minor Ballade</i></p>
<b>Milhaud</b>	<i>Second Symphonic Suite</i> Repeated despite being ‘not a popular success and hopelessly bad’	Sibelius – <i>Symphony No. 4</i> ‘not a popular success but extremely good’
<b>Mozart</b>	‘Listen to a “Prom.” audience applauding. Hear them as ecstatic over some wretched ballad-wailing female committing an assault upon a Mozart aria, as over fine playing of a great work – like Victor Schiøler of the Reger Pianoforte Concerto’	
<b>Rachmaninov</b>	<i>Second Concerto</i>	<i>Third Concerto</i>
<b>Ravel</b>	<i>String Quartet</i>	<p>‘The Ravel songs fare even worse [than Debussy’s]. Once in years do we hear the Clement Marot <i>Épigrammes</i>, the <i>Schéhérazade</i> songs, or the amazing Mallarmé set, surely one of the highest achievements of French song’ (129)</p> <p><i>Piano Trio</i> ‘one of the very best things that has come from France in our time’</p>
<b>Reger</b>		<p><i>Piano Concerto</i> (‘has taken <i>thirteen</i> years to reach London’. Sorabji particularly commends ‘the enterprise and courageous unconventionality’ of Victor Schiøler’s [<i>sic</i>: Schiøler’s] Prom performance)</p> <p><i>Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Bach</i> ‘a monumental work worthy of being placed beside the greatest of its genre’</p>
<b>Saint-Saëns</b>	<i>Piano Concerto</i> [No. 2?]	
<b>Florent Schmitt</b>		<p><i>Piano Quintet</i> ‘one of the very best things that has come from France in our time. For gorgeous magnificence and sumptuous splendour, I do not know any chamber work to compare with this great Quintet. It has much of the characteristics of Byzantine architecture, glowing with gold and</p>

		polychromatic mosaics. The wide, arching curves of its fine themes and its large spaciousness of style are singularly remote from the smallness and meanness that is so typical of modern French music'
<b>Schumann</b>		'the very beautiful' <i>Faust</i> 'I never remember to have seen on any London programme'
<b>Sibelius</b>	<i>Valse Triste</i>  Milhaud - <i>Second Symphonic Suite</i> Repeated despite being 'not a popular success and hopelessly bad'	'the composer's remarkable' <i>Symphony No. 4</i>  <i>Symphony No. 4</i> 'not a popular success but extremely good [...] a work that for concentrated terseness and closely-woven conciseness of expression is unique'
<b>Stravinsky</b>	<i>3 Pieces for String Quartet</i> 'simian gibberings'	
<b>Szymanowski</b>		<i>Violin Concerto No. 1</i> [MT has 'Pianoforte Concerto' printed in error here]
<b>Tchaikovsky</b>	<i>Piano Concerto No. 1</i> 'it is not a masterpiece at all, but a very ordinary piece of artizan work, long since worn out'  <i>Violin Concerto</i> 'The time-dishonoured association of their [violinists'] whimpering instrument (as it so often is) with suppressed erotic cravings draws them inevitably to the Tchaikovsky Concerto'	Bach, Brahms, Elgar, Delius Violin Concerti
<b>Van Dieren</b>	Stravinsky – <i>3 Pieces for String Quartet</i> : 'simian gibberings'	Van Dieren – <i>String Quartets</i> 'one of the two or three authentic great masters of our time.[...] the quartets of van Dieren demand intellectual power of considerable order'
<b>Vieuxtemps</b>	'occasional daring excursions into the' Violin Concerto	Bach, Brahms, Elgar, Delius – Violin Concerti
<b>Wagner</b>	<i>Tannhäuser Overture</i>	Prelude to Act 3 of <i>Siegfried</i>
<b>Wieniawski</b>	'occasional daring excursions into the' Violin Concerto	Bach, Brahms, Elgar, Delius Violin Concerti



Cecil Austin, writing in reply to Sorabji's article, thought the author a little too indulged, his interest in neglected and obscure works a result of overexposure. Austin argues in defence of the validity of the 'masterwork': 'M. de ---- probably plays the Grieg more than any other Concerto because he is always requested to do so, many music-loving people being less fortunate than Mr. Sorabji, who is evidently able to attend *every* performance'.<sup>22</sup> Sorabji did indeed attend many performances before and during his time as a critic and – when he withdrew from regular concert attendance in the 1930s – listened to and passed judgment on numerous recordings, facts to which his almost unbroken output of concert and gramophone reviews from 1924 to 1945 bear witness.<sup>23</sup> Unremunerated for his writings, Sorabji's activities as a critic were supported by a trust fund which, as Nazlin Bhimani explains, 'could afford him the luxury of saying anything he wanted without fear of loss of income'.<sup>24</sup> Not particularly given to philanthropy, Sorabji's pronouncements often veered towards an elitism itself bordering on the misanthropic. The concluding lines of 'On Neglected Works' are typical in this regard. After comparing the 'simian gibberings' of Stravinsky's Three Pieces for String Quartet to van Dieren's neglected quartets, which 'demand intellectual power of considerable order', Sorabji writes that

Ninety-nine per cent of people, according to recent psychological investigation, remain at the stage of mental development they reached at ten years of age, but that is no adequate excuse for exalting the *littérateur* and cartoonist of the subways above Buonarroto or da Vinci.<sup>25</sup>

The implication here, of course, is that Sorabji believed he belonged to the 1%, and it follows the logic of this imagined cultural oligarchy that it should restrict entrance to the upper echelons. As Carl Dahlhaus in *Nineteenth-Century Music* explains, 'taste' serves 'the unambiguously social function' of 'helping a group to cohere from within and insulate from without. The taste a person had [...] associated him with "his own kind" and separated him from "others" (whether "above" or "below")'.<sup>26</sup> There can be little doubt

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<sup>22</sup> Cecil Austin, 'Letter to the Editor: Neglected Works', *The Musical Times*, 65/974 (April 1924), 350.

<sup>23</sup> See Nazlin Bhimani, 'Sorabji's Music Criticism' in Paul Rapoport (ed.), *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 261-2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 260. For the details of Sorabji's finances, see Marc-André Roberge, *Opus Sorabjianum: The Life and Works of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji*, Version 1.10 (Quebec, Canada: 2014), 194-5.

<sup>25</sup> Sorabji, 'On Neglected Works', 129. In *Around Music*, this same *littérateur* and cartoonist is further relegated to 'the public lavatory' (p. 106).

<sup>26</sup> Carl Dahlhaus (trans. J. Bradford Robinson), *Nineteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 246.

that Sorabji's 'taste' for the neglected and obscure served this higher purpose. He accordingly draws a distinction between 'the enormous majority who demand offal and the microscopic minority of connoisseurs'.<sup>27</sup> Such elitism runs throughout Sorabji's writings, and it soon becomes apparent that he was not so much interested in converting others to the cause of the neglected work (if he was, he went about the task with astonishingly little concern for ingratiation) as he was of reminding English audiences and critics of their dire ineptitude for appreciating the obscure masterpieces comprising his counter-canon.

### Critical reception of *Around Music* and *Mi contra fa*

As a critic, then, Sorabji made something of a speciality out of writing on neglected works and obscure composers. His journalistic *métier* was seemingly honed to decry the undue obloquy visited upon opuses he held in higher regard than the conditions for their reception would or possibly could grant at the time of his writing. The critical reception of his two books – particularly *Around Music* (in which 'On Neglected Works' reappears as a chapter to all intents and purposes unchanged, save for the inclusion of Medtner and extended entries on Reger and Szymanowski) – shows that Sorabji's sympathy for marginalised composers and peripheral works did not go unnoticed in the wider press. It hardly could. As a preliminary literature review, these press notices indicate that, at the time, Sorabji was more visible as a critic than he was audible as a composer, even if he garnered a similar degree of notoriety in both capacities; that his sympathies lay predominantly with composers whose unpopularity was usually justified by way of the prohibitive scope and complexity of their works; and, significantly, that there was to be discerned an aesthetic correlation between Sorabji's critical position and what was generally known or rumoured to be true of his own compositional output.

Notable reviews of *Around Music* highlight these aspects by focusing on its author's commitment to composers and repertoire generally ignored by performers and impresarios and – if given rare audition – roundly dismissed by critics and concertgoers. In short, 'The causes of a number of neglected composers, such as Liszt, Charles Morhange [Alkan], Mahler, Reger, Busoni, Szymanowsky [*sic*], and Medtner' are in *Around Music* 'championed to some considerable purpose'.<sup>28</sup> A reviewer for *The Monthly Musical*

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<sup>27</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 157.

<sup>28</sup> Anon., 'The Musician's Book-shelf: *Around Music* by Kaikhosru Sorabji'. Source as yet unidentified.

*Record* noted that Sorabji's essays 'are largely given over to the advocacy – generous in spirit, if frequently petulant in tone – of composers one and all “most unlikely to be commercially successful”, such as Busoni, Reger, Mahler, Medtner and Bernard van Dieren'.<sup>29</sup> 'In view of the surprising apathy concerning the music of both Medtner and Mahler in this country', wrote S.R.N., 'Mr. Sorabji's championship of these two composers is well-timed'.<sup>30</sup> Clinton Gray-Fisk, Sorabji's friend and fellow critic at *The New Age* explained that, although 'His benediction is not easily won', when it was, 'there could be no more able or powerful advocate, as can readily be seen from his fiery championship of Alkan (Morhange), Busoni, Mahler, Medtner and Reger'.<sup>31</sup> *The Times Literary Supplement* accorded 'the most valuable feature of these essays' to Sorabji's 'constant advocacy of music which others neglect'.<sup>32</sup> A notice given in *The Modern Scot* suggested a parallel between the singularity of Sorabji's mind and the attention he devotes to neglected works:

The independence and originality of Mr Sorabji's thought are nowhere more clearly in evidence than in the works he recommends for performance in place of some of the more trite items that clutter up the average programme. [...] No other British critic has more assiduously pressed the claims of unknown masterpieces that clamour to get past the bar of lethargic concert promoters and performers.<sup>33</sup>

Critics who were inclined – or simply given the requisite column inches – to explore the matter further began to correlate Sorabji's advocacy of neglected works with the obscurity and mystery enshrouding his own. As Harvey Grace remarked, 'Mr. Sorabji is perhaps at his best when championing composers who, *like himself*, have yet to meet with due appreciation'.<sup>34</sup> In *The Observer*, A. H. Fox-Strangways opined that

A composer's view is worth having, because he rarely gives it, because it is at a different angle from the listener's, and because it is quite definite and usually different from another composer's. To this composer [i.e., Sorabji], it is Busoni's 'intellectual and sublimated

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<sup>29</sup> Anon., 'Notes of the Day', *The Monthly Musical Record* (January 1933), 6.

<sup>30</sup> S. R. N., 'Bookworm's Corner: Great Books on Music: "Around Music"', K. Sorabji', n.p. Source as yet unidentified.

<sup>31</sup> Clinton Gray-Fisk, "'Around Music'", *The New Age* (16 February 1933), 190.

<sup>32</sup> Anon., 'Musical Essays', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 82/1626 (3 March 1933), n.p.

<sup>33</sup> Anon., 'A Composer-Critic', *The Modern Scot*, 3/4 (1933), 81.

<sup>34</sup> Harvey Grace, "'Around Music". By Kaikhosru Sorabji', *The Musical Times* (March 1933), 232-3. Emphasis added.

emotion', Reger's 'massive structure' and Medtner's 'aloofness and austerity' that make the highest appeal.<sup>35</sup>

'Like tends to attract like on all planes', explains Gray-Fisk, 'and it is clear that Sorabji is drawn to composers who, *like himself*, work on a large canvas, and make extremely heavy musical and technical demands'.<sup>36</sup> On a similar point, *The Monthly Musical Record* summarised that 'Elaboration, seriousness and bulk are qualities that weigh most in his judgment' (to the extent that Sorabji seems 'to be fascinated by music of mere bulkiness'). In a particularly perceptive comment, the same writer goes on to assert that Sorabji's 'principal heroes have all worked on a large scale and have all been prophets in the wilderness':

Sorabji himself pushes these characteristics to extremes in his own compositions; so much so that, though by report we all know of the gigantic proportions and singular intricacy of his music, by actual experience the world in general remains quite ignorant of it.<sup>37</sup>

*The Modern Scot* similarly identified a recursive interplay between Sorabji's compositional and critical aesthetic (the review appears appropriately enough under the rubric, 'A Composer-Critic'):

Mr. Sorabji's own remarkable compositions, of such a scale as to be all but unplayable, indicate in what direction his musical likes and dislikes lie. He has excellent pages in *Around Music* on Mahler, Medtner, Reger, Busoni and other modern composers whose profundity of thought, expressed in music of an architectural grandeur, commands his admiration.<sup>38</sup>

Thus Sorabji is described as 'The most severely intellectual and inaccessible of composers' and, to the statement that his 'remarkable compositions' are 'all but unplayable', the author adds a footnote explaining that 'Only Mr Sorabji has performed his major piano works. Disgracefully little is heard of them. His Michael Angelo Sonnets, too, are shockingly neglected'.<sup>39</sup> For S.R.N., 'It is a great pity that so little of the author's own music has been heard here', but the truth behind his own neglect and that of his favoured

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<sup>35</sup> A. H. Fox-Strangways, 'Music and Musicians: On Trying', *The Observer* (26 March 1933), 14.

<sup>36</sup> Gray-Fisk, "'Around Music'", 190. Emphasis added.

<sup>37</sup> Anon., 'Notes of the Day', 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> Anon., 'A Composer-Critic', 81.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

composers was a pragmatic one: ‘his passion for the larger forms and preoccupation with pure technique is, I think, more responsible for this neglect than the prevalent concert-giving anomalies which the author lashes so perfectly in this book’.<sup>40</sup> Eric Blom, writing for *The Birmingham Post*, similarly thought that in his ‘Explosive Criticism’ Sorabji’s ‘methods of attack are so disproportionate to the thing aimed at as to become ineffectual’. Nevertheless, ‘one cannot withhold from him the respect due to one whose devotion to his art amounts to a religion for which, it is felt, he would cheerfully become a martyr’:

Perhaps he is one already, for is he not himself an ardent but neglected creative musician, of much the same stamp as Busoni and Medtner, Mahler and Reger, whom he defends with such impetuous generosity?<sup>41</sup>

Blom returns to what he saw as Sorabji’s martyrdom fifteen years later in reviewing the ‘stimulatingly controversial book’ *Mi contra fa*, noting here that Sorabji ‘is as good a hater of this country as anyone who has managed to live in it all his life’.<sup>42</sup> Notices of Sorabji’s second collection of essays paid less attention to his concern with the earlier theme of neglect, choosing instead to devote their ink to Sorabji’s pronouncements on his detachment and self-imposed isolation from society at large. Nevertheless, the earlier theme remained – this second miscellany contained, in Gray-Fisk’s account, ‘eloquent pleas on behalf of unjustly neglected composers’<sup>43</sup> – albeit less prominently stated. Sorabji writes on the neglect of, for example, Leopold Godowsky (in 1936 ‘there were, so far as I am aware, no more than three people who were publicly paying Godowsky’s work its due tribute’<sup>44</sup>), Ernest Chausson (a ‘rare musical experience’<sup>45</sup>), Bernard van Dieren (‘the concert-going and concert-giving rabble, of course, know him not’<sup>46</sup>), Szymanowski (‘as good as unknown’<sup>47</sup>), F. G. Scott (‘I see no future at all for work as fine, bold, powerful and free as his in the etiolated, debilitated, chlorotic musical atmosphere of England’<sup>48</sup>) and York Bowen (whose work is generally ‘unknown, belittled or frankly ridiculed’<sup>49</sup>). But by far the more provocative statements – and by far the finer

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<sup>40</sup> S.R.N., ‘Bookworm’s Corner: Great Books on Music: “Around Music”. K. Sorabji’, n.p.

<sup>41</sup> Eric Blom, ‘World of Music: Explosive Criticism’, *The Birmingham Post* (2 January 1933), 8.

<sup>42</sup> Eric Blom, ‘World of Music: Never, Never Slaves’, *The Birmingham Post* (n.d., [1948]), n.p.

<sup>43</sup> Gray-Fisk, ‘Sorabji ad infinitum!’, 306.

<sup>44</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 63-4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

fodder for review copy – were those in which Sorabji declares his antipathy to the state of affairs in Britain (or, more often and more specifically, England) from the vantage point of the mid-century. *The Times Literary Supplement* counted that ‘Nearly two-thirds of the thirty essays contained in this book violently attack contemporary musical tendencies, beliefs or individuals who have the ill fortune not to please the author’. Thus ‘He is loud in his abuse of everything English except a few English composers and the musical life of London in the decades before 1914’.<sup>50</sup> Richard Capell similarly pauses on Sorabji’s claim that London was in ‘the Dark Ages’, that there was ‘no future at all for music in England, in his view’. But ‘Mr. Sorabji does not go into the reasons of the decline (these are obvious – the two world wars, fought for the best of causes at an unimaginable cost). His polemic is unfair. The fury of his writing strikes the reader as perhaps covering up an inner sadness, that of a man who for some reason has had to spend his life among a people he intensely dislikes’.<sup>51</sup> In similar vein: ‘Doubtless many will jib at what might be considered an excessive use of invective’ and so ‘write the book off as the work of a disappointed and frustrated man. Certainly such an explanation will be that of the psychoanalyst – and maybe that of a much over-rated so-called “musicologist”’.<sup>52</sup> ‘He does not like the British’, wrote William McNaught in his review of *Mi contra fa* for *The Musical Times*: ‘Is all this part of a subtle design to increase circulation? Mr. Sorabji must know that if you write a book calling the British bad names they will queue for copies. But no: Mr. Sorabji is sincere’. Of his writings on the English critics’ circle: ‘Here we peer into an abyss of hatred that even Mr. Sorabji’s language can scarcely give utterance to its throes’.<sup>53</sup>

#### Isolationism as negative romanticism: interpretative approaches to Sorabji’s criticism

McNaught is compelled to concede that Sorabji ‘has a standpoint from which to hurl his taunts’.<sup>54</sup> This is the position of critical eccentricity from which the present thesis views Sorabji’s assaults and insults: that of the aggrieved outsider who actively chooses to voice

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<sup>50</sup> Anon., ‘Music and Society’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 47/2404 (28 February 1948), 118.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Capell, ‘World of Music: Mr. Sorabji’s Jeremiad’. Source as yet unidentified.

<sup>52</sup> The Editor, ‘Book Reviews: Mi Contra Fa’, *Tomorrow* (March 1948), 237. C.H.S., in another review of *Mi contra fa*, explained that ‘We are not [...] much perturbed by his denunciation of the word “musicologist” when he has himself treated us on the previous page to “dogmatic-moralitarian-doctrinomaniac”’. ‘Book Reviews: *Mi Contra Fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician. K. S. Sorabji.*’, *Music Survey*, 1/6 (1948), 69.

<sup>53</sup> William McNaught, ‘“Mi Contra Fa.” The Immoralizings [sic] of a Machiavellian Musician’. By Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji’, *The Musical Times*, 89/1261 (March 1948), 76-7.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

his grievances from the margins, but not without leaving his readers with the inkling that, as another notice of *Mi contra fa* put it, ‘the old adage about protesting too much applies more strongly to this volume than to any other we can remember to have read’.<sup>55</sup> Two further reviewers of *Mi contra fa* found Sorabji’s aesthetic as composer-critic to have emerged from this eccentricity: Mellers noted that both ‘the shrillness of his critical tone and the fantastic complexity of his music’ are ‘indirectly the products of his isolation’<sup>56</sup> and R. Crombie Saunders similarly identified Sorabji’s ‘lively and enquiring intellect’ as ‘comfortably domesticated in its iconoclastic isolation’. These qualities led Sorabji to explore ‘some little-frequented territory’, his dedication to neglected works most profitably.<sup>57</sup>

But for some, Sorabji’s isolationism was unproductive, not to mention fundamentally unhealthy. Arnold Whittall, writing of Sorabji, Philip Heseltine, Cecil Gray and Cyril Scott as ‘The Isolationists’ in an article so titled almost twenty years after the publication of *Mi contra fa*, explains that Sorabji belonged to a small and marginal group of composer-critics who in the early-twentieth century exhibited a ‘wide-ranging, active disillusionment’ to the music culture of England; they were escapists ‘evading reality’ through dissimulation.<sup>58</sup> Most damningly, they lacked ‘what all great creative artists have – a positive attitude to society’; they could ‘only communicate in negative terms’ and their ‘blatant rejection of the present’ was ‘the most negative gesture a creative artist in the twentieth century can make’.<sup>59</sup> While ‘isolationism is, of course primarily a romantic characteristic’, its manifestation in the music and writings of this ‘doomed generation’ of composer-critics was rather more destructive.<sup>60</sup> He quotes Deryck Cooke: ‘The main underlying assumption of romanticism’ is ‘that music is ultimately about life, is a part of life, and should make its appeal to the ordinary cultured man as well as the connoisseur’. Whittall then comments: ‘By ignoring this, and by attempting to cling to exaggerations of nineteenth-century romanticism, the doomed generation of composers became no better than fakes. They were unable to break with the past, or to create an entirely new musical

<sup>55</sup> G.N.S., ‘*Mi contra Fa*. By K. S. Sorabji’, *The Music Review* (n.d.), 124.

<sup>56</sup> Wilfrid Mellers, ‘Reviews of Books: *Mi contra Fa: the Immoalizing [sic] of a Machiavellian Musician*. By Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji’, *Music and Letters*, 29/2 (April 1948), 205. [204-5]

<sup>57</sup> R. Crombie Saunders, ‘Diabolus in Musica. MI CONTRA FA: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician, by K. S. Sorabji’, *Scottish Art and Letters* (n.d.), 56.

<sup>58</sup> Arnold Whittall, ‘The Isolationists’, *Music Review*, 27 (1966), 122-3.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 124, 125, 128.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

language’.<sup>61</sup> The exaggerations of nineteenth-century romanticism mutated in the first half of the twentieth century into a ‘negative, pseudo-romanticism’ best exemplified by the ‘hysterical complexity’ of Sorabji’s music.<sup>62</sup> Sorabji’s writings gave indisputable evidence to this negative-romantic aesthetic: ‘Sorabji, entirely convinced of his own greatness and necessity, is the *reductio ad absurdum* of all this self-centred bombast, which cloaks, ineffectively, strong symptoms of withdrawal from all responsibility, social and artistic’.<sup>63</sup>

Sarah Collins’ recent (2013) article on the ‘Practices of Aesthetic Self-Cultivation: British Composer-Critics of the “Doomed Generation”’<sup>64</sup> responds to Whittall’s own negativity by suggesting that the isolationism he describes opens up ‘an alternative way of discerning the operation of intellectual discourses in music circles in the first decades of the twentieth century’.<sup>65</sup> In particular, an understanding of the ‘existential enterprise’ of the doomed generation of composer-critics offers an alternative to the historiographical trope of an ‘English Musical Renaissance’, its insiders and (usually as a footnote, if that) its outsiders.<sup>66</sup> Recalling the sometimes crudely binaristic concessions necessary to make in order to approach a structural understanding of eccentricity, Collins admits that, while the ‘outsider/insider’ divide ‘is clearly an artificial construct’, the antagonistic isolationist position is nevertheless ‘predicated upon a perception of its existence’.<sup>67</sup> Thus ‘the very homogeneity of “the Establishment”’ (or even the exclusivity of the ‘critics’ circle’) acts ‘as a point of departure for their own isolationist cause’: ‘Through the “outsider” frame they were able to position their work as being somehow “out of time”, their breadth of vision being actively repressed by the narrow-mindedness of their critical contemporaries’.<sup>68</sup> Though their marginal status appears as a ‘contrived construction’ lending a framework of support to their critical writings, it is one which nevertheless ‘prefigures their own position within a cyclic view of history whereby great composers are never recognized in their own time’:

Foreshadowing the shift in historical musicology which has allowed for the examination of minor figures as alternative representations of the musical climate of a time, Scott, Sorabji,

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 124, 129.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>64</sup> Sarah Collins, ‘Practices of Aesthetic Self-Cultivation: British Composer-Critics of the “Doomed Generation”’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 138/1 (2013), 85-128.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 91.



Heseltine and Gray, in their own music histories and criticism, attempted to bring marginal figures such as van Dieren, Gesualdo, Alkan, Busoni, Medtner and Szymanowski, into the canon.<sup>69</sup>

The only criticism one could possibly make in response to this comment is that, in the case of Sorabji in particular, it is not so apparent that he *did* wish to bring such marginal figures into ‘the canon’. The evidence presented here will rather suggest that, so as to maintain the singularity of his own canon, it was necessary to always keep it at several removes from (more often than not above) that of the mainstream. His counter-canon, in other words, was constructed precisely to critique the standard early-twentieth-century canon and he would not have it incorporated into the cultural schema of the English.

On a similar note, Whittall, in a letter to *The Musical Times* on the subject of Sorabji, Cecil Gray and Bernard van Dieren’s justifiably peripheral positions within or at the very margins of this canon, explained that these Isolationists ‘make a point of praising composers who stand outside the main stream of musical development – Busoni, Sibelius, Medtner, Szymanowski’:

But while in the music of these men, as in other of their idols, from Gesualdo to Meyerbeer and Alkan, one can find a positive simplicity, the music of Van Dieren and his friends, at its most characteristic, is of a complexity which can only be defined as negative – muddled rather than memorable.<sup>70</sup>

But what exactly *was* their point in praising composers so far removed from ‘the main stream of historical development’? Since Sorabji’s writings are those in which the obscure composer and neglected work figure most prominently, the other Isolationists he was closely associated with – Heseltine, van Dieren and Gray – can wait in the wings for the time being. What, then, was Sorabji’s point? Was his canon merely a means, as Whittall suggests in his article, of withdrawing contrarily from majority consensus, of striking an attitude which ‘ineffectively’ masked the outsider’s feeble consolation that ‘it was safer to be in a minority, to feel that the secret could not be shared’?<sup>71</sup> Or, after Collins’ example, does Sorabji’s canon of neglected works, taken as a coherent body of music, open up the possibility of an ‘alternative representation of the musical climate’ of the period, offering a

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>70</sup> Arnold Whittall, ‘Van Dieren’, *The Musical Times*, 105/1456 (June 1964), 438.

<sup>71</sup> Whittall, ‘The Isolationists’, 125.

new, revisionist account of music in Britain, its culture, history and practice in the early twentieth century?

It is possible to take both arguments as starting points and arrive at an integrated conclusion. Following Whittall, it can be argued that Sorabji's self-centredness was indeed entirely negative and offered little of value other than evidence of a maligned composer-critic's aestheticized persecution complex compensated for by a sense of overarching superiority. Even so, such an interpretation would go some way to explaining the repellent characteristics many find in listening to his music. In this light, Sorabji's sympathetic identification with the marginalized composer and his critical investment in the neglected work contributed towards the foundation of a defence-mechanistic confirmation bias which could but only validate what Sorabji anticipated to be the unfavourable reception of his own works. In short, "Blessed are ye when all men shall speak evil of you. . . ." so runs it, does it not?<sup>72</sup> This Sorabji-centric approach, however, will do little more than enshrine his position as an historical curiosity, as a risible eccentric best left in the obscurity of his own making. Collins' approach, on the other hand, has the potential to beneficially situate Sorabji within a broader musicological discourse. Stripping away all the decidedly unpleasant aspects of some of Sorabji's more misanthropic pronouncements, what alternatives does a critical consideration of his counter-canon of neglected works offer? This thesis presents a number of case studies of Sorabji 'On...' an obscure composer and his (it is, sadly, always 'his' – nothing so radical as a female composer among Sorabji's ranks) neglected works (or, as in the case of Mahler and Rachmaninov most obviously, composers who were once considered obscure and their works neglected, but through the concurrence of historical events and revolutions in taste, have since been brought to light). Each presents Sorabji's views in opposition to those of 'the mass of English critical opinion';<sup>73</sup> in this way, parallel reception histories will emerge in which it will be possible to address the questions of both Sorabji's unproductive negativity and, conversely, whether this negativity can in fact impart hitherto neglected facets of the history and historiography of early twentieth-century music.

Part I explores the roots of Sorabji's counter-canon criticism in terms of his self-construction as *persona ingratisissima*. Chapter One reads his 1913-22 letters to Heseltine

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<sup>72</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 210. Sorabji delivers these lines in response to his recollection of the dubious London reception of Szymanowski's Third Symphony. See Chapter Six.

<sup>73</sup> Sorabji, 'The Greatness of Medtner' in Richard Holt (ed.), *Nicolas Medtner (1879 [sic] – 1951)* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1955), 131.

as a direct response to the latter's *Musical Times* article calling for greater eccentricity in music and criticism. Over the course of the correspondence (in which he signs off with a number of permutations of his name) we see K. S. Sorabji emerge fully in command of his own eccentric identity, valorising his outsidership – in terms of sexuality and ethnicity most poignantly – in London. Chapter Two considers his one-and-only meeting with Ferruccio Busoni in 1919 as the consecratory moment in which Sorabji actively begins to court subjects of neglect: no longer was he an ardent champion of 'ultra-modernism' as he had been in his earlier letters to Heseltine; Sorabji followed Busoni into the more obscure realms of music. Part II sees Sorabji's critical attachment to the aesthetic of maximalism as manifest in the *kolossal* works of two late-romantic Austro-Germans neglected on the interwar English stage: Chapter Three considers Sorabji's writings 'On Mahler's "monstrous German orchestra"' and Chapter Four 'On Reger's "too many notes"'. Their rejection on the score of the demands posed by their orchestral and instrumental writing brings Sorabji to question the artificial post-war termination of an evolutionary, historical course of musical development. Part III surveys Sorabji's response to "modernism" 'in the inverted commas sense'. The fashionable, 'simplicity-fetishistic' ascendancy of Stravinsky relegated the late-romantic maximalism Sorabji favoured to the margins. In this light, the work of Medtner and Rachmaninov – the joint subjects of Chapter Five – became rejected and neglected as anachronisms. The tripartite creative career of Szymanowski is the focus of Chapter Six, charting Sorabji's response to one composer's abandonment of romanticism and capitulation to the "modern" trends of the day. Part IV returns us to the Isolationists and Sorabji's position among them. But an earlier (and fittingly anachronistic) example is offered as a preliminary in Chapter Seven: Sorabji's writings on Alkan provide a historical portrait of the appeal the archetypal neglected composer offers and the social (or antisocial) traits attending a taste for the obscure. Sorabji's canonisation of Bernard van Dieren forms the core of the final chapter. Here the *sui generis* is elevated to the status of dogma, and van Dieren's influence on Sorabji's criticism is seen to entrench his negative-romantic isolationism. An *Envoi* considers the part played by Sorabji's eccentricity in his own performance of *Opus clavicembalisticum* in Glasgow in 1930.

Two interpretations will be offered in conclusion, one specific to an understanding of Sorabji as a composer-critic and the other with a broader view towards the potential historiographical significance of Sorabji's criticism. In the first instance, it will be argued that Sorabji's canonisation of neglected works over the course of his critical career served

to insulate his own efforts as a composer from damaging criticism. He created the ideal conditions for making a virtue of his own hostile reception and preordained neglect. In the second instance, a consideration of the neglected work presented in Sorabji's counter-canon as a *sui generis* product of unclassifiable composers and hard-to-define styles brings into discussion the unstable taxonomies of a 'lingering romanticism' (Glenn Watkins) and 'ambivalent modernism' (Walter Frisch). In this sense, Sorabji's isolationist position led him time and again to composers of negative-romantic (perhaps even negative-modernist) persuasions due in no small part to their general unpopularity with the majority. As a result of the consistency of effect of Sorabji's cultivated contrarianism and his self-construction as *persona ingratisissima*, his writings split off eccentrically from creative practices which have come to comprise orthodox accounts of early-twentieth-century music and have, perhaps for that very reason, been consigned to the position of historical footnotes. As Theodor Adorno in *Philosophy of Modern Music* noted of the limited options available beyond the totalizing Schoenberg/Stravinsky dialectic: 'The middle road [...] is the only one which does not lead to Rome'.<sup>74</sup> Be that as it may, if we follow Sorabji down this same path we are at least likely to encounter some interesting characters along the way, even if they ultimately lead us to a dead end.

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<sup>74</sup> Theodor W. Adorno (trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster), *Philosophy of Modern Music* [1948] (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), 1.

## **Part I**

*Persona ingratisissima*  
**Becoming K. S. Sorabji**



## Preamble

. . . if and when the work of any younger men shows any real creative vitality and drive . . . it is the work of men working in comparative obscurity, unknown, boycotted or both, and for one reason or another *personae ingratisissimae* with the organised gangs, cliques, rings and institutions of music.

SORABJI, *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (1947)<sup>1</sup>

. . . an outsider's outsider, Sorajbi [*sic*] existed beyond the mainstream world in just about every way, and had a hard go, career-wise, because of it.

JOHN A. SARKETT, *Obscure Composers* (2014)<sup>2</sup>

In October 1913, a certain Sorabji read the following words on the matter of originality in music, words set to outline 'the true, natural originality that distinguishes the individual from the mass, and which alone makes progress in musical expression possible'. In pursuit of this individualist originality, the author inevitably comes to circle round the question of eccentricity:

For what, after all, is eccentricity but an attitude of nonconformity with certain established traditions and customs, the courage to stand out above the herd and its conventionalities?

'The strongest man', wrote Ibsen, 'is he who stands alone'. But he is always an eccentric to the crowd, if not a madman.

These words were written by Philip Heseltine in his 'Reflections on Modern Musical Criticism' published in the pages of *The Musical Times*.<sup>3</sup> They appear to have struck a chord with Sorabji, who wrote to the author immediately to thank him for, and congratulate him on, his 'splendid, courageous article'.<sup>4</sup> For Sorabji, Heseltine's sentiments in this article were 'never to be forgotten'.<sup>5</sup>

There followed some nine years of correspondence between Sorabji and Heseltine. Thirty-eight letters in Sorabji's hand remain; none of Heseltine's has been found. One-sided though they may be in this sense, these documents nevertheless chart the development of Sorabji's aesthetic first as a critic and second as a composer. Integral to

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<sup>1</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: Porcupine Press, 1947), 100.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Sarett, *Obscure Composers* (Illinois: Sarett Press, 2014), 279.

<sup>3</sup> P. A. Heseltine, 'Some Reflections on Modern Musical Criticism', *The Musical Times*, 54/848 (October 1913), 653.

<sup>4</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (3 October 1913). For full source details of the Sorabji-Heseltine correspondence, see Chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (early March 1914).

Sorabji's self-cultivation was the search for that eccentricity Heseltine links to true originality – even if it is garnered at the expense of appearing 'a madman'. Over the 1913-1922 period of correspondence, Sorabji increasingly concerns himself with fostering that 'attitude of nonconformity' central to Heseltine's conception of eccentricity and originality, and in doing so takes on and experiments with a number of different names in signature. Sorabji comes to abandon his given names Leon Dudley and adopt Kaikhosru Shapurji. K. S. Sorabji emerges from the letters as the most enduring in terms of the nomenclature attached to Sorabji's fully-fledged critical and compositional output. Chapter One thus reads Sorabji's letters as a formative experiment in his critical identity. In sequence, they follow the pattern of an epistolary *principium individuationis* – a chronicle of the means by which his self-integration required a radical distinction from the masses – the chief individuating principle of which appears to be the desire to be an outsider, *persona ingratisima*.

This desire functioned as the animadverting principle defining his music-critical aesthetic and, as such, played a significant role in his turn towards obscure composers and neglected works as a gesture of sympathetic identification. In this way, Sorabji's letters to Heseltine reveal the foundations of an aesthetic which led to the curation of the singular canon by which he set to distinguish his own views in opposition to those of 'the mass of English critical opinion'. To begin to understand the formative course taken by Sorabji's period of communication with Heseltine, we need only compare some of his earlier pronouncements with later ones. In a letter dated 8 December 1913 – his third to Heseltine – Sorabji declares that 'No genius has any right to lock up in one difficult and costly-accessible corner of the world a work of supreme art, even his own'.<sup>6</sup> Later, with the processes of individuation in motion, such an egalitarian, democratic view of art was already beginning to disappear from Sorabji's aesthetic purview:

Yes, the Personal Equation is *Everything*. The rest is nothing. For myself, my own works means to me just this, *the expression of my own emotions and individuality as I will, with all the force, sincerity and conviction at my command*. I don't know if this is called 'swelled head' but I find my own work satisfies me more completely than anyone else's. Should this be so, I wonder? Yes, I think it should. It is a sort of guarantee as it were!<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (8 December 1913).

<sup>7</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (June 1917).



This incipient, still questioning individualism became heightened after a two-year silence in the communication. When Sorabji writes to Heseltine again in a letter dated 19 June 1922 – the antepenultimate in the chronological sequence of the correspondence – he counters the critique made against him that, if he continued to compose works of ‘monstrous difficulty’ such as Sonata I and Sonata II (published in 1919 and 1920, respectively), he would be in danger of alienating performers and listeners, his music being inaccessible to both: ‘Is it not conceivable that in its very nature and essence this music *can* and *must* only appeal to an extremely restricted audience?’ Sorabji concludes: ‘I shall go on as I have begun, regarding no one’s taste & prejudices or wishes on earth but my own’.<sup>8</sup>

The intensification of Sorabji’s somewhat self-centred, eccentric individualism thus seems to have occurred during the caesura in his correspondence with Heseltine. In Chapter Two, I suggest that the primary influence in this regard was Ferruccio Busoni, the Italian-German composer, pianist, sometime critic and theorist to whom Sorabji dedicated his two ‘monstrously difficult’ sonatas and for whom he performed the first privately in London in November 1919. Sorabji’s meeting with Busoni proved axial in the consolidation of his music-critical aesthetic. In particular, Busoni’s own artistic beliefs – unpopular and antisocial by design and justified by way of hieratic claims to esotericism – came to decisively inform Sorabji’s counter-canon of neglected works. If the Heseltine correspondence was formative, his one-and-only meeting with Busoni was defining. In aligning his critical aesthetic with what Judith Michelle Crispin calls the ‘Busoni tradition’ and by situating himself within what Marc-André Roberge would later identify as the ‘Busoni Network’, K. S. Sorabji, *persona ingratissima*, was actualized. The esotericism espoused by the priest-like figure of Busoni led Sorabji away from the ultra-modernism he so enthusiastically championed in his early letters to Heseltine; after his meeting with Busoni, Sorabji went on to explore some of the more obscure realms of music. Here we find Sorabji seeking out that ‘negative romanticism’ Arnold Whittall identified at the aesthetic heart of the isolationist position. Significantly, both Heseltine (under the pseudonym Peter Warlock) and Busoni were, in Wilfrid Meller’s opinion, composers of ‘negative music’, music which ‘expresses a stupendous personal victory, but it is a victory which we cannot share, or can only share with the greatest difficulty. [...] it cannot

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<sup>8</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (19 June 1922).

communicate its joy to us'.<sup>9</sup> The ex-communicatory nature of this negative music is essential to the neglect of those works comprising Sorabji's counter-canon.

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<sup>9</sup> Wilfrid Mellers, 'The Problem of Busoni', *Music & Letters*, 18/3 (July 1937), 247.

## Chapter One

### **To Heseltine: the epistolary development of Sorabji's critical aesthetic**

My name is a curious one. It is either Sorabji-Shapurji or Shapurji-Sorabji but as people make such a ghastly hash of it all we call ourselves Sorabji "tout court". We have been called among other things Swabby; Soggy; Soralli; Swably, Sorbi, Soppy Scrabby, Sorabeeji etc: etc: etc: etc. to 40 places of decimals!!

D. SORABJI SHAPURJI to Philip Heseltine (3 February 1914)

Thanks for the "Kaikhusru". No more D.K. please K only please. I abandon D to the *outer* darkness.

K.S. to Philip Heseltine (June 1917)

Over the 1913-1922 period of correspondence with Philip Heseltine (1894-1930), Sorabji is seen to engage in a process of identity formation.<sup>1</sup> Integral to this process was the variations on his name as it is given on his birth certificate: Leon Dudley Sorabji. In the twenty-eight letters written between October 1913 and June 1917, Sorabji concludes his missives with a total of nineteen different forms of this name.<sup>2</sup> Fig. 1 shows some of these in the signature of Sorabji's hand. In the last of this nearly four-year period, Sorabji settles on 'Kaikhusru' (later 'Kaikhosru'); in doing so he abandons 'Dudley' to 'the *outer* darkness', 'Leon' disappearing similarly. There followed a two-and-a-half-year silence before the correspondence resumed on 26 January 1920. In this time Sorabji's aesthetic as a composer-critic had been consolidated after his consecratory meeting with Busoni in 1919 (see Chapter Two). The first half of the correspondence, however, sees Sorabji seeking that positive eccentricity the negative-romantic isolationist Heseltine linked to originality in his *Musical Times* article on 'Modern Musical Criticism' which so impressed Sorabji. Sorabji's experimentation with his nominal identity might therefore be construed as an integral part of his search for an eccentric critical identity.

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<sup>1</sup> The letters can be found in the British Library (Ms. add. 57963 (Heseltine Papers)). A substantial portion of the correspondence has been edited with a commentary by Kenneth Derus, 'Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine' in Paul Rapoport (ed.), *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 195-255. Barry Smith has edited and annotated the entirety of the correspondence. This unpublished edition is available from the Sorabji Archive ([www.sorabji-archive.co.uk](http://www.sorabji-archive.co.uk)).

<sup>2</sup> See Marc-André Roberge, 'Forms of Sorabji's Name' on the *Sorabji Resource Site* <http://www.mus.ulaval.ca/roberge/srs/01-forms.htm> [accessed 29 September 2015].

Fig. 1 Selected forms of Sorabji's name in signature

3 October 1913  
*Dudley Sorabji Shapurji*

Believe me to be  
Yours in all truth,  
Dudley Sorabji<sup>^</sup> Shapurji

8 September 1914  
*Dudley Sorabji*

Ever Yours.  
Dudley Sorabji

2 May 1915  
*D. K. Sorabji*

Ever  
D. K. Sorabji

June 1917

K. S.

Yours  
K.S.  
Thanks for the "Kaikhwaru". I am sure D. K. please  
K only please. I am sure to like the darkness.

In order to establish Sorabji's eccentricity by some empirical measure, we should set out by comparing how the content of his letters to Heseltine might match up with the fifteen characteristics David Weeks and Jamie James, in *Eccentrics: A Study of Sanity and*

*Strangeness*, outline as typical of the eccentric character.<sup>3</sup> Additional commentary below is taken from Weeks' earlier study (in collaboration with Kate Ward), *Eccentrics: The Scientific Investigation*.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. Non-conforming

Weeks and Ward explain that 'By definition, eccentrics are individuals who do not fit and, knowing this as positive autonomy, wilfully go against the grain'. They seek alternatives 'to commonly held cultural codes' and, conversely, 'the iconoclast knows that often the objects of his ridicule are cherished by the majority'.<sup>5</sup> This rings true of Sorabji's canonisation of neglected works and his concomitant desecration of the popular classics. The non-conformist, moreover, 'mocks convention and frustrates people in authority' as a means of 'fostering confidence about being oneself and knowing where one is going'.<sup>6</sup> Sorabji takes an evident pride in his non-conformity and frustrating such a prominent English Musical Renaissance figure as Herbert Howells. As he tells Heseltine:

Howells, I hear in concert with a few other lewd fellows of the baser sort have conspired together to do me the honour of publicly expressing their execration of me. This is quite the most encouraging thing I have heard for a long time and still further convinces me – if that were necessary – of my own value. It is, however, good to have such startling confirmation of suspicion from such a quartet, and shows we are getting on. Congratulate me!<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Creative

The 'eccentric creator is only loosely repressed', explain Weeks and Ward; 'their creative process is unpredictable and manifests itself in an under-controlled and sometimes indirect approach'.<sup>8</sup> Sorabji sends Heseltine a fragment from his Second Concerto with the note:

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<sup>3</sup> David Weeks and Jamie James, *Eccentrics: A Study of Sanity and Strangeness*, (New York: Villard, 1995), 27-8.

<sup>4</sup> David Weeks and Kate Ward, *Eccentrics: The Scientific Investigation* (Kilbride: Stirling University Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Weeks and Ward, *Eccentrics: The Scientific Investigation*, 113, 115.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>7</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (8 November 1920)

<sup>8</sup> Weeks and Ward, *Eccentrics: The Scientific Investigation*, 178.

there seetheth at the bottom of the cauldron of my mind the plan of Concerto 2!!!! But it is as yet quite nebulous and vague [...] – this is how it will commence, I think. It is in my usual mood of ungovernable violence as you will remark [...]<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 2 ‘the plan’ of Sorabji’s Second Piano Concerto. Letter to Philip Heseltine (6 July 1916).

‘If any expert opinion disagrees with his own’, explain Weeks and Ward, ‘he will not be dissuaded from following his particular tack. To the contrary, the more sceptical the response is, the more tenaciously will the eccentric redouble his efforts to pursue it,

<sup>9</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (6 July 1916).

sometimes for many years'.<sup>10</sup> In response to the opinion of critic Harvey Grace that his piano writing was of 'monstrous difficulty', Sorabji relays his response to Heseltine: 'What if it is only for the "very finest pianists"? What if it is for no one at all but its creator?'<sup>11</sup>

### **3. Strongly motivated by curiosity**

Sorabji's letters show him to be at the vanguard of the ultra-modernist movement throughout the arts, attending numerous performances and visiting various galleries. His curiosity in this sense led him to seek out little-known works: 'I have also unearthed a very fine and interesting piano Concerto of Nicholas Chérépnnin, of the existence of which I suppose hardly a soul is aware over here except Breitkopf!'<sup>12</sup> This characteristic, of course, would later on heighten the appeal of the neglected work.

### **4. Idealistic: he wants to make the world a better place and the people in it happier**

Sorabji has the reputation of a misanthrope, and not without good reason. However, in his early letters we find considerable empathy for his fellow beings. He writes of 'the barbaric atrocities of hare coursing, fox- and tame-stag hunting, so much beloved of the English sportsman'.<sup>13</sup> At the outbreak of the War, he writes: 'It is the end I hope and trust, for Germany and anything it stands for; its ruthless militarism, despotism, tyranny and mediaeval oppression. A nation that repudiates every law of humanity and righteousness *cannot* endure. Evil destroys itself'.<sup>14</sup> In addition, he reads – and lends to Heseltine – the 'extremely absorbing' pacifist pamphlets issued by the Independent Labour Party'.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most surprising sentiment in the entire correspondence, however, is this early one: 'Great Art is universal. It should not be made the monopoly of the few'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Sorabji is seen to revoke this notion as the correspondence progresses.

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<sup>10</sup> Weeks and Ward, *Eccentrics: The Scientific Investigation*, 197.

<sup>11</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (19 June 1922).

<sup>12</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (8 September 1914).

<sup>13</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (March 1914).

<sup>14</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (8 September 1914).

<sup>15</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (24 August 1915).

<sup>16</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (8 December 1913).

## **5. Happily obsessed with one or more hobbyhorses**

Sorabji becomes engrossed in the study of music: 'I have this year given up other scholastic studies to devote myself entirely to musical study with a view to becoming a *'critic'*!'<sup>17</sup>

## **6. Aware from early childhood that he is different**

This aspect of Sorabji's eccentricity will be considered in some detail below. For now, it suffices to say that, from a young age, Sorabji had experienced racist abuse in London. His sexual orientation was also a matter which Sorabji saw as setting himself apart from his contemporaries. True to the nature of the non-conformist, however, these aspects of otherness became a source of pride for Sorabji. As Weeks and Ward explain, 'Most eccentrics experience periods of isolation. This was enforced by circumstances or because they fell back on their own resources for amusement and solace, experimented with their environment and ideas, and generally extended themselves'.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, 'adverse feelings about the community can engender in the eccentrics a need to maximise their differences from it. They cognitively separate themselves from those they dislike and want to shock, and sometimes this produces an embarrassment of alienation'.<sup>19</sup> Sorabji took recourse to an exoticism which had the desired effect of maximising his difference from the English he felt alienated from (see below).

## **7. Intelligent**

Besides his immersion in the somewhat highbrow world of the artistic avant-garde, Sorabji shows wide reading on a variety of topics (he asks, for example, Heseltine to return the books '*Esoteric Buddhism*', '*Christianity and Buddhism* (I think)' and '*Buddhist Catechism*'<sup>20</sup>) and a sound working knowledge of a number of European languages (to give a concise example: 'Heart, mind, body and soul I am Indian and would wish to be

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<sup>17</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (3 February 1914).

<sup>18</sup> Weeks and Ward, *Eccentrics: The Scientific Investigation*, 66.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>20</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (2 March 1915).



nothing else, though grateful for the soupçon of Spanish – “avec un peu d’Espagne autour”! Dear me what a very egotistic rigmarole nicht wahr?’<sup>21</sup>).

#### **8. Opinionated and outspoken, convinced that he is right and the rest of the world is out of step**

Weeks and Ward explain that ‘If someone craves the extreme reactions of others, however hostile, to be met with tolerance or indifference is often the greatest affront’.<sup>22</sup> It is just as well, then, that Sorabji’s letter to *The Musical Standard* on Wagner was not published as, he tells Heseltine, ‘it “controverts in nearly every point, the ideal point of view”!!!!!!’<sup>23</sup>

#### **9. Non-competitive, not in need of reassurance or reinforcement from society**

Such qualities are apparent in the following declaration: ‘I shall go on as I have begun; regarding no one’s taste & prejudices or wishes on earth but my own’.<sup>24</sup>

#### **10. Unusual in his eating habits and living arrangements**

Not much to report here. Sorabji’s closeness (both emotionally and domestically) to his mother might be the only unusual thing about his living arrangements as revealed over the course of the correspondence (remembering that Sorabji, latterly of independent means, was aged 21-30 by the time his letter-writing to Heseltine had commenced and concluded).

#### **11. Not particularly interested in the opinions or company of others, except in order to persuade them to his – the correct – point of view**

As Sorabji put it in a letter of 1916, ‘I loathe the crowd’.<sup>25</sup> Aside from the epistolary company of Heseltine, Sorabji does not appear to be seeking the company of others: ‘Your account of Public School and university life are truly ghastly. Fortunately for me I have

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<sup>21</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (11 February 1916).

<sup>22</sup> Weeks and Ward, *Eccentrics: The Scientific Investigation*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (6 January 1914).

<sup>24</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (19 January 1922).

<sup>25</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (21 April 1916).

escaped both. I could not possibly be away from my mother for long periods of time [...]. Besides a Public School would have about killed me not before I should have contrived to knife somebody like poor Shelley'.<sup>26</sup> Related to this combative, borderline murderous disregard for the company of one's peers, Weeks and Ward explain that the adolescent eccentric typically demonstrates the ability 'to stand up for themselves for the sake of unpopular causes' – this is very much in evidence when we come to Sorabji's curation of neglected works and obscure composers.

A related point Weeks and Ward make is on the eccentric's 'disregard for up-to-date fashion, which they view as facile manipulation and sterile over-concern with passing changes'. It was a thoroughly eccentric trait of Sorabji to display a deep suspicion of anything nearing popularity. Weeks and Ward continue: eccentrics 'see trendiness as being yet another eminently dispensable relic of modernity. To them, fashion-setters perpetrate an on-going hoax or confidence trick. Those who fall for it are the duped. All the tools of the marketplace, including advertising and mass communication, are seen as ultimately stultifying'.<sup>27</sup> These comments become particularly relevant when we turn to Sorabji's response to the emergence of "modernism" as fashion.

## **12. Possessed of a mischievous sense of humour**

When Sorabji got into a spat with H. C. Colles and Hugh Arthur Scott over 'Melody and Modern Music' in the August 1916 edition of *The Musical Times*, the journal's editor ('the McNaught creature', in Sorabji's words) 'now wants to publish my letter versus Colleywobbles and Great Scott in an abbreviated form'. He sends Heseltine an accompanying illustration, a 'Futurist impression of the states of mind of Colleywobbles and Great Scott after a reading of the Epistle'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (3 February 1914).

<sup>27</sup> Weeks and Ward, *Eccentrics: The Scientific Investigation*, 114-5.

<sup>28</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (27 August 1916).

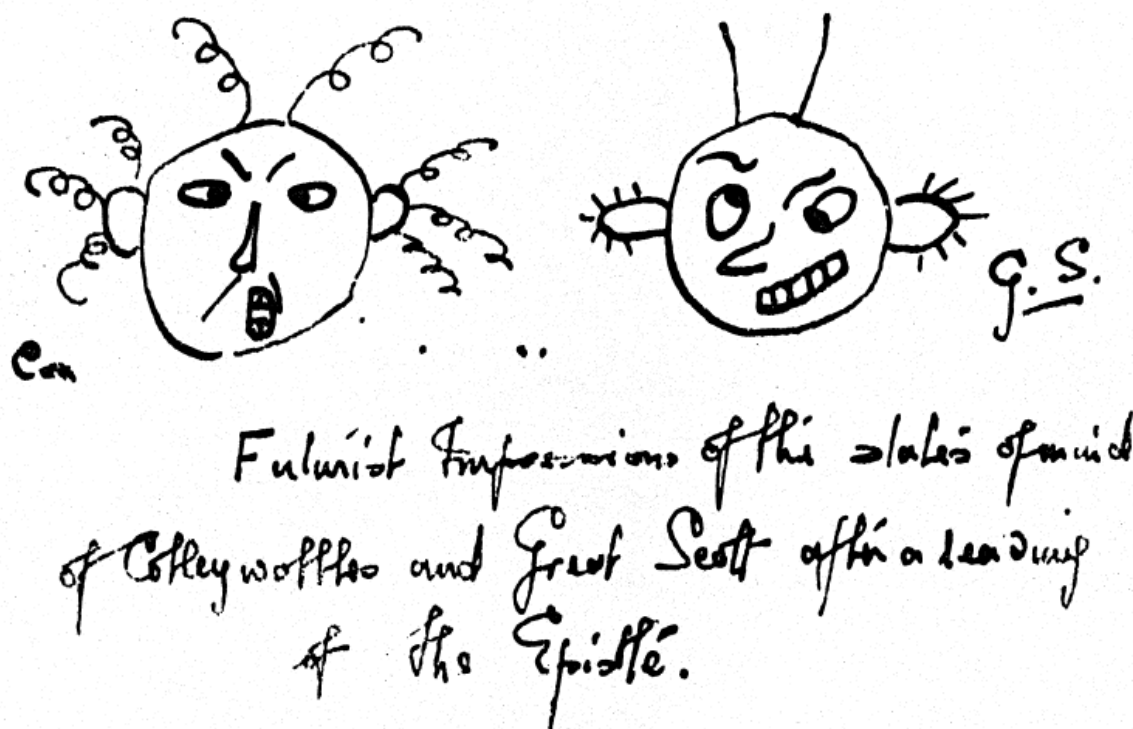


Fig. 3 Sorabji's 'Futurist Impression' of H. C. Colles and Hugh Arthur Scott. Letter to Philip Heseltine (27 August 1916).

Sorabji was also wont to refer to Arthur Bliss hilariously as 'Arthur Piss'.<sup>29</sup>

### 13. Single

Of necessity, Sorabji was not in a relationship during the course of the correspondence (see below). Besides, he was too preoccupied with composing to enter into anything of the sort: 'what sort of a . . . - - wife should I take unto myself were I of the breed that takes wives unto themselves the which praise be to God that I am not – still less shall I allow them to influence me in the infinitely more important matter of creating my monsters!'<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (2 January 1922).

<sup>30</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (19 June 1922).

#### 14. Usually the eldest or an only child

‘Fortunately for me I am an only child! [...] to have a brother or sister would make me expire with rage or be utterly consumed with jealousy!’<sup>31</sup>

#### 15. Usually a bad speller

Not really. In fact Sorabji was quite fastidious on this front, his precision extending even to the matter of transliteration. For example, ‘Chaikovsky’: ‘please spell him this way, it is the only really sensible way; see my letter on the subject in “The Musical Standard” of Jan. 24<sup>th</sup>, over my own name *mis-spelt* Soratji!!!’<sup>32</sup>

All in all, then, Sorabji scores reasonably highly on Weeks and Ward’s eccentricity test. Having thus summarily introduced some of the causes and effects of Sorabji’s eccentricity we now turn to how these played out in terms of his developing critical aesthetic, with a view to situating his early attitude to music in the context of his later counter-canon. His response to Heseltine’s call for greater eccentricity is explored in his early attachment to the ‘ultra-modern movement’, in the exploration of his sexuality and ethnicity in oppositional terms of Englishness and otherness, his opposition to the propagandistic project of the English Musical Renaissance and, finally, in Sorabji’s distancing himself from the nation’s musical establishments and institutions.

#### ‘The ultra-modern spirit’

Sorabji introduces himself to Heseltine in his first letter as ‘an ultra-modernist musician’: ‘it is among the ultra-moderns that I am in my musical element’.<sup>33</sup> He was clearly looking for a likeminded correspondent, and Sorabji’s search was not in vain if his response to Heseltine’s own reply is anything to go by: ‘We must be astonishingly alike in temperament [...]. There are chords in our nature which vibrate in sympathy with the ultra-modern spirit’.<sup>34</sup> But what, in the years immediately preceding the Great War, did it mean

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<sup>31</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (6 January 1914).

<sup>32</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (3 February 1914).

<sup>33</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (3 October 1913).

<sup>34</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (30 October 1913).

to be an ‘ultra-modernist’ in London? It seems that ultra-modernism – any modernism, really – was primarily the stuff of fodder for the ‘Foreign Notes’ section of *The Musical Times*, novelties created on and occasionally shipped in from the continent, but certainly not the done thing in England.<sup>35</sup> To commit to the ultra-modern movement was, by Sorabji’s account, to invite the bafflement and ridicule of the Londoner of a more general culture.

Sorabji’s correspondence with Heseltine shows him to be at the vanguard of developments in early-twentieth-century music, acknowledging such contemporary composers as Scriabin, Busoni, Reger, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Bartók, Kodály, Florent Schmitt, Satie, Louis Aubert, Dukas, Bantock, Cyril Scott, Debussy, Ravel and Strauss in his first, 800-word letter alone. In spite of his vanguardist leanings – ‘nothing can check the resistless sweep of the Modern Movement’<sup>36</sup> – the principles of Sorabji’s nascent critical aesthetic were more or less in keeping with the cautiously progressive liberal tradition of English criticism, one which saw the historical course of development as an evolutionary process built upon incremental and historically necessitated modifications to musical form.<sup>37</sup> After studying Schoenberg’s *Drei Klavierstücke* (Op. 11, composed 1909), for example, Sorabji discovers for himself that this composer’s ‘wildest passages are found to be extensions of old principles and the pushing of them to their logical extremes’.<sup>38</sup> He appears to believe in a thorough grounding in the rules (‘I do not compose! I have not yet reached that stage. I am ploughing through “Ebeneezer”!’<sup>39</sup>) before even attempting to break them or, at least, bending them to fit one’s creative purpose: ‘one must learn orthodox methods to see how the ultra-modern methods have – and they *have* – grown out of them’.<sup>40</sup> This belief leads him to advocate a kind of brinksmanship, a pushing of the envelope of advanced musical thinking: ‘Béla Bartók is extremely advanced; but not so

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<sup>35</sup> See Antony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 157, 178.

<sup>36</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (3 October 1913).

<sup>37</sup> Matthew Riley, ‘Liberal Critics and Modern Music in the Post-Victorian Age’, in Matthew Riley (ed.), *British Music and Modernism, 1895-1960* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 15.

<sup>38</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (8 December 1913).

<sup>39</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (3 February 1914). Ebenezer Prout, music theorist and textbook didactician, was later abandoned by Sorabji. On ‘Organic and Inorganic Form’ in *Mi contra fa*, Sorabji exclaims, ‘Ebenezer Prout . . . Great Gods, what a name! [...] The man’s name is irrevocably associated for its lasting and deserved damnation, with a shelf-full of text-books on the schoolman’s mechanics of music, Harmony, Counterpoint, Fugue, etc., etc., darkeners of counsel, confusers of the issue, makers of the straight path crooked – of such he is the pattern, the, for all time, execrable, and to be execrated exemplar in the English-speaking world’ (p. 47).

<sup>40</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (March 1914).

much as Schönberg [...]. Zoltán Kodály is not quite as advanced as Béla Bartók but of course like him far beyond the Modern French or English school'.<sup>41</sup> This scaling of advancedness prompts Sorabji to dismiss the more radical ventures in composition, and he concludes that 'the Futurists proper are too extreme. They want to sweep away the past and everything connected with it'. Instead, Sorabji holds to an organic, evolutionary comprehension of history quite opposed to a revolutionary approach: the Futurists 'forget that but for the past, modern developments could never have come to pass any more than a plant could grow if you go and cut away its roots. I think one must – however ultra-modern our sympathies are or may be – be careful not to become too bigoted. The extreme bigotry of ultra-modernism, i.e., Futurism, is surely just as bad as the bigoted academicism of the Corders and Bridges, n'est-ce pas?'<sup>42</sup>

Not only was Sorabji keeping abreast of the latest developments in music, but he was also following the various fluctuations in the modernist movement throughout the art world. He tells Heseltine of his visits to a number of London exhibits and in doing so flaunts an appreciation of such diverse challenges to formal representation as Expressionism, Fauvism, Orphism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism and, again, Futurism.<sup>43</sup> He even sends Heseltine a copy of Wyndham Lewis's *Blast* – this 'puce monster', a manifesto for Vorticism – for perusal.<sup>44</sup> Just how Sorabji would later come to distrust any '-ism' remains to be seen. For now, it is more important to note the very apparent sense that Sorabji came to enjoy his rather isolated – save for the epistolary company of Heseltine – position within an avant-garde minority. Here we can discern Sorabji's developing *persona ingratisima*. In his introductory letter, Sorabji explains to Heseltine that, 'Of course my ultra-modernist sympathies give rise to a good deal of offence among unsympathetic "friends" but that does not bother me in the least!'<sup>45</sup> Sorabji seems to welcome the ridicule visited upon the ultra-modern artist. On his seven trips to the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries and twelve such to the Post-Impressionist and Futurist Exhibition at the Doré – both in London within the space of a year – Sorabji writes to Heseltine:

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<sup>41</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (8 December 1913).

<sup>42</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (March 1914).

<sup>43</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (February 1914).

<sup>44</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (27 December 1914).

<sup>45</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (3 October 1913).

To ridicule of course is easy. Ignorance always ridicules, if only to hide *its* ignorance! [...] For my part I cannot understand what people found to laugh at at these exhibitions! I tried very hard to see what was ‘funny’ but could find nothing ‘funny’ except the giggling idiots who little knew what fools they make themselves look in the eyes of the sensible *thinking* person.<sup>46</sup>

The persecutory compensation claim for being misunderstood is straightforward: *they do not understand*. This distinction between the misunderstood minority and the misunderstanding majority appears as the seed of Sorabji’s later, somewhat arcane confirmation bias: the public at large *do not know, they cannot know*. This superior belief will form the basis of a defence mechanism which led to his identification with maligned composers and to his curation of their neglected works as an act akin to martyrdom. As he wrote of Schoenberg in regard to the *Drei Klavierstücke*: ‘People seek notoriety for a definite purpose; raking in money as a rule; but no one can say *that* is Schönberg’s object! No one buys his music! No one goes and hears it! He is assailed with slander, calumny, abuse nay, even personal violence would, from what we hear, have seemed to have been attempted’.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps worse than idiotic, giggling incomprehension or even slander, calumny and abuse, however, was the pretentious attitude towards the ultra-modern which affected deep understanding. In this regard, Sorabji recommends to Heseltine Robin H. Legge’s *Daily Telegraph* article on ‘Audiences and the New Music’.<sup>48</sup> ‘It was splendid’, Sorabji reported back to Heseltine. ‘I wonder how the affected posing students to whom it alludes felt when they read it?’<sup>49</sup> Embarrassed, presumably, for Legge questions whether the audience at the ultra-modern concert in question knew what they either applauded or hissed or even why they did so:

It is hard to believe that conviction has anything to do with the matter, for – I don’t want to be rude – I feel confident that not five per cent of the large audience which were present at the concerts of the Schönberg and Scriabin [...] had had a sufficiently earnest study of the men or their music or their various aims when they applauded or hissed, as the case may be.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (February 1914).

<sup>47</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (8 December 1913).

<sup>48</sup> Robin H. Legge, ‘Audiences and the New Music’, *The Daily Telegraph* (28 March 1914), 7.

<sup>49</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (March 1914).

<sup>50</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (24 August 1915).

In particular, Legge cannot fathom why the students in attendance who ‘applauded with almost alarming violence’ did so, having observed during the performance itself that ‘the faces of most of them wore an expression of resigned boredom, whilst others were obviously irritated, and still others were amused and were at no pains to hide their merriment’.<sup>51</sup> He can only surmise that these ‘young barbarians’ will unthinkingly ‘acclaim the foreign modern’ simply because it is both foreign and modern.<sup>52</sup> Legge despairs of the future for music in a country whose youthful concertgoers are positioned to become the arbiters of the nation’s tastes: ‘Nothing can be prospectively more deplorable in the history of our music than the thought that a future generation is to be ruled by those who in their earliest youth despised all the foundations of the art, who in their cradle and ever after mistook the shell for the kernel’.<sup>53</sup> The young, modish concertgoer who rejects tradition in the name of fashion was to become the object of Sorabji’s severest scorn soon after the post-war emergence of “modernism”. Even at this relatively early stage, however, it is not particularly difficult to see why Sorabji might have found Legge’s article so agreeable: Sorabji’s early investment in the ultra-modern was both hard-won (‘I have also unearthed a very fine and interesting piano Concerto of Nicholas Chérépnnin, of the existence of which I suppose hardly a soul is aware over here except Breitkopf!’<sup>54</sup>) and jealously guarded.

Indeed, it would be in keeping with Sorabji’s later attitude that such ultra-modern high-art music as the Scriabin and Schoenberg programmed should not be for the masses, an attitude which calls to mind Schoenberg’s own remark that, ‘If it is art it is not for everybody; if it is for everybody it is not art’.<sup>55</sup> This elitist dictum would become a *reductio ad absurdum* in Sorabji’s fully-fledged critical aesthetic. At this formative stage, however, it merely needs pointing out that he seemed to enjoy the marginal status of the ultra-modern as a secret he was not entirely willing to share, least of all with giggling, gallery-bothering ‘idiots’ and ‘affected posing students’. It is not insignificant that Scriabin’s *Prometheus* should have attracted the students in Legge’s article, for this composer was, during the earlier parts of the Heseltine correspondence, Sorabji’s ultra-

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<sup>51</sup> Legge, ‘Audiences and the New Music’, 7.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (8 September 1914).

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, Vol. 4, ‘Music in the Early Twentieth Century’ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 353.



modernist *beau ideal*. As he wrote in his first letter, ‘Skriabine is to my mind a colossal genius and there is, to me at any rate, nothing in the whole range of music quite so wonderful and strangely, weirdly *beautiful* as his marvellous music’.<sup>56</sup> Sorabji keeps Scriabin personal, as if he is the only one in the world to appreciate this music, a point he to all intents and purposes makes in his third letter recalling the February 1912 Queen’s Hall performance of *Prometheus*:

It was so sublime to *me*, as to be almost painful: the exstasy and gloriousness of it! And people hissed and laughed!!!! No composer living or dead has written or could write music so transcendental as this: Scriabine stands absolutely alone, but *what* an isolation! *what* an eminence!!!<sup>57</sup>

Scriabin was a composer for the very few: ‘Only those with a considerable degree of inner vision and marked supernormal receptiveness can hope to grasp and sense such music’.<sup>58</sup> Scriabin’s ‘isolation’, his standing alone aloof from the hisses and laughter of the many – those without ‘supernormal receptiveness’ – is a Nietzschean trope we see time and again in Sorabji’s writings on the composers of neglected works. It was an isolation, moreover, which Sorabji was beginning to foster for himself through his exchanges with Heseltine.

### Englishness and Otherness

Not too long into the correspondence and soon after the ultra-modernist preliminaries had been despatched, Sorabji begins to confide in Heseltine on a personal level. He writes frequently and often bitterly about his loneliness and, in particular, his feeling out of place in England. Where his marginality as an ‘ultra-modernist musician’ was a source of pride from the outset, Sorabji took some time to similarly adjust to the alterity he felt in terms of his sexuality and ethnicity. In his fourth letter, Sorabji writes to Heseltine:

where in the Devil’s name do they think that a boy of 19 or 20 of musical & artistic tastes is going to find congenial companionship among his compeers of that age in *England*, where to be a musician or artist is to be regarded as a disagreeable sort of monstrosity to be sternly reprobated and, if possible, equally sternly suppressed?<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (3 October 1913).

<sup>57</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (8 December 1913).

<sup>58</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (1915).

<sup>59</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (6 January 1914).

There is, perhaps, a coded message here. The language used by Sorabji in these lines links his musicality to a deviant otherness (a ‘monstrosity’ to be ‘suppressed’) comparable to the Edwardian social discourses surrounding homosexuality and its punishable illegality.

Philip Brett has commented that ‘among the many code words for a homosexual man before Stonewall [1969] (and even since), “musical” (as in, “is he musical, do you think?”)’ was considered ‘safe insider euphemism’.<sup>60</sup> Even if Sorabji was oblivious to the slang association of the term ‘musicality’ with male homosexuality, he was less circumspect although still cryptic about the expression of his own sexuality later on. From Vienna in 1922, he writes to tell Heseltine of a prostitute working at the Hotel Krantz: ‘She sits nightly in the Lounge making furious eyes at all the men who come in. [...] I was rather enraged to see her get hold of a nice looking English boy - - - - - no . . . not professional jealousy’.<sup>61</sup>

Maybe it was the case that Sorabji was becoming more open about his sexuality, or at least as open as he could be. In Paul Rapoport’s words, ‘He turned what could have been a debilitating problem into something positive, making a virtue of a necessity while nonetheless realizing the necessity of keeping this particular virtue quiet’.<sup>62</sup> In his next letter, Sorabji proudly informs Heseltine that ‘I got an article on “Sexual Inversion” in “*Medical Times*” last October’.<sup>63</sup> This admirable piece bears the fruits of Sorabji’s early researches into homosexuality, or ‘sexual inversion’ as it was known: ‘None but the very ignorant can now, after the labours of Havelock Ellis, Black [Iwan Bloch?], [Magnus] Hirschfield and others, regard the invert merely as a moral monster, a “degenerate”, or a perverted vicious sensualist’: ‘Modern psychology has shown what physical and mental havoc repression can work in a human being’. Sorabji recognised that homosexuality was ‘congenital’ and, ‘as [Edward] Carpenter so well puts it’ in *The Intermediate Sex*, “Twined in the very roots of the individual life”’. On the prospect of the work of eminent sexologist Havelock Ellis being produced as evidence in defence of an alleged criminal invert, Sorabji enlists even this figure as a subject of neglect: ‘it is wildly improbable that one of any twelve average jurymen have ever heard of Havelock Ellis; he would probably be

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<sup>60</sup> Philip Brett, ‘Musicality, Essentialism and the Closet’ in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, Gary C. Thomas (ed.), *Queering the Pitch* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (New York: Routledge, 2006), 11.

<sup>61</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (2 January 1922).

<sup>62</sup> ‘Sorabji: A Continuation’ in Paul Rapoport (ed.), *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 70-71.

<sup>63</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (12 February 1922).

shocked if he had'.<sup>64</sup> Sorabji's mother sent him to see Ellis, 'a shy and eccentric doctor from Croydon who saw the world differently',<sup>65</sup> probably in 1924.<sup>66</sup> In the same year Sorabji completed his *Concerto per pianoforte e piccola orchestra*, "*Simorg Anka*" and dedicated it 'To Dr. Havelock Ellis. – / in respectful admiration, homage and gratitude'.<sup>67</sup>

Rapoport has suggested that, although Sorabji's homosexuality meant he had 'trouble adapting socially', he nevertheless refused to conform to societal norms: 'He maintained that he was what he was, and those that could not accept him be damned'. Indeed, 'sometimes the more contrary his position seemed, the more he enjoyed having and expressing it. In this context, his homosexuality not only fitted but thrived'.<sup>68</sup> In a letter to *The Catholic Herald* thirty years after meeting Ellis, Sorabji effectively damned English laws against homosexuality: 'England maintains barbarous, inhuman, irrational and completely futile penal laws against overt manifestations of homosexuality, laws that are unanimously condemned by all responsible opinion, long after such laws have been abolished elsewhere'.<sup>69</sup> Sorabji's hatred towards the English and his isolation from them was already apparent in his earliest letters. In 1914, he writes to Heseltine:

I am very lonely; I have no friends at all, except my mother's, and it will indeed be a joy to find such a keenly sympathetic soul. Oh how I loathe these English: with their coarseness, crudeness, vulgarity, and clodlike unimaginative stolidity! Don't be offended please! You will understand my feelings.<sup>70</sup>

Sorabji goes on to reassure Heseltine that he (Heseltine) is 'unconventional and refreshingly un-British'.<sup>71</sup> Although none of Heseltine's replies to Sorabji is known to be extant, we can nevertheless gain an idea of what his letters might have expressed by looking at those he wrote to other correspondents around the same time. For example, Heseltine explains to Frederick Delius on 18 October 1914 that 'I have never been able to understand the sentiment of patriotism, the love of empire'.<sup>72</sup> To Colin Taylor, on 12 November 1915, he writes that 'every day – it is after all no good pretending to think and

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<sup>64</sup> Sorabji, 'Sexual Inversion', *Medical Times* (October 1921), 148-9.

<sup>65</sup> Henry Hemming, *In Search of the English Eccentric* (London: John Murray, 2008), 151.

<sup>66</sup> Rapoport, 'Sorabji: A Continuation', 70.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Rapoport, 'Could you just send me a list of his works?' in Paul Rapoport (ed.), *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 126-7.

<sup>68</sup> Rapoport, 'Sorabji: A Continuation', 71.

<sup>69</sup> Sorabji, 'Christianity and Homosexuality' in *The Catholic Herald* (26 January 1954), n.p.

<sup>70</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (February 1914).

<sup>71</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (14 April 1914).

<sup>72</sup> In Cecil Gray, *Peter Warlock: A Memoir of Philip Heseltine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), 94

feel what one sincerely does not – I feel more and more out of sympathy with the general temper of the country’.<sup>73</sup> To Bernard van Dieren on 8 June 1916, Heseltine writes that ‘in this country, where Sir Hubert Parry is the beau-ideal of a composer, no sort of pseudo-musical monstrosity is impossible’.<sup>74</sup> To Delius again, on 19 June 1918: ‘The atmosphere of these islands becomes more and more stifling and putrescent to anyone who cares for art above all things’.<sup>75</sup> On these and similar matters, it would be reasonable to suggest that Sorabji did indeed find in Heseltine ‘a keenly sympathetic soul’. These mutual feelings and expressions of isolation may have positively reinforced their shared outsidership, inducing a certain feeling of pleasure in their respective persecution complexes and artistic martyrdom. Both Sorabji and Heseltine sought to position themselves as ex-centric to the Anglocentricity of the period, an ideological Englishness the centripetal pull of which was strongest at the heart of the British Empire. Cecil Gray, in his 1934 biography of Heseltine/Warlock, wrote that:

The English capital, which our countrymen like to call the hub of the universe, is really a great cesspool – more especially where any kind of art is concerned; if one lives in it continuously for a year or so, one sinks deeper and deeper into the mire until one reaches such a pitch of blasphemy that one begins to positively enjoy one’s wallowing.<sup>76</sup>

The negative-romantic isolationist position was predicated precisely on the cultivation and maintenance of such grievance: Sorabji and Heseltine needed an oppositional standpoint from which to voice their discontent.

Sorabji writes to Heseltine in 1914: ‘I find that English people – whom with all due respect to your honoured self and my own dear mother, herself English – [I] detest “en masse” – do not respond to music of a deep profound nature’.<sup>77</sup> This is an extraordinary admission from Sorabji, extraordinary if only for referring to his mother as ‘English’ as, right up to more recent times, it had been taken as fact that Sorabji was Indian-Parsi on his father’s side, Spanish-Sicilian on his mother’s. This snippet of what would turn out to be biographical misinformation first entered the records when, after Heseltine requested details for his entry on Sorabji in *A Dictionary of Modern Music and Musicians* (1924) Sorabji returned, in part, the following: ‘Born 1895 [*sic*] – Mother Spanish, Father Parsî –

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<sup>73</sup> In *ibid.*, 105

<sup>74</sup> In *ibid.*, 139

<sup>75</sup> In *ibid.*, 177-8.

<sup>76</sup> In *ibid.*, 153.

<sup>77</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (3 February 1914).

in Essex'.<sup>78</sup> Either he forgot about his earlier admission about his mother being English (reading – or trying to read – Sorabji's letters in his own hand often gives the impression they were written at a slapdash pace) or he hoped Heseltine had forgotten, Sorabji was by 1916 blurring the picture of his ethnicity. The following provides an illustrative example, with Sorabji using English, French and German to express his Indo-Spanish heritage:

And remember whatever may hap – I *will not* be called a '*British*' composer. Heart, mind, body and soul I am Indian and would wish to be nothing else, though grateful for the soupçon of Spanish – 'avec un peu d'Espagne autour'! Dear me, what a very egotistic rigmarole nicht wahr?<sup>79</sup>

Sorabji was, however, changeable in the details: he would later refute claims he was Indian with utter disdain.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, he held to his non- or even anti-Englishness throughout his life, writing in 1975 that

I am BY NO MANNER OF MEANS NOR IN ANY WAY ENGLISH... My racial, ancestral and cultural roots are in civilisations with more millennia behind them than Anglo-Saxondom has centuries.<sup>81</sup>

The chief objective of Sorabji's claims of this kind to an historically and culturally distinguished ancestry – and there are many such claims, despite their changeability over time – was to set him apart from the English he detested; as long as exotic bloodlines flowed through him his birth and residence in England was little more than unfortunate happenstance. However, after extensive archival research, Sean Vaughn Owen in 2006 could prove that Sorabji had invented one side of his parental background: Sorabji's mother was in fact English. Madeline Matilda Worthy – the Spanish-Sicilian of Sorabji's imagination, the operatic soprano with distinguished family ties to the Catholic church – was in fact born on 13 August 1866 in Camberwell, Surrey to English parents of Anglican denomination: 'Madeline was not just born in England, she was English and, by extension, Sorabji himself was half-English'.<sup>82</sup> Owen concludes his thesis by stating that 'Sorabji was an Englishman, and as much as he would have frowned upon this conclusion, one must

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<sup>78</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (July 1922).

<sup>79</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (11 February 1916).

<sup>80</sup> Nalini Ghuman, "'Persian composer-pianist baffles": Kaikhosru Sorabji', in Julie Brown (ed.), *Western Music and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 129.

<sup>81</sup> Sorabji in a letter to Garrard McLeod (1975) quoted in Sean V. Owen, 'Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji: An Oral Biography' (University of Southampton: PhD, 2006) 45.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

wonder whether he was ashamed of his true identity or if perhaps the truth was painful in some way'.<sup>83</sup>

Whatever the case, we know from the Heseltine correspondence that Sorabji began to use his racial otherness to bolster his critical eccentricity in response to his experiences of racism in London. He tells Heseltine of 'what we have to endure at England's hands'<sup>84</sup> and confesses that 'I find the insufferable arrogance and conceited affectation of many English people unbearable. One day I will tell you some tales of what Indians have to endure at the hands of British arrogance; but not now'.<sup>85</sup> In one of his earliest published letters – on the subject of 'Foreigners in England' in *The New Age* of 15 April 1915 – he creates a martyrological discourse of a beleaguered 'us' and an ever-present 'them':

If we go in the train, the 'bus, the street, we are greeted with rude, insolent stares. Insulting and offensive remarks are passed about us in loud tones, we are ridiculed and laughed at to our very faces. They make no attempt of concealing their behaviour. Oh, dear, no, that would never do, for it would fail in its design of wounding, offending and hurting us if they did so.<sup>86</sup>

In a later letter to Erik Chisholm, Sorabji elaborates on one such occasion:

My own experience in THIS country as a child and a boy were APPALLING ... I was once insulted with my mother in a first class railway carriage by a gaitered 'dignitary' (????!?) of the Church of England ... I was in my early teens at the time, and rather timid ... This cod-fishmouthed old reptile stared offensively at me and Ma for a long time then turned to the old faggot with him and roared in a loud voice 'A BLACK BOY' ... Ma turned LIVID ... She wasn't a Sicilian for nothing ... She went over to him and said, in that wonderful clear speaking voice of hers which could carry ever so far when she spoke in a perfectly normal tone of voice ... YOU ODIIOUS OLD CREATURE ... MY SON IS NOT A BLACK BOY ... BUT EVEN IF HE WERE IF HE WERE A GORILLA OR A BABOON I SHOULD THANK GOD FOR IT RATHER THAN THAT HE SHOULD BELONG TO ANYBODY THAT PRODUCES PEOPLE LIKE YOU!!!!<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>84</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (February 1914).

<sup>85</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (March 1914).

<sup>86</sup> Sorabji, 'Foreigners in England' in *The New Age*, 15 April 1915, 653.

<sup>87</sup> Letter to Erik Chisholm, c. 1960, quoted in John Purser, *Erik Chisholm Scottish Modernist 1904-1965: Chasing a Restless Muse* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2009), 62.

It is clear from this recollection that his experience of racism at a young age was to have the effect of singling him out in the public eye by engendering a feeling of exclusion from London for his appearance – an inescapable visual signifier of his difference.

But Sorabji was not prepared to adapt on this front, either; not for him, servile assimilation to the English order. He begins to take pride in the façade of his absolutely non-English identity, his alterity or otherness, for not only was Sorabji musical but he was also good with colours, as he tells Heseltine:

You see being an Oriental I have all the Orientals' colour-sense, in which Englishmen are lacking, and I feel quite at home and at ease in juxtapositions [...] at which the ordinary person pretends to be horrified. And after all what is the accepted scheme of colour grouping but another convention such as that of consonance and dissonance which the ultra-modern artists and musicians are seeking to upset?<sup>88</sup>

This is strikingly consonant with Susan Stanford Friedman's definition of the notion of 'parataxis' – 'the juxtaposition of things without providing connectives' – as a key to understanding and appreciating modernism. Parataxis is defined as 'a common aesthetic strategy in modernist writing and art, developed to disrupt and fragment conventional sequencing, causality, and perspective'.<sup>89</sup> Sorabji continues: 'Of course the average blasted Britisher will call any Orientals' ideas of colour, or anything else for that matter, barbarous, though what could be more hideously barbarous than his own attire and often his whole personality?'<sup>90</sup> Sorabji's receptivity in this sense derived from his putatively oriental background and would come to colour the paratactic understanding of ultra-modernism he used to his advantage as a critic: 'Yes, it would be great fun – an Eastern on Ravel!!!'<sup>91</sup> On such matters Sorabji secures a self-appointed authority. For example, on Cyril Scott's Piano Sonata he seems to be correcting Heseltine's opinion that the work in question constituted an effective musical impression of the East: 'Will you believe an Oriental when he tells you there is absolutely *nothing* Oriental about this work either in spirit, feeling, or expression or atmosphere: it is pure Occident!'<sup>92</sup> For Sorabji, there was

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<sup>88</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (14 April 1914).

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Jennifer Doctor, 'The Parataxis of "British Musical Modernism"', *The Musical Quarterly*, 91/1-2 (2008), 3.

<sup>90</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (14 April 1914).

<sup>91</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (23 February 1916).

<sup>92</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (14 April 1914).

one decisive factor in Scott's failure as a composer: he 'has been crippled by environment'; he 'might have done great things had he never been born in England'.<sup>93</sup>

The question of Orientalism in Sorabji's work has been addressed by Nalini Ghuman who, through her use of the concepts of Orientalism and hybridity respectively derived from Edward Said and Stuart Hall, claims that 'Intellectually, [Sorabji's] view of the Orient, and (paradoxically) of himself, is an essentially Western conception'.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, Sorabji often makes bold statements explicitly drawing attention to his supposed Oriental stock and temperament both privately (as in his letters to Heseltine) and publically (as in his critical writings). But by his insistence on and exhibitionistic enactment of these ideals, his stock and temperament in light of recent biographical facts can instead be read as distinctly *Orientalist*. A sense that Sorabji believed himself to be an authentic embodiment and representative of Eastern thought and practice is pervasive; furthermore, his was a belief which positioned him in a place of authority from which he could castigate those he saw to be mere imitators:

It is very disgusting to see how Europeans pilfer bits from Oriental and particularly Hindu philosophy, trick it out in their own words which no one can understand – which is perhaps as well – and palm it off as the results of their own philosophic speculations and researches.<sup>95</sup>

The foundations of Sorabji's Oriental(ist) authority are closely tied to modes of exoticism. Ralph P. Locke has suggested that an imaginative turn to the exotic may come in reaction to 'sexual politics in the home culture [...] or individual psychology' that is 'the response of hyper-sensitive artists [...] to the "enervating, corruptive, brutalizing" world of modern Europe'. Such artists were attracted to exoticism 'perhaps because of that feeling of apartness from the mainstream of urban industrialized society'.<sup>96</sup> In other words, exoticism presented a means of escapism. Jonathan Bellman has asked, 'is exoticism simply exotic?' The word 'does not merely mean distant (indeed, distance is not even a necessary prerequisite). The suggestion of strangeness is the overriding factor'; the exotic 'suggests a specifically alien culture or ethos'. Furthermore, Bellmann continues, 'exoticism is not

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<sup>93</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (June 1917).

<sup>94</sup> Ghuman, "'Persian composer-pianist baffles": Kaikhosru Sorabji', 131.

<sup>95</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (March 1914).

<sup>96</sup> Ralph P. Locke, 'Cutthroats and Casbah Dancers, Muezzins and Timeless Sands: Musical Images of the Middle East', in Bellman, Jonathan (ed.), *The Exotic in Western Music* (Boston, Massachusetts: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 107-108.



about the earnest study of foreign cultures, it is about drama, effect, and evocation'.<sup>97</sup> Through his various writings and correspondence, we begin to form the impression that Sorabji found in his self-exoticising otherness a source of pride which found affirmation in challenging the English commonplace. The substitution of his English first- and middle names (Leon Dudley) for the more exotic Kaikhosru Shapurji is one aspect of this: these were to be 'abandon[ed] to the *outer* darkness'.<sup>98</sup>

### The case of Fritz ("Frederick") Delius

Sorabji's rejection of any incriminating ties to English national identity – both nominally and by way of a semi-fictionalised heritage – had a significant impact on the formation of his counter-canon. As a general rule, Sorabji rejected composers who were claimed on ideological grounds to be emblematic of a musical Englishness, those who were co-opted by the critics' circle into promoting the notion of an English Musical Renaissance. Sorabji was – or positioned himself to be – ex-centric to the Anglocentric claims of the period, the nationalist tendency explained by Krishan Kumar in *The Making of English National Identity* to 'see all major events and achievements of national life as English'.<sup>99</sup> This 'has often been taken as an expression of arrogant English pride, English nationalism in its most blatant form'.<sup>100</sup> The case of Fritz Theodor Albert (now more commonly remembered as 'Frederick') Delius is a notable instance of the propagandistic assimilation of non-British composers into the Anglocentric cause of the Renaissance. As Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes put it in *The English Musical Renaissance*, Delius's case offers the 'most striking testament to the centripetal power of mainstream representation'.<sup>101</sup> Its significance is underlined not least because British-born, Dutch-German Delius 'professed to despise England and everything English';<sup>102</sup> he 'often expressed a virulent distaste for all things English – especially English music'.<sup>103</sup> Delius was another outsider figure, a negative romantic: 'He believed in nothing except himself and his own sensations, had

<sup>97</sup> Jonathan Bellman, 'Introduction', in Jonathan Bellman (ed.), *The Exotic in Western Music* (Boston, Massachusetts: Northeastern University Press, 1998), xii-xiii.

<sup>98</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (June 1917).

<sup>99</sup> Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>101</sup> Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance, 1840-1940: Constructing a National Music*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), 169-70.

<sup>102</sup> Cecil Gray, *Musical Chairs or Between Two Stools, Being the Life and Memoirs of Cecil Gray* (London: Home & Van Thal, 1948) 189.

<sup>103</sup> Stradling and Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 66.

little use for his fellow men or other people's music [...] no music could be more completely personal and asocial'.<sup>104</sup> In Eric Fenby's words, Delius's is an art 'which will never enjoy an appeal to the many, but one which will always be loved, and dearly loved, by the few'.<sup>105</sup> For Heseltine, Delius was a 'much neglected composer [...] whose works I positively adore'. Delius 'comes nearest to my own imperfect ideal of music'.<sup>106</sup>

Through Heseltine, Sorabji was able to hear an excerpt of Delius's work before it had even gone to print, an exclusive honour – Sorabji was 'in' with the 'outsiders' – he was keen to share with the wider public. As he wrote to *The Monthly Musical Record* towards the end of 1916, 'Certain fragments of a new work, as yet in manuscript and not completed, of the illustrious Delius, which I have had the great privilege of hearing, are as thoroughly typical of this great master as anything I know'.<sup>107</sup> But behind Sorabji's interest in Delius's music there was the critical question of the composer's national identity. In February 1914, he writes to Heseltine to tell him that 'I take all opportunities of hearing Delius's music. It is, I think, the most beautiful music produced by an Englishman, if you can really call Delius an Englishman!'.<sup>108</sup> The following month he asks probingly, 'What nationality is Delius?'.<sup>109</sup> By 1917, in the same letter as that in which Sorabji abandons D. 'to the outer darkness', his critical stance on the matter had become proactive, telling Heseltine to 'keep your eye on the M[usical] S[tandard]. [...] I am administering reproof to an individual who has the effrontery to claim Delius as a British composer'.<sup>110</sup> In turn, Delius took an interest in Sorabji through their mutual acquaintance, Heseltine. Delius writes to Heseltine in November 1915 enquiring about a certain 'Surooadj',<sup>111</sup> and that, on his next visit to London, 'you must arrange for me to hear something of your friend Saradji – it would interest me very much'.<sup>112</sup> It was when Heseltine suggested he send Delius the score of Sorabji's *Concerto pour piano et grande orchestra* that Sorabji gave his

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<sup>104</sup> Wilfrid Mellers, *Music and Society: England and the European Tradition* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1946), 107.

<sup>105</sup> Eric Fenby, *Delius as I Knew Him* [1936] (London: Quality Press Ltd., 1948), 208.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Barry Smith, *Frederick Delius and Peter Warlock: A Friendship Revealed* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xvii.

<sup>107</sup> Sorabji, 'Correspondence', *The Monthly Musical Record* (1 December 1916), 320.

<sup>108</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (3 February 1914).

<sup>109</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (March 1914).

<sup>110</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (June 1917).

<sup>111</sup> Frederick Delius to Heseltine (24 November 1915) in Lionel Carley (ed.), *Delius: A Life in Letters*, Vol. II (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1988), 155.

<sup>112</sup> Frederick Delius to Heseltine (24 March 1920) in *ibid.*, 229.

permission, but with the caveat: ‘whatever may hap – I *will not* be called a “British” composer’.<sup>113</sup>

Despite his protestations to the contrary and despite those of his supporters in similar vein, Delius was posthumously consecrated as an ‘icon of Englishness’ (this canonisation taking place a year after his death and following his disinterment from a French grave only to be reburied in a Surrey churchyard under the cover of darkness).<sup>114</sup> John Bridcut explores the methods employed in the ‘image management’ of Delius, ‘revealing the degree to which the composer’s chief champion’ – Sir Thomas Beecham – ‘manipulated his reputation to make him appear more “British” than he really was’.<sup>115</sup> Sorabji was particularly opposed to Delius being misrepresented as such an icon of Englishness. His earlier ambivalence on the question of Delius’s nationality resolved into certainty. In his *Musical Standard* reproof, Sorabji declares that any reference to Delius as an ‘English composer’ would be ‘a piece of absurdity and hypocrisy’.<sup>116</sup> Much later, in *The New English Weekly* in 1941, Sorabji’s opinion on the matter was entrenched. In the following passage, we see Sorabji identifying with Delius’s plight, only for Sorabji to present his situation to be the more egregious:

The absurdity of speaking of Delius as a ‘British’ composer is only surpassed by referring to the N.E.W.’s wretched musical critic [i.e., Sorabji himself] in those terms! Delius has not one drop of specifically ‘British’ blood in his veins, being Dutch on his father’s side and German on his mother’s side.<sup>117</sup>

But Sorabji’s most extended treatment of the topic – and his own embroilment in it – occurs in *Mi contra fa*:

The epithet [‘British Composer’] becomes almost fantastic when applied to the Dutch-German, Frederick Delius, though in spite of all the nonsense they talk about him, one can understand why the English want to try and pretend that one of the supreme Masters of Music of the last fifty years is a Briton. As far as can be deduced from available evidence, Delius was just about as un-English in his ways of thought and his outlook as well as can

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<sup>113</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (11 February 1916).

<sup>114</sup> Stradling and Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 140.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Jessica Duchon, ‘Frederick Delius: How a great British musical myth was born’, *The Independent* (23 May 2012), <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/frederick-delius-how-a-great-british-musical-myth-was-born-7778714.html> [accessed 11 January 2014].

<sup>116</sup> Sorabji, ‘French Music’, *The Musical Standard* (20 October 1917), 274.

<sup>117</sup> Sorabji, Music. Delius: B.B.C. Sunday afternoon Broadcast Symphony Concert (May 4<sup>th</sup>), *The New English Weekly* (29 May 1941), 63.

be imagined. He kept all his life utterly apart and aloof from English musical life; his opinion of English musicians was scarifying, with very few and rare exceptions. [...] Ample evidence there is now to show that English life, habits, ways of thought, were not only distasteful, but deeply antipathetic to him.

Sorabji describes ‘the corpus of “British Composers”’ as ‘an ethnographical museum, a grand procession of all nations’ and he includes his own position within it as the ‘ultimate of grotesquerie’:

The case of the Spanish-Sicilian-Parsi is the pick of the bunch. Here is one who, without one drop of specifically “British” blood in his veins [...], looking, thinking and feeling as much unlike a Briton as can well be imagined, having no sort of connection with English musical life (he neither performs, nor is his work performed, in this country), having no official status at any institution, combining, as he is wont to say himself, by a quaint device every quality most perfectly calculated to make him *persona ingratisissima* with any official musical circle, an open and outspoken disbeliever in all the prescribed correct dogmas of the moment, musical, ideological, and political Left or Right, and far worse than all tracing his origins to a locale very far East of the East End or any handy Ghetto – the utmost limit of permissible, fashionably permissible, racial orientalism – even this freak, this *monstrum* has on occasion been described as a ‘British composer’!<sup>118</sup>

After the example of Delius, Sorabji redoubles his own efforts not to be incorporated into the project of what can be broadly identified here as the English Musical Renaissance: by presenting himself as a Spanish-Sicilian-Parsi ‘grotesquery’, ‘freak’ and ‘monstrum’ he was positioning himself as ex-centric to the centripetal pull of ideological Anglocentricity. Whether or not the administrators of the Renaissance would have even wanted to claim Sorabji as their own is another matter, but his self-presentation in such terms as *persona ingratisissima* would have rendered the prospect a most unappealing one.

### The Ring and the ‘tin-pot totalitarianism’ of the BBC

As the last quotation makes clear, Sorabji proudly detached himself from ‘English musical life’, its ‘institutions’ and ‘official musical circles’. This is not to say, however, that this had always been his ambition, as his early letters show: not only did he dutifully work his

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<sup>118</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 78-9.

way through exercises set by Ebenezer Prout, he also intended to gain a degree in music from the University of London in order to bolster his credentials as a critic. He tells Heseltine: ‘An academic qualification is an enormous help over here, where people are so impressed by *tangible* results’.<sup>119</sup> Sorabji nevertheless came to reject music institutions altogether as homogenizing potential talent, describing London’s conservatoires as ‘official musician-factories’.<sup>120</sup> This recalls the following lines from Heseltine’s ‘Reflections on Modern Musical Criticism’ and his plea for greater eccentricity in the profession, for

If it were not for this attitude, there would be no art whatever, or if there were, we should be deluged with innumerable works – for everyone in the world would turn creator of them – all as totally indistinguishable from each other as the nails or screws turned out by any two men in the ordinary mechanical workshop.<sup>121</sup>

Allied to the ‘factory’ or ‘workshop’ culture of music institutions was their administration by a certain elite. ‘By Heseltine’s time’, writes Richard Terry, “‘fair competition’ had become a farce, and the once open market turned into a *hortus conclusus*’.”<sup>122</sup> Terry explains that a ‘ring’ of influential figures in musical life formed through the ‘unofficial (of course) *rapprochement*’ between Oxford and Cambridge Universities and the London Colleges of Music, and that this had a stifling effect on the production of genuine creativity in English music:

Formerly a budding composer could with reason hope to maintain himself and find time for composition by gaining on his merits [...]. Nowadays he has no such chance unless he is ‘inside the ring’ or is prepared to pay court to the ruling mandarins. The type of student most acceptable to ‘the ring’ is that distinguished for docile mediocrity. Heseltine was not docile, and far from being a mediocrity, so he remained outside.<sup>123</sup>

The English Musical Renaissance was indeed ‘a world of insiders and outsiders’, as Terry’s account goes on to highlight:

Before the public [...] they always preserve a united front. They talk consistently about each other, and take good care to talk about nobody else. They give lectures about each

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<sup>119</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (3 February 1914)

<sup>120</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New English Weekly* (23 July 1936), 293–4.

<sup>121</sup> Heseltine, ‘Some Reflections on Modern Musical Criticism’, 653.

<sup>122</sup> In Gray, *Peter Warlock*, 269.

<sup>123</sup> In *ibid.*, 269–70.

other (and, again, nobody else). Where they gain access to the Press they use it to write about each other (and about nobody else). They magnify each other's most puny achievements and maintain complete silence about the work of every 'outsider'. The British public is apathetic and incurious; it becomes accustomed to seeing one set of names in print; it knows of no others, and so the members of 'the ring' have succeeded in establishing themselves, in public estimation at least, as the leaders of British music.<sup>124</sup>

Two years before Terry's exposition of 'the ring' appeared in print Sorabji, in *Around Music*, comments on a certain type of musician 'who, by reason of adroit association with certain rings and circles in the musical world [...] has succeeded in imposing him or herself on a credulous and ignorant public'.<sup>125</sup> This became a key theme in Sorabji's criticism: 'The nepotism and corruption wherewith the public practice of music in this country is permeated has often been – incidentally – the subject of certain animadversions of mine in this place'.<sup>126</sup> By Sorabji's logic, an artist who is not attached to any official institution or circle of critics is to be taken more seriously than any Establishment figure. As he writes in *Mi contra fa*, 'if and when the work of any younger men shows any real creative vitality and drive [...] it is the work of men creating in comparable obscurity, unknown, boycotted or both, and for one reason or another *personæ ingratisimæ* with the organised gangs, cliques, rings and institutions of music'.<sup>127</sup> Obscure, unknown, boycotted – in another word, neglected: the unallied composer was given a head start in Sorabji's estimation.

As Sarah Collins explains, it was necessary for such constructions as an Establishment 'ring' of insiders for the outsiders, such as Sorabji or Heseltine, to project their contrived isolationism.<sup>128</sup> It follows just as well that Sorabji would similarly identify a critics' circle from which he could eccentrically distance himself. In the 1920s, however, the 'old establishment' of the conservatoires and Fleet Street (or 'ditch', as Sorabji had it) had given way to newer power structures, and it was the institutional monolith of the BBC which became for Sorabji the single most destructive influence on the progress of music in the country. Given the evidence presented so far, part of the reason for his opposition to

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<sup>124</sup> In *ibid.*, 270.

<sup>125</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 159.

<sup>126</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New English Weekly* (23 July 1936), 293-4.

<sup>127</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 100.

<sup>128</sup> Sarah Collins, 'Practices of Aesthetic Self-Cultivation: British Composer-Critics of the "Doomed Generation"', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 138/1 (2013), 125.

the BBC must have been its democratisation of the new music, its being made available to the public at large: ‘the member of the ordinary public, in these days, as distinct from the valiant concertgoer, has music *via* the wireless laid on like gas and water, and unlike gas and water keeps the wireless running the whole time. Not so is a love and appreciation of music fostered, still less when the vast majority use it, that is merely as a stimulus’.<sup>129</sup> The corporation’s promotion of the music Sorabji cherished most dearly in his formative period is most succinctly articulated in the title of Jennifer Doctor’s book, *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music, 1922-1936: Shaping a Nation’s Tastes*.<sup>130</sup> The BBC was indeed central to the construction of a national canon. As John Reith put it in *Broadcast Over Britain*, the BBC’s goal was ‘to give the public what we think they need, and not what they want’.<sup>131</sup> Or, in Constant Lambert’s words from *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline*, ‘You can rarely escape a B.B.C. gramophone hour [...]. The whole of London, whatever it is doing, and whatever its moods, is made to listen to the choice of a privileged few or even a privileged one’.<sup>132</sup>

Doctor writes that, in the early days of the BBC ‘it was impossible [...] for anyone to predict how deeply sound media would permeate contemporary society, or how influential the BBC would become – and how breathtakingly quickly those processes would take place’.<sup>133</sup> Sorabji addresses the deleterious effects of the BBC’s broadcasting hegemony, ‘the catastrophic decline in standards that has proceeded *pari passu* with the growth of the tentacular monopoly of this Government Bureaucracy’.<sup>134</sup>

A mere enumeration of some of the musical activities of those [pre-war] days utterly disposes of the temeritous claims made by and on behalf of the B.B.C., that it has been responsible for any ‘growth’ of taste and ‘appetite’ for music, as is so often asserted by those to whom any change is what they call ‘progress’. The facts point decisively and emphatically the other way.<sup>135</sup>

In a concluding remark, Sorabji puts this state of musical affairs down to ‘the monstrous fungoid growth of the wireless which has gradually – and not so gradually – assumed a

<sup>129</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Notes on the Coming Season’, *The New Age* (17 November 1932), 33.

<sup>130</sup> Jennifer Doctor, *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music, 1922-1936: Shaping a Nation’s Tastes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 38.

<sup>132</sup> Constant Lambert, *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline* (London: Faber and Faber 1936), 169-70.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-1.

<sup>134</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 90.

<sup>135</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 94.

position of totalitarian monopolism'.<sup>136</sup> Sorabji does not equate the 'growth' of broadcasting with progress; he rather likens the BBC's monopoly status in the broadcasting medium to having the all-embracing reach of an alien form (it is 'tentacular') and to the insidious spread of an organic malignancy. Both sub-anthropomorphisms render the wireless an awful spectre of the modernity Sorabji would anachronistically position himself again.

Sorabji's concerns regarding the spread of wireless technology and the nation-wide influence of the BBC are thus in keeping with those suspicions about massification and cultural homogenisation formulated in his correspondence with Heseltine in response to the latter's article calling for greater eccentricity in music. This individualist attitude as it surfaces in such a distrust of establishment organizations and institutions runs throughout his writings. The corollary of this stance was that he harboured a distrust of mainstream, insider figures and typically championed those denied such privileges. In this regard, the case of Alan Bush is illustrative. Andrew Blake writes that, 'By the end of the 1920s the BBC had emerged as a crucial force in the production of contemporary music, and the BBC had a clearly discriminatory policy from the start: after a brief flirtation with European Modernism, the patronage turned to British mainstream music without specific political messages'.<sup>137</sup> The music of Alan Bush was thus censored in 1941 on account of his communist sympathies. After some protest, the BBC retracted its decision and the incident came and went, but not without Sorabji adding his opinion: 'The ignominious scramble-down of the B.B.C. from the – as it proved – slippery Upas-tree of its own inflated self-importance and tin-pot totalitarianism, in the matter of artists and musicians of whose private opinions IT seems to disapprove, was quite the event last month'. Sorabji concludes by stating his contrived position as being most unwelcome at the door of Broadcasting House: 'I – who combine in my person – by an ingenious device, as Mr. Macaulay would have said – all the qualities most perfectly calculated to make me *persona ingratis* with the B.B.C.'. <sup>138</sup>

There are a number of discrepancies between the opinions expressed in Sorabji's letters to Heseltine and those of Sorabji's mature critical aesthetic. For example, his dismissal of Mahler and Reger sits rather incongruously next to his later championship of them (see

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<sup>136</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 95.

<sup>137</sup> Andrew Blake, *The Land Without Music: Music, culture and society in twentieth-century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 43.

<sup>138</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New English Weekly* (10 April 1941), 290.



Part II); Sorabji's positive remarks to Heseltine on the matter of Stravinsky present a similar source of intrigue in light of his rejection of "modernism" in the 1920s (see Part III); his adoration of Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto, as expressed to Heseltine, is quickly dispensed with once the work in question becomes a mainstay of the popular-classical canon (see Chapter Five). But two more immediate questions present themselves in relation to the Heseltine correspondence: why did Sorabji abandon Scriabin from his personal canon, and why did he cease communication with Heseltine and presumably destroy his letters? The first answer appears to be this: in the 1920s Scriabin, no longer laughed and hissed at, no longer neglected, 'became kind of fashionable'.<sup>139</sup> If this seems a cynical explanation at this early stage then it is advised that any misgivings be held in check until Part III. Of course Sorabji had every right to change his mind, and he gives good musical reason for doing so when he describes, in 1934, Scriabin's work as essentially empty: 'after a long interval [...] the horrid truth stood nakedly revealed that the whole effect of these works was dependent upon sound, first, second, last and all time'.<sup>140</sup> However, this does not quite explain the way in which he went about airing his mature dislike of Scriabin:

'Prometheus' must surely be – with the exception of certain works of Messieurs Cyril Scott and Rutland Boughton – the most typical representative in musical terms of the *invertebrata* of biology. Here is a work cast in an entirely conventional, indeed timidly conventional, formal mould that is yet nothing more than a series of spasmodic sighs, gasps – exclamations such as you may hear from a crowd watching a firework display, though 'Prometheus' is nothing like so entertaining nor artistically satisfying, and any firework manufacturer who produces such a damp squib as this composition would quickly drop out of the business.<sup>141</sup>

In *Mi contra fa*, Sorabji writes of 'the heaving rainbow-tinted protoplasmic jelly that is so much of the later orchestral work of Scriabine': 'The stuff barely exists in two, let alone four dimensions!'<sup>142</sup> Sorabji's 'fourth dimension', we will see in the following chapter, is reserved for the few; the two- and three-dimensional planes of perception and reception belong to the common lot.

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<sup>139</sup> Jürgen Schaarwächter, *Two Centuries of British Symphonism* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2015), 447.

<sup>140</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New Age* (19 July 1934), 142.

<sup>141</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New English Weekly* (20 December 1934), 218.

<sup>142</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 75.

As regards his termination of the Heseltine correspondence, two possible reasons present themselves. On 11 January 1915, Sorabji writes: ‘As you slate the unfortunate Dr Hull so mercilessly, I wonder what you say about *me* behind my back’.<sup>143</sup> Perhaps Sorabji later caught wind of his correspondent’s true sentiments as, for example, Heseltine wrote to Delius on 11 February 1914:

The Parsee I told you about continues to write me the most gushing and enthusiastic letters! In the fourth letter, I was already ‘the most sympathetic person he had ever come across’, save his mother (to whose apron-strings he appears to be tied!), and by the time the fifth was reached, he was convinced that in a *former incarnation* (!) I must have been closely related to him: ‘the law of Karmâhas ordained us to meet in this life. What sort will it be in the higher stages of the Marwantara? Can you imagine?’ . . . etc., etc.!! He concludes with the wonderful phrase, ‘Yours quite as much as his own’!!! This to a person he has never seen! It is really great fun, and I encourage him to write more and more, since I find his letters most entertaining, and sometimes really interesting, when he talks about music.<sup>144</sup>

In another letter, Heseltine writes of Sorabji:

The Blackmore whom you spotted at Ravel’s concert was the very man! . . . I shall never dare to visit him now and am beginning to fear that, amusing as his correspondence is, I shall soon repent having encouraged it, since I am sure I will never get rid of him again!! He becomes more and more queer every letter he writes, but it is getting too personal: I am ‘the most sympathetic person he has ever met’, etc. etc. (although he has never met me – for that, at least, I am thankful!!) [...] What funnys these Parsees are!!<sup>145</sup>

For all that, as his first biographer put it, Heseltine took ‘amiable delight in the eccentricities of odd characters and the motives behind them’,<sup>146</sup> it is hard not to feel some pity for Sorabji being made a figure of fun here: his belief in Heseltine as ‘a keenly sympathetic soul’ is shown up to have been a potentially hurtful lie. For once, Sorabji was *persona ingratis* not of his own volition. The second reason concerns the subsuming transformation of Philip Heseltine to Peter Warlock around 1921. Where Heseltine ‘was an internationally-minded pacifist’, Warlock ‘was a bellicose and insular Englishman’; Where

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<sup>143</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine (11 January 1915).

<sup>144</sup> In Barry Smith, *Frederick Delius and Peter Warlock: A Friendship Revealed*, 124.

<sup>145</sup> In Tellef Johnson, *Essays (Pertaining Directly or Peripherally to Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji’s Piano Sonata No V: Opus Archimagicum [1934-5])* (Hyperfocal Media, 2010), 9.

<sup>146</sup> Gray, *Peter Warlock*, 73.

Heseltine was ‘a romantic idealist not particularly successful with women’, Heseltine was ‘a hedonistic Don Juan’.<sup>147</sup> In his Warlock guise, Heseltine had become a rogue icon of Englishness.<sup>148</sup> Sorabji wrote towards the end of his life that, ‘in his latter years I saw little of Philip Heseltine. I found myself growing more and more out of sympathy with the Peter Warlock side of him’.<sup>149</sup> Sorabji disliked ‘so many of the people who latterly gravitated around him’.<sup>150</sup> Heseltine abandoned his aestheticized, negative-romantic isolationism; in Michael Trend’s words, ‘The social life of Heseltine during the 1920s is well recorded for he had become a figure of some popular interest’.<sup>151</sup> Nevertheless and despite the end of their correspondence, Sorabji would write in his *New Age* obituary of his ‘very dear friend’ Heseltine: ‘What I owe personally to his early encouragement, sympathy and championship I can never adequately express’.<sup>152</sup> Heseltine’s formative influence in terms of Sorabji’s cultivation of an eccentric critical individualism which drew him to neglected figures outside the mainstream has been outlined above; we now turn to Sorabji putting this contrarian aesthetic into practice following his meeting with Busoni.

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<sup>147</sup> This is part of Ian Copley’s summary of Gray’s unsubtle outline of the Heseltine/Warlock dichotomy. As Copley writes: ‘these differences between Heseltine and Warlock were little more than the differences between Philip sober and Philip drunk’. Quoted in Derus, ‘Sorabji’s Letters to Heseltine’, 248-9.

<sup>148</sup> Stradling and Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 169-70.

<sup>149</sup> Quoted in Derus, ‘Sorabji’s Letters to Heseltine’, 249.

<sup>150</sup> Quoted in Roberge, *Opus Sorabjianum: The Life and Works of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji*, version 1.10 (Quebec, Canada: 2014), 59.

<sup>151</sup> Michael Trend, *The Music Makers: the English Musical Renaissance from Elgar to Britten* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985), 188.

<sup>152</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New Age* (15 January 1931), 129.



## **Chapter Two**

### **On Busoni, ‘alone on a mountain top’**

If all Europe is divisible into Stravinskyians and Schönbergians Mr. Sorabji must be classed with the latter. . . . No, decidedly, Sorabji cannot be reckoned a Schönbergian. His heroes are cast in grander moulds.

ANON., ‘Notes of the Day: *Around Music*’ (1933)<sup>1</sup>

Busoni’s makes other modern music sound small and provincial, and I do not hesitate to add *bourgeois* . . . the latest Schönberg and Stravinsky, to say nothing of their camp-followers, sounds stale and effete beside it.

SORABJI, ‘Busoni and Mr. Philip Levi’ (1930)<sup>2</sup>

On 25 November 1919, towards the end of a two-and-a-half-year hiatus in the Heseltine correspondence, Sorabji met and played for the Italian-German composer, pianist and music theorist Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924). Through the likely introduction of their mutual friend Bernard van Dieren, Sorabji came to perform his *Sonata no. 1* for Busoni at the Regent’s Park residence of Maud Allan. The details of the encounter have been well rehearsed within Sorabjian lore and one need only turn to the title of Marc-André Roberge’s article, ‘Producing Evidence for the Beatification of a Composer: Sorabji’s Deification of Busoni’,<sup>3</sup> to begin to understand anything of the significance their meeting had for at least one of them. But, if the scant and largely indifferent references to Busoni in Sorabji’s prior articles and earlier letters to Heseltine are anything to go by, it was only after (if not during) his audition that Sorabji came under Busoni’s mesmeric spell. Remembering Busoni’s ‘courteous grace of manner impossible to the Northern Barbarians’, Sorabji recalled the following dialogue:

‘But do you say that this music was written in this country? . . . THIS country?’, he recounted, with astonishment in his tone. I assured him it was. ‘I do not say that I altogether like this music but it has given me the most extraordinary sensations . . . it is like a tropical rainforest’. I of course took good care to tell him that there was nothing, but *nothing* English about me.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anon., ‘Notes of the Day: *Around Music*’, *The Monthly Musical Record* (January 1933), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Sorabji, ‘Busoni and Mr. Philip Levi’, *The New Age* (20 March 1930). 237.

<sup>3</sup> Marc-André Roberge, ‘Producing Evidence for the Beatification of a Composer: Sorabji’s Deification of Busoni’, *The Music Review*, 54/2 (May 1994), 123-36.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

Indeed, Busoni explained in a letter to his wife that ‘Kaikhusru [*sic*] Sorabji turns out to be Indian, quite young.[...] A fine, unusual person, in spite of his ugly music. A primeval forest with many weeds and briars, but strange and voluptuous’.<sup>5</sup> To Emil Hertzka of Viennese publishing house Universal Edition, Busoni wrote on 5 January 1920: ‘I became the dedicatee of a piano sonata (from the pen of a 20-year-old [*sic*] Indian, Kahushru Sorobdji [*sic*]) with tropical ornamentation, luxuriant foliage, absorbing’.<sup>6</sup> Keeping any private reservations in check, Busoni produced a letter of recommendation for Sorabji: ‘Mr. K. S.’s talent delights’ in ‘harmonic and profusely ornamental complexity’; the Sonata is ‘oblivious of its irregular features – especially in its proportions’; it ‘crosses a threshold which is no longer purely European, capable of producing vegetation of an almost exotic nature. (Not in the sense of our “charming” Oriental Dances, however!)’. Busoni concludes: ‘In all, a rising talent, of a still new kind, which makes one think and hope’.<sup>7</sup>

Busoni’s letter was to play a particularly significant role not too long after Sorabji’s audition when he and Heseltine found themselves at the centre of a controversy with the eminent critic Ernest Newman. In short, Newman refused to consider reviewing a selection of Sorabji’s and van Dieren’s manuscript scores sent to him by Heseltine. Heseltine set out to attack Newman in a letter to *The Observer*. It wasn’t published. Sorabji, following suit, sent a letter to the *Sunday Times* in an attempt to bring the incident to light. That didn’t go to print, either. The Ring never seemed so fortified. No sooner, however, had Heseltine become editor of *The Sackbut* than he reproduced Sorabji’s unpublished letter in the June 1920 issue of his journal. Sorabji here writes ‘from personal experience’ of ‘the way in which Mr. Newman pursues his search after the potential masterpieces of British or any other music’. But Newman did not consider manuscripts: ‘this one staggering revelation of his methods shows that the others are not more like themselves than he is like to them’. Sorabji closed with the following:

Not a week after this incident, Signor Busoni – to whom my work went entirely without introduction or recommendation of any kind – asks me to play certain of my compositions to him, and, as a result, is kind enough to give me a letter of high commendation wherein

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Kenneth Derus, ‘Sorabji’s Letters to Heseltine’ in Paul Rapoport (ed.), *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 254.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

he expresses himself as greatly interested in what I had played him, describing at some length the qualities in my work that seized his attention.<sup>8</sup>

Directly underneath Sorabji's letter Heseltine appends Busoni's commendation in full, 'In order to prove that Mr. Newman would not have spent an hour amiss in listening to Mr. Sorabji's composition'. Heseltine concludes his editorial lamenting the purblind state of English criticism with this:

Signor Busoni came to London for the purpose of giving pianoforte recitals, not to open the eyes of Englishmen to the fine work that is being done in their midst. But in spite of his multifarious activities and in spite of the fact that he has doubtless been deluged with unoriginal and worthless manuscripts in his time, he has not closed his door to the potential genius.<sup>9</sup>

Busoni emerges from the controversy as a saviour figure, a Messianic champion of neglected works eager to lend a sympathetic ear to the composition of a 'potential genius'. Were it not for Busoni's magnanimity, might Sorabji have been discouraged from composition by Newman's rebuff and by the indifference to his cause shown by two national papers? We cannot be certain on this matter. What we can suggest, however, is that Sorabji's meeting with Busoni exerted a profound influence which sustained his activities not only as a composer, but as a critic. The momentous event of Sorabji's audition recalls the *Weihekuss*, the 'kiss of consecration' Beethoven allegedly bestowed upon the young Liszt in 1823. Just as Beethoven's blessing came to figure so centrally in Liszt's 'internal world of artistic and personal myth, of unconscious identification and invention',<sup>10</sup> so Busoni's benediction went on to profoundly influence the critical makeup of K. S. Sorabji. But, where Beethoven's commendation stood Liszt in good canonic stead for the rest of his life, Busoni's only confirmed Sorabji's place outside the mainstream as it was perceived in the first decades of the twentieth century, for Busoni was himself an archetypal neglected composer whose obscure works were all too often met with incomprehension and derision upon reception. Busoni's persecution – his martyrdom so often overplayed by Sorabji – became the germ of that confirmation bias borne of

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<sup>8</sup> Letter dated 18 May 1920 intended for publication in the *Sunday Times*, reprinted in Heseltine, 'Ille Reporter', *The Sackbut*, 1/2 (June 1920), 55-6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>10</sup> Allan Keiler, 'Liszt and Beethoven: The Creation of a Personal Myth', *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music*, 12/2 (Autumn 1988), 116.

*ressentiment* motivating not only Sorabji's creative practice, but also his critical attachment to neglected works. As Sorabji remarked in the first of his hero-worshipping articles on Busoni, published in the March 1921 edition of *The Sackbut*, the reason why Busoni's music was met with 'puzzled dislike' among 'the more ignorant of the critics' was simple: 'The English mind hates and fears nothing so much as an absolute individuality that it cannot classify'.<sup>11</sup> This appears as special pleading on behalf of the *sui generis* artist: 'Busoni the composer admits of no pigeon-holing or labelling except as – Busoni'.<sup>12</sup> Later, Sorabji describes Busoni as 'one of the supreme, albeit practically unknown, figures of modern music'.<sup>13</sup> Busoni's marginal presence in the early canons of twentieth-century music can be partly explained as a result of his incipient anachronicity, by the preordination of his historical neglect. As Newman noted from the other side of the controversy in July 1920, Busoni 'is the most eminent representative among us of the old order that was supposed to have been turned into a back number by the war'.<sup>14</sup> Busoni is thus an ambivalent figure in terms of musical modernism, one left untouched by the defining innovations and revolutions which sought to sever ties with ongoing tradition. In *Around Music*, Sorabji wrote that Busoni 'can neither be called one of the Extreme Left or Right; at the same time, the elements of very decided "queerness" and "oddness" make it impossible for the "plain man", whether critic or just member of the audience, to lump him with either'. Busoni remained 'undefiled and untainted by popular success, or, what is worse, fashionable success among the Art Snobs and the high Bohemia Circus Riders'.<sup>15</sup> To the former we can tentatively admit followers of Schoenberg and his serial acolytes; to the latter we can with certainty associate the camp-followers of Stravinsky.<sup>16</sup> Between these 'twin popes' of musical modernism<sup>17</sup> there stood the priest-like Ferruccio Busoni, 'the world's worst great composer',<sup>18</sup> a 'sublime failure'.<sup>19</sup> 'While Schoenberg and

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<sup>11</sup> Sorabji, 'Contingencies: Busoni', *The Sackbut*, 1/9 (March 1921), 417. In *Around Music* Sorabji retains this point verbatim, except for one notable revision: 'the English mind' becomes 'the popular mind' (p. 24).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: Busoni and Mr. Philip Levi: March 7', *The New Age* (20 March 1930), 237.

<sup>14</sup> Ernest Newman, 'Music in London', *The Manchester Guardian* (7 July 1920), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 25, 23.

<sup>16</sup> See Part III.

<sup>17</sup> The phrase is Robert Craft's, quoted in Daniel Albright (ed.), *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 282.

<sup>18</sup> William McNaught, 'London Concerts: Busoni's Doktor Faust', *The Musical Times*, 78/1130 (April 1937), 361.

<sup>19</sup> L. Henderson Williams, 'Busoni, the Man', *The Sackbut*, 13/1 (October 1932), 21-4. Excerpted in Marc-André Roberge, *Ferruccio Busoni: A Bio-Bibliography* (New York, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1991), B338 (p. 203).



Stravinsky today stand as giants', writes Peter Heyworth, 'Busoni remains a shadowy figure'.<sup>20</sup>

### Networking: esotericism and the Busoni tradition

Sorabji's meeting with Busoni effected a reactionary reorientation of his aesthetics at the outset of his activities as a critic. No longer did his interests lie with the avant-garde; Sorabji followed Busoni into an altogether darker realm of music. It is suggested here that Busoni's aesthetic had a decisive impact on Sorabji's own, that Sorabji's canon of neglected works was curated under the influence of the hermetic principles informing Busoni's esotericism. Unpopular and antisocial by design, Busoni's doctrine as espoused in his writings and as manifest in his later compositions led Sorabji away from the historical mainstream of early-twentieth-century music. From the beginning of the 1920s it is apparent that Sorabji became a voracious inquirer into anything and everything Busonian.<sup>21</sup> Thus, only a month after the Newman debacle, we find Sorabji referring to Busoni's 'remarkable little treatise' of 1907, his *Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music*.<sup>22</sup> Sorabji clearly absorbed Busoni's fin-de-siècle teachings of subclinical despair, his late-romantic *Weltschmerz* decrying the dissolution and degeneration of the great traditions. Both, for example, came to remarkably similar conclusions by way of nihilistic recourse to Nietzsche. For Busoni, an ideal music or *Ur-Musik* exists only in 'Nirvana [...] the realm "beyond the Good and the Bad" [...] we must leave earth to find that music'.<sup>23</sup> The closing lines of Sorabji's *Around Music* resign with the prevarication that 'everything is at once good and bad, beautiful and ugly, true and untrue [...] – the Nietzschean idea: "jenseits Gut und Böse". Let us take refuge in Nirvana and leave it at that'.<sup>24</sup> The extent of Busoni's influence here can be gauged by comparing the expression of these sentiments with

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Heyworth, 'Between Two Worlds', *The Observer* (8 September 1985), 21.

<sup>21</sup> Sorabji's encyclopaedic knowledge was such that he went on to point out oversights in the appendix to Dent's authoritative biography of Busoni and Breitkopf und Härtel's *catalogue raisonné* of Busoni's work: both sources neglected to include the composer's 'Prélude et étude en arpèges' in their lists. See 'Music', *The New English Weekly* (16 March 1933), 518. The work in question was published in Paris by Heugel in 1923, and is catalogued by Roberge as BV 297. See *Busoni: A Bio-Bibliography*, 43.

<sup>22</sup> Sorabji, 'Modern Piano Technique', *The Sackbut*, 1/9 (July 1920), 116. The edition referred to here is as follows: Busoni, 'Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music' (trans. Theodore Baker) [1911] in *Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), 73-102.

<sup>23</sup> Busoni, 'Sketch of a New Esthetic', 95-7.

<sup>24</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 244. Bernard Bromage, the original dedicatee of *Around Music*, opined in 1938 that all Busoni's music belongs to 'a species of mystical feelings in which the lurid, the sardonic and the terrifying becomes merged in the conventions of a realm "Jenseits Böse und Gute"'. Excerpted in Roberge, *Busoni: A Bio-Bibliography*, B304 (p. 197).

Sorabji's admission to Heseltine in 1914 that 'I have never read a syllable of Nietzsche' – it was 'piffle', 'preposterous drivel and senseless stuff', 'the demented ravings' of a 'shrieking maniac'.<sup>25</sup>

Sorabji also praised Busoni's 'remarkable essays'<sup>26</sup> (similarly suffused with Nietzschean ideas<sup>27</sup>), papers in which the composer-as-critic sheds some considerable light on his later aesthetic.<sup>28</sup> In these writings we also find the germ of Sorabji's own principles of criticism. Busoni's doctrine of *Junge Klassizität* – far removed from the ironic cosmopolitanism of the post-War neo-classicism of Stravinsky et al – outlined an endeavour of consolidation seeking 'the mastery, the sifting and the turning to account of all the gains of previous experiments'; it 'signifies completion in a double sense; completion as perfection and completion as close'.<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere, Busoni explains that 'I strive for the enrichment, the enlargement, and the expansion of all means and forms of expression'.<sup>30</sup> Busoni adheres to an organic comprehension of history – one of ever-expanding traditions – and a concomitant suspicion of forced revolutions: in 1920 he wrote that the 'perplexing experiments of the head of the Viennese Secession had failed because they broke too radically with tradition'.<sup>31</sup> In the posthumous paper, 'What is Happening at the Present Time', he expresses the belief that real achievement in art 'cannot emanate simultaneously from a group of people aged about twenty. The craft requires too long a training for that, life too great a number of experiences. [...] The newcomers deceive themselves, too, in thinking they can break, or have broken with their predecessors'.<sup>32</sup> This belief in the cumulative force of tradition and history gave rise to 'late style' as an ideal, an attribute of micro- and macro-periodization (of both individuals and movements) set to recur in the present thesis with some regularity, for it is precisely these qualities which informed Sorabji's own attachment to maximalism and led to his rejection of

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<sup>25</sup> See Sorabji to Heseltine, letters [6] and [11]. See Chapter One.

<sup>26</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New English Weekly* (28 April 1932), 46.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, 'Concerning Harmony' [1922] and 'The Meaning of *Arlecchino*' [1918]. Nietzsche's realm 'Beyond Good and Evil' took hold of Busoni as an *idée fixe*. See Beaumont, 314, 318.

<sup>28</sup> References to follow are taken from Busoni (trans. Rosamund Ley), *The Essence of Music and Other Papers* (New York: Dover Publications, 1957). Although this is a later collection than that with which Sorabji would have been familiar at the time of writing, it is nevertheless asserted that between various editions the essence remains the same.

<sup>29</sup> Busoni, 'Young Classicism' [1920] in Busoni (trans. Ley), 20.

<sup>30</sup> Busoni, 'Self-Criticism' [1912] in *ibid.*, 49.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Judith Michelle Crispin, *The Esoteric Musical Tradition of Ferruccio Busoni and Its Reinvigoration in the Music of Larry Sitsky: The Operas Doktor Faust and The Golem* (Ontario, Canada: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 32.

<sup>32</sup> In *ibid.*, 43.

“modernism”.<sup>33</sup> Busoni’s brand of classicism promoted an ideal in-betweenness – a metaxy equidistant from the old and the new – as the most fecund ground for creativity:

This twilight condition seems to me to be the stable one; dawn and full light of day are considerations of perspective for historians who gather them gladly and arrive at the results.<sup>34</sup>

Here Busoni admits the historiographical implications of working in the obscure twilight of late style, of adhering to tradition in spite of the revolutions of the day: by not conforming to mainstream currents in composition – to be consecrated in the modern canon as followers of either the Schoenberg/Stravinsky avant-garde – composers of Young Classical persuasions were destined to become footnotes to orthodox accounts of music history. By taking the middle road they were, in other words, destined for neglect.

Judith Michelle Crispin suggests that Sorabji ‘consciously placed’ himself ‘within the Busoni tradition’.<sup>35</sup> With the Master’s blessing, Sorabji had entered the counter-canon of the ‘Busoni Network’, a classificatory term coined by Roberge to trace the genealogy of a somewhat dysfunctional ‘family’ of predominantly nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists ‘whose music, for a variety of reasons, has long been neglected’.<sup>36</sup> To many they appear as ‘isolated eccentrics’ whose works, ‘in terms of length and complexity’, typically ‘go far beyond anything in the standard repertoire’.<sup>37</sup> This is one of the key reasons for their neglect and obscurity: they ‘have always been rather difficult to classify because they do not belong to the mainstream of musical activity’ and, as a consequence, they have been ‘reduced to footnotes or passing mentions in musicological writing’.<sup>38</sup> In another article, Roberge explains that members of the Network ‘have long been considered outsiders in European music history’. ‘Their status as outsiders’, he continues, ‘resulted mainly from the length and complexity of several of their works’. They have consequently been ‘long kept in the shadow’, ‘relegated to the footnotes of history or not mentioned at all’:

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<sup>33</sup> See Parts II and III respectively.

<sup>34</sup> Busoni, ‘Young Classicism’ [1920] in Busoni (trans. Ley), 20.

<sup>35</sup> Crispin, *The Esoteric Musical Tradition of Busoni*, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Marc-André Roberge, ‘The Busoni Network and the Art of Creative Transcription’, *Canadian University Music Review*, 11/1 (1991), 68.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Busoni was part of a group of composers who needed a champion who would go beyond the traditional pleas in order to attract attention enough to make up for the neglect these composers had to suffer.<sup>39</sup>

Enter K. S. Sorabji. But, far from ‘championing’ neglected composers in any usual sense – by, for example, presenting them to his readers in an ingratiating manner – Sorabji’s curious obscurantism in fact tended to keep them in the shadows: throughout we will see him extolling the greatness of some or other neglected composer, only to conclude that the time and place was not right for their deserving reception. Busoni is a prime example: he was ‘*in* the world, but not *of* it’; his *Turandot*, for example, ‘exists outside time and space’.<sup>40</sup> It is suggested in the pages to follow that this attitude stemmed from the elevation of his own alterity, an ‘otherness’ explored and articulated over the course of the Heseltine correspondence and consecrated by Busoni. No longer, however, was Sorabji in a persecuted minority of one, but found himself in company of a group of maligned outsiders – *personae ingratisissimae* – chief among them ‘one of the most solitary, most slandered, most misunderstood figures in perhaps any music of any time, Ferruccio Busoni’:

No malignancy was too mean and shameful, no calumny too foul for his enemies to hurl at this grand and legendary figure, the fabulous pianist, the stupendous musical mind and intellect, in some ways unique in the history of music.<sup>41</sup>

Later, Sorabji explains that ‘The aura of odium that attached to Busoni himself was reflected in a greater or less degree upon those who belonged to his circle or were his pupils or friends’.<sup>42</sup>

For Sorabji, Busoni was ‘alone on a mountain top’.<sup>43</sup> On ‘The Problem of Busoni’, Wilfrid Mellers explains that his major works ‘will tend in the course of time to become grand but isolated peaks which will stand outside rather than within the main traditional range of

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<sup>39</sup> Roberge, ‘Producing Evidence’, 123, 132.

<sup>40</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New English Weekly* (26 April 1934), 40.

<sup>41</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New English Weekly* (30 January 1936), 315.

<sup>42</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music. B. B. C. Concert of Contemporary Music (Albert Roussel)’, *The New English Weekly* (6 January 1938), 254.

<sup>43</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: The Death of Busoni’, *The New Age* (14 August 1924), 189.

European music'.<sup>44</sup> 'Busoni and Sorabji are both outsiders and isolated peaks in twentieth-century music', writes Roberge: 'Feeling a profound kinship with such an artist was only normal for Sorabji'.<sup>45</sup> The metaphor of altitudinous isolation is a recurrent one. Sorabji certainly elevated Busoni as a species of *Übermensch*,<sup>46</sup> and only by keeping him so pedestalled could Sorabji maintain Busoni at an unattainable distance from the base criticism of the many. The metaphor may be read as an allusion to Nietzsche's Zarathustra who, upon descending the mountain, was met with incomprehension and derision by the 'rabble' in the marketplace. Zarathustra thought it thus wise to save his proselytizing energies for the conversion of those who would listen. The Zarathustrian nature of the 'Busoni tradition' to which Sorabji aligned himself was based on the mystical principles of esotericism which, as Crispin explains, restricted entry to 'self-selecting, numerically small elites and hidden carefully by contrived obfuscation'.<sup>47</sup> This is the key to Sorabji's canon of neglected works; what follows is an attempt to unlock Sorabji's critical aesthetic as it ran in parallel with Busoni's esotericism as explored in the reception of the Piano Concerto, the *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* in the context of a post-late-Beethovenian performance tradition, and the opera *Doktor Faust*.

### Skyscraper: Busoni's 'terribly long' Piano Concerto

Perhaps the first of Busoni's works to indicate his altitudinous isolation as a composer was the Piano Concerto of 1904. Busoni described it as his 'Skyscraper', and wondered: 'Why does a skyscraper look wrong? Because its proportions are wrong in relation to the size of men, and because the height of the building is out of scale with the greatness of its conception'.<sup>48</sup> This sublime overreaching – an aspect of *fin de siècle* maximalism, of the turn-of-the-century *kolossal* – is also a recurrent theme in Sorabji's canon. For Sorabji, Busoni's Skyscraper was 'one of the masterpieces of music [...] the highest pinnacle ever reached in the piano concerto form'.<sup>49</sup> 'Of a work in every way so stupendous, so absolutely original, so wholly *sui generis* [...] it is hard to write calmly'.<sup>50</sup> But, inevitably,

<sup>44</sup> Wilfrid Mellers. 'The Problem of Busoni', *Music & Letters*, 18/3 (July 1937), 247.

<sup>45</sup> Roberge, *Opus Sorabjjanum: The Life and Works of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji* (version 1.10) (Quebec, Canada: 4 June 2014), 98.

<sup>46</sup> See Roberge, 'Producing Evidence', 131.

<sup>47</sup> Crispin, *The Esoteric Musical Tradition of Busoni*, 19.

<sup>48</sup> In Antony Beaumont, *Busoni the Composer* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1985), 74.

<sup>49</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 26.

<sup>50</sup> Sorabji, 'The Busoni Concerto – B.B.C., Feb. 21', *The New English Weekly* (8 March 1934), 495.

it was neglected. As he explained in *Around Music*, ‘performances of this mighty work have been of the rarest, and so far as I am aware, there has only been one in London, in 1912 [*sic*]’.<sup>51</sup>

Sorabji acknowledges a good reason for this neglect: ‘Its vast dimension [...] and its immense technical problems place it beyond the reach of all but the very greatest pianists’.<sup>52</sup> Ernest Newman takes a similar view of Busoni’s concerto: ‘It is not everyman’s music, perhaps; no music of Busoni’s will ever be that. But, of all his works, I think, this is the one that might become fairly popular if the difficulties of it did not stand in the way of frequent performance’.<sup>53</sup> Sorabji intensifies Newman’s first claim: ‘Decidedly this is not the music for Everyman. It lives and moves in a world of experience that is closed to that gentleman’.<sup>54</sup> Busoni did not wish to increase the number of performances of his or any other work he deemed a masterpiece; his intention was rather to restrict admission to all music. This is perhaps one of the tenets bearing the greatest significance in terms of Sorabji’s own unpopular and antisocial aesthetic, of that which in turn informed his interest in neglected works. Busoni calls for a reduction in the number of performances taking place in order to sanctify performance practice. ‘Music is the most mysterious of the arts’, writes Busoni, and so it is only fitting that ‘Around it should float something solemn and festival-like. The entrance to it should be through ceremony and mystery as to a Freemasons’ Lodge. It is artistically indecent that anyone from the street, railway train, or restaurant is free to clatter in [...]’.<sup>55</sup> Busoni dictated that ‘The essence of music is divined by a few single individuals; to the majority it is unknown or misunderstood’. This essence ‘might manifest itself to the inner perception of one of the elect in a moment of exalted vision’.<sup>56</sup> The Busonian aesthetic was decidedly not for the Everyman. To Bernard van Dieren, Busoni implored that ‘We must make the texture of our music such that no amateur can touch it’.<sup>57</sup> The prohibitive, alienating difficulties integral to such works as the concerto – its great length, extortionate instrumental and choral requirements, and complex piano solo labouring often thanklessly under the

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<sup>51</sup> *Around Music*, 68. Sorabji is not quite right here: Busoni conducted his *Berceuse élégiaque* in London this year; the Concerto received its London premiere in 1910 in Queen’s Hall, with the composer conducting and Mark Hambourg at the piano.

<sup>52</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 26.

<sup>53</sup> Ernest Newman, ‘Week’s Music: Busoni’s Concerto’, *Sunday Times* (25 February 1934), 7.

<sup>54</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: London Philharmonic Orchestra Broadcast, January 15<sup>th</sup>’, *The New English Weekly* (31 January 1935), 340.

<sup>55</sup> Busoni, ‘How Long Will it Go On?’ [1910] in Busoni (trans. Ley), 182.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Mellers, ‘The Problem of Busoni’, 241.

orchestra – meant that it posed a precarious prospect in performance; the requisite conditions for its adequate realisation would of necessity be rather rare. Consequently, it was more often than not doomed to failure. At its premiere, for example, one German critic complained: ‘Noise, more noise, eccentricity and licentiousness provoked yet more noise’.<sup>58</sup> Its 1910 London premiere was similarly met with a degree of incomprehension, with one reviewer writing that, ‘I must confess at the outset little sympathy with the particular class of composition that insists on the listener compelling his appreciative faculties to the recognition of an inner artistic life in the composer’.<sup>59</sup> Conditions changed sufficiently little in the intervening years between then and its revival in 1934 that the Concerto remained a historical curiosity, a typically ‘portentous’ product of the turn of the century, wherein Busoni was ‘under the spell of magniloquence’.<sup>60</sup> For W. R. Anderson, this was a ‘terribly long, turgid Pianoforte Concerto’, with Busoni being ‘a sadly unpersuasive composer here, tiresomely over-ornate in his pianoforte writing’. There were ‘Good moments in it, but sleepless hours’.<sup>61</sup>

For Sorabji, the composer and his music could do no wrong. As *Ur-Musik*, the Concerto ‘is epic in its grand spaciousness of style, and with all its mighty length never falters nor palls for a moment’.<sup>62</sup> Under the hands of such an artist as Busoni’s pupil, Egon Petri, the piano part, at least, was ‘transcendental’.<sup>63</sup> In his lengthy review of the 1934 performance, Sorabji goes on to quote Heseltine in his occult phase: “‘this was no mere music-making, something all the while coming *through* the music. We stand on the verge of a strange initiation, where the soul trembles on the edge of the unhallowed”’.<sup>64</sup> There were, however, few initiates among the performing body to support Petri. Certainly there was none among the BBC male chorus employed for the Concerto’s *Cantico*, for this body ‘did not appear to have the faintest notion of, or insight into the hieratic nature of what they were called upon to sing’:

it was like someone reading some great secret invocation of awful power in a language of which they understood not a word, and in a tone and manner that suggested a suburban choir-practice under the local organist.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Beaumont, *Busoni*, 72.

<sup>59</sup> Anon., ‘Music: Signor Busoni’s Choral Concerto’, *The Observer* (12 June 1910), 9.

<sup>60</sup> Anon., ‘B.B.C. Symphony Orchestra’, *Times* (22 February 1934), 12.

<sup>61</sup> W. R. Anderson, ‘Wireless Notes’, *The Musical Times* (December 1934), 1082.

<sup>62</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Death of Busoni’, *The New Age* (14 August 1924), 189.

<sup>63</sup> Sorabji, ‘The Busoni Concerto’, 495.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 496.

At least Newman and Sorabji were singing from the same hymn sheet here: Newman quipped that ‘there was perhaps rather more Chorus than Mysticus about these sturdy British voices’.<sup>66</sup> A foreshadowing, here, of the Protestant renditions ruining Mahler’s symphonies: unless Catholic insight was admitted his work would, according to Sorabji, ‘remain a closed book in an incomprehensible tongue’.<sup>67</sup> Again, it is neither the music nor the composer’s fault: it is the combined deficiencies of the performers’ executive powers and listeners’ receptive faculties which rendered Busoni’s incantation impotent. On hearing the Piano Concerto in 1934, Sorabji wrote in his review how ‘one almost wondered, for what strange, great sin was the mighty spirit of its creator banished into a merely human body? *In* the world he was, but *of* it a thousand times no’.<sup>68</sup> Busoni is out of time and place – anachronistic and anatomic – and ‘that is why the world finds it so difficult to understand and appreciate him. It has never attained *his* world, let alone been banished therefrom’. This is perhaps the outstanding statement underlining Sorabji’s canonisation of obscure composers and neglected works. Their rejection from popular acceptance points to cultural decline in interwar London, to music’s historical mainstream going irretrievably off course in the twentieth century: ‘The petty, puny “revolutions” of “modern” music have to work and wear themselves out before the truly original and novel greatness of works like this can make themselves felt’.<sup>69</sup>

#### The Fourth Dimension: transcendental performance practice post-late Beethoven

Given the ‘immense technical problems’ presented by the Concerto, it was just as well Busoni was in possession of ‘a technique so unique that it passes all conceptions’.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, for Sorabji, Busoni’s playing was ‘fourth dimensional’.<sup>71</sup> This transcendental epithet appears with even greater frequency in Sorabji’s reviews of Busoni’s pupil and disciple Egon Petri’s numerous London recitals in the late 1920s and mid-1930s. It surfaces in regard to his performance of one work in particular: Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier* Sonata, often forming the cornerstone of both Busoni and Petri’s

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<sup>66</sup> Ernest Newman, ‘Week’s Music: Busoni’s Concerto’, *Sunday Times* (25 February 1934), 7.

<sup>67</sup> Sorabji, ‘Mahler and English Audiences’, *The Musical Mirror and Fanfare* (April 1932), 86.

<sup>68</sup> Sorabji, ‘The Busoni Concerto’, 495.

<sup>69</sup> Sorabji, ‘Busoni and Levi’, 237.

<sup>70</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: The Death of Busoni’, *The New Age* (14 August 1924), 189.

<sup>71</sup> Sorabji, ‘To the Editor of the Gramophone’, *The Gramophone* (August 1930), 164.



‘tremendous’ recital programmes.<sup>72</sup> For example, Petri’s playing of Beethoven’s Op. 106 ‘lifts the art of the keyboard into a fourth dimension far beyond the range and ken of the ordinarily eminent pianist’.<sup>73</sup> Following Petri’s recital a month later, Sorabji expands on the quasi-mystical, religious aspects of this fourth dimension as it was opened up by Petri’s playing of, among other items, the *Hammerklavier*:

this was no performance – it was a celebration of a great rite, such as Busoni himself would have given – surrounded irresistibly with the peculiar feeling one always had with him of being at no mere music-making, but at an accomplishment of a magnificent and sublime ritual. Homage again and again is all one can offer to the great artist – priest one is tempted to call him – Egon Petri, true and only successor of his immortal master, Busoni, for at this exalted level art is no longer merely art, it is religion, and the artist becomes a high priest – a hierophant.<sup>74</sup>

Sorabji makes much the same claim following a Petri recital in 1935, but draws a significant conclusion which bears upon Sorabji’s valedictory treatment of the recurring theme of undue neglect. This recital was, again, akin to ‘the celebration of a great and high mystery in the innermost shrines of music. *Hence the otherwise scandalous smallness of the audience*’. Sorabji justifies this scant attendance thus: ‘few auditors can approach these innermost arcana, wherein dwell such great spirits as Busoni and Petri’.<sup>75</sup>

Only under the hands of a Busoni or Petri does the *Hammerklavier* admit entrance to these ‘innermost arcana’, to the ‘fourth dimension’ opened up by a clairvoyant sympathy with the esoteric Busonian tradition. So, at least, Sorabji would have his readers believe: Busoni’s interpretation of the Sonata granted ‘a sudden sight of hidden secret things’.<sup>76</sup> We should remember that the *Hammerklavier* was the product of *late* Beethoven, and the anachronistic qualities of lateness will go on to inform much of what follows in this thesis. Edward Said, in his posthumous study *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*, explains that

The masterpieces of Beethoven’s final decade are late to the extent that they are beyond their own time, ahead of it in terms of daring and startling newness, later than it in that

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<sup>72</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Egon Petri (Wigmore Hall)’, *The New English Weekly* (7 November 1935), 75.

<sup>73</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Egon Petri’, *The New Age* (24 October 1929), 308.

<sup>74</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Egon Petri. Wigmore, November 9’, *The New Age* (21 November 1929), 32-3.

<sup>75</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Egon Petri. Recital (Wigmore, November 8<sup>th</sup>)’, *The New English Weekly* (28 November 1935), 135.

<sup>76</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 23.

they describe a return or homecoming to realms forgotten or left behind by the relentless advancement of history.<sup>77</sup>

It is not insignificant that Said returns time and again to third-and-final-period Beethoven as a key referent in his study on late style, suggesting that this composer in his last years figures as a, if not the, *locus classicus* of the phenomenon. Said writes that Beethoven's later works 'constitute an event in the history of modern culture', a 'moment when the artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it. His late works constitute a form of exile'.<sup>78</sup> Said adds that, 'far from being simply an eccentric and irrelevant phenomenon',

late-style Beethoven, remorselessly alienated and obscure, becomes the prototypical modern aesthetic form, and by virtue of its distance from and rejection of bourgeois society and even a quiet death, it acquires an even greater significance and defiance for that very reason.<sup>79</sup>

Sorabji showed a particular fascination for these exilic, 'alienated and obscure' qualities as they appeared in Beethoven's latter works. Indeed, Sorabji's own writings on late Beethoven suggest that a composer's 'lateness' was not a quality to escape his attention. Neither interested in 'the Haydnish, Mozartian Beethoven of the very early period'<sup>80</sup> nor in the popular and consequently 'much-pummelled' middle-period works,<sup>81</sup> Sorabji was instead drawn to 'very late' Beethoven, to 'what may be called transcendental fourth-dimensional Beethoven'.<sup>82</sup> The late works 'ought to make those who think Beethoven begins and ends with the Appassionata and Waldstein Sonatas realise that in the latter works he hardly begins, so utterly different is the world to which these very late works belong from that of the middle period'.<sup>83</sup> Busoni was of a similar opinion, writing that Beethoven's middle period was 'the weakest of the three'.<sup>84</sup> Busoni explains that, in his

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<sup>77</sup> Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London, Berlin, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2006), 135.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-4.

<sup>80</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: New Records', *The New English Weekly* (19 December 1935), 194.

<sup>81</sup> Sorabji, 'Some Ideas on the Concert Problem', *The Musical Times* (1 May 1925), 415.

<sup>82</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: Some New Records', *The New English Weekly* (13 December 1934), 200.

<sup>83</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New Age* (26 February 1925), 211.

<sup>84</sup> Busoni, 'Melody of the Future' [1911] in Busoni (trans. Ley), 31.

late period, Beethoven worked in ‘spheres which are quite his own’.<sup>85</sup> Op. 111 was ‘inward turning and rich in sound’, the Hammerklavier ‘the most powerful composition for pianoforte of all time’.<sup>86</sup> Most significantly, Busoni acknowledges that late Beethoven was the originator of a maximalism which would accumulate by historical necessity into the late-romantic *kolossal*: ‘Beethoven’s work aroused in his successors the ambition to put significance and depth into their work and to compose on a cyclopean scale; the measurement of width and of means piled up chronologically’.<sup>87</sup>

The prohibitive difficulties abounding in the music of late Beethoven – difficulties unmitigated for performers and audiences alike – were perceived by Sorabji as the composer’s means of repelling the masses: ‘In his very last compositions’, Beethoven ‘wrote music of a character so recondite, so aloof, so “out of touch with the needs and longing of the common man”’, they ‘move as far in spirit and in substance from the “message of democracy and brotherhood . . . that every man could understand” as well as can be imagined’.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, ‘so detached, so aloof are these latter works of Beethoven that they represent a sort of Arcanum of music’:

In his last five piano sonatas particularly, when stone-deafness had literally walled him in from the outside world and from all hearing but that of his own ‘inner ear’, one feels the music to be of a transcendental quality, music (like that of the last string quartets) that no longer takes cognisance of what is poetically called the workaday world, but is concerned with a world of thought and feeling very much other than that with which most people are in contact.<sup>89</sup>

The pseudo-Adornian strain of elitism in these remarks finds a parallel in Wendell Kretschmar’s speech on late Beethoven in Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus* (in many ways ghostwritten by Adorno himself and, incidentally, published in the same year as Sorabji’s comment above). Kretschmar explains that, in his last period,

Beethoven’s art had overgrown itself, risen out of the habitable regions of tradition, even before the startled gaze of human eyes, into spheres of the entirely and utterly and nothing – but personal – an ego painfully isolated in the absolute, isolated too from sense by the

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<sup>85</sup> Busoni, ‘What Did Beethoven Give Us?’ [1920] in Busoni (trans. Ley), 132.

<sup>86</sup> Busoni, ‘From the Zürich Programmes: Beethoven’ [1915] in Busoni (trans. Ley), 134.

<sup>87</sup> Busoni, ‘What Did Beethoven Give Us?’, 131.

<sup>88</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 38. Sorabji is quoting from Elie Siegmeister’s *Music and Society* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1938), 45.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

loss of his hearing, lonely prince of a realm of spirits, from whom now only a chilling breath issued to terrify his most willing contemporaries, standing as they did aghast at these communications of which only at moments, only by exception, they could understand anything at all.<sup>90</sup>

Inward-turning and introspective, late Beethoven (ex-)communicates in a private language denying any immediate accessibility; its arcane attributes prefigure the Busonian esoteric tradition. As Said suggests, Beethoven's late style strives 'to undermine our pleasure, actively eluding any attempt at easy understanding'.<sup>91</sup> His last works are 'constitutively alienated and alienating':

difficult, forbidding works like the *Missa Solemnis* and the *Hammerklavier* Sonata are repellent to audiences and performers alike both because of their redoubtable technical challenges and because their disjointed, even distracted sense of internal continuity offers no very easy line to follow.<sup>92</sup>

The *Hammerklavier* had a direct influence on the conception and composition of Busoni's *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*.<sup>93</sup> This, in turn, provided the model for Sorabji's *Opus clavicembalisticum*. As Sorabji wrote to Erik Chisholm on 25 December 1929: this 'portentous' opus was directly 'inspired' by the *Fantasia contrappuntistica*, a work 'with which I presume to flatter myself it has a mood of feeling not un-akin'.<sup>94</sup> In the score, he notes that its model is the *Fantasia contrappuntistica* 'which, with the *Hammerklavier* Sonata and the Reger Variations on a theme of BACH are three of the supreme works for piano'.<sup>95</sup> While he was working on his own score, Sorabji wrote in a review of a recital given in London's Wigmore Hall by Egon Petri:

More and more the conviction is forced upon me that since the *Hammerklavier* one piano work has appeared that belongs to the same order of definitely transcendental music, and that it is the *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*, but it is a terrible as well as mighty work, for, like the *Hammerklavier*, it will turn and rend any rash weakling who dares try to invoke it'.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Said, *Late Style*, 8.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>93</sup> See Beaumont, *Busoni*, 163 and 176.

<sup>94</sup> Paul Rapoport, 'Sorabji's Other Writings' in Paul Rapoport (ed.), *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, 300.

<sup>95</sup> 'Short-form Analysis of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*' (Sorabji Archive).

<sup>96</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: Egon Petri. Wigmore, November 9', *The New Age* (21 November 1929), 32-3.

H.F. of the *Sunday Times* wrote of the same work that ‘It is no fairy palace that is here evoked from a chip of Bach, but the fortress, formidable and forbidding, of a remarkable intellect. There can be few pianists besides Mr. Petri who [...] could make it sound anything like so near piano music’.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, while formally Busoni’s *Fantasia* takes as its starting point Bach’s *Kunst der Fuge*, its reception places it firmly in the late tradition of Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier*. It is a forbidding fortress in sound and has been further likened to ‘the Gothic equivalent of a skyscraper’; it ‘stands like a skyscraper, isolated, massive and imposing and yet not without a certain element of ugliness’.<sup>98</sup> The work was repellent to the average concertgoer, and ‘It would be idle to pretend that the *Fantasia* is easy to understand or even very likeable. It involves considerable intellectual effort to follow it all, and it is often so brusque in manner as to be downright rude to polite and humble inquiry to its meaning’.<sup>99</sup> The cipher-like nature of the *Fantasia* gave Sorabji the opportunity to evoke the mystical-transcendental, fourth-dimensional processes underlying Busoni’s compositional procedures as a means of justifying its poor rendition under the hands of the uninitiated. As he wrote of Philip Levi’s performance of the work early the following year, this particular pianist ‘is neither spiritually nor intellectually able to approach this most uncompromising music’. Levi ‘utters the *words* of the spell, but, not being a Magus, nothing happens’.<sup>100</sup> For its alienating qualities – an aspect of the performance tradition of late Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier* – its generic unclassifiability and impotence in average performance, Busoni’s work was destined for neglect. When Eduard Steuermann and Margot Hinnenberg, for example, programmed a concert of Schoenberg, Berg, Eisler and Busoni, the BBC broadcast the recital in its entirety, save for the *Fantasia contrappuntistica*.<sup>101</sup>

### Failing sublimely: *Doktor Faust* and the uncanny

Busoni’s *Fantasia contrappuntistica* was for Sorabji a work ‘that savours of the uncanny and sinister’.<sup>102</sup> Sorabji heard these qualities throughout Busoni’s output, but by far the

<sup>97</sup> H.F., ‘Yesterday’s Music. Mr. Petri Plays Modern Piano Music’, *Sunday Times* (10 November 1929), 23.

<sup>98</sup> Beaumont, *Busoni*, 174, 170.

<sup>99</sup> Anon., ‘Concerts: Mr. Egon Petri’, *Times* (11 November 1929), 9.

<sup>100</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Busoni and Mr. Philip Levi’, 237.

<sup>101</sup> Jennifer Doctor, *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music, 1922-1936: Shaping a Nation’s Tastes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 167.

<sup>102</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 214.

uncanniest and most sinister of all his compositions was the opera *Doktor Faust*. Left unfinished at the time of Busoni's death, it in many quite literal ways epitomises the principles of late style.<sup>103</sup> In *Around Music*, Sorabji wrote that *Doktor Faust* 'represents the climax and summing-up of Busoni's entire creative work':

It was his last. It is a supreme, magnificent and triumphant affirmation of the composer's theory that opera should be concerned with the necromantic, the magical, the fantastic [...]. It is unlike anything else in all music. Its atmosphere is that of 'In a Glass Darkly', Blackwood at his most sinister, or Dr James' incomparable stories. Uncanny from first bar to last, all one's attempts to analyse just how the astonishing effects are produced are defeated again and again.<sup>104</sup>

Sorabji links Busoni's *Doktor Faust* up to a tradition of gothic horror, ghost stories and the literary occult; his references to Sheridan LeFanu, Algernon Blackwood and M R James begin to reveal the extent of his dabblings in these sarcophagi of literature. His was an interest shared by Busoni, whose library boasted numerous volumes of bloodcurdling fiction with a particular penchant for vampirism.<sup>105</sup> Sorabji's preoccupation with the uncanny deserves some attention. A number of definitions culled from various dictionaries might suggest the connotations this word had for Sorabji. Thus, the uncanny pertains to mischief and malice, the mysterious and frightening, dangerous and unsafe; it attaches its meaning to persons associated with supernatural arts and weird powers – they are not to be trusted. The uncanny invokes superstitious dread. It is at one and the same time uncomfortably strange and uncomfortably familiar:<sup>106</sup>

It is this quality of strangeness, ubiquitous in Busoni's work, hints and suggestions at dangerous forces and powers lurking below the surface side of things just without reach, or within it of those who have courage to put forth their hand and seize them – Black Magic, if one likes – and the fantastic unreal eerie beauty of this music that makes its hold over some of us so strong, and its fascination so inescapable and overwhelming.<sup>107</sup>

Sorabji's writings on Busoni's *Doktor Faust* showcase his fluent command of the lexicon and grammar of disquietude informing notions of the uncanny. Beneath his largely

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<sup>103</sup> Its completion was entrusted to Busoni's student, Philip Jarnach. See Beaumont, *Busoni*, 349-51.

<sup>104</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 29.

<sup>105</sup> Crispin, *The Esoteric Tradition of Ferruccio Busoni*, 11, 14.

<sup>106</sup> Taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and Chambers and Webster's dictionaries. See Royle, *The Uncanny*, 9-10.

<sup>107</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 29-30.

vernacular usage, however, lurks Freud's 1919 reading of the uncanny as a signalling of 'the return of the repressed', a psychoanalytic-aesthetic reconfiguration of F W J Schelling's definition of *das Unheimliche* as 'something that should have remained hidden and has come to light'.<sup>108</sup> For Sorabji 'the uncanny' belongs to the same category as 'the *just-below-the-surface side of things* that most people find so repellent and prefer either to *ignore or deny*'.<sup>109</sup> There is, then, a sense that the uncanny is apprehended only through arcane insight, by fleeting glimpses of forbidden knowledge. Busoni, in full garb as hierophant, possessed precisely this 'uncanny power' to grant select listeners 'a sudden sight of hidden forbidden things'.<sup>110</sup>

In this guise Busoni appears priest-like, and the 'understanding of the composer as "musical priest"', explains Crispin, is manifest in two ways: first, 'in the composition of works that can only be fully understood with the aid of a mystic vision' and, second, 'in his acceptance' that 'the average person would have insufficient spiritual preparation to gain such an understanding'.<sup>111</sup> Sorabji claimed to understand Busoni's works in precisely this way. *Doktor Faust* belonged to the mediumistic field of the 'metapsychic' in music, a term used by Sorabji to denote 'the entire known range of supernormal or quasi-mystical phenomena'<sup>112</sup> appreciable to the clairvoyant faculties: 'I myself *think* I know when they are there; at least I am a sufficiently wideawake and keen observer of my own reactions when I get it again'.<sup>113</sup> The metapsychic, then, is closely allied to that flickering sense of the supernatural associated with the uncanny. It had the effect – when sensed by Sorabji – of transplanting items ordinarily found in the mainstream canon to Sorabji's own imaginary museum of obscure works, 'outstanding examples in the classics of what Mrs Crowe might have called "The Night-side of Nature"'.<sup>114</sup> One such classic, darkened by the mysterious penumbra of the metapsychic, was the song '*Der Doppelgänger*' of Schubert, a composer not ordinarily appreciated by Sorabji. Sorabji admits that, 'though I candidly confess to being very far from a Schubert enthusiast', from this 'rather naïve and

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<sup>108</sup> Sigmund Freud (trans. David McLintock), *The Uncanny* [1919] (New York and London: Penguin Books, 2003), 147, 148.

<sup>109</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 218-9. Emphases added.

<sup>110</sup> Sorabji, 'Death of Busoni', 189.

<sup>111</sup> Crispin, *The Esoteric Musical Tradition of Ferruccio Busoni*, 22.

<sup>112</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 195.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 205. Sorabji is here quoting the author of supernatural stories, Catherine Crowe, some of whose fiction was collected in Montague Summers' *Victorian Ghost Stories* (1936). Sorabji references Summers seven pages earlier in the same chapter on 'Metapsychic Motivation in Music'.

sunny genius' there nevertheless emerged one instance of 'a work of quite daemonic power and conviction'.<sup>115</sup> He explains:

*Der Doppelgänger* is at once a fantasm and a living person, a 'double', and has also something of the ancient Egyptian conception of the Ka and the Zoroastrian 'fravashi' about it. The peculiar point about the idea of the double is that [...] it is the projection of a 'double' of oneself while waking and fully conscious.<sup>116</sup>

The climax of Schubert's song on this subject 'is overwhelming in its tragic and uncanny horror, when the man sees the face of the agonised, distraught stranger before his window and realises that it is his own'.<sup>117</sup> Although Sorabji was deeply suspicious of the work of Freud ('Have you ever stopped to consider that two of the greatest hoaxes of the twentieth century, one in psychiatry and the other in music, both came from Vienna?'<sup>118</sup>), there is some similarity between their two readings of this phenomenon. Freud, for example, similarly traces the idea of the double back to 'the civilization of ancient Egypt'<sup>119</sup> and, in a footnote to his text, recalls the 'unpleasant experience' of momentarily misidentifying his own reflection in the mirror, of being confronted by his own image 'unbidden and unexpected': 'was the displeasure we felt at seeing these unexpected images of ourselves perhaps a vestige of the archaic reaction to the "double" as something uncanny?'<sup>120</sup>

Freud also reflects on Goethe's *Faust*,<sup>121</sup> and the Faustian is nothing if not concerned with doubles (indeed, the double is 'an insurance against the extinction of the self'<sup>122</sup>). Osman Durrani notes that Faust always has a double, 'a diabolical assistant or alter ego', a Mephistophelean other.<sup>123</sup> Can we suggest that the *persona ingratis* of K. S. Sorabji was by Faustian design? That Faust was subject to some confusion as to whether he was a historical personality or literary construct meant he quickly became 'a distinctive emblem of Romanticism'.<sup>124</sup> Portrayals tended to treat him as a marginal, fringe

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> The 'hoaxes' referred to are psychoanalysis and serialism. Quoted by Donald Garvelmann in 'The Great Sorabji Mystique' [printed privately, 1971] in Derus, 'Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine' in Paul Rapoport (ed.), *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 202.

<sup>119</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 142.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 161-2.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 149-50.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>123</sup> Osman Durrani, *Faust: Icon of Modern Culture* (Hastings: Helm Information, 2004), 4.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 132.



figure, but a potent one at that – ‘the epitome of the titanic individual’.<sup>125</sup> In Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, the author defines the ‘Faustian Man’ as one at odds with his time and so ‘sees culture as doomed’ and ‘is characterised by a sense of isolation [...] he is constantly and painfully reminded of his solitude’.<sup>126</sup> Perhaps, with Faust, it was ever thus; Goethe himself thought that no music could be adequately written for his drama: ‘the repulsive, unpleasant qualities that it would in some places require are out of tune with our age’.<sup>127</sup> These qualities – all, in certain respects, uncanny – Sorabji saw as increasingly rare in the modern twentieth century:

Once past the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> centuries, there comes a perfect spate of works with ‘uncanny’, mysterious’ or ‘supernatural’ motives, that has continued with intermissions and some slackening right down to our own times.<sup>128</sup>

Faust, a typical product of the romantic imagination,<sup>129</sup> was veering towards anachronicity by the time Sorabji was writing.

Small wonder Sorabji was drawn in the early 1930s to the Faust theme for an opera (he had in fact begun writing the choruses but, alas, ‘the whole thing was too “Northern” for me’, and he abandoned his plans and discarded all drafts).<sup>130</sup> The Faust legend even figures in his own autobiographical lore, Sorabji having claimed that sometime before his second birthday (and before the romantic century was out) he had witnessed his mother sing the role of Marguerite in a performance of Berlioz’s *Damnation de Faust* in Paris.<sup>131</sup> As a critic, Sorabji was notably drawn to works in the Faustian genre. Not, of course, those accessible to the concertgoing majority, such as the popular treatment of the theme by ‘Monsieur Sugar-Plum Gounod’<sup>132</sup> whose *Faust* was ‘banal’.<sup>133</sup> Sorabji only cared for Gounod’s *Faust* in Liszt’s transcription (‘it was a favourite of Busoni’s’<sup>134</sup>), ‘that superb

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 125, 128.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>127</sup> Beamont, *Busoni*, 325.

<sup>128</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 198.

<sup>129</sup> See Eric Frederick Jensen, ‘Liszt, Nerval, and Faust’, *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music*, 6/2 (Autumn 1982), 151.

<sup>130</sup> See Roberge, *Opus Sorabjianum*, 158-9.

<sup>131</sup> But this claim, Roberge suggests, was likely to be ‘a case of literary license’. Sorabji’s mother probably performed only in her son’s imagination as a means of giving himself an inherited musical background’. See *ibid.*, 41.

<sup>132</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music. Rome. Teatro Reale (broadcast of “Damnation de Faust”’, *The New English Weekly* (9 May 1940), 37.

<sup>133</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 197.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

transmutation of Gounod saccharine into Liszt strong-drink, proof-spirit'.<sup>135</sup> For Sorabji the true mark of the Faustian composer rather bore the stigma of obscurity. In his article 'On Neglected Works', Sorabji bemoans the indifference shown to Liszt's *Faust* Symphony and Schumann's *Scenes from Goethe's Faust*, the latter another case of a composer generally disliked by Sorabji on this occasion charmed by metapsychic motivations. Alkan's Grande Sonate (judged 'extremely interesting for its oddity' by Sorabji<sup>136</sup>) contains a movement entitled 'Quasi-Faust' which has been described as 'the strangest and most complex passage in all nineteenth-century piano music': 'the black satanic forces sweep through this gigantic movement'.<sup>137</sup> Sorabji had an inkling that Rachmaninov's First Piano Sonata – which 'is of course never played' – 'owes its inspiration to Goethe's *Faust*'.<sup>138</sup> It did indeed owe this particular infernal debt: Rachmaninov, writing in 1907, confirmed its literary provenance but conceded that 'Nobody will ever play this composition, it's too difficult and long and possibly – and this is the most important – too dubious musically'.<sup>139</sup> Sorabji praised 'the most haunting hallucinating obsessing quality' of Szymanowski's *King Roger*,<sup>140</sup> an opera quite possibly influenced by Tadeusz Miciński's apocalyptic novel *Xiadz Faust* (1913).<sup>141</sup> Finally, there is Mahler's Eighth, 'The Symphony of the Thousand'. For Sorabji, this was 'the crown and climax of all the Mahler symphonies', not least for its 'setting of the tremendous final scenes of *Faust* [...] perhaps the greatest dramatic work ever written [...]. The neglect of this work in England is inexplicable'.<sup>142</sup>

The Faustian works Sorabji was interested in were all, in a sense, failures. True to the Faustian archetype, such an undertaking was an inevitable disaster, and to write a truly Faustian work was a performative task doomed from the outset: in striving for the unattainable so many composers consigned their Magian efforts to oblivion. In this sense they approach the sublime (see Part II). For Dietrich Borchmeyer, 'There can hardly be a single dramatic work in world literature that is filled with so much inaudible music, and which, despite innumerable attempts [...] is ultimately as hostile to musical composition as

<sup>135</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: New Records (Columbia)', *The New English Weekly* (1 October 1936), 415. [415-6]

<sup>136</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 216.

<sup>137</sup> Smith, *Alkan: The Music* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2000), 75, 71.

<sup>138</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 59.

<sup>139</sup> Rachmaninov to Morozov, letter dated May 1907, in Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* [1956] (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 138.

<sup>140</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 185.

<sup>141</sup> See Jim Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1981), 43.

<sup>142</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 190-1.

*Faust*'.<sup>143</sup> In seeking metapsychic transcendence many simply transgressed the aesthetic receptivity of the majority. The Faustian spirit is concerned with 'the unattainable and indefinable'; all attempts at representing *Faust* in music 'are of necessity fragments of a whole that can at best be dimly glimpsed'.<sup>144</sup> As William McNaught wrote: 'Mahlerians tell us to look at the ineffable things passing in the composer's mind. The things are there, agreed; the idealist speaks through his failures'. McNaught thought Mahler simply couldn't find the 'right notes'.<sup>145</sup> To the popular ear, so many of the works in Sorabji's canon – not to mention his own – sounded like an endless succession of 'wrong notes'. This was his cue not to humbly accept the idiosyncrasy of his own tastes as both critic and composer, but to criticise the receptive faculties of London's interwar concertgoers. Busoni's *Doktor Faust* is a prime example: where its critics would claim it inaccessible and incomprehensible, his champions, Sorabji most vocally, would laud its esotericism. As Dent recalled, *Doktor Faust* 'on its first night appeared to have won only a *succès d'estime*. It was not an opera for the general public'; it 'is not likely ever to be a popular opera'.<sup>146</sup>

Reports from foreign correspondents of the opera's first performances in Germany which appeared in British papers did little to entice concertgoers. 'It is not a work which is ever likely to become a critical success' wrote one from Dresden in *The Times* in 1925.<sup>147</sup> Two years later, a report filed from Frankfurt prophesied that 'There is little prospect [...] that *Doktor Faust* will go the round of the opera houses'.<sup>148</sup> When it was performed in London in 1937, it was not at all well received. One reviewer for *The Times* wrote with regard to the opera that 'Busoni's music is fearfully unattractive at the outset and often seems wilfully to refuse its obvious duty of clearing what is obscure in the action. One wondered whether anything quite so ugly as the organ solo which introduces the Cathedral scene has ever been written'.<sup>149</sup> McNaught, in *The Musical Times*, concluded on the basis of the opera that 'Busoni might be the world's worst great composer', his music is 'mostly

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<sup>143</sup> Quoted in Durrani, *Faust*, 241.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 166, 251.

<sup>145</sup> William McNaught, 'London Concerts: Mahler's Second Symphony', *The Musical Times*, 75/1059 (May 1931), 452-3.

<sup>146</sup> Edward J. Dent, 'Busoni's *Doctor Faust*' [1926] in Hugh Taylor (ed.), *Edward J. Dent: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 131.

<sup>147</sup> Anon., 'Busoni's "Doktor Faust": Posthumous Opera at Dresden (From a Correspondent), Dresden, May 22', *Times* (27 May 1925), 14.

<sup>148</sup> Anon., 'Frankfurt Musical Festival. Busoni's "Doktor Faust" (From Our Critic). Frankfurt, June 30<sup>th</sup>', *Times* (1 July 1927), 12.

<sup>149</sup> Anon., '"Doktor Faust": The Musical Impression', *Times* (20 March 1937), 12.

nonsense – powerful, striking, brainy nonsense, if you like, but still nonsense’. *Doktor Faust* ‘may not belong to the art of composition or be pleasant to listen to; but it is very big’.<sup>150</sup> The most fulsome condemnation of the opera, however, came in a two-part instalment from Ernest Newman in *The Sunday Times* over two weekends in March 1937. In the first he deals with the drama: Goethe’s plot ‘could not fail to attract a mind so given to philosophical brooding as Busoni’s’ but nevertheless concludes that ‘all this is the most egregious philosophical muddle that could be conceived. [...] Dramatically “Doktor Faust” falls between too many stools to be a success’.<sup>151</sup> While Busoni’s dramatic construction is ultimately ‘unsatisfactory’, ‘the music must be frankly and regretfully written down, for the most part, as a failure’. Newman’s is a perceptive account of Busoni’s handling of the Faust theme, pointing out the unattainability of adequately setting this subject: Busoni’s ‘practice, as so often happened with him, could not rise to the heights of his theory’; this indicated ‘the tragic gulf between his desires and his capacity’. On the disconnect between Busoni’s setting of words to music, Newman wrote: ‘such incredible misfits, and so interrupted a succession of misfits, have never before been heard in Queen’s Hall, and are never likely to be heard there again’. With *Doktor Faust*, Busoni ‘failed most conclusively’. *Doktor Faust* is merely ‘an ambitious failure’:

Too much of his music gives us the impression of a grate in which there are all the materials for a splendid fire; the only thing lacking is the light. In his efforts to be himself he too often became nobody. [...] He built the greatest hopes on this opera of his, fondly believing that it would found a school; upon which one’s only possible comment is that there is apparently no limit to man’s capacity for self-delusion.<sup>152</sup>

This points to the essence of ‘negative music’: it is a sublime failure in the sense that, in striving for greatness – to transcend, to enter the ‘fourth dimension’ – it merely transgresses, alienating those who dwell in humbler three-dimensional planes.

The impression given by such music is that it is fundamentally unhealthy, and so it was received. Mellers, again on ‘The Problem of Busoni’, wrote that ‘I do not think one can listen to this music impartially without feeling that there is something wrong about it – something pathological’, ‘unpleasant’ and harbouring ‘the impression of something

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<sup>150</sup> McNaught, ‘London Concerts: Busoni’s *Doktor Faust*’, *The Musical Times*, 78/1130 (April 1937), 361-2.

<sup>151</sup> Ernest Newman, ‘The World of Music: “Doktor Faust”: Busoni’s Drama’, *The Sunday Times* (14 March 1937), 7.

<sup>152</sup> Ernest Newman, ‘The World of Music: “Doktor Faust”: Busoni’s Music’, *The Sunday Times* (21 March 1937), 7.

sinister which is most potent'. There was 'certainly something which the composer "could not quite bring to light"'.<sup>153</sup> Where Busoni failed to bring his intentions to light, it fell on his disciples to convince the uninitiated of the secrets of the Arcanum. Sorabji does so, but only by reinforcing the secrecy of the Busoni tradition. Sorabji sent Busoni deeper into obscurity: he did not wish for the majority to have access to Busoni's music, for his neglect – his rejection by concertgoing majority – only proved the esoteric ideals of the Busoni tradition. Sorabji kept Busoni *sui generis* by lauding his incompatibility with the currents of the historical mainstream. As a critic, Sorabji saw himself as, quoting Mephistopheles from Goethe's *Faust*, the *spirit that denies*, 'a "Geist der stets verneint" in so far as all the principal fashionable catchwords, conventions, and shibboleths of "modern" music are concerned'.<sup>154</sup> The influence of Busoni had far-reaching consequences on Sorabji's critical aesthetic. Part II considers his writings on two late-romantic maximalist composers, Mahler and Reger, and how the accumulative force of history is manifest in their *kolossal* works. True to Busoni's esotericism, their neglect on this score was for Sorabji a guarantee of their aesthetic merit.

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<sup>153</sup> Mellers, 'The Problem of Busoni', *Music & Letters*, 18/3 (July 1937), 244-5.

<sup>154</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: Joseph Marx', *The New Age* (14 October 1926), 277.



## **Part Two**

### ***Kolossal***

### **Sorabji and Late-Romantic Maximalism**





## Preamble

And the odd cases of Mahler and Reger! These composers seem to go instantly to the heads of some people, causing them to utter statements that are complete and demonstrable nonsense in point of actual fact. Thus Mahler, according to legend, always and everywhere uses an immense orchestra. . . . And now Reger; it matters not one hoot than an elaborate intricate Byzantine texture is only part of his work. . . . By a sort of Pavlovian conditioned reflex, the noise 'turgid' is heard whenever the name of Reger is mentioned.

. . . there must be some very potent quality in these two Masters thus to cause people to take leave of such scanty senses as *le bon Dieu* saw fit to endow them with, whenever they hear their names.

SORABJI, 'The Silly Season' (1954)<sup>1</sup>

From the early 1920s on, Sorabji penned numerous articles, reviews and open letters in defence of Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) and Max Reger (1873-1916), two composers routinely smeared in the ink of interwar English criticism. His views were consolidated and given full expression under the chapter headings, 'Notes on the Symphonies of Mahler' and 'The Organ Works of Reger' in *Around Music*.<sup>2</sup> In these writings we can discern Sorabji's alignment with what might well be described as a late-romantic aesthetic given over to maximalism, the 'radical intensification of means toward accepted or traditional ends (or at least towards ends that could be so described)'.<sup>3</sup> Such maximal works – 'always of hugely ambitious dimensions'<sup>4</sup> – praised by Sorabji as, for example, Mahler's Second and Eighth Symphonies or Reger's *Symphonic Fantasy and Fugue* were typically received with hostility in the English press of the time. Peter J. Pirie, in his account of *The English Musical Renaissance*, explains why Germanic maximalism came to be regarded with suspicion. 'The tendency of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century German music' to 'massed forces and loud noises', writes Pirie, 'became associated in the English mind with the *kolossal* aspects of German militarism, with the result that a very general revulsion was felt against this kind of music'. The *kolossal* was 'essentially un-English and typically German', and 'the fact that German composers could handle vast forces with great skill, create large forms and write with uninhibited expression, while the English could not, was the very reason why German music was superior to English music'.<sup>5</sup> Adverse reactions to the *kolossal* provided the perfect foil to

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<sup>1</sup> Sorabji, 'The Silly Season', *Musical Opinion* (November 1954), 77, 79.

<sup>2</sup> *Around Music*, 178-93 and 220-6 respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, Vol. 4: 'Music in the Early Twentieth Century' (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Peter J. Pirie, *The English Musical Renaissance* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1979), 87-8.

Sorabji's advocacy of late-romantic maximalism: perceptions of German superiority, Pirie suggests, could only point up English inferiority. As apotheoses of the German tradition of symphonic and instrumental development, Mahler and Reger's *oeuvre* presented a forceful reminder of Oscar Schmitz's barb: where England had little or no music, Germany had it to excess.<sup>6</sup> In compensatory reaction, the *kolossal* was interpreted in the wider press as an instance of Germanic cultural hubris culminating in a crisis or impasse in the historical course of musical progress. In view of Mahler and Reger's hostile London reception in the first half of the twentieth century, it would have plausibly seemed that they were both headed for neglect in the short term and obscurity in the long run (which was, in the end, to be the case with one but not the other). Sorabji took the impending doom of Reger and Mahler as a cue to critique the prevailing culture. The English, Sorabji maintained, were incapable of appreciating the 'massed forces' behind Mahler's symphonies or the 'loud noises' emanating from the organ loft whenever Reger was on the bill. Where Mahler was admonished for his 'monstrous German orchestra' and Reger for 'spawning too many notes' Sorabji, *persona ingratisissima*, set about his criticism.

For the great majority of London-based critics, however, the failure of Reger and Mahler to inspire audience enthusiasm did not so much point up the shortcomings of English aesthetic receptivity as simply indicate the long, drawn-out expiration of a waning tradition. The thread of the contrapuntal lineage stretching back to Bach had, in Reger's case, ended up in a knot of Gordian undisentanglability; under Mahler's direction, the symphony – once the medium of choice for the expression of pure, absolute-musical thinking – became a bloated vessel freighted little other than the composer's overblown ego. In these terms, the excesses of the *kolossal* signalled the precipitation of the end of German musical hegemony. Ernest Newman, for example, wrote in 1917 that German music was by then undergoing a process of degeneration: 'every tradition is bound in the very nature of things to exhaust itself in time; and the German tradition has obviously been approaching exhaustion for a generation at least. It has run to seed [...] musically and morally'. Newman points to maximalism as the symptom: 'The filling up of the great symphonic patterns (I use the term "symphonic" to cover operatic as well as purely instrumental writing) tends more and more to become a matter of technical facility. Max

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<sup>6</sup> *Das Land ohne Musik* was Oscar Schmitz's polemical view of English music from Germany in the early months of the Great War. See Jürgen Schaarwächter, 'Chasing a myth and a legend: "The British musical renaissance" in a "Land without music"', *The Musical Times*, 149/1904 (Autumn 2008), 53–60.

Reger is the supreme illustration of this'.<sup>7</sup> Or, as N.C. put it, Reger's 'inflated style [...] linked him up with a tradition of German art and thought of which we have grown a little tired'. This was an indication of 'the Faust spirit run to excess', of a 'preoccupation with bulk and complexity for their own sakes'.<sup>8</sup> Statements such as these are shown to be fairly representative of English critical opinion from the first half of the twentieth century. For Newman, N.C. and countless other London-based arbiters of musical taste, the *kolossal* was an outsized and unwanted relic of the previous century. Sorabji's countervailing response inevitably appeared eccentric in its defiance: not only did he antagonistically champion such late-romantic maximalists as Mahler and Reger, but followed their designs as prototypes – mere starting points – for his own colossal conceptions.

Sorabji belonged to an increasingly marginalised minority in support of Mahler and Reger, for theirs was an approach to composition rapidly losing currency (if not already or altogether out of favour) by the time K. S. Sorabji put pen to both letter- and manuscript paper. Indeed it is significant that, before settling on his critical *nom de guerre*, Sorabji was not exactly sympathetic to either Mahler or Reger's cause. As the Heseltine correspondence shows, Sorabji's earliest recorded references to these two were rather of a piece with some of the more disparaging attitudes then commonplace. Thus, 'Reger is dry as dust!', he decides in an early, pre-War letter to Heseltine dated 3 February 1914.<sup>9</sup> Harvey Grace, in his hardly mournful *Musical Times* piece on 'The Late Max Reger', concurred:

There is nothing quite like the dryness of Reger at his worst. Generally dryness is a negative quality: one is merely bored. With Reger it is positive – devastating. It does not send you to sleep: he uses it as a club, and hits you over the head with it.<sup>10</sup>

The seemingly empty orotundity of Mahler's symphonic gestures was an aspect similarly primed for platitudinous repetition. Following Mahler's London premiere, J. A. Fuller Maitland of *The Times* declared that, 'at the end of the three-quarters of an hour which the [First] symphony occupies in performance, one found oneself still wondering what the

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<sup>7</sup> Ernest Newman, 'The Present Trend', *The Musical Times*, 58/892 (June 1917), 250.

<sup>8</sup> N.C., 'Manchester University Musical Society: Max Reger', *The Manchester Guardian* (26 November 1924), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine, letter dated 3 February 1914. See Chapter One for sources.

<sup>10</sup> Harvey Grace, 'Church and Organ Music. The Late Max Reger as Organ Composer', *The Musical Times*, 57/880 (June 1916), 282.

composer set out to say'.<sup>11</sup> A decade or so later, on 20 March 1914, Sorabji again wrote to Heseltine, this time musing that,

When a man thinks it necessary to wrap up his thoughts in complicated verbose phraseology one is bound to become suspicious. If he has really something of value to say he will not swaddle it up in a mass of verbiage. We can now-a-days very quickly detect the composer who having nothing to say takes 1½ hours to say it like the late Gustav Mahler!<sup>12</sup>

Sorabji found Mahler's Seventh Symphony and *Lied von der Erde* 'as a whole, very weak' and, from Vienna, complained to Heseltine about 'this bloody Mahler orgy. I cannot turn without seeing some bleeding Sonderheft devoted to the man'. Sorabji proposed that any one of the commemorative etchings of *Das Lied von der Erde* would serve perfectly well as 'bum-fodder'.<sup>13</sup>

How do we account for Sorabji's later divergence of opinion, his attitudinal shift from holding Reger as unrelievedly dry and Mahler unintelligibly verbose to declaring both unrivalled 'masters'?<sup>14</sup> Sorabji's growing familiarity with their music on the page and in performance without doubt played a part (in 1926, for example, he writes of having studied Mahler 'rather closely during the past year or two'<sup>15</sup>). But this does not fully explain the critical approach by which Sorabji came to elevate Mahler and Reger so far above the prevailing consensus. It is reasonable to suggest here that the combined formative influence of, first, his epistolary communications with Heseltine and, second, his entry into the Busoni Network in 1919 together encouraged an aesthetic reorientation which actively attuned Sorabji's receptivity to the maligned brand of German maximalism exemplified by Mahler and Reger. On the first count, these two composers were widely considered antipathetic to English sensibilities: Mahler was 'reviled as 'un-English',<sup>16</sup> and Reger as 'so aggressively German'<sup>17</sup> (indeed, no less an authority than Busoni described

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<sup>11</sup> J. A. Fuller Maitland, 'Concerts', *The Times* (22 October 1903), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine, letter dated 20 March 1914.

<sup>13</sup> Sorabji to Heseltine, letters dated 3 February 1914 and 2 January 1922.

<sup>14</sup> Sorabji, 'Mahler, Reger, Alkan', *The Musical Times* (February 1928), 159.

<sup>15</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: The Passing of the Public Concert. II.', *The New Age* (15 July 1926), 121.

<sup>16</sup> Wilfrid Mellers, 'Mahler and the Great Tradition: Then and Now' in Donald Mitchell and Andrew Nicholson (eds.), *The Mahler Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 565.

<sup>17</sup> Grace, 'Church and Organ Music', 282.

the latter as ‘the Greatest living and deeply German composer’<sup>18</sup>). Sorabji’s advocacy in this light contravened orthodox English opinion; this contrariety can therefore be linked to the renunciation of his own Englishness over the course of the Heseltine correspondence. On the second count, related to the first, the scale and complexity of both Mahler and Reger’s work – its cumulative ‘Germanness’ – and the demands it placed on performers and audiences alike ensured a degree of inaccessibility particularly amenable to the esotericism associated with Busoni. In short, the negative construal of Mahler and Reger among London’s press and concertgoers was met by Sorabji in a singularly positive light; their general unpopularity with English audiences presented an opportune cause through which his own sense of apartness and outsidership could be voiced from within.

There was, then, the appeal of the obscure for Sorabji in the reputations of Reger and Mahler, those ‘two very great modern Masters (or rather Masters of modern times – it’s not quite the same thing)’.<sup>19</sup> Sorabji’s quibbling parentheses encapsulate a concern recurrent throughout his writings, one indicating an anxiety not to see figures from his canon of neglected works and obscure composers brought to light and co-opted into the modernist movement he unequivocally reviled as ‘the fashion’.<sup>20</sup> It was a strategy which tended to both foster their neglect and perpetuate their obscurity: while Sorabji would concede that Mahler and Reger were *in* the twentieth century, he would not admit that they were *of* it. In this way he sought to secure a state of parachronicity for them, insulating their works from the base judgments of the present in a kind of historical ex-centricity corresponding with Carl Dahlhaus’s definition of ‘neo-romanticism’ as denoting the ‘late flowering’ of the ‘romantic in an unromantic age’.<sup>21</sup> Understood in this way as a peripheral movement – that is, viewed historically as a typically nineteenth-century trait displaced in the margins of the twentieth – neo-romanticism is characterised by its ‘dissociation from the prevailing spirit of the age’. This dissociation, moreover, ‘enabled it to fulfil a spiritual, cultural, and ideological function of a magnitude which can hardly be exaggerated: it stood for an alternative world’.<sup>22</sup> The neo-romantic is romanticism ‘out of its proper time and yet powerful’, and it is this sense of otherworldly grandeur that we see insinuated in Sorabji’s

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Helmut Brauss, *Max Reger’s Music for Solo Piano* (Alberta: The University of Alberta Press, 1994), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Delusions and Pathetic Fallacies (continued)’, *The European* (1955), 46.

<sup>20</sup> See Part III.

<sup>21</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, ‘Neo-romanticism’ in *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century* (trans. Mary Whittall) (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: 1989), 11, 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

writings on Mahler and Reger: they were neglected precisely because, as Sorabji saw it, the English temperament was denied access to these alternative worlds. Further to Dahlhaus's term we might add another in order to better understand Sorabji's attachment to this decentred aesthetic.<sup>23</sup> The 'neo-romantic' is, to all intents and purposes (and despite its expositor's protestations to the contrary), as good as synonymous with 'late romanticism' if we accept Edward Said's conception of 'lateness' as incorporating 'the idea of surviving beyond what is acceptable and normal'.<sup>24</sup> Said's posthumous text, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*, argues that lateness is a fundamentally obscure and obscuring attribute, one which 'insists on the increasing sense of apartness and exile and anachronism'.<sup>25</sup> As with Sorabji's distinction that Mahler and Reger were 'Masters of modern times' and categorically *not* 'modern Masters', for Said 'late style is *in*, but oddly *apart* from the present'.<sup>26</sup>

Sorabji does not attempt to bring Mahler or Reger into line with the mores of English music culture; rather, he presents their works as arcane and inaccessible to the majority of London concertgoers. This tactic – so typical of the *ressentiment* guiding Sorabji's canonisation of neglected composers and obscure works – occludes Reger and Mahler's music in terms which, if not simply uningratiating, were positively prohibitive: in England, Mahler was likely to 'remain a closed book in an incomprehensible tongue';<sup>27</sup> performances of Reger's organ works were not only 'very rare' but 'generally so execrable as to make those of us who know these great works wish that they were rarer still'.<sup>28</sup> Sorabji's appeal to Mahler's incomprehensibility and Reger's rarity – their obscurity – intensified the lateness ascribed to their works as representative of the post-dated culmination of nineteenth-century music. The senescence of German romanticism is akin to Said's notion of lateness as 'being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present'. Late style becomes 'an untimely, scandalous, even catastrophic commentator on the present'.<sup>29</sup> The *Kolossalismus* of late romanticism served as a key animus to Sorabji's criticism and he is seen to enlist Mahler

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<sup>23</sup> Of the fin-de-siècle neo-romantic period, Dahlhaus explains that 'The central trends of the age were represented by peripheral works, while the central musical works were representative of the periphery of the age'. Ibid., 7.

<sup>24</sup> Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London, Berlin, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2006), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 24. Emphases in original.

<sup>27</sup> Sorabji, 'Mahler and English Audiences', *The Musical Mirror and Fanfare* (April 1932), 86.

<sup>28</sup> Sorabji, 'Mr. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji writes', *Musical Opinion* (1955), 373.

<sup>29</sup> Said, *On Late Style*, 14.

and Reger as exemplars in order to narrate a catastrophizing commentary on English music culture. Sorabji did so in defiance of official Renaissance ideology, one which promoted the degeneration of German musical hegemony as the dialectic principle enabling English music's own regeneration. Where English music was, at the dawn of the twentieth century, in a state of renewed nascence (so it went), German music at the end of the long nineteenth century belonged to the twilight of old age. Sorabji's criticism poses a challenge to such narrative tropes animating the historical imagination, to notions of ends and beginnings, degeneration and regeneration, and the fin-de-siècle transition of the nineteenth to twentieth century.

The recognition of 'lateness' as a discernible musico-historical trait arises from attempts to deal with the interpretation of stylistic limit points, of moments of apparent formal saturation which seem to precipitate the imminent rethinking of periodic designations. It is indissociably tied up with notions of linear chronology. The late-romantic instance of the *kolossal* was perceived as the summit – both peak and precipice – of fin-de-siècle symphonic-orchestral and instrumental development whereafter *something had to give*. And in the end something did, as the *kolossal* German orchestra gave way in the 1920s to the Franco-Russian trend for more pragmatic ensembles better suited to the sparser textures of neo-classicism. For Richard Taruskin, this inaugurated modernism proper, which is to say the dominant aesthetic mode governing twentieth-century art music and its post-facto historical re-presentations. He writes that 'The ultimate failure of maximalism as a means of renewal, however great or valuable its products, was implicit in its very premises. Eventually limits are discovered'.<sup>30</sup> The title heading his chapter on maximalism, 'Reaching (for) Limits', is suggestive: between the decisive break from a late-romantic aesthetic to an early modernist one there is an implied limit point or threshold beyond which no further development or expansion is either conceivable or possible in practical terms. While Taruskin is chiefly preoccupied with three Austro-Germans reaching (for) limits (Mahler maximalizing the symphony, Strauss the opera and Schoenberg tonality), he is ironically compelled to concede that it was in fact a reputedly eccentric English composer – Havergal Brian (1876-1972) – who prevailed in the symphonic domain, having reached 'the maximalist boundary for symphonies (according to the authority in

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<sup>30</sup> Taruskin, *Oxford History*, 'Music in the Early Twentieth Century', 22.

such matters, the *Guinness Book of World Records*)'.<sup>31</sup> Brian's 'Gothic' Symphony (completed in 1927) 'lasts somewhere over 100 minutes' and 'was not performed until 1961, when the composer was eighty-five, and has had only two performances since then, which already suggests one of the pitfalls of maximalism'.<sup>32</sup>

But surely a dearth of performances is only a pitfall if a composer actively courts public recognition? In Brian's own words from 1924 – words which could very well have been uttered by Sorabji – 'it is better to go on working in silence and obscurity and get works written, rather than seek the glare of the footlights and have illusions destroyed'.<sup>33</sup> In this regard Brian's biographer Reginald Nettel asks, 'Is it to be wondered at that the composer shuns realities, digs deeper and deeper into his dream-life for an environment in which he can believe?'<sup>34</sup> Brian worked 'in a medium unlikely to be heard by his own generation', employing 'an orchestra so tremendous that few concert halls could house it, and few purses afford it' at a time when 'the grip of commerce had begun to strangle the arts'. This is an exemplary expression of that 'negative music' Wilfrid Mellers detected throughout Busoni's and Heseltine/Warlock's output, music so appealing to Sorabji for its expression of 'a stupendous personal victory [...] a victory which we cannot share'.<sup>35</sup> Some of Sorabji's own most maximal works are perhaps quintessential instances of this. For example, the Mahlerian (in spirit if not letter) Catholic-devotional *Messa alta sinfonica* (1955-61) was to be 'Sorabji's – if not music history's – grandest orchestral work', comprising 1,001 pages and weighing in at 18.1kg.<sup>36</sup> Marc-André Roberge remarks that Sorabji 'took an obvious pleasure in writing for such huge forces' before quoting the composer himself:

Of course, *everybody* will be busting themselves, the Organ *all out*... And if the roof falls in on top of the whole bloody lot... well, all the better.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 22-3. The Havergal Brian Society presently lists six complete performances to date. See <http://www.havergalbrian.org/performances-by-work.php#symphonies> [accessed 6 December 2013].

<sup>33</sup> Letter dated 8 March 1924, cited in Reginald Nettel, *Ordeal by Music: the Strange Experience of Havergal Brian* (London, New York and Toronto: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1945), 118.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Mellers, 'The Problem of Busoni', *Music & Letters*, 18/3 (July 1937), 247.

<sup>36</sup> Marc-André Roberge, *Opus Sorabjianum: The Life and Works of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji*, Version 1.10 (Quebec, Canada: 2014), 311.

<sup>37</sup> Sorabji to Frank Holliday, letter dated 25 May 1958 in *ibid.*



Not for nothing, then, has Sorabji been described as ‘a one-man musical apocalypse’.<sup>38</sup> It ought to go without saying that staging performances of any one of Sorabji’s orchestral compositions would present a prohibitive enterprise for all concerned. And so, with no consideration for public appreciation (an absolute disdain, in fact, for such a degrading prospect), Sorabji continued composing primarily in this late-romantic maximalist manner throughout his life, putting down pen only when eyesight failed him in old age (in 1984 when – after however many waves of modernism one cares to count – minimalism had asserted itself as the post-modern style *du jour*). As he explained in 1977, when asked about the far-flung possibility of the *Messa alta sinfonica* someday being performed in London’s Albert Hall, Sorabji as good as welcomed his own neglect:

Of course it will never be performed, which doesn’t matter to me a scrap. I was put into the world to write them, so that’s that. What happens to them after I can’t tell; it doesn’t matter to me two hoots. I don’t care a damn.<sup>39</sup>

Sorabji’s defence of the *kolossal* in his interwar criticism went some considerable distance in justifying his own maximalist ventures as a composer. There is the sense that he attempted to forestall the dramaturgically preordained denouement of the catastrophe of late romanticism, creating ever larger musical forms seemingly impervious to the synchronic pull of modernism’s post-war sublation. Sorabji sought to extend the long nineteenth century – the ‘Great Main Stream’ – throughout an indifferent, if not hostile, twentieth: his was a stubbornly ‘lingering romanticism’. By going so determinedly against the grain of music’s historical course of development – understood both contemporaneously and as studied in retrospect – Sorabji’s parachronistic neo-romanticism became ever more entrenched in anachronicity, exile and eccentric obscurity: he was a composer *in* the twentieth century, but was determined not to be *of* it. Sorabji’s criticism was instrumental in setting the foundations for this belief. The following two chapters suggest that his writings on the neglect of Mahler and Reger fortified his belief in the validity of maximalism against the austere, post-war claims of modernism.

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<sup>38</sup> Kyle Gann, ‘Godzilla of the Piano Repertoire’, *Postclassic* (21 June 2004) [http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2004/06/godzilla\\_of\\_the\\_piano\\_repertoi.html](http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2004/06/godzilla_of_the_piano_repertoi.html) [accessed 10 June 2014].

<sup>39</sup> Interviewed on 1 March 1977 by Russell Harty for London Weekend Television’s *Aquarius* programme (broadcast 11 June 1977). This is the only known film to exist featuring Sorabji. Excerpts can be found in ‘Interview with Sorabji and Michael Habermann’ on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTDCPTA7uLI> [1 May 2013]



## **Chapter Three**

### **On Mahler's 'monstrous German orchestra'**

Amongst the many objectionable ideas which Germany with so much tenacity and narrowness of mind has endeavoured to spread abroad is the conception of the orchestra as an organization multipliable *ad infinitum*, quantity being made at least as important as quality.

The German primitive regard for the 'Kolossal' shows itself in this sphere as in so many others. . . . Richard Strauss and more especially Gustav Mahler are two of the greatest sinners. It is high time that we came back to saner ideas, and returned to traditions of moderation and proportion from which the German mind has departed.

GEORGES JEAN-AUBREY, 'A Plea for the Small Orchestra' (1918)<sup>1</sup>

And then we come to Strauss and Mahler and people of that kind. They simply – perhaps it is rather brutal to say – they simply developed the orchestra in the direction of extravagance. They used extra instruments a good deal. But when all is said and done you find their work, with a little trouble, can be performed by quite a small orchestra. . . . With the work of these composers of the late German period I feel it is almost a gain when instruments are removed – in fact I have heard it said that the more instruments you take from the score the better it sounds.

ADRIAN BOULT, 'The Orchestral Problem of the Future' (1923)<sup>2</sup>

I don't know who started the hoary legend of the 'monstrous German orchestra', but it is really time it were dead. I see the latest to repeat the parrot cry is Dr. Adrian C. Boulton. . . . what is the point of gibbering about the size orchestras should be? Presumably they are of the size necessary for the composer's need, and any attempt to dictate to the composer in the matter is gratuitous impertinence.

SORABJI, 'Inflated Orchestras' (1923)<sup>3</sup>

Two months before the end of the Great War, Georges Jean-Aubrey's letter appeared in *The Musical Times*. Though a French critic based in London, his appeal for 'moderation and proportion' against the invasive influence of Teutonic excess nevertheless belonged categorically to the compensatory anti-German rhetoric cultivated among English Musical Renaissance ideologues of the time. That Mahler was not German at all but, in his own words, 'thrice homeless' ('as a Bohemian among Austrians, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout the world')<sup>4</sup> was beside the point; his orchestral works were perceived (or, for want of experience, rumoured) to be the most extreme manifestation of musical Germanism and, as such, the overbearing antithesis of musical

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Jean-Aubrey, 'A Plea for the Small Orchestra', *The Musical Times*, 69/907 (September 1918), 421.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Boulton, 'The Orchestral Problem of the Future', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 49<sup>th</sup> Session (1922-3), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Sorabji, *The Musical Times*, 64/963 (May 1923), 347.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Lily E. Hirsch, *A Jewish Orchestra in Nazi Germany* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2010), n. 76, 207.

Englishness. Adrian Boult's suggested method of dealing with the maximal Mahlerian orchestra is indicative of a then prevalent attitude: the *kolossal* needed to be cut down to size, and not just literally. The figuratively castrative implications of his proposed remedy – that Mahler, Strauss and 'people of that kind' could really do with reduced instrumentation to, in a psychoanalytic reading, render them *impotent* – was to undermine the sound and appearance of Germanic pre-eminence for English concertgoers. This was not simply a practical matter of staging performances of such resource-draining works in the strained conditions of the immediate post-War period. As Florence G. Fidler noted in *The Musical Times*,

A very real problem of the moment, serious alike to the professional and the amateur musician, is that of the financial position of the orchestral concert.[...] The only way out seems to be that composers who wish to have their works performed in the future must write for a small orchestra instead of a big one.<sup>5</sup>

But, as Boult declared (beginning with a deliberately contrastive 'However'), 'when our English composers treat themselves to a Gargantuan orchestra (as for instance Mr. Holst in "The Planets") there is a definite loss if performance is attempted with anything less than the full equipment'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, for Vaughan Williams conducting Wagner, 'extra instruments could almost always be dispensed with altogether [...]. But when it came to Elgar the case was quite different'.<sup>7</sup> With no little irony, Peter J. Pirie notes that the 'greatest' success of the one English composer who approached the likes of Mahler and Strauss (and Bruckner) in the *kolossal* – Edward Elgar – 'was no accident'.<sup>8</sup>

Sorabji was particularly attuned to the ideological operations of such double standards and the unthinking dissemination of received opinion in this regard (Boult's authority aside, his was a mere 'parrot cry'). For example, in an indirect attack on the 'commis-voyageur' Jean-Aubrey's concern for musical fashions, Sorabji takes purveyors of 'patriotic-jingo ravings against "monstrous Germans orchestras"' to task for 'cleverly overlook[ing ...] the fact that the originator of the "monstrous German orchestra" was a

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<sup>5</sup> Florence G. Fidler, 'The Re-Standardisation of the Small Orchestra', *The Musical Times*, 65/972 (February 1924), 134-5.

<sup>6</sup> Boult, 'The Orchestral Prolem of the Future', 41.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph Vaughan Williams, 'What Have We Learnt from Elgar?', *Music & Letters*, 16/1 (January 1935), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Peter J. Pirie, *The English Musical Renaissance* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1979), 88.

Frenchman – Berlioz’.<sup>9</sup> He was particularly adamant on this point, writing of ‘The Small Orchestra’ in December 1918 that

Those who think that the growth of the orchestra, of which they so strongly disapprove, is due to a sort of German conspiracy to impose it on the rest of the musical world are surely mistaken. No German living or dead has ever approached, let alone equalled or surpassed, the truly monstrous demands of Berlioz for his ‘Requiem’.<sup>10</sup>

In his article on ‘Inflated Orchestras’, Sorabji continues:

I remember pointing out to one of those egregious gentlemen that Berlioz started the really ‘monstrous orchestra’ generations before Strauss and Mahler (who was not a German at all, but a Jew and an Austrian one at that), and that no score of Strauss, Mahler, or even the *Gurrelieder* orchestra of Schönberg makes any demand conformable to the truly fabulous requirements of Berlioz for his *Requiem*.<sup>11</sup>

Mahler was a victim of the nationalist hypocrisy of English critical opinion, and Sorabji was keen to highlight this exclusionary bias. Writing of ‘the lack of appreciation of Mahler’s work in this country’ following a performance of the Second Symphony in 1931, he noted that English critics

proceed, after the manner of their tribe, to rationalise or, as I would rather say, forge spurious reasons for this and their dislike. Mahler’s symphonies are of such ‘interminable length’. The longest of them lasts an hour and three-quarters – the ‘Messiah’ takes at least two and a half and ‘Gerontius’ the best part of three hours, but no one thinks of complaining.<sup>12</sup>

His perceptiveness in this regard is most clearly articulated in the lengthiest and, in Eric Blom’s view, ‘most excessively aggressive’<sup>13</sup> chapter in *Around Music*. The perfunctory heading – ‘Notes on the Symphonies of Mahler’ – belies the real significance of the matter with which the contents are in fact concerned. Although Sorabji fulfils the obligations of the title, providing descriptive accounts of Mahler’s nine symphonies, *Das Lied von der*

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<sup>9</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New Age* (20 November 1945), 45.

<sup>10</sup> Sorabji, ‘The Small Orchestra’, *The Musical Times* (1 December 1918), 553.

<sup>11</sup> Sorabji, ‘Inflated Orchestras’, 347.

<sup>12</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Courtauld Concerts: April 15 and 17, Mahler Second Symphony’, *The New Age* (30 April 1931), 307.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Blom, ‘The World of Music: Explosive Criticism’, *The Birmingham Post* (2 January 1933), 8 quoted in Sorabji, ‘Music’, *New English Weekly* (23 February 1933), 446.

*Erde* and a passing acknowledgment of the unfinished tenth, the critical point of the chapter is revealed in his assessment of the conspicuously English disregard for the composer. It begins:

Mahler shares with Reger in England an unpopularity and dislike that is based not on his works, since these are never (or hardly ever) heard, but upon what a certain stereotyped formula of critical opinion says about him. And what critical opinion here, with one or two very notable exceptions, does say about him is that they are tedious, laborious, portentously long-winded platitude-mongerings, having nothing to express and a thoroughly uninteresting way of saying it.[...] It is a convenient way of dismissing a man whom one is unwilling or whom it is too much trouble to study – and Mahler, whose symphonies are very large and difficult works, is certainly some trouble to study.<sup>14</sup>

And it continues throughout in similar vein, with Sorabji concluding that Mahler is ‘a Master who abroad is recognized as such’ but, ‘as far as England is concerned’, is ‘still only a subject for patronizing conjecture’.<sup>15</sup>

Sorabji holds that Mahler’s (and Reger’s) ridicule and resultant neglect in England was based not on any rational, objective account of his music but on ‘psychological and temperamental resistances’<sup>16</sup> peculiar to that nation (although it will be seen that these resistances were in fact grounded – psychologically and temperamentally, certainly – in a discourse proclaiming rationality and objectivity as guiding principles). The *kolossal* presented or, rather, was construed by the English music press (for the prospective or retrospective benefit of concertgoers unsure as to what conclusions of judgement to arrive at) as presenting an agglomeration of traits – variously interpreted as expressions of megalomania, sentimentality, morbidity, degeneration – which were not only antipathetic to English Musical Renaissance sensibilities but actively portrayed as unassimilable to the cultural structure and unity of the nation. Mahler was invoked as a byword and the *kolossal* a catchall term denoting the hypertrophic embodiment of a degenerating culture – the Austro-German tradition irretrievably headed for self-destruction – against which rhetoric the regenerative endeavours of the Renaissance could only compare favourably.

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<sup>14</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1932), 178.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

### Encountering the *kolossal*

In defending Mahler from his English detractors, Sorabji was all too aware of the unpopularity of his campaign. By the time he was writing on the subject, Mahler had already suffered two decades' worth of unfavourable opinion among London's leading journalists. The precedent was set as early as 1903 when audiences and critics alike were first confronted by the Mahlerian *kolossal*. The premiere of his First Symphony (the so-called 'Titan' of 1889, it would end up dwarfed as the shortest – with the possible exception of the Fourth, allowing for interpretative decisions – of Mahler's nine completed symphonies) was followed by notices distinctly taxed by the issue of the demands it imposed on listeners' attentions. In *The Times*, J. A. Fuller Maitland – 'a dynamic voice within and on behalf of the Renaissance'<sup>17</sup> – concluded that 'Herr Mahler has little or no creative faculty'; the work was 'a desert of incongruous and inconsecutive dullness'.<sup>18</sup> For J.H.G.B. of *The Musical Standard*, the music – 'nearly sixty minutes of dreadful monotony and weakness' – was 'utterly impossible': 'There is nothing daring in the symphony beyond the fact that the composer asks us to listen to yards of stuff that seems to be of the least imaginable musical value.[...] I doubt whether any rational musical being wants to become acquainted with it'.<sup>19</sup> *The Musical Times* found the symphony 'so over-developed as to frequently give rise to a sense of weariness before the hour, less eight minutes, occupied by the performance had expired'.<sup>20</sup> Though devoid of the latterly critical militaristic connotations of the *kolossal*, such negative initial reactions were to secure Mahler's neglect in England for another half century.

When his works were programmed – 'those rare occasions when a Mahler symphony reaches an English audience', Sorabji noted ruefully in 1932<sup>21</sup> – reviewers were more often than not fixated upon the size of the symphonies and the possibility that their apparent excesses were to disguise a deficit in musical value. For example, following the second performance of Mahler's Fourth Symphony in December 1907, 'H.H.' wrote that

The analytical note states that this is Mahler's shortest symphony and the one in which his ideas are expressed most clearly. If this be so, we may reasonably anticipate the others

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<sup>17</sup> Meirion Hughes and Robert Stradling, *The English Musical Renaissance, 1840-1940: Constructing a National Music*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), 41.

<sup>18</sup> J. A. Fuller Maitland, 'Concerts', *The Times* (22 October 1903), 5.

<sup>19</sup> J.H.G.B., 'Review', *The Musical Standard* (24 October 1903), n.p.

<sup>20</sup> Anon., *The Musical Times* (1 November 1903), n.p.

<sup>21</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: A few remarks on Szymanovsky', *The New English Weekly* (29 December 1932), 255.

with a certain amount of dread, for there is a paucity of genuinely original matter in this work which renders it intolerably dull.<sup>22</sup>

In 1913, William Maitland Strutt recalled of the same symphony of that ‘hopeless megalomaniac Gustav Mahler’ that ‘the length of time, the number of players, and the amount of rehearsing required for its adequate production were quite out of proportion to the real merit of the music’.<sup>23</sup> *The Musical Times* again expressed similar reservations:

Mahler’s compositions have not been heard much in this country. One reason for this is that the most important of his works demand exceptional executive resources, and are of great length. This means much rehearsal and consequent expense, and behind it all there is the uneasy doubt as to whether the game is worth the candle.<sup>24</sup>

Notices of these kinds trailed the occasional performances Mahler’s work received during this period. Even in instances where audiences were spared the dread prospect of sitting through an entire Mahler symphony – as when the modestly scored fourth movement of his Fifth was played in isolation in 1909 – the attitude was curtly dismissive: ‘An “Adagietto” for strings and harp, by Gustav Mahler, performed on August 31, was not striking’.<sup>25</sup>

As Sorabji observed, such dismissive indifference sat incongruously next to Mahler’s growing acclaim in Central Europe. Indeed, over the course of nine concerts in just sixteen days, Amsterdam’s May 1920 ‘Mahler Feest’ staged the complete cycle of symphonies, *Das klagende Lied*, *Das Lied von der Erde*, the *Kindertotenlieder* and *Rückert Lieder*.<sup>26</sup> Mahler’s adopted home city had a festival of its own, as *The Musical Times*’ foreign correspondent reported in 1924: ‘The vogue for Mahler’s great symphonic works is still increasing. Recently Vienna had six Mahler performances in a week, and four within two days’. The Seventh and Ninth were played ‘in close succession’ to ‘two

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<sup>22</sup> H.H., ‘Mahler’s Fourth Symphony’, *The Musical Standard* (7 December 1907), quoted in Donald Mitchell, ‘The Mahler Renaissance in England: Its Origins and Chronology’ in Mitchell and Nicholson (eds.), *The Mahler Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 554.

<sup>23</sup> William Maitland Strutt, *Musical Reminiscences* (printed privately, 1913), quoted in *ibid.*, 553-4.

<sup>24</sup> Anon., ‘London Concerts: Queen’s Hall Orchestra’, *The Musical Times*, 54/840 (1 February 1913), 115.

<sup>25</sup> Anon., ‘Promenade Concerts’, *The Musical Times*, 50/800 (1 October 1909), 665. What is striking is how far this opinion diverges from later popular acceptance of the movement in question. Mahler’s *Adagietto* (unqualified: its italicization is warranted on account of being regularly programmed as a standalone piece) has been an audience favourite since at least Visconti’s 1971 *Morte a Venezia*. The complete work only received its British premier on 21 October 1945 in London.

<sup>26</sup> Eveline Nikkels, ‘Mahler and Holland’ in Mitchell and Donaldson (eds.), *The Mahler Companion*, 334.



sold-out houses listening attentively to each Symphony'.<sup>27</sup> With all these celebrations taking place across the continent, English criticism remained in resolute adherence to its pre-war convictions that Mahler was undeserving of any significant attention. His works were variously dismissed as 'over-burdened, overgrown'; they 'run to excess in every possible direction'.<sup>28</sup> A. J. B. Hutchings, on the prim-and-proper topic of 'Orchestration and Common Sense', complained about 'the whole of that monstrous "Eighth"': 'there is nothing to admire in megalomania itself'.<sup>29</sup> According to Scott Goddard, there were few who could constitutionally 'stomach' Mahler 'without either boredom or retching'.<sup>30</sup> Sorabji was one. Aware of the contrariety of his advocacy of Mahler, Sorabji knowingly adopted a position outside the mainstream currents of popular and critical opinion. His recurrent emphasis on the national biases informing these opinions suggests, moreover, that his advocacy of Mahler was in direct and antagonistic opposition not only to English cultural interests but to the construct of Englishness itself.

#### English empiricism and the 'osophy of *Weltanschauungsmusik*

Sorabji's claims about the reflexive regurgitation of a 'stereotyped formula' of English critical opinion regarding Mahler are shown to be more-or-less accurate in view of the above accounts. None of these reviews acknowledges specifics pertaining to the standard of execution of Mahler's music in concert (not that this matters: such issues are of little concern when received opinion is at hand<sup>31</sup>), although Sorabji's assessment concluded that performances never failed to do Mahler's work an injustice. But this did not really matter much either as, when 'the fullest allowances are made for the false impressions caused by performances that have generally amounted to little more than a travesty', there remain 'temperamental, cultural and psychological obstacles in the way of Mahler's complete

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Bechert, 'Musical Notes from Abroad: Orchestral Novelties and Conductors', *The Musical Times*, 65/974 (1 April 1924), 366.

<sup>28</sup> 'E.E.', 'London Concerts', *The Musical Times*, 72/1055 (1 January 1931), 74.

<sup>29</sup> A. J. B. Hutchings, *The Musical Times*, 72/1066 (1 December 1931), 1082.

<sup>30</sup> Scott Goddard, 'Gramophone Records', *Music and Letters*, 13/3 (July 1932), 357.

<sup>31</sup> Sorabji maintained that this remained the case even up to the mid-1950s: 'Mahler, according to legend, always and everywhere uses an immense orchestra. It matters not that, for instance, the orchestra of the Ninth Symphony and "Das Lied von der Erde" is of no more than normal symphonic size [...] and in the Fourth Symphony an orchestra without any heavy brass at all. Yet on two occasions recently one critic prattled of the "enormous orchestra" of the Ninth, and of the "extravagant orchestral demands" of the Fourth'. 'The Silly Season', *Musical Opinion* (November 1954), 77, 79.

acceptance in England, which to speak quite frankly, I do not think will ever be entirely overcome’:

Here come into play, it is obvious, considerations that strictly speaking are not musical ones at all, involving questions of national psychological idiosyncrasies which have no bearing at all on the greatness or quality of the music involved.<sup>32</sup>

This remarkable diagnosis suggests that Sorabji was of the belief that there operated at a certain level something approximating an English collective conscious or unifying national Symbolic, and that this embedded structure would conspire to keep Mahler from majority acceptance. What were some of those ‘national psychological idiosyncrasies’? Eric Blom would off-handedly refute the existence of anything of the sort, remarking simply that ‘We just don’t want Mahler here’.<sup>33</sup> This appears at first glance an insufficient explanation, but in its uncritical abruptness we might begin to suggest culturally-entrenched reasons why Mahler *just wasn’t wanted* in England at the time. Consider in this regard Thomas Beecham’s oft-quoted quip that ‘The English may not like music, but they absolutely love the noise it makes’<sup>34</sup> (granting – *pace* Pirie – it is not too loud, of course). This roguish, Edwardian-gentlemanly one-liner is an illustrative example of that stiff-upper-lipped tradition of empiricism commonly counted as one of England’s most resilient national characteristics,<sup>35</sup> and Mahler’s often direct appeal to listeners’ emotions was particularly liable to set stiff upper lips aquiver. As Henry Boys – one of Mahler’s (not to mention Berlioz and Busoni’s) outstanding champions of the period – wrote in 1938, ‘Mahler’s music often gives the impression that he is compelling the listener to feel things to the same intense degree as Mahler felt them himself.[...] Those who do not feel in the same way, or who do not want the revelation Mahler seeks to give, will feel that they are being bullied, or will be embarrassed by what they take to be mere “rhetoric” and “sentimentality”’.<sup>36</sup> According to empiricist discourse, that which is not immediately accessible to the senses is to be held with suspicion; any trace of ‘rhetoric’ or ‘sentimentality’ ought to be regarded as an insincere tactic to evoke false emotions.

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<sup>32</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 180-1.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Asa Briggs, ‘Mahler and the BBC’ in Philip Reed (ed.), *On Mahler and Britten: Essays in Honour of Donald Mitchell on his Seventieth Birthday* (Aldeburgh: The Boydell Press, 1995), 33.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Obituary: Sir Thomas Beecham’, *New York Herald Tribune* (9 March 1961) cited in Elizabeth Knowles (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), n.p.

<sup>35</sup> See Antony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), *passim*.

<sup>36</sup> Henry Boys, ‘Mahler and His Ninth Symphony’, sleeve note for HMV Records (1938) cited in Norman Demuth (ed.), *An Anthology of Musical Criticism* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1947), 317.

Following on from Beecham's epigrammatic maxim, there is the implication that the English (or, like Blom above and Anderson and McNaught below, adherents of discursive Englishness<sup>37</sup>) prefer the *sensation* of noise (objective, concrete, practical) over the *idea* of music (subjective, abstract, theoretical).

This strain of empiricist thinking is evident in W. R. Anderson's claim following a 1936 performance of Mahler's *Lied von der Erde* that 'any music mixed with 'osophy will always leave us cold'.<sup>38</sup> The elision of a categorising prefix is instructive – what 'osophy is Anderson referring to? Philosophy, theosophy, anthroposothy, cheirosophy? The question is ultimately of little concern since any 'osophy amounts to sophistry and any sophistry is as good as incompatible with empiricism. Two years later Anderson commented on a figuratively half-staffed performance of Mahler's 'bloated' Eighth, the 'Symphony of a Thousand': 'if five hundred could so massively fail to get Mahler's message over, perhaps it was as well we did not have any more. A symphony of a thousand wearinesses, one said that night'. Having thus paid his dues to common-or-garden anti-Mahlerian cant, he astutely turns his attention to the origins of Mahler's 'message': the symphony was, 'In a word, a field-day of end-of-the-century *Kolossal* at its worst. It was the spirit of the age which destroyed him'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Mahler's *Kolossalismus* was a product of the artistic and intellectual decadence of fin-de-siècle Vienna, that city of an opulent cultural history latterly haunted by a destructive end-of-century *Zeitgeist*, if we are to acknowledge Anderson's somewhat contradictory nod to Hegel. This is the point in time and place at which Taruskin introduces readers of the fourth volume of his *History* to maximalism, and it is here that we find Mahler 'maximalizing the symphony'.<sup>40</sup> Maximalism was not, however, merely an exercise in grandiosity for its own sake, as those predominant English views of the Mahlerian *kolossal* already encountered would tend to suggest. Rather, at stake were claims to nigh-apocalyptic visions which could only be realised through radically intensified means. In this way the *kolossal* presented a Schopenhauerian-Nietzschean emanation of a subjective fantasy of omniscience, giving rise to what Rudolf

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<sup>37</sup> Briggs clarifies that the first-person plural of Blom's 'We just don't want Mahler here' refers to 'the English' (p. 33).

<sup>38</sup> W. R. Anderson, 'Wireless Notes', *The Musical Times*, 77/1117 (March 1936), 232.

<sup>39</sup> W.R. Anderson., 'London Concerts: Mahler's Eighth Symphony', *The Musical Times*, 79/1141 (March 1938), 223.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, Vol. 4: 'Music in the Early Twentieth Century' (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6-28.

Stephan termed *Weltanschauungsmusik* – ‘music expressive of a world outlook’ or even ‘philosophy music’:

Such works, always of hugely ambitious dimensions, attempted [...] to deal with and resolve metaphysical issues – *questions that cannot be answered on the sole basis of sensory experience or rational thought* – that had preoccupied philosophers (particularly German philosophers) throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup>

It was believed that music, ‘in its word-transcending expressivity’, was ‘the only medium through which eschatological matters – matters of “ultimately reality” could be adequately contemplated’.<sup>42</sup> It is perhaps no wonder, then, that the English should have felt as ill at ease with such philosophy music as Mahler’s. For Sorabji, the *kolossal* was typically German and therefore decidedly un-English:

the immense Wagnerian music dramas are symbolical of the German love of things on the grand scale, massive proportions, profound thought and elaborate symbolism. But what kinship have these things with the English temperament and mind [...], its traditions of restraint in artistic expression often pushed to such lengths as to become inhibition, its emotional reticence, and so on?<sup>43</sup>

Colin Wilson, in his *Purely Personal Opinions on Music* (the purely personal nature of which, as of Sorabji’s, cannot be stressed enough), similarly remarked on ‘the Englishman’s pride in his “unemotional nature”, his reputation for phlegm and caution’:

England specializes in a curious intellectual philistinism. In any other country the words would cancel one another out; not so here. The English intellectual [...] is a strange figure who regards it as bad form to think too much.[...] he dislikes ‘large questions’ about life, human destiny, and so on, and is inclined to regard these people as fakes. Since most great music is somehow implicitly about the ‘large questions’, as is most good art or literature, his attitude tends to be one of scepticism. It is not quite English to ask large questions, or expose one’s ideas or emotions in public.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 6. Emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 6. Emphasis added.

<sup>43</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Colin Wilson, ‘Some English Music’ in *Chords and Discords: Purely Personal Opinions on Music* (California: Maurice Bassett, 1966), 133-4.

Mahler's music, on the other hand, was *kolossal* not only in form and content but – and this is crucial to understanding its incompatibility within empiricist discourse – by sophistic design. The 'large questions' posed by his *Weltanschauungsmusik* were typically met with incomprehension. If Sorabji didn't exactly profess to know the answers, then he at least implicitly understood the questions. But Sorabji's sophistication in this regard was not enough: it was only through spiritual insight, he maintained, that one could understand Mahler at all.

### Catholicism and Colossalism

In its grandiose conception as *Weltanschauungsmusik*, as in its *kolossal* execution, Mahler's work – particularly the largest and most overtly musico-philosophical numbers such as the Second and Eighth Symphonies – was, in short, received as a dogmatic affront to good English common sense. Indeed, 'common sense' might be counted as one of those unshakable national idiosyncrasies Sorabji highlighted as contributing to the conditions which led to Mahler's marginalisation and neglect at the time. Adolf Weissmann, comparing 'English and German Musical Life' in the same issue of *The Musical Times* in which Sorabji's 'On Neglected Works' appeared, wrote that, 'Looking back over three centuries of English history, we find the national capacity for common sense to be, in fact, the big stumbling-block in the path of English music':

This repressive habit is just that which has prevented the English from becoming a musical race, for as a national virtue it has rendered artistic personality much more difficult of attainment than with the German people, who are inclined to utter their feelings in a way which seems rather foolish in everyday life, but which may become precious in art.<sup>45</sup>

Antony Easthope argues that the discursive empiricism which upholds the construct of Englishness rests upon the regulation of a number of binary oppositions (common sense/dogma being among them) wherein the one is confirmed only in antagonistic relation to its other.<sup>46</sup> So, for example, where empiricism is objective, its other is subjective; the one is clear and the other obscure; one deals with truth while the other indulges in pleasure – facts matter more than fiction; sincerity is privileged over

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<sup>45</sup> Adolf Weissmann, 'English and German Musical Life Compared', *The Musical Times*, 65/972 (February 1924), 137-8.

<sup>46</sup> Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture*, 90.

artificiality as is right over wrong; home is equated with the centre and the foreign with the extreme. If this all sounds somewhat puritanical then that may well be because, of all the eighteen ‘great oppositions’ Easthope identifies as sustaining the empiricist discourse of Englishness, there is one which is reflected in all the others and which has historically had the most significant bearing on the construction of English national identity, namely, the opposition between Protestantism (Englishness) and Catholicism (otherness).<sup>47</sup>

It was in Mahler’s apostatical Catholicism that Sorabji identified the key psychologically and temperamentally entrenched reasons why Mahler was rejected by the English: ‘As far as English people and Mahler are concerned, these psychological resistances are summed up in the fact that Mahler was an ardent Catholic’. Mahler’s Catholicism rendered him ‘fundamentally *antipatico*’ to Northern Europeans in general and the English in particular.<sup>48</sup> This is not a passing estimation as, in a number of other sources, Sorabji sets out to prove that Mahler’s genius was attributable to his Catholicism and, in turn, his Catholicism to his disregard in England: ‘in this want of sympathy and spiritual understanding we have a clue to the lack of appreciation of Mahler’s work in this country’. For Sorabji, Mahler was ‘the type of Catholic mystic’ which ‘has not only never been produced in England [...] but is something entirely alien to the English temperament’.<sup>49</sup> Mahler would never appeal to an audience skewed by ‘a long inculcated (so that it has become an essential part of them) and engrained misapprehension and miseducation regarding the Catholic Church’.<sup>50</sup> Again, Sorabji points to a definite national character in recognising the ‘long inculcation’ and ‘engraining’ of the English suspicion of Catholicism to the extent that it becomes an ‘essential’ part of its socio-cultural constitution. In his ‘Notes on the Symphonies of Mahler’, he explains further:

As a result of centuries of interested propaganda, cooked history and sentimental idealization of that fornicating, incestuous monster and shameless robber Henry VIII, and his scarcely more edifying daughter Elizabeth, an unconscious bias has been so well and deeply imprinted on English minds with regard to the Catholic Church and the Catholic attitude, that even the most intellectually emancipated have the greatest difficulty in seeing straight where that great institution is concerned.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 181.

<sup>49</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Courtauld Concerts: April 15 and 17. Mahler Second Symphony’, *The New Age* (30 April 1931), 307.

<sup>50</sup> Sorabji, ‘Mahler’s Eighth Symphony’, *The Monthly Musical Record* (2 June 1930), 169.

<sup>51</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 181.

Of course, England never was an entirely Protestant country, although the exceptions did tend to prove the rule. Even so, Sorabji could not completely admit that the creator Spiritus ever was fully present in English followers of the faith:

Now it may quite possibly be objected that Elgar is a Catholic too, and that on that score the question of religious ideology breaks down. Not at all; Elgar's Catholicism one never feels colours the whole of his works, it is [not] its very mainspring and fount of inspiration as it was of Mahler's. And it has always struck me that English Catholics are a set apart from their brethren of the Roman Rite elsewhere; I always feel that, speaking quite generally, of course, they are much more English than ever they are Catholics; I have been known to suggest to the intense embarrassment and annoyance of some of my Catholic friends, that they are much too English and not *nearly* enough Catholic! Elgar's Catholicism, if you like, is less obtrusive or even aggressive than Mahler's, but unless one is prepared to realise and understand this great driving force of Mahler's art, he will remain a closed book in an incomprehensible tongue.<sup>52</sup>

Sorabji's opinion that English Catholics were more English than Catholic would imply that Englishness and Catholicism were in his view incompatible, that they would never entirely coalesce in the one person.

At this point we might begin to suggest a level of identification – that is, of Sorabji recognising attributes of his own ideal self in Mahler – which goes beyond and yet still informs a shared predilection for expansive musical gestures. Sorabji's own Catholic faith is emphasised in the matrilineal fiction he held to throughout his life (a fiction elaborately furnished with a pope-in-waiting and a ring to prove it).<sup>53</sup> It is important in view of this to note Sorabji's unquestioning idealisation of Mahler's Catholicism and the extent to which

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<sup>52</sup> Sorabji, 'Mahler and English Audiences', *The Musical Mirror and Fanfare* (April 1932), 86. Emphasis in original.

<sup>53</sup> Sorabji concocted a bizarre story concerning the sizable gold and amethyst ring he wore. Throughout his life, Sorabji proudly claimed the ring to have once been in the possession of a related Cardinal in line for the papacy (in a letter of 11 March 1975 to Kenneth Derus, Sorabji claimed that 'my four-times great grand uncle [was] Cardinal archbishop of Palermo about the first two decades of the last century'. One presumes this to be the relative in question). The ring was an heirloom passed down through generations of the Sicilian branch of his family tree (his mother's side, of course) and into his hands. Sean Vaughan Owen took this supposedly distinguished ring for professional inspection. It turned out to have been crafted in London around 1914. See Derus, 'Sorabji's Letter to Heseltine' in Paul Rapoport (ed.), *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 243 and Sean V. Owen, 'Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji: An Oral Biography' (University of Southampton: PhD, 2006), 31.

he claims those mystic beliefs associated with its practice to have ‘obtrusively’ or ‘aggressively’ – either way, *explicitly* – infused his works:

Gustav Mahler, I feel, is one of the rare cases in music of the temperament of the full-blown mystic. This nature at once so ardent and ecstatic, a spiritual blend of Pascal and St John of the Cross, presents us in his magnificent series of symphonies with the history of a spiritual pilgrimage, passing through the black anguish and despair of ‘The Dark Night of the Soul’, to glowing tender serenity such as the lovely finale of the Fourth, the exquisite ‘Farewell’ of the Ninth.<sup>54</sup>

It did not seem to matter to Sorabji that Mahler adopted the faith for less than wholly devout reasons (of course he knew of Mahler’s Jewish background<sup>55</sup>). Indeed, it was more a stratagem of political expediency than overwhelming religious fervour on Mahler’s part that he was, on 23 February 1897, baptised into the Roman Catholic Church. His assimilation into the Viennese state religion was not so much of a Damascene moment as it was an opportunity to bolster his chances of winning the prestigious directorship at the Wiener Hofoper – an otherwise unlikely prospect for a Jewish musician (sure enough, the appointment came shortly after his official conversion). In contrast to Sorabji’s opinion of Mahler as ‘essentially a Catholic mystic to the highest degree’, Norman Lebrecht suggests Mahler was, in fact, ‘the most reluctant, the most resentful of converts’ and quotes Mahler as stating at various times and to a number of individuals that, ‘I had to go through with it.[...] This action [...], which I took out of self-preservation, and which I was fully prepared to take, cost me a great deal’. Lebrecht comments that Mahler is here ‘letting it be known for the record that he is a forced convert’. Though ‘officially Catholic’, Mahler ‘remains a monotheist and a Jew’.<sup>56</sup>

Sorabji’s fancied birth right together with his assured belief in Mahler’s religious devotions gave him the critical conviction necessary to comment authoritatively and with unquestioning insight on the more Latinate aspects of Roman Catholicism as he wishfully perceived them manifest in Mahler and his music. Sorabji’s pronouncements on Mahler’s

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<sup>54</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: The Porcupine Press, 1947), 210.

<sup>55</sup> As quoted above, Sorabji explains that Mahler ‘was not a German at all, but a Jew and an Austrian one at that’.

<sup>56</sup> Norman Lebrecht, *Why Mahler? How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed the World* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 95.



Eighth Symphony, for example, proclaim a gothic-architectonic parallel between the complementary practices of Catholicism and colossalism. The Symphony ‘is like St. Peter’s in Rome or the great Gesù Church’:

This is why the work comes in for such hostile or frankly uncomprehending criticism at the hands of those nurtured in the ‘chaste’ traditions of cathedral-close religious emotion with the dear Dean in discreet and gentlemanly charge of the proceedings, the anaemic, lukewarm and colourless proceedings. Mahler felt very intensely, very vehemently about all this, and expressed himself musically about it with a truly Latin Catholic ardour.<sup>57</sup>

He makes an implicit criticism of Protestant religious practice here – alluding to ‘chaste’ traditions, the provinciality of the cathedral close, and the poor ‘dear Dean’ whose sermons presumably awaken puritanical bouts of self-loathing in his faithfully fatigued flock – and Sorabji does so to deliberately set moderate English religious practice in opposition to a decadent Latinate Catholicism he claimed as his own. If a semiotic appeal to a selective iconography of these respective denominations were to be made, then we could very well imagine why Sorabji opted for the spectacle of an earth-rending *dies irae* over one of sheep grazing safely (an image not too far removed from that of Warlock’s docile cow, either): the fire-and-brimstone apocalypticism of the former naturally enough engulfed the cud-chewing pastoralism of the latter. Returning to Mahler’s Eighth, Sorabji writes in *Around Music* that

The neglect of this amazing work in England is inexplicable. It is practically unknown here [...]. Even the oratorio-conscience would find, one would imagine, nothing at which to jib, while the complexity and difficulty of the music and its lack of superficial attractiveness would induce that boredom which in this country is inevitably associated with the public practice of polite holiness.<sup>58</sup>

Again, Sorabji’s allusion to an ‘oratorio-conscience’ would suggest an implied criticism of musical practices typically associated with ‘polite’ English Protestantism. As Delius is reported to have asked Elgar why he had ‘wasted so much time and energy in writing those long-winded oratorios’ – ‘That’, replied Elgar, ‘is the penalty of my English environment’.<sup>59</sup> Sorabji paid no such penalties. For Sorabji, the word ‘oratorio’ was

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<sup>57</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Mahler’s VIII Symphony (BBC Symphony Concert Feb. 9<sup>th</sup>)’, *The New English Weekly* (24 February 1938), 303.

<sup>58</sup> *Around Music*, 191.

<sup>59</sup> Eric Fenby, *Delius as I Knew Him* [1936] (London: Quality Press Ltd., 1948), 124.

suggestive of ‘mealy-mouthed sanctimoniousness, and somnolent post-prandial Albert Hall religiosity’.<sup>60</sup> It brought to Sorabji’s mind scenes of provincial amateur choral societies staging seasonal performances of accessibly drab Handelian vocal numbers:

One always wonders if the immense vogue of Handel with English Choral Societies is due not so much to genuine liking for his music as to the fact that the Biblical provenance of many of his texts serves to surround performances of his works with a kind of churchgoing flavour and the comfortably conscious rectitude that ostentatious public indulgence therein always gives a large number of English people, some of whom wear their religion, not like the Catholics of Catholic countries, because it is natural and normal to do so as an integral part of their lives, but as they do their ‘Sunday’ clothes, principally for it to be seen that they possess them.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, Sorabji comments on the mismatch – the ‘temperamental lack of harmony, amounting almost to antipathy’ – between seasoned oratorio vocalist Muriel Brunskill’s singing as put to service in the mezzo solo of Verdi’s *Requiem*. Her ‘unfortunate tendency to that contralto quality of English tradition [...] is ludicrously out of place in a Latin Requiem by one who was a Latin of the Latins’.<sup>62</sup> So the ‘inexplicability’ of the neglect of Mahler’s Eighth really needs little explication since Sorabji has already answered the question: Mahler’s ‘mystic’ Catholicism is simply incompatible with the ‘engrained’ and superficial public practice of Protestantism; the symphony is situated on the unfavourable side of the empiricist-discursive binary sustaining Englishness.

Eric Blom, in his review of Sorabji’s *Around Music*, could not accept such an abstract notion or *theory*:

To drag in the Jewish-born composer’s Catholicism as a reason why England refuses to appreciate his works [...] is surely too far-fetched when it is at the same time ignored that Mahler’s lack of taste may very well account for his persistent neglect here.<sup>63</sup>

To Blom’s reasoning, Mahler’s neglect was simply down to the ‘lack of taste’ exhibited in those ‘inflated suites and song-cycles which go by the name of symphonies’ and had very little – if anything – to do with his (turncoat) Catholicism. Mahler’s adulation in Central

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<sup>60</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New Age* (10 December 1931), 66.

<sup>61</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 115-6.

<sup>62</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New English Weekly* (26 April 1934), 41. Sorabji may have also overestimated Verdi’s Catholic devotions. ‘Cauto i preti!’: Verdi was notably ambivalent towards the Church.

<sup>63</sup> Eric Blom quoted in Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New English Weekly* (23 February 1933), 446.

Europe was attributable ‘to those countries’ fancied obligation to keep up a symphonic tradition at all costs’, not because ‘his frantic invocations of the Creative Spirit were ever satisfactorily answered’.<sup>64</sup> Blom goes on to question the possibility ‘that there is such a thing as Catholic music, purely as music’. *Music, purely as music*: there is no room for interpretation, nothing ‘outside the text’ – no ideas, no worldview promised in the notes alone; music as meaningless sound, as agreeable noise – a logocentrist attitude which might be traced back to the Protestant doctrine of the *sola scriptura*. This typifies an empiricist-discursive English critical methodology whereby a preoccupation with facts derived from experience supplants the anti-positivistic, fancifully hermeneutic proposal of untested and untestable theory: objective statements prevail over subjective interpretations. There is no such thing as *Weltanschauungsmusik*. Blom’s hostile musical absolutism was nevertheless met with a response by Sorabji in which he once more points out the national-ideological biases informing the opinions of the English music press:

Mr. Blom merely serves to underline and emphasise the truth of my strictures on English criticism regarding Mahler [...]. I will conclude these remarks by inviting my readers carefully to watch Mr. Blom and others of his school when next a French critic attacks Elgar. French criticism is wont to say much the same sort of thing about Elgar as English criticism about Mahler . . . . I venture to assert that they, my readers, will be in for some diverting observations on the working of consistency . . . .<sup>65</sup>

### Between the late and the early

Sorabji’s charge of hypocrisy against Blom’s assessment of Mahler was, in many ways, ahead of its time. Donald Mitchell would some sixty years later confirm Sorabji’s suspicion: ‘the dominant culture of the day [...] was ideological rather than rational’ and so ‘set its face against Mahler, or rather, closed its ears to him. The confidence of the adverse views expressed was only equalled by the ignorance of the music itself’.<sup>66</sup> This much we have already seen: the scale of Mahler’s symphonies was typically construed in English letters as either preposterous in its excessiveness or as a threatening manifestation of German bellicosity and should, on both counts, be rejected outright. As for the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Donald Mitchell, ‘Eternity or Nothingness?: Mahler’s Fifth Symphony’ in Mitchell and Nicholson (eds.), *The Mahler Companion*, 309.

philosophical foundations of his larger symphonies, these were dismissed as symptomatic expressions of Mahler's unbecoming megalomania. That Sorabji attributed these traits – the *kolossal* tendencies of *Weltanschauungsmusik* – to what he saw as Mahler's devout, mystical Catholicism suggests a significant degree of identification with and sympathy for his position outside those Protestant practices which Easthope sets as a foundation supporting the construct of Englishness. In this view, Mahler's neglect was a result of a historically and geopolitically specific national ideology and temperament; Sorabji's criticism of Mahler's neglect in England sought in many instances to bring these biases to light.

There is, however, one issue of context which remains to be addressed in order to approach a greater understanding of the English disregard for the typically Mahlerian trope of a philosophically grounded maximalism and, conversely, for situating Sorabji's critical and creative affinity with the broadly-construed *kolossal* against it. It is a contextual issue which returns us to the question of lateness and the anachronicity of neo-romanticism introduced at the outset. Although it has been confidently asserted that Mahler was a late- or neo-romantic composer (or, at least, that he was so received), the artistic milieu from which his works emerged in fact constitutes a contested site of historiographical enquiry, as it does in the case of Reger's: did the *fin-de-siècle* and its cultural products signal the beginning of early (twentieth-century) modernism or was it in fact a final manifestation of late (nineteenth-century) romanticism? The fraught questions of 'ambivalent modernism' and 'lingering romanticism' and the uncertain destination of Adorno's middle road are, as so often when considering Sorabji's counter-canon of neglected works, brought to the fore. A quick and readily at-hand example will suffice to illustrate this problematic point: where Taruskin introduces Mahler on the very first page of his history of 'Music in the Early Twentieth Century', Carl Dahlhaus sets out to deal with him in the penultimate chapter of *Nineteenth-Century Music*<sup>67</sup> (the final chapter – 'End of an Era' – is a conclusion in all but name); where Taruskin is concerned primarily with Mahler's Second Symphony (1888-94), Dahlhaus examines the *Kindertotenlieder* (1901-04). The question, then, is not simply calendarial but one of contestation over ends and beginnings, of the 'lateness' of romanticism and the 'earliness' of modernism. The tensions thus attendant upon the interpretation of the turning of the nineteenth to the twentieth century are such that

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<sup>67</sup> Carl Dahlhaus (trans. J. Bradford Robinson), *Nineteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1989).

attempts to resolve them are often revelatory of an ideological partisanship cleft along the broad fault line of progressivism and conservatism, the one driven by radical optimism and the other tintured with reactionary nostalgia. In other words, the issue of periodicity in the case of Mahler brings into focus notions of the late and the early as neighbouring and liminal historiological categories which give resonance to an inherent unease and anxiety in relating the past to the future, what has been and what is to come. It is in this ambivalent transitional space between musically defined centuries that Sorabji's critical and compositional aesthetic took shape: a perpetual lateness giving rise to the catastrophizing impression that all is about to collapse, but never quite does.

Mahler's were 'the last and greatest symphonies given to the world, the supreme and final development of the form, it seems to me'.<sup>68</sup> This opinion, simply stated (candidly, even – at least for Sorabji), does not engage in debates concerning the futurity of Mahler's *oeuvre* so common to the time – that would be to mundanely place them in the world. English Musical Renaissance propagandists tended to adhere to this view that Mahler was, indeed, one of the last in the Austro-German symphonic line (Boult, we may recall, had him down as a composer of 'the late German period'), but did so only to present it in terms of a lineage which had been in sickly decline ever since the New German School broke away from orthodox musical absolutes in a philosophical and philosophising quest for the *Zukunftsmusik*. This Hanslickian, conservative view held that, in Mahler, symphonic form – the once unsullied medium for the expression of the 'pure' and 'musically beautiful' from early-to-mid-Beethoven through Brahms – had become an unserviceable vehicle carrying little besides the composer's impenitent megalomania. Frederick Corder, an otherwise sympathetic Wagnerian, believed Mahler's symphonic excesses were unnecessary exercises in immoderation for no sake other than its own:

Most people, I should imagine, will agree that all the blarings and hootings of the super-orchestras of the Mahler variety have never – in spite of the immensity of the orchestra required to render them, and the amazing complexity of the scoring employed – produced more impressive effects than those produced with the beautifully-balanced orchestras of Beethoven.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Sorabji, 'Music, Delusions, Pathetic Fallacies', 43. This view, however, is not supported by Sorabji's considerations of, for example, Rachmaninov's Third Symphony. See Chapter Five.

<sup>69</sup> Frederick Corder, 'Mr. Clutsam's Articles on "Principles of Modern Composition"', *The Musical Times*, 59/909 (November 1918), 504.

In terms promulgated by the outreach programme of the Renaissance – the musical appreciation movement – Mahler's music was not balanced or beautiful; it was *unhealthy*, and so too, by a diseased phylogenetic extension, was German culture. It had 'run to seed', as Newman put it.<sup>70</sup> For that pontificating guardian of the nation's tastes Herbert Antcliffe, writing in 1939, the introspective morbidity of old age – lateness – was the deathly and consumptive symptom of Mahler's work:

Sentimentality, morbidity! What has art to do with these? A sentiment that is not healthy is as much out of place in a work of art as is an unhealthy organ in the human body. A morbid expression is merely a sign of an inward morbid character and immediately condemns the work in which it appears [...] those of Mahler suffer the most in this respect.[...] 'Das Lied von der Erde' is the work of an old man, of a man worn out before the normal time; and it has all the worst qualities of premature senility.[...] Out of the six numbers two, the third and fourth, have some character which approaches healthy beauty, these two being the least original of all.<sup>71</sup>

Antcliffe here selects the two relatively short and conventionally orchestrated middle movements of *Das Lied* (wherein Mahler addresses the themes of youth (III 'Von der Jugend') and beauty (IV 'Von der Schönheit')) as the only examples – and derivative ones at that – from which any kind of 'healthy beauty' may be experienced. In contrast to this view, Henry Boys was of a more open-minded opinion, perceiving in and beyond the works of Mahler the potential for renewal, innovation and a necessary, *revitalising* severance from the past. Writing in 1938, he proposed that Mahler 'is a key-figure for the understanding of one of the great crises in musical history':

He was the last of the great German line to express himself in the old idiom, but he also found forms which pointed a way towards the transformation of this seemingly exhausted idiom into a new one of great potentiality. Thus there is much music being written to-day which depends on some knowledge of Mahler for its full comprehension.<sup>72</sup>

These two opposing views – respectively reactionary and progressive in outlook – illustrate divergent historiographical approaches to Mahler's work in terms of lateness (of endings) and earliness (of beginnings). For Antcliffe, Mahler presents an endpoint or

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<sup>70</sup> Newman, 'The Present Trend', *The Musical Times*, 58/892 (June 1917), 250.

<sup>71</sup> Herbert Antcliffe, 'Mahler', *Dominant* (March-April 1939) in Demuth, *An Anthology of Musical Criticism*, 318-9

<sup>72</sup> Henry Boys, 'Mahler and his Ninth Symphony', Note for HMV Records (1938) in *ibid.*, 316-7.

impasse as an old, worn-out figure of hopeless senility; there is in his diagnosis of decrepitude no hope of recovery or regeneration. Boys, in contrast, recognises Mahler's lateness whilst simultaneously perceiving the immanent transfiguration of the late into the early, of night becoming day (and it is worth noting on this figurative point that the crepuscular *fin-de-siècle* trope of transfiguration as heard in, for example, Strauss's *Tod und Verklärung* (1888) and Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* (1899) may be associated with a number of symbolic transitions, not least the turning of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the shift from a romantic sensibility to a modernist one<sup>73</sup>). For Antcliffe, Mahler casts a morose shadow over the present whereas, for Boys, an understanding of Mahler's work promises to shed new light on the immediate future.

For Sorabji? Nowhere do we find Sorabji seeking to promote Mahler in any conventional sense: for Sorabji, Mahler is as ill-suited to the present as he is to the future. Nor do we find Sorabji actively consigning Mahler to the past. Like 'very late' Beethoven, Mahler is for Sorabji 'transcendental, fourth-dimensional', one whose music 'no longer takes cognisance of what is poetically called the workaday world'.<sup>74</sup> Sorabji seemed content keeping Mahler in the shadows of obscurity; he did not wish to share the secret: Mahler's music – like Sorabji's own – was best preserved as a 'closed book in an incomprehensible tongue'. This is but one aspect of Sorabji's obscurantist aesthetic borne of *ressentiment* as to be discussed in greater detail in Part IV, but it suffices to say in summary here that Sorabji often purposefully played a part in obscuring access to the appreciation of already neglected composers. In this light (as it were), the chiaroscurist analogy as it can be discerned in William McNaught's 1931 review of Mahler's Second Symphony was something which, presented negatively, could only have appealed positively to Sorabji:

The performance did a service to those who had definite gaps to fill in their knowledge; but in the rank and file of the Concert Club audience, who are more interested in the vitality of a piece of music than in its rarity, there must have been many whose faith in the hidden virtue of this unenjoyable but apparently well-connected music suffered a strain.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, Tim Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution* (London: Phoenix, 2010), 176-86.

<sup>74</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 205.

<sup>75</sup> William McNaught, 'London Concerts: Mahler's Second Symphony', *The Musical Times*, 72/1059 (1 May 1931), 452-3.

McNaught makes the distinction between connoisseurs interested in ‘rarities’ (the obscure, literally ‘dark’, corners of the repertory) and amateurs (the rank-and-file concertgoers) who reasonably enough appeal to a brighter ‘vitality’ as an incentive for listening. Whatever virtues the symphony contained were cryptically concealed and not accessible to immediate experience; those who held out for such an experience were misguided by blind faith or belief unsupported by direct evidence. In Sorabji’s words, ‘Nothing here is external, or, if you like, extroverted. Mahler is the most subjective, the most introspective of composers’.<sup>76</sup> Or, in Hegel’s phrase, ‘the true content of Romantic art is absolute inwardness’.<sup>77</sup> For McNaught, the music was ultimately unenjoyable despite being *apparently* (one senses his measured disillusionment) championed in other quarters. He continues:

The devotion which a number of responsible musicians display towards Mahler’s music becomes more and more of a mystery as each work comes into ken. How much really living music is contained in the five movements of this Symphony? Scarcely two minutes’ worth, in the ejaculations and fire-breathings of the opening Allegro.<sup>78</sup>

Again, McNaught implies a certain level of irresponsibility in those musicians of (presumably) otherwise sound judgement who choose to devote themselves to Mahler’s cause. Why should they? The music is evidently mystifying; the more one hears the less appreciable it is within one’s capacity for comprehension. Save for two minutes or so (he is probably referring to the immediately compelling and relatively plain-speaking exposition, compelling and plain-speaking as exposition sections tend to be) the music is as good as dead. He comes to a shattering conclusion:

Mahlerians tell us to look at the ineffable things passing in the composer’s mind. The things are there, agreed; the idealist speaks through his failures. The Symphony is, then, a detailed annotation of what the music would be like if only the composer could think of the right notes. Either that, or, if we suppose the notes to be the right ones in the mind of the composer (as suppose we must), the work is a terrible monument to the power of insincerity in art.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 210-11.

<sup>77</sup> Cited in Sanna Pederson, ‘Romantic music under siege in 1848’ in Ian Bent (ed.), *Music Theory in the Age of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 59.

<sup>78</sup> William McNaught, ‘London Concerts: Mahler’s Second Symphony’, 452-3.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*



In a direct address to his readers (those lofty Mahlerians ‘tell *us*’), McNaught dismisses Mahler’s abstract, ‘ineffable things’ as concrete failures: they amount simply to ‘wrong notes’. The English don’t like music, but they are more than happy to indulge in noise, provided that, first, it isn’t too loud and, second, it consists of the *right notes*. The notion of music as idea hardly warrants entertaining; that would be to concede to an unmitigated act of insincerity. McNaught’s image of the symphony as ‘a terrible monument’ returns us to the *kolossal* and the shadows it casts: for Mahler’s detractors, his orchestral works were condemned edifices fit only for dismantlement (recall Boult’s castrative intervention and, similarly, Antcliffe’s proposed surgical excision); if music was to progress healthily, beautifully – true to Renaissance principles – such moribund structures needed to be consigned as relics of another age, not pedestalled as towering vantage points from which music’s future could be apprehended. Between these two positions Sorabji’s own may seem redundant, and it is perhaps because he did not partake in historicising debates between, to and from left-and-right that his views on Mahler had little currency then and are so rarely acknowledged now (although, given Mahler’s stature today, a corrective in this regard might be in order). For Sorabji, Mahler’s *oeuvre* was monumental, certainly; but it was timelessly so, casting neither shadow nor beaming light, belonging neither to the past nor future: it was perpetually late in the sense that ‘lateness includes the idea that one cannot really go beyond lateness at all, cannot transcend or lift oneself out of lateness, but can only deepen the lateness.’<sup>80</sup> The case of Max Reger sees this deepening of late style as a crisis of historicism, a surfeit of memory, as the end of a tradition Sorabji sought to prolong.

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<sup>80</sup> Said, *On Late Style*, 13.



## Chapter Four

### On Max Reger's 'too many notes'

Once Reger gets fairly going there is never any stopping him; he does not compose, he spawns. ERNEST NEWMAN, 'Sharps and Flats' (1926)<sup>1</sup>

Such a composer could have come out of no other place than the Germany of the period 1890-1910. Music of erudition, streaked with turgid romanticism, was spawned in that period, not created.

N.C., 'Max Reger' (1935)<sup>2</sup>

Reger might fairly be called the Apostle of the Redundant: too many notes, too many dynamic indications, too many difficulties, too heavy a hand – in short, too much of everything except simplicity and beauty.

'PICCOLO', 'An Organist's Notebook' (1937)<sup>3</sup>

And now . . . after this very interesting if very inadequate *coup d'œil* over a great master's work, may we, do you think, expect to hear less of that demented balderdash, that footling nitwittery about the too-large number of notes in and the 'turgidity' of the music that are the stock and oh-so-small talk among those who call themselves – what no one else would – our intelligent music lovers? I don't!

SORABJI, 'Max Reger' (1951)<sup>4</sup>

In 1936, twenty years after the composer's death, Sidney Grew thought it about time to declare Max Reger 'the supreme failure in the entire history of music'.<sup>5</sup> As if this epithet did not suffice, he has since been nominated 'prime candidate for honours as the worst composer'.<sup>6</sup> Posterity, in other words, owes nothing to Reger. By Archibald Farmer's reckoning, 'if everything Reger wrote were to be lost, few people would notice it, which is another way of saying that he is at the very nadir of unfashionableness'.<sup>7</sup> To be clear (that is, to clarify Farmer's potentially ambiguous double negation: surely Reger isn't conversely at the zenith of fashionableness?), John A. Sarkett in his 2014 compendium of *Obscure Composers* puts it most succinctly: 'Some composers never fall out of fashion. Max Reger never fell in'.<sup>8</sup> The question of Reger's 'fashionableness' or otherwise highlights issues pertaining to contemporaneity and anachronicity, to neo-romanticism as 'romanticism in an unromantic age' and to the neglect and obscurity befalling those who

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Newman, 'Sharps and Flats', *The Musical Times*, 67/997 (March 1926), 260.

<sup>2</sup> N.C., 'Max Reger', *The Manchester Guardian* (11 October 1923), 6.

<sup>3</sup> 'Piccolo', 'An Organist's Notebook', *The Musical Times*, 78/1134 (August 1937), 731.

<sup>4</sup> Sorabji, *Musical Opinion* (May 1951), 419.

<sup>5</sup> Sidney Grew, 'Max Reger', *British Musician and Musical News*, 13/125 (May 1936), 109.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Fenton and Mark Fowler, *Fenton & Fowler's Best, Worst, and Most Unusual* (London: Random House, 1985), 56. The authors come to this conclusion by way of an appeal to the authority of Stravinsky. This will have some significance in Part III.

<sup>7</sup> Archibald Farmer, 'Organ Recital Notes', *The Musical Times*, 88/2350 (April 1947), 134.

<sup>8</sup> John A. Sarkett, *Obscure Composers* (Winnetka, Illinois: Sarkett Press, 2014), 254-5. Emphasis in original.

are deemed to pull against the currents of the historical mainstream. As such, Reger's candidature for inclusion in Sorabji's counter-canon was as good as assured, and to Reger's unfashionableness was the added attraction of his generally unfavourable reception in England. Indeed, by a measure now somewhat formulaic, Reger's unpopularity with English audiences was just about proportional to Sorabji's advocacy for him. Here is a composer who 'has been so much maligned and misunderstood in English-speaking countries like the great Mahler';<sup>9</sup> Reger's music 'is recognised as among the established classics [...] in Germany' whereas, in England, 'it is to all intents and purposes ignored and unknown'.<sup>10</sup> As with Mahler's, Sorabji was astute in pointing out the national-ideological biases underpinning Reger's reception during the War and interwar period. According to Grew, Reger was 'a genius to some Germans, an honest bore to most Englishmen';<sup>11</sup> Reger's obituary in the *Musical Times* prophesied that little of his music 'will survive very long outside Germany'.<sup>12</sup> Again, Reger's works were deemed 'unacceptable to all but a small minority outside Germany' and he 'will probably remain, like Bruckner and Mahler, a prophet in his own country but nowhere else'.<sup>13</sup> The widespread perception obtained that Reger was 'aggressively German'<sup>14</sup> and, like Mahler for the very same reason, came to be considered derisively un-English. As a degenerative symptom of German romanticism in decline, Reger appeared antithetic to the aesthetics of 'moderation', 'simplicity and beauty' promulgated by the English Musical Renaissance. Hubert Parry's 'delightful English Suite for Strings', for instance, 'is far removed from Reger's dullness'.<sup>15</sup> Parry 'vitalised' his works with 'the exquisite cleanness and tenderness of his own musical nature' and, in so doing, 'kept immune from the German heaviness, the diseased intricacy and megalomania to which Reger too often succumbed'.<sup>16</sup>

Though sharing the same *kolossal* symptomology, Reger, unlike Mahler, never had the good fortune of any posthumous concert-hall rehabilitation and remains to an extent unknown. As Susanne Popp noted, a 'paralyzing indifference' to Reger's music took hold

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<sup>9</sup> Sorabji, 'Modern Composers and the Organ', *The Rotunda* (September 1930), 38.

<sup>10</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New English Weekly* (28 April 1932), 183.

<sup>11</sup> Sidney Grew, 'Gramophone Records: Reger: *Variations on a Theme of Mozart*', *Music & Letters*, 19/1 (January 1938), 117.

<sup>12</sup> Anon., 'Obituary: Max Reger', *The Musical Times*, 57/880 (June 1916), 290.

<sup>13</sup> 'Piccolo', 'An Organist's Notebook', 732, 733.

<sup>14</sup> Harvey Grace, 'Church and Organ Music: The Late Max Reger as Organ Composer', *The Musical Times*, 57/880 (June 1916), 282.

<sup>15</sup> Anon., 'The Promenade Concerts: Reger's Concerto', *Times* (10 October 1923), 8.

<sup>16</sup> W. Wright Roberts, 'Sir Hubert Parry's Choral Preludes for the Organ', *The Musical Times*, 58/892 (June 1917), 259.

after his death, resulting in a ‘widespread ignorance’ in ‘countries beyond the German-speaking area’.<sup>17</sup> This was, as William E. Grim explains, because Reger’s death in 1916 came ‘at a time of widespread anti-Germanic feeling which greatly influenced the critical assessment and reception of all German contributions to the arts’.<sup>18</sup> It was in this climate that Sorabji wrote his first article appreciatively citing that most disparaged composer in England. In ‘On Modern Piano Technique’, Sorabji takes the opportunity to assert his counter-canonic principles by inverting the commonly held belief that Reger was by some margin secondary in importance to Johannes Brahms, a timelessly favoured German composer among the English Musical Renaissance’s critic’s circle:<sup>19</sup> ‘Brahms, whatever his other qualities may be (and I confess they bore me), was never a writer for the piano [...]. His would-be spiritual son, Max Reger, is an incomparably better writer for the instrument’.<sup>20</sup> For Sorabji, Brahms was ‘a bourgeois of a commonplace and pedestrian mind’ whereas ‘in Reger and the best work of Medtner are really to be seen and in excelsis the qualities claimed for Brahms, particularly in Reger’. Next to Reger, ‘Brahms is seen to be meagre and poverty stricken [...] his musical material is enormously inferior in both originality and significance’.<sup>21</sup>

History has, however, proven Brahms the more significant of the two. There was something in Reger which – however appealing it may have been to Sorabji – was distinctly *unpopular* with the general concertgoing public, and this facet of his early reception has consigned him to obscurity. Perhaps it is not too cynical to say that it was in large part precisely this unpopularity – a repellent characteristic stemming from his forbidding instrumental maximalism – which so appealed to Sorabji: in Reger’s dismissal by the majority there was a coup to be claimed for the esoteric minority. As Carl Dahlhaus remarked, even in his homeland ‘Reger is a composer who listeners in strong measure reject’.<sup>22</sup> More recently, Antonius Bittmann has suggested that Reger simply fell afoul of the orthodoxies of the ‘Schoenberg critical tradition’ as developed by Adorno, consolidated by Dahlhaus and, thus approved, disseminated throughout the officialdom of

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<sup>17</sup> In Helmut Brauss, *Max Reger’s Music for Solo Piano* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1994), xi.

<sup>18</sup> William E. Grim, *Max Reger: A Bio-Bibliography* (New York, Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1988), 8.

<sup>19</sup> See Matthew Riley, ‘Liberal Critics and Modern Music in the Post-Victorian Age’, in Matthew Riley (ed.), *British Music and Modernism, 1895-1960* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 15.

<sup>20</sup> Sorabji, ‘Modern Piano Technique’, *The Sackbut*, 1/3 (July 1920), 116.

<sup>21</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Queen’s, December 1’, *The New Age* (22 December 1927), 94.

<sup>22</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, ‘Warum ist Regers Musik so schwer verständlich?’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 134 (1973), cited in Grim, 8.

musicology within and without the German academy. Bittmann contends that processes of canon formation have yielded to a majoritarianism by which countless composers deemed inassimilable to the trajectory of the modernist historical project fell by the wayside.<sup>23</sup>

Reger was just another composer destined for Adorno's lonely middle road. The subsequent marginalization of such composers is a concern central to the historiographical aims of the present thesis. Their being made the supplementary remainder of the paradigm-shifting dialectic overturning late-nineteenth-century romanticism to early-twentieth-century modernism effectively rejects them as anachronisms from a shared and institutionally legitimated discourse. Or, put another way, they didn't fit, they became misunderstood, neglected, forgotten – *obscure*, just as Sorabji needed them to be in order to project his own sense of apartness to anyone who cared to read or listen.

#### A turgid reception

Reger's was a singularly unpopular cause. We might, therefore, be inclined to suggest that Sorabji's critical allegiance to such an incessantly ridiculed and denigrated composer was part and parcel of his identification as *persona ingratis* and, in turn, identification with *personae ingratis*. Reger's unpopularity became a largely unquestioned tenet held among some of the most prominent constituent elements in 'the mass of English critical opinion'. This unpopularity can be effectively indexed in the journalistic repetition of just a few platitudes all pointing to the interpretation of Reger's late-romantic maximalist proclivities: he was indicted with 'spawning' 'too many notes'. One word in particular repeatedly appears in Reger's reception discourse, as Archibald Farmer points out: 'English musicians complain that they find him *turgid*'.<sup>24</sup> In Sorabji's exasperated overview of the situation in 1926:

It is an article of faith with English critics that Reger's music is dull, dry, and turgid – by which is meant that it is beyond the technical and intellectual capacity of Academy of Music students, which is perfectly true. Happily it is so; it is thus safe from the abominable mauling to which the works of the Old Masters are subjected, coming, as they do, within the range of teaching material.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Antonius Bittmann, *Max Reger and Historicist Modernisms* (Baden-Baden: Verlag Valentin Koerner, 2004), 234-5.

<sup>24</sup> Archibald Farmer, 'Programme-Making (Continued)', *The Musical Times*, 73/1070 (April 1932), 309-11., 311. Emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: The Budapest String Quartet', *The New Age* (4 March 1926), 213.

And later:

it matters not one hoot that an elaborate intricate Byzantine texture is only one part of his work, which includes a very large number of the lightest, slenderest texture. By a sort of Pavlovian conditioned reflex, the noise ‘turgid’ is heard whenever the name of Reger is mentioned.<sup>26</sup>

Sure enough, this adjective – signifying the swollen, distended, congested and consequently ‘bombastic’, ‘pompous’, ‘overblown’, etc. qualities imputed to Reger’s output – crops up time and time again. According to Harvey Grace in 1916, Reger’s music suffers ‘from turgidity as well as lack of continuity [...] with the result that one cannot hear the music for the notes’.<sup>27</sup> ‘Turgidity’ was a quality ‘that Reger could rarely keep out of his choral preludes, even the simplest’.<sup>28</sup> Reger’s E-flat String Quartet was described as ‘long, wearisome [...]. Not so much obscure as turgid (like many other works of Reger’s)’.<sup>29</sup> Reger’s music is characterised by ‘turgid harmony, compounded of giant chords’.<sup>30</sup> For Shinn, Reger’s ‘larger works seem to be full of miscalculations, extravagant scoring and harmonies which are often overloaded and even at times turgid’.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, ‘With all its complexity and occasional turgidity, it is definitely in the line of the great tradition of German music’.<sup>32</sup>

Reger’s ‘turgidity’ pointed to an orotundity ill-met by English sensibilities; it was one perceived as a typically German trait. As Christopher Anderson suggests, ‘Reger’s music is written in sometimes impenetrable German, like a musical version of Martin Heidegger, but without, some would say, the substance’. His scoring maps a ‘hyperchromatic topography’ which renders it ‘seemingly indecipherable’.<sup>33</sup> Similarly,

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<sup>26</sup> Sorabji, ‘The Silly Season’, *Musical Opinion* (November 1954), 79.

<sup>27</sup> Harvey Grace, ‘Church and Organ Music. The Late Max Reger as Organ Composer’, *The Musical Times*, 57/880 (June 1916), 282-5.

<sup>28</sup> Anon., ‘New Music’, *The Musical Times*, 65/971 (January 1924), 55.

<sup>29</sup> Anon., ‘London Concerts’, *The Musical Times*, 67/997 (March 1926), 251.

<sup>30</sup> Cunningham, ‘Distribution of Diplomas, Royal College of Organists, January 1936’, *The Musical Times*, 77/1116 (February 1936), 139.

<sup>31</sup> Shinn, ‘Royal College of Organists’, *The Musical Times*, 90/1273 (March 1949), 85.

<sup>32</sup> Cunningham, ‘The History and Development of Organ Music (Continued)’, *The Musical Times*, 80/1154 (April 1939), 282.

<sup>33</sup> Christopher Anderson (ed. and trans.), *Selected Writings of Max Reger* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), x, xii. A comparison between Reger’s cursive hand and Sorabji’s might be illuminating. Anderson comments on Reger’s ‘habitual use of exclamation marks’ and his ‘multiple underlining of words’ (xiii) – a declarative and emphatic habit also shared by Sorabji. Reger similarly exhibits ‘Deeply biting

Popp writes that ‘the “vocabulary” of Reger’s diction [...] must be studied like a foreign language in order to be understood’.<sup>34</sup> In want of precisely this understanding it was far easier to admonish Reger – as had his own German critics – as a *Vielschreiber*.<sup>35</sup> He simply spawned too many notes. Sorabji took this criticism against Reger as a cue to counter-critique the prevailing ‘simplicity fetish’, writing in 1930 that ‘The usual objection made against the larger and more important works of Reger is that they have too many notes. This objection arises out of that absurd elevation of the cult of simplicity into a fetish’.<sup>36</sup> As we will see, this fetishization of simplicity came about as a result of the abandonment of Teutonic maximalism after the War in favour of the clean lines typifying the neo-classical ascendancy of modernism. Against this background, Reger’s works were incongruous for their crude bigness. As one writer put it in a discussion of ‘English taste’: ‘We shake our heads at the masses and masses of notes on his pages, and murmur “Too thick” when we hear them turned into sound’.<sup>37</sup> ‘His melodies are choked with notes, and have little or no chance to live’, wrote Brent-Smith:

Whenever he saw a crack in his counterpoint, he stuffed it up with two or three demisemiquavers; had a chord only four notes, he added two more; did a melody move in a single line, he instantly doubled it, and this even in his organ music. The variations on a theme of Bach, to mention one of his greatest works, contains passages of exquisite beauty concealed beneath a tangled overgrowth of semi- and demisemiquavers.[...] These passages are difficult to find, not only because they are hidden in a wilderness of chromatics, but because Reger has concealed their tracks by throwing expression marks all over the music.<sup>38</sup>

Brent-Smith’s implication is that Reger wilfully obfuscated his musical ideas with complex surface textures: turbidity in print amounted to turgidity in sound. Cunningham is more explicit about this: ‘Towards the performer Reger’s feelings were apparently spiteful! If, by some rare lapse, he has written a really easy passage, he makes haste to

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cynicism, unbridled yet refined humour, childish tantrums, hasty and often repetitive thinking couched in prolix sentences, seemingly intuitive yet well-reasoned opinion – all of these elements meet the reader in the most varied alchemies of tone and substance, and, quite, aside from entertainment value, one is frequently left with the same uncomfortable impression that some take away from his music – the notion that one has not understood something that is supposed to be important’ (xxi).

<sup>34</sup> In Brauss, *Max Reger’s Music for Solo Piano* xii.

<sup>35</sup> Bittmann, *Max Reger and Historicist Modernisms*, 176.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Modern Composer and the Organ’, *The Rotunda* (September 1930), 38.

<sup>37</sup> Anon., ‘Recitals of the Week: Miss Bartless and Mr. Robertson’, *Times* (27 April 1928), 14.

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Brent-Smith, ‘Max Reger’, *The Musical Times*, 66/988 (June 1925), 498.



rectify this by inserting a difficult shake, or by doubling the manual parts in octaves'. Cunningham suggests cuts can be made: 'In such cases, the unscrupulous player has the remedy in his own hands!'<sup>39</sup> Piccolo, opening up a page of Reger's 'Hallelujah! Gott zu loben' at random, concurs with Cunningham's proposed course of action, one not dissimilar to Adrian Boult's suggested method of downsizing Mahler's 'monstrous German orchestra':

This passage is by no means exceptional, and it is far from being the worst example of the megalomania that has apparently made Reger unacceptable to all but a small minority outside Germany. Mr. Cunningham's remark as to the player's course in some instances is justified, and in leaving out a good many of the shakes and octaves we need not fear to be called unscrupulous: the effect is often improved by the omissions.<sup>40</sup>

An instructive example of Reger's notational excess can be found in his Op. 57 *Symphonic Fantasy and Fugue*. This 'deeply disturbing'<sup>41</sup> work – for a long time 'declared crazy and completely unplayable'<sup>42</sup> – took as the source of its inspiration the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canto of Dante's *Inferno*, containing the damning line, 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here'.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps Reger wasn't striving after easy accessibility with this number. For Sorabji, Reger's *Symphonic Fantasy and Fugue* constitutes 'One of his greatest works':

powerful, bold, vehement, immensely difficult; it taxes player and instrument to the utmost, making demands of a quite unprecedented kind. From the sombre magnificence and dark, menacing grandeur of the Fantasy with its unheard of effects of colour and dynamics, its severe splendour of harmony, we pass to the dazzling brilliance of a superb double fugue – worked with overwhelming power and skill. There is enough greatness in this one work to establish a lifetime's reputation of any lesser man, but no lesser man could attain this work.

Sorabji here elevates Reger to a species of *Übermensch* – a designation reserved for the very few, Busoni most prominently. Others, however, were less sure about either Reger's standing or the merits of the Dantean work in question, with one describing the latter as 'a blustering, top-heavy Symphonic Fantasia, fresh in nothing but ugliness'.<sup>44</sup> This 'ugliness'

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<sup>39</sup> Cunningham, 'The History and Development of Organ Music', 282.

<sup>40</sup> Piccolo, 'An Organist's Notebook', 731.

<sup>41</sup> C. Anderson, *Selected Writings of Max Reger*, xi.

<sup>42</sup> Farmer, 'Organ Recital Notes', 134.

<sup>43</sup> Hartmunt Haupt (1979) cited in Grim, *Max Reger: A Bio-Bibliography* 77.

<sup>44</sup> Anon., 'Modern Organ Music', *Times* (15 April 1911), 9.



As Brent-Smith wrote,

I doubt if so many notes have ever congregated in one page as they do in the Symphonic Fantasy and Fugue, Op. 57. One pities the organist who tries to perform the work, but still more the unfortunate fellow who had to engrave it. I do not know what sale these works have, nor if any publishers are contemplating bringing out new editions; but if they are, I suggest that instead of printing the black notes upon white paper, they should print the white spaces between the notes upon black paper. I admit that this method may seem unusual, but I am sure that in the long run it would be much quicker and less expensive.<sup>46</sup>

Efficiency and economy of means were, however, of no interest to Sorabji. The ‘Byzantine’ denseness of Reger’s output Sorabji associated with the natural, evolutionary course of music’s historical development. This was fundamentally at odds with the prevailing ‘simplicity fetish’ which dammed the tides of Sorabji’s imagined ‘Great Main Stream’.

#### Last in line? Reger at the end of the romantic period

Textbook accounts of early twentieth-century music will not brook Sorabji’s notion of what constituted the ‘Great Main Stream’, populated as the latter is with obscure composers and neglected works at the margins of the canon. Bittmann explains that advocates of the aforementioned ‘Schoenberg critical tradition’ colluded in constructing ‘nearly identical narratives of an alleged mainstream culture’, an ‘official history’ reducing musical modernism ‘to what it certainly never was: a uniform and one-dimensional movement’.<sup>47</sup> Not sufficiently typical of this mainstream conception of early-twentieth-century modernism, Reger is relegated to the position of a superannuated relic of the nineteenth century. While at ‘around the turn of the century he was considered by many of his contemporaries to be an extreme revolutionary’, today, writes Helmut Brauss, ‘we think of Max Reger as a representative of the late romantic era’.<sup>48</sup> Within this transitional metaxy – *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, to recall Dahlhaus’s title – Christopher Anderson affirms that Reger poses ‘messy questions’: he will not readily assimilate into the construct of that historical mainstream critiqued by Bittmann. As a result, he has to this

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<sup>46</sup> Brent-Smith, ‘Max Reger’, 499.

<sup>47</sup> Bittmann, *Max Reger and Historicist Modernisms*, 235.

<sup>48</sup> Brauss, *Max Reger’s Music for Solo Piano*, 2.

day ‘yet to rise above the level of a curiosity’.<sup>49</sup> Beyond that, Reger is dismissed as a throwback, a ‘musical aberrant who had taken a dead end path where the Schoenbergs and Bartóks of the world struck out on new and productive ones’:

Musical Calvinists who preached restraint and economy as both the telos and the virtue of twentieth-century music, a music which experiences its Hegelian *Aufhebung* in (depending on the camp) the ascetic, clean lines of Webern or the so-called neo-classicism of Stravinsky – these voices would admonish that Reger was an example of what could happen when one capitulated to excess and epigonism, a manifestation of Germanic hubris, the end of the blind alley down which Wilhelminian optimism had led.<sup>50</sup>

This all points to that lateness of romanticism understood as the limit- or endpoint of the German tradition, as the moment at which maximalism was set to give way and the *kolossal* poised to collapse under its own weight, thereby clearing the ground for the ‘true’ modernist revolution. Reger’s maximalism – like that of Mahler’s – can therefore be interpreted as a manifestation of late German romanticism at the fault line of the modernist paradigm shift, that point at which the *kolossal* was no longer tenable.

Despite the verdicts of history then and now (the former seemingly validated in view of the latter), Reger was for Sorabji a vital instantiation of music’s ever-swelling ‘Great Main Stream’.<sup>51</sup> Dismissive of modernism’s *Aufhebung* in the ascetic work of the Second Viennese School or the fashionable neo-classicists, Reger’s output was in Sorabji’s view a just extension of the musical enterprise of the long nineteenth century. Overflowing with notes, Reger’s music exemplified Sorabji’s principle of progress as the incremental accumulation of complexities, the piling up of difficulty upon difficulties, notes upon notes. In *Around Music*, Sorabji asks on the subject ‘Of Simplicity’,

‘The Great Simple Things’, what are they, where are they? Art knows them not, Nature even less – she herself is one great and continual contradiction of the lie with her infinitely intricate and complex processes, movements, organisms growing ever more and more complex and elaborate as they develop and rise higher [...]. So through man from Nature there flows into art some of her boundless variety, infinite diversity and complex ever changing rhythms.[...] Surely the greater the transmitting medium – the greater the artist,

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<sup>49</sup> Christopher Anderson, *Selected Writings of Max Reger*, ix, xv.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>51</sup> The instrumental music of both Medtner and Reger are key instances of this ‘Great Main Stream’. See Sorabji, ‘The Greatness of Medtner’ in Richard Holt (ed.), *Nicolas Medtner (1879 [sic] – 1951)* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1955), 131.

that is – more of this unending richness and complexity will pour through him to find expression in his work, and we should be glad of it and rejoice exceedingly, not expect him to dam down the flood of his thought into a pitiful, piddling trickle because of our feebleness and weakness.<sup>52</sup>

For Sorabji, through Reger there poured the ‘unending richness and complexity’ of a polyphonic and contrapuntal lineage stretching back to Bach. To the majority of English critics, however, Reger was an exemplar of the degenerate, decadent excesses of a German tradition ‘run to seed’. As N.C. explained in 1924, Reger embodied ‘the Faust spirit run to excess’; he belonged to ‘a tradition of German art and thought of which nowadays we have grown a little tired’.<sup>53</sup> ‘Seldom have the rusty wheels of the obsolete German school technique creaked so painfully as here’, wrote Ernest Newman of Reger’s piano concerto in 1923.<sup>54</sup> A *Times* reviewer put it down as ‘a work of great length [...] but its size is the only impressive thing about it’.<sup>55</sup> Sorabji, commenting the following year, praised this same concerto as having had ‘the merit of being almost unanimously abused by the “responsible” critics’, and he lauds its ‘granitic or, rather, basaltic closeness of texture’, ‘extraordinary massiveness of structure’ and ‘its immense difficulties’.<sup>56</sup> It was precisely these *kolossal* qualities that critics came to associate with the lateness of the German tradition and which Sorabji, conversely and contrarily, made a point of elevating. A certain Mr Pownall (disapprovingly cited by Sorabji) claimed that Reger was ‘possibly the last of a line of artists obsessed with the notion that music must be great in bulk in order to be great’.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, ‘Piccolo’ complained (perhaps naturally enough) about the scale of Reger’s works: ‘All this excess of difficulty [...] stacks of redundant notes, inordinate length [...] puts Reger out of the running for a place next to (or even very near) Bach, unless we are to confuse size with greatness’.<sup>58</sup>

But wasn’t “‘Bigger equals better’” Reger’s ‘implicit equation’?<sup>59</sup> This correlation of size with greatness – a sublime formula for the *kolossal* – was something which clearly appealed to Sorabji’s monumentalist sympathies. For Sorabji, Reger was in no way the

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<sup>52</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music* (London: Unicorn Press, 1932), 118-9.

<sup>53</sup> N.C., ‘Max Reger’, 11.

<sup>54</sup> Newman, ‘The Week in Music’, *The Manchester Guardian* (11 October 1923), 6.

<sup>55</sup> Anon. ‘The Promenade Concerts: Reger’s Concerto’, (10 October 1923), 8.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Music’, *The New Age* (20 November 1924), 45.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Sorabji, ‘Reger’ (1951), 575.

<sup>58</sup> Piccolo, ‘An Organist’s Notebook’, 733.

<sup>59</sup> Brauss, *Piano Music of Max Reger*, 28.

‘last in line’; he did not see Regerian maximalism as a dead end or blind alley, but as a conduit for the continuation and development of this now maligned Faustian Kultur des Kolossalismus:

It was left to Max Reger, another great and misunderstood and, as far as English-speaking countries are concerned, ignored master, to recover the thread of the grand, that is the Bach, tradition, and to expand and develop it in all directions in a manner beyond conception.<sup>60</sup>

Reger would have shared this sentiment. In his 1907 article on the subject of ‘Degeneration and Regeneration in Music’, Reger claims that ‘the amassing of technical difficulties’ is par for the historical course, citing Bach’s music as having been ‘considered so unplayable that one believed that only Bach alone could perform his works’. He wrote of late Beethoven similarly: ‘Were not precisely Beethoven’s very greatest works – the last sonatas and string quartets – considered unplayable for nearly a generation?’<sup>61</sup> Sorabji would add Reger himself to this historically-determined, evolutionary process of incremental complexity and complication. As he wrote of Reger’s ‘magnificent and truly awe-inspiring’ *Variations and Fugue on an Original Theme*,

it is a pity that some press-burbling nonsense as to the ‘unplayability’ of the work has been put about by people who should know better. That fairy-story has been set going about every great work during the last few hundred years or so – every great work, that is to say, that presented some fresh problems for technical solution.<sup>62</sup>

The technical challenges posed by Reger’s instrumental writing indicated to Sorabji the fulfilment of the prerogative of the truly progressive composer:

The usual objection to the music of Reger, especially the larger and more complex works, is that they have too many notes. This is an objection arising out of the simplicity fetish with which I have already dealt. To all such objections made against no matter whom, by no matter whom, Mozart, in his reply to the Emperor of Austria making the same objection to a work of his, has supplied the answer once and for all, when he said there were as many notes as he wanted.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 221.

<sup>61</sup> In Christopher Anderson, *Selected Writings of Max Reger*, 44, 47.

<sup>62</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: The Organ Music Society’, *New English Weekly* (March 1939), 320.

<sup>63</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 221.

This – a favourite anecdotal riposte of Sorabji's – appears as patrician justification for not only the perceived excesses in Reger's works (or, for that matter, Mahler's orchestral requirements), but for Sorabji's own. At the end of the long nineteenth century, in the historical crisis of the *fin-de-siècle*, such unchecked quantitative advances in the progress of music seemed to have precipitated the end of an era. It is to be suggested that Sorabji sought to prolong this ending, to draw out the 'catastrophe' of romanticism's late style in a creative practice supported by his critical aesthetic.

### Crisis of history

'We moderns stand at the brink of debacle', announced Reger in 1907, 'Presently we will [...] plunge into the abyss'.<sup>64</sup> Reger wrote these words in reply to an article by Hugo Riemann on the subject of 'Degeneration and Regeneration in Music'. Riemann critiqued 'this excess-ridden, modern concert life' and its composers' maximalist tendencies 'to avoid natural simplicity', to

attract attention to oneself through all sorts of exaggerations; difficult notation, technical impediments to performance; expansion of the orchestral corpus; amassing of simultaneous, interlocking, and confused melodic lines; as well as of blurred harmonies [...]. At the moment, then, conditions have fundamentally deteriorated.<sup>65</sup>

Reger responded:

In all seriousness: Does Hugo Riemann really believe that we – Strauss, Mahler, Pfitzner, etc. and finally my humble self – venture out on our ride into the 'uncertain' in such 'directionless' fashion that we allow ourselves to be carried by our muse, completely unprepared, into a realm not accessible to everyone, that we stray without principle from one phantom to another?<sup>66</sup>

Reger's reference to himself – as well as, among others, Mahler – as a 'modern' finds a parallel in Sorabji's early conception (from October 1913) of the short-lived 'ultra-modern spirit' as enthusiastically invoked in his letters to Heseltine. It was a brinksmanship of

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<sup>64</sup> In Christopher Anderson, *Selected Writings of Max Reger*, 48.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 37, 38, 39.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

advancedness, one which he viewed as a process by which progress was measured by the accumulation of complexities. But his notion of ‘ultra-modernism’ was about to be turned into a back number following the war and in the wake of ‘true’ modernism’s *unnatural*, in Sorabji’s view, simplicity-fetishistic *Aufhebung*. To recall Helmut Brauss, while Reger was considered ‘an extreme revolutionary’ at the turn of the century, today we think of him ‘as a representative of the late romantic era’.

It has already been suggested that Reger’s maximalism – like Mahler’s – can be interpreted as a manifestation of late German romanticism at the fault line of the modernist paradigm shift – ‘the brink of debacle’, ‘the abyss’ – that point at which the *kolossal* was no longer a viable enterprise. Composers from this fractious period in music history have repeatedly caught Sorabji’s positive critical attention. This phase has been perceived as the transitional nexus between aesthetically defined centuries, one imbued with a sense of historical crisis within the cultural episteme of the *fin de siècle*. For Christopher Anderson, Reger and his music ‘remain conflicted, provocative, and acrimonious, painfully caught between a monumental past and a precarious future, brimming with the bile of his time’.<sup>67</sup> Reger has thus been described as ‘one of the most important composers of the period between late romanticism and modernism,’<sup>68</sup> as one of music history’s ‘quintessential *fin de siècle* representatives’.<sup>69</sup> If lateness involves a comprehensive awareness of the past – an encyclopaedic cultural memory – Reger’s *oeuvre* presents a maximal accumulation of the German tradition stretched to breaking point. As Bittmann explains, his music ‘may be understood as the product of a late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century crisis of historicism’ in large part caused ‘by a surfeit of history’.<sup>70</sup> Walter Frisch coined the term ‘historicist modernism’ as applicable to a number of turn-of-the-century composers (including Busoni, Mahler and especially Reger) whose works ‘were intended and received as “modern”, but which derived their compositional energy primarily from techniques of a more remote past’. It is critically distinguished from a later neo-classicism exemplified by Stravinsky and Hindemith – so reviled by Sorabji (see Part Three) – which tended ‘to distance the musical past through a cosmopolitan lens’. Works of historicist modernism, in contrast, had ‘a more urgent, elemental, and intense connection with the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>68</sup> Grim, *Max Reger: A Bio-Bibliography* ix.

<sup>69</sup> Bittmann, *Max Reger and Historicist Modernisms*, 4.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 173.



past, as in those of Max Reger that probe his psychic and musical relationship to Bach'.<sup>71</sup> Bittmann tables another mediatory term to describe Reger's music. He describes 'psychomorphic modernism' as the turning inward of romantic organicism – the interpretation of history that, like Sorabji's, sees cultural development as akin to the processes of nature; however, 'while becoming increasingly self-aware, early nineteenth-century organicism turned against itself and, in so doing, constituted what I will call psychomorphic modernism'.<sup>72</sup> It was, in other words, a manifestation of the latening of romanticism. Reger's assimilation of the musical past gave rise to a distinctly panoptic stylistic repertoire, drawing from – and drawing in – baroque structural principles and classical ideals of symmetry psychomorphically distorted through the prism of late-romantic chromatic harmony and the hysterical emotionality of early-twentieth-century expressionism.

But this disturbance of categories caused some confusion, at least in the English press. In 1908, a *Times* reviewer commented on Reger's 'tendency to cling to old-fashioned forms, a tendency which mates curiously with his love of new contrapuntal effects';<sup>73</sup> another, three years later, drew attention to Reger's 'belief that periodic returns to the old orthodoxy are necessary to compensate for excursions into the experimental'.<sup>74</sup> 'The most noticeable mannerism of Reger is his chromaticism', explained a reviewer in 1923, 'it is so excessive that the logic of the music – and it must be remembered that Reger is in the classic tradition, and not a modernist striking out a new line – becomes incoherent, and all feeling of stability is lost'.<sup>75</sup> 'Piccolo' again: 'the man and his work present a problem of unusual interest. [...] he seems to have been pulled two ways – a classic from a sense of duty, with a romantic inclination that got the upper hand on occasion'.<sup>76</sup> To Sidney Grew's ear, 'Reger's music seems to get nowhere, to be interminably centripetal, taking us into no new worlds. Reger's world was Reger or, at a more generous estimation, Reger's music. It was a world killed by what happened in 1914. The time is not yet when we may feel comfortable exploring it'.<sup>77</sup> For these reasons, Eric Blom thought Reger incompatible with the true, mainstream course of music history: his

<sup>71</sup> Walter Frisch, 'Reger's Historicist Modernism', *The Musical Quarterly*, 87/4 (Winter 2004), 732.

<sup>72</sup> Bittmann, *Max Reger and Historicist Modernisms*, 137.

<sup>73</sup> Anon., 'Mr. Theodore Spiering's Recital', *Times* (7 November 1908), 13.

<sup>74</sup> Anon., 'Modern Organ Music', *Times* (15 April 1911), 9.

<sup>75</sup> 'The Promenade Concerts: Reger's Concerto', *Times* (10 October 1923), 8.

<sup>76</sup> Piccolo, 'An Organist's Notebook', 733.

<sup>77</sup> 'Max Reger by Fritz Stein', *Music & Letters*, 20/2 (April 1939), 212.

music ‘scarcely yielded any new experience while it did nothing to modify our reluctance in England to accept the decayed classicism and the distorted diatonism [*sic*] of this composer as either finely traditional or admirably progressive. Nothing will ever make us understand why Central Europe still clings desperately to its belief in Reger as a great master’.<sup>78</sup> Neither clearly traditional nor progressive, Reger presents a problematic in terms of a stylistic taxonomy staking claims to either a romantic or modern aesthetic. As such, Grim explains that ‘The compositional eclecticism of Reger presents the historian of music with a real dilemma as to the stylistic categorization of the composer’:

Part of the difficulty that many critics have had in coming to terms with Reger’s music (and that of his friend and kindred spirit, Ferruccio Busoni) is its all-encompassing nature, forming, as it were, an aperçu of past and contemporary musical practices.<sup>79</sup>

Bittmann similarly comments on Reger’s ‘intense artistic dialogue with history’ wherein the past ‘becomes a vehicle on a retreat to a *voyage intérieur*’, a ‘flight inward’.<sup>80</sup>

Reger’s turn to history as a means to turn inward generated what might be classified as negative music – it certainly earned enough negative reviews to bring that appellation into consideration. His internalisation of the past held a profound appeal for Sorabji as it put the individual composer in a position of autocratic mastery over tradition. This Busonian elusiveness – the *sui generis* characteristic of not being readily boxed into an extant category – was a quality which kept Reger from easy accessibility and comprehension and, perhaps for these very reasons, elevated him in Sorabji’s esteem. Reger’s ‘flight inward’ gave rise to a negative music which was destined for neglect, not only because audiences rejected it (and it rejected them), but also because it offered few genuinely original creative outlets for other musicians to explore. Reger was the last in line; in terms of complexity, his instrumental writing presented an impasse. For Sorabji, however, this complexity was a natural stage in the historical course of music’s evolution. In a revealing aside, Sorabji would link himself up with Reger and the line of inheritance of the German tradition: ‘if Bach could do all he wanted to and all he did with such comparatively simple means, why should Reger (and incidentally myself) want such complex ones for what we have to do, the answer is Bach was doing one thing and we

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<sup>78</sup> Eric Blom, ‘Music on Wires and Wireless Music’, *The Manchester Guardian* (1926), 20.

<sup>79</sup> Grim, *Max Reger: A Bio-Bibliography*, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Bittmann, *Max Reger and Historicist Modernisms*, 5, 7.

another'.<sup>81</sup> But, true to his conception of music history and the Great Main Stream, Sorabji in fact outdid Reger in the organ-loft *kolossal*, acknowledging that his own Regerian First Organ Symphony was widely considered 'to be the most difficult organ composition in existence'.<sup>82</sup> Sorabji's counterpoint has been likened to that of Reger, only 'Sorabji carried the process one step further. His contrapuntal writing is even thicker and more unwieldy, though perhaps not as turgid as that of Reger can be'.<sup>83</sup> As Marc-André Roberge puts it, 'Reger's works pale in front of the massive creations of Sorabji'.<sup>84</sup>

In his appreciation and appropriation of Regerian techniques during the height of Reger's unfashionableness – that is, during a period of 'restraint and economy' in Anderson's phrase, during the predominance of a 'simplicity fetish' in Sorabji's and, together, both indicative of the asceticism of twentieth-century modernism 'proper' – Sorabji is involved in a process of historical exhaustion, hyperextending the nineteenth-century romantic lineage well into the modern twentieth century and thereby proclaiming his own recalcitrant neo-romantic anachronicity. This was an eccentric position launched in defiance of the conventions of musical fashions then current: his first Organ Symphony, Sorabji explained, 'does all the things that are *not done* in well-bred musical circles of today, circles of which Monsieur Igor Stravinsky and Monsieur Serge de Diaghilew [*sic*] are the centre'.<sup>85</sup> In 1930, Sorabji wrote of the same work that, in terms of organ literature, 'Since Reger's loss nothing of the first order of importance has been written for the instrument':

The only big work I know written since is my own organ symphony which is on the very largest lines, occupying an entire programme for its performance. [...] It is admittedly of titanic difficulty, intended for none but the most commanding and powerful artists, and in style it is marked by extreme harmonic and rhythmic freedom. A second which I hope will far surpass the first, is already partially completed.<sup>86</sup>

In the end, Sorabji completed three Organ Symphonies. The first, completed in 1924 is at two hours' duration considerably shorter than its successors. The Second Symphony for

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<sup>81</sup> Sorabji, 'Modern Composers and the Organ', 39.

<sup>82</sup> Sorabji, 'Organ Recitals and the Press', *Musical Times*, 70/1036 (June 1929), 540.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Habermann, 'Sorabji's Piano Music' in Paul Rapoport, *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 346.

<sup>84</sup> Marc-André Roberge, *Opus Sorabjianum: The Life and Works of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji*, version 1.05 (Quebec: 15 October 2013), 18.

<sup>85</sup> Sorabji, 'Sorabji's Organ Symphony', *Musical Opinion* (May 1928), 813. Emphasis in original.

<sup>86</sup> Sorabji, 'Modern Composers and the Organ', 41.

Organ (1929-32) lasts some nine hours; his Third (completed in 1953) is ‘only slightly shorter’ than its predecessor and was, significantly, for some time intended to be ‘dedicated to the memory of Max Reger’.<sup>87</sup>

### Reger’s monsters, Sorabji’s monstrum

There is something monstrous about the memory of Max Reger, if we are to regard ‘memory’ in this sense as a cultural construct taking in aspects of reception history. This was, furthermore, a feature of the *kolossal* which especially appealed to Sorabji. As with Mahler’s maximal orchestra, Reger’s output came to be regarded as a monstrous manifestation of the late German tradition and, as such, the discourse surrounding his reception spawned a number of tropes beyond flatly dismissive accusations of turgidity. In 1915, for example, one critic wrote that ‘the turgid profundity of a Max Reger’ is ‘a species of that hydra-headed monster “Teutonic Kultur”’.<sup>88</sup> According to Harvey Grace, Reger’s music is ‘architectural, immense, cyclopean’.<sup>89</sup> For Farmer, Reger ‘generated a breed of Polyphemus-monsters of music. [...] What in other media would be turgidity and inflation, in the case of the organ can be turned into an expression of its giant-like qualities’.<sup>90</sup> Elsewhere, Farmer again suggests that ‘the more abstruse of his compilations [...] are as immense as the monsters of the “primordial slime”, and as horrible, and as epic’.<sup>91</sup> We may wonder whether generating such beasts was not beyond Reger’s intentions all along: when asked to make simplifications to his Violin Concerto, Reger responded, ‘No, that’s impossible [...]. The work is, and will remain, a monster’.<sup>92</sup> Having dismissed Reger as ‘Dry as dust!’ in a 1914 letter to Heseltine, by 1921 Sorabji was already publishing appreciative articles on him; a year later, he refers to his compositional practice in terms of ‘creating my own monsters’.<sup>93</sup> He was certainly successful in his Frankensteinian endeavours. For instance, Ivan Hewitt’s 2003 *Telegraph* review of Jonathan Powell’s performance of *Opus clavicembalisticum* repeatedly draws on the imagery of the monstrous: ‘Surviving the monster’ is the review’s title and the work under

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<sup>87</sup> In the end its dedicatee was Norman Gentieu. See Roberge, *Opus Sorabjjanum*, 291.

<sup>88</sup> Anon., ‘The Golden Legend’, *The Musical Herald* (May 1915), 205.

<sup>89</sup> Grace, ‘Church and Organ Music. The Late Max Reger as Organ Composer’, *The Musical Times*, 57/880 (June 1916), 283.

<sup>90</sup> Farmer, ‘An Introduction to Organ Music’, *Music & Letters*, 14/4 (October 1933), 332.

<sup>91</sup> Archibald Farmer, ‘Programme-Making (Continued)’, *The Musical Times*, 73/1070 (April 1932), 311.

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Carl Flesch, *The Memoirs of Carl Flesch* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 1979), 247.

<sup>93</sup> Sorabji to Philip Heseltine, letter dated 19 June 1922.

considerations is described as ‘one of the mythical beasts of 20<sup>th</sup>-century music [...] perhaps the longest and most monstrously difficult piano pieces ever written.[...] It’s the absolute slave of the composer’s monstrous ego’.<sup>94</sup>

Recent interest in monstrophy as ‘the academic study of monsters’ might find a place for – or play host to – the creations of a Reger or Sorabji, for it deals with the incomprehension met by liminal phenomena at the borders of normative understanding. The maximal limits of the *kolossal* became, as we have seen in the cases of Mahler and Reger and their resultant neglect, construed as a type of sonic monstrosity. Monstrophy delimits a field of study in which monsters figure as ‘representational and conceptual categories’, as ‘semiological markers indicating the seams of internal cultural tension’.<sup>95</sup> For Holly Lynn Baumgartner and Roger Davis, ‘the monster awaits at the borders, kneels at the threshold; its true terror is its ability to exceed the frame, to spill out of its confines’.<sup>96</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that the construct of the monster ‘is a category that is itself a kind of limit case, an extreme version of marginalization, an abjecting epistemological device basic to the mechanics of construction and identity formation’; therefore ‘the monster is best understood as an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category and a resistant Other’.<sup>97</sup> The third of Cohen’s ‘Seven Theses on Monster Theory’ posits that ‘The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis’ and, understood as such, the appearance of monsters within histories of reception indicates a moment of unease, for monsters refuse ‘to participate in the classificatory “order of things”’: they are ‘disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions’; it ‘notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes’.<sup>98</sup> The construction of Reger’s output as monstrous appeared at just this time of crisis, between romanticism and modernism and the ideologically informed conditions cultivated for the reception of

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<sup>94</sup> Ivan Hewitt, ‘Surviving the Monster’, *The Telegraph* (18 September 2003) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalmusic/3602881/Surviving-the-monster.html> [accessed 16 April 2014].

<sup>95</sup> ‘Call for Papers: Preternature 2.2. Monstrophy: The Academic Study of Monsters’ (2012), <http://iafa.highpoint.edu/2012/call-for-papers-for-preternature-2-2-monstrophy-the-academic-study-of-monsters/> [accessed 9 September 2015].

<sup>96</sup> Holly Lynn Baumgartner and Roger Davis, ‘Hosting the Monster: Introduction’ in Holly Lynn Baumgartner and Roger Davis (eds.), *Hosting the Monster* (Amsterdam and New York: “At the Interface/Probing the Boundaries”, 2008).

<sup>97</sup> Jeffrey J. Cohen, ‘Preface: In a Time of Monsters’ in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed.), *Monster Theory* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), ix, x.

<sup>98</sup> Cohen, ‘Monster Theory (Seven Theses)’ in Cohen (ed.), *Monster Theory*, 6.

maximalist German music within England during the war and interwar period. The monstrous, then, is ‘that which calls into question our (their, anyone’s) epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us [...] to acknowledge the failure of our systems of categorization’.<sup>99</sup> Monsters ‘are prehistoric, ahistoric, innate anachronisms. They arrive to recount a lesson in the complexity of temporality’.<sup>100</sup>

Cohen writes that the monster ‘exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the border that cannot – *must* not – be crossed’. The classical guardian of this border, notes Cohen, was Polythemus,<sup>101</sup> that man-eating giant evoked by Farmer in alluding to Reger’s music. We are reminded here of the 1907 exchange between Riemann and Reger on the subject of ‘Degeneration and Regeneration’ in music. Riemann’s call for all creative artists ‘to demarcate the limits which ought not be transgressed!’ is met with Reger’s retort: ‘What does this mean? Have not absolutely *all* of our great and immortal figures ruthlessly and with mighty fists advanced into the eternal limits as understood in their time, that the contemporary aesthetic fixed “paralyzed” in place?’<sup>102</sup> There is, as this argument reminds us, a fine line between transcendence and transgression. This was, moreover, one of the key philosophical concerns outlined at the very outset of the German romantic movement. Kant, in his ‘Analytic of the Sublime’ explains that, in seeking transcendence, the seeker may very well end up transgressing. Kant draws a distinction on this point between the colossal and the monstrous:

An object is *monstrous* where by its size it defeats the end that forms its concept. The *colossal* is the mere presentation of a concept which is almost too great for presentation, i.e., it borders on the relatively monstrous; for the end to be attained by the presentation of a concept is made harder to realize by the intuition of the object being almost too great for our faculty of comprehension.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Asa Simon Mittman, ‘Introduction: The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies’ in Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 8.

<sup>100</sup> Cohen, ‘Postscript: The Promise of Monsters’ in Mittman and Dendle, 451.

<sup>101</sup> Cohen, *Seven Theses*, 13-4.

<sup>102</sup> In Christopher Anderson, *Selected Writings of Max Reger*, 47.

<sup>103</sup> Kant, ‘Analytic of the Sublime’ (trans. James C. Meredith) in *Critique of Judgement* [1790] (Oxford and New York: Oxford World’s Classics, 2007), 83.

As David Beard and Kenneth Gloag explain, the sublime ‘conveys the impression of largeness, of magnitude, the scale of which we are unable to understand through the construction of any concept. In other words, it goes beyond our normative conceptual framework’. This results in ‘the overwhelming impression made by some music seeming to meet with incomprehension’.<sup>104</sup>

If there is one recurrent theme in the reception discourse of Sorabji’s own music – much as in the case of Mahler’s and Reger’s in English letters during the first half of the twentieth century – it is incomprehension: his musical concepts overreach the grasp of normative means of classification. In this sense, Sorabji accomplished his task of creating his monsters, for ‘The monstrous is a genus too large to be encapsulated in any conceptual system; the monster’s very existence is a rebuke to boundary and enclosure’.<sup>105</sup> Those of Sorabji’s larger works which have made it in to the concert hall or, indeed, organ loft, have time and again elicited responses not dissimilar to those to early encounters with the late-romantic *kolossal*. The situation is little different with Sorabji’s music in more recent times. In a 2012 edition of *BBC Music Magazine* there appeared a feature article written by Jeremy Pound entitled ‘The 15 daftest works in classical music’ which set about listing ‘the most eccentric pieces ever written’, to chart ‘all sorts of wonderful weirdness’: ‘Here, we take a look at 15 of the battiest, from the engagingly amusing to the downright barmy...’. Sorabji’s Second Organ Symphony took fifth place (although it would appear that the ranking system adopted conforms to no particular logic):

The *BBC Music Magazine* team is proud to boast at least three organ music enthusiasts in its number – or ‘organ bores’ as the unenlightened like to jest – but even we might draw the line at sitting through the entirety of the Second Organ Symphony by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji. Completed by the English composer in 1932, this work for solo organ lasts a mighty nine hours. Yes, nine. Perhaps not surprisingly, it’s never really caught on. At time of writing, it has yet to be recorded or broadcast, and has enjoyed just nine performances, all at the supremely talented (and, clearly, indefatigable) hands and feet of Kevin Bowyer. No record is made of how many attended those performances . . . or, more to the point, how many were still there at the finish.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Subject entry: ‘Sublime’ in *Musicology: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 180.

<sup>105</sup> Cohen, ‘Seven Theses’, 7.

<sup>106</sup> Jeremy Pound, ‘The 15 daftest works in classical music’, *BBC Music Magazine* (July 2012), 46-7.

‘Still only a subject for patronizing conjecture’: Sorabji’s words on Mahler are just as fittingly applicable to himself.<sup>107</sup> But this is perhaps part of his *persona ingratisima*: to be reviled was a key animadverting objective for Sorabji. Nevertheless, even though the above-mentioned article acknowledges that ‘the boundaries of musical convention have always been there to be tested’, Sorabji’s limit-testing (‘Reaching (for) Limits’) belongs to a category of music variously construed as ‘daft’, ‘weird’, ‘batty’, ‘barmy’ or, in a word, ‘eccentric’.<sup>108</sup> Even ‘organ bores’ ‘draw the line’ before ‘Enduring Sorabji’ – his Second Organ Symphony is *beyond the pale*; it is, in another word, ex-centric.

To dismiss some of the larger or more monstrous specimens in Sorabji’s output as risibly eccentric is to perhaps miss the point of his forbiddingly maximalist enterprise. His larger forms – the Second and Third Organ symphonies after Reger, for example, or the Mahlerian, Catholic-devotional *Messa alta sinfonica* – appear to have been conceived as a rebuke to the ‘simplicity fetish’ he saw come to dominance during the emergence of the modernist movement. His maximalist proclivities as a composer were given support by his aesthetic as a critic, one which praised the endeavours of a Mahler or Reger as the natural, historically legitimated products of the Great Main Stream. The neglect suffered by their works was symptomatic of a culture in decline. Sorabji’s aesthetic in this regard was cultivated at a time when English sensibilities were particularly averse to the *kolossal* as incompatible with the ideological principles espoused in particular by the ‘critics’ circle’ forming the wheels-within-wheels driving English Musical Renaissance propaganda and trickled down through the press to inform popular opinion. Sorabji was only too aware of this: the ‘immoderate’, ‘disproportionate’ maximalism of Mahler’s ‘monstrous German orchestra’ or the equally monstrous ‘turgidity’ of Reger’s ‘too many notes’ were qualities generally disparaged as ‘un-English’. It follows that Sorabji’s critical and compositional affiliation with a broadly *kolossal* style constituted an idealised difference from the English and the traits of Englishness he so exclusively set himself against. What Sorabji

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<sup>107</sup> In the subsequent edition of the magazine, Alistair Hinton challenges Pound’s conjecture: ‘Since Jeremy Pound claims that “no record is made of . . . how many were still there at the finish” of performances of Sorabji’s Second Organ Symphony (*15 Daftest Works*, July), let me put that “record” straight, at least in respect of its premiere, which I attended (and, yes, “sat through in its entirety”), by confirming that there were more people in the audience at the end than were present at the beginning. I rather doubt that this happens very often, although a colleague did tell me that Sorabji was once the unfortunate victim of the opposite circumstance when a nameless and haplessly incapable musician attempted a programme including some of the composer’s shorter works – there had, he declared, been many concerts that he’d queued up to get into but that this was the first that he’d queued to get out of...’ ‘Letter to the Editor: “Enduring Sorabji”, *BBC Music Magazine* (August 2012), 8.

<sup>108</sup> Pound, ‘15 Daftest Works’, 46.



perceived as a typically English lack of appreciation for large-scale structures turned out to present the perfect foil to his own outsized endeavours. There is, then, a sense that Sorabji countered the putatively English inferiority in the domain of the *kolossal* with monuments to his own perceived superiority. If we are thus prepared to admit the likelihood of a superiority complex in this regard (whether genuinely pathological or merely mocking), then we can begin to better understand Sorabji's motivations for composing in such a manner undeterred. By the logic of a confirmatory bias, incomprehension to his works only proved his superiority. That the majority of his compositions were written with no respect for or prospect of public audition – that their ideal, *sublime* forms as music existed only on paper and in his imagination – suggests Sorabji wrote in a largely private musical language. He composed, in other words, negative music destined for neglect – the model was set not only by the examples of Mahler and Reger, but by Sorabji's critical construction of them as at the forefront of the Great Main Stream coursing against the prevalence of a 'simplicity fetish'. Sorabji's conception of this mainstream was, in a time of the ascendancy of the 'true' modernism, anachronistic and, in this sense moreover, historically ex-centric: just like some of his most admired composers, the narrative history of twentieth-century music has yet to find a fitting place for him.

In the same 1917 letter to Heseltine in which he abandons the last vestige of his nominal English identity 'to the outer darkness', Sorabji confesses that the score of his latest work-in-progress, the Second Piano Concerto, is 'as "megalomaniac" as before', and mentions the ever-expanding orchestral body required by the score, with 'the addition of *Organ* a 4<sup>th</sup> *Trombone* a *picc.* *Clarinet* a *Bass Oboe* (!! ) and *Caisse Claire* but it is used very sparingly'.<sup>109</sup> His *Symphony for Piano, Large Orchestra, Chorus and Organ* (completed 1921-2), expands his orchestral demands further, requiring a colossal battery of instruments and voices as outlined in the manuscript's final 'Constitution of the Orchestra':

2 Piccoli; 3 Large flutes; 1 Bass flute; 1 Piccolo clarinet (Eb or higher); 3 Large clarinets (Bb); 1 Bass Clarinet; 3 Bassoons; 1 Contrabassoon; 1 Contrabass Sarrusophone; 3 Oboes; 1 Alto Oboe (cor anglais); 1 Bass Oboe; 8 Horns; 5 Trumpets (trumpet piccolo as well if needed); 4 Trombones; 1 Contrabass Tuba; Kettledrums; Triangle; Cymbals; Tambourine

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<sup>109</sup> Sorabji to Philip Heseltine, letter dated June 1917.

(Caïx roulante [?]; Tambour antique); Big Drum; Side Drum; Gong; Castanets; Glockenspiel; Xylophone; Celesta; 2 or more Harps; (16-24) 1<sup>st</sup> Violins (div.); (16-24) 2<sup>nd</sup> Violins (div.); (12-16) Violas (div.); (12-16) Violoncellos (div.); (12-16) Contrabasses; Chorus: Soprani (50-100 voices per part); Alti (50-100 voices per part); Tenori (50-100 voices per part); Bassi (50-100 voices per part); Organ; PIANO SOLO.

One only needs to glance at any one of the 300 pages comprising the manuscript score (it is yet to be typeset) to begin to comprehend the conceptual vastness of scale and thinking behind the ink. True to the telos of the *kolossal*, it is invariably on the final page of such works that we find the titanic orchestral consummation of all that preceded it. Indeed, it is almost as though Sorabji was impatient to realise this apotheosis: Roberge explains that ‘the work begins sharply, and one could easily think that the first page is missing were the instruments’ names not written in full at the beginning’.<sup>110</sup> The work is in one movement and, without following any structured tonal design or motivic-thematic processes, cannot be said to belong to any conventional understanding of symphonic form or underlying sonata principle. Still, and if nothing else, the conclusion is satisfyingly cataclysmic:

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<sup>110</sup> Roberge, *Opus Sorabjianum*, 118.



True to the colossal and monstrous subdivisions of the sublime, it is perhaps fitting (or literally not) that this example is rendered nearly unintelligible within the conventional constraints of the A4 page. Sorabji supplemented the score with those extra instruments (contrabassoon, chorus, organ, bass oboes and bells – but no whistles) which would not fit the forty-stave paper.<sup>111</sup> As he later remarked to Erik Chisholm, ‘The whole score is two miles high like “Alice” at the end of the Court scene’.<sup>112</sup> As well as its temporal demands, then, the Symphony has an imposing spatial dimension: the ‘entire score, with its binding, weighs 4.5kg; heavier ones also with supplementary scores, were to follow’.<sup>113</sup> Sorabji’s First Symphony may be seen and (perhaps one day) heard as a typical example of his graphomaniacal expressionism executed on a mass-orchestral scale. The quadruply fortissimo tutti texture and chromatically mediated pan-tonality of the various parts arguably defy any *meaningful* formal analysis, save to arbitrarily say that *in toto* they culminate in a chord rooted in F# major, a tonal centre then ambiguated by non-diatonic additions to the upper registers. The organ part will serve as a short-score form of the final bar of the orchestral whole:



**Ex. 2 Sorabji, *Symphony for Piano, Large Orchestra, Chorus and Organ*, final bar (organ).**

It is not entirely clear what the direction to the left of the chord reads, although it might be safely assumed that Sorabji’s intention was to *pull out all the stops*.

Against the English call for moderation and proportion – to move away from the ‘monstrous German orchestra’ – Sorabji, interpreting this as a regressive instance of the reigning ‘simplicity fetish’, composed in a defiantly maximalist, neo-romantic fashion. In

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Sorabji to Erik Chisholm, letter dated 18 April 1930, cited in *ibid.* As a point for comparison, Nettel recalls Brian’s method: ‘He pins the score to his bedroom wall – all the way down – and works on it from a step-ladder’. ‘*Ordeal by music . . . and after*’ (1976), <http://www.havergalbrian.org/ordealandafter.htm> [accessed 9 December 2013].

<sup>113</sup> Roberge, *Opus Sorabjianum*, 118.

1930, he described his First Symphony as ‘the crowning achievement of my earlier period’,<sup>114</sup> although, given the ambitiousness of this project and the demands it makes, we might think of Sorabji’s earlier period in terms of a *premature lateness*. Cecil Gray, an otherwise sympathetic associate of Sorabji and fellow critic-at-the-margins, held quite specific views on the colossalist predilections of some of his contemporaries. In *Peter Warlock*, Gray writes:

It is certainly true that an obsession with the colossal is generally symptomatic of immaturity or arrested mental development in an artist. Practically everyone starts off trying to outdo the monumental creations of a Michelangelo, a Beethoven, a Goethe; those who continue in later life – and how well we know them! – have invariably second-rate minds. [...] Granted, if one happens to be a Bach or a Beethoven, one may freely indulge in a taste for the colossal, but unfortunately such figures, it may have been noticed, are of somewhat rare incidence. With artists of a different order of talent – lesser if you will – the outcome is generally fatal. No better warning of this could possibly be found than in that exquisite and charming miniaturist, Gustav Mahler, who chose to squander his natural gifts in a vain attempt to achieve the monumental and the colossal.<sup>115</sup>

This is but one way to look at and interpret not only Mahler’s but Sorabji’s predilection for the *kolossal*. Another is to once more invoke the memory of Max Reger and his fraught position within music history and musicology. Helmut Brauss writes of the ‘polarized opinions’ arising from ‘the controversy surrounding Reger’ and ‘the underlying motives for his extraordinary creativity’. On the one hand, there is the accusation that Reger ‘was driven by an indiscriminate creativity, endlessly churning out work after work and finding satisfaction only in robot-like creativity’. On the other, ‘A sympathetic view would stress the sincere, nearly missionary effort of a composer deeply concerned about the direction music was taking in his time, trying to counteract this trend by a conscious proliferation of his own creative work’.<sup>116</sup> This latter, sympathetic understanding of Reger might also be applied to Sorabji. For all his negativity as both a critic and composer, there is something to be said for Sorabji as a champion of a romantic tradition as manifest in the *kolossal*. He

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>115</sup> Cecil Gray, *Peter Warlock: A Memoir of Philip Heseltine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), 22-3. Gray admits elsewhere that his critique of colossalism quoted here ‘was a piece of special pleading on my part, in an attempt to show that Peter Warlock’s exquisitely achieved miniatures were of more value than the grandiose failures of most of his rivals – a proposition that I still believe to be true. A good small work will always be better than a large bad one; but everything else being equal, the question of size is one of positive importance’. *Musical Chairs or Between Two Stools* (London: Home and Van Thal, 1948), 21.

<sup>116</sup> Brauss, *Max Reger’s Music for Solo Piano*, 41.

provides a countervailing response to the historiographical orthodoxies of twentieth-century music and, from this perspective, one might wonder whether Richard Taruskin was best to choose Havergal Brian's 'Gothic' Symphony as the exemplary instance of the limits of maximalism, for such a work as Sorabji's First Symphony, let alone certain later ones, amply demonstrates what Riemann might have called 'the limits which ought not be transgressed'. Sorabji's was not a limit- or endpoint of the *kolossal* aesthetics of late romanticism, but its sublime vanishing point.

Sorabji's neo-romantic and anachronistic work as both composer and critic calls to mind that spectre of disillusionment, Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of History':

His face is turned towards the past. Where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair [*verweilen*: a reference to Goethe's Faust], to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm.<sup>117</sup>

Sorabji's critical and compositional output sees the incremental accumulation of the wreckages of music history – curating those works abandoned by the majority in a canon of neglected works and contributing his own ultimately neglected works to that corpus. The storm called 'progress' was for Sorabji a process of regression. The post-war 'simplicity fetish' sent Sorabji's conception of the Great Main Stream further, irretrievably off course and relegated some of his most vaunted maximalist composers to the margins. Part III examines his response to the neglect of Medtner and Rachmaninov as anachronisms and to Szymanowski's exit from impending obscurity by way of a capitulation to a sublated twentieth-century "modernism", to make use of Sorabji's mocking inverted commas.

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<sup>117</sup> Walter Benjamin (trans. Dennis Redmond), *On the Concept of History* [1940] <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm> [Accessed 15 April 2016].

## **Part III**

### ***Violently Unfashionable*** **Sorabji contra “modernism”**





## Preamble

To judge by the faint but unmistakable sickly-sweetish reek of the “best people” over the whole proceedings, it is plain, my dears, that Soviet music is becoming just *too* shatteringly chic!  
SORABJI, ‘Music: Aeolian Hall’ (1935)<sup>1</sup>

It seemed that the *kolossal* disappeared along with the nineteenth century – not with any calendrical precision exactly, but with that vague, hesitant farewell seeing off the indefinite *fin de siècle*. Its lateness as a romantic idiom was, however, certainly felt in post-War London, and such composer-critics as Sorabji who continued to proclaim its inexhaustibility found themselves in an ever-shrinking and increasingly eccentric minority. Sorabji’s fellow contrarian Cecil Gray gives a typically colourful account of the cultural shift wrought by the new, modern twentieth century overturning the old, romantic nineteenth century. ‘Luxury, luxuriousness, opulence’, writes Gray, ‘these are the primary characteristics of the art of the period which is over’. He calls to mind the maximalist output of Mahler, Richard Strauss and late-romantic early Schoenberg as being ‘of a piece with the *Hotel Splendide*, champagne, oysters, *paté de fois gras* of the Edwardian era’. The ‘characteristic vice of overscoring is significant – it is the gesture of the *nouveau riche*, the millionaire, the self-made man of art. The more money it cost, that was the test of excellence’.<sup>2</sup> That was also Sorabji’s test of excellence and it is hoped that his championing of this conspicuously Austro-German plutocracy has been adequately dealt with in prior considerations of his writings on the neglect of Mahler and Reger. The present section faces forward to address Sorabji’s response to the incoming period. ‘The art of the succeeding phase’, Gray continues, ‘is best typified by Stravinsky’. It ‘is of a more subtle order, but remains essentially the same at bottom’:

His is the luxury of the cocktail bar and chromium-plated steel furniture; rather uncomfortable but *chic* and elegant, discomfort *de luxe* in place of comfort *de luxe* – but always *de luxe*. This kind of art has its parallel in fashionable slimming cures, the voluntary self-starvation of the rich, Miss Greta Garbo’s diet of carrot juice, the self-imposed martyrdom of winter sports in Switzerland or Scandinavia, with its accompaniment of broken limbs, and enduring the agony of peeling skin on torrid

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<sup>1</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Aeolian Hall’, *The New English Weekly* (30 May 1935), 134.

<sup>2</sup> Cecil Gray, *Contingencies and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947), 37.

Mediterranean beaches at the height of summer, in order to achieve the fashionable beige tint.<sup>3</sup>

Stravinsky and fashion: Gray identifies the two central issues motivating Sorabji's animadversions on the prevailing music of the post-War period. Indeed, the one term is never far from the other in Sorabji's criticism of the sleek modernity and modernism which came to replace the *kolossal* in this new age of *chic*. The terms 'Stravinsky' and 'fashion' are, to be sure, as good as interchangeable in the Sorabjian lexicon. Stravinsky is thus likened to

the Paris couturier who, stumped for ideas idiotic and eccentric enough to titillate even the average woman of "fashion", revives a style of a century ago, and palms it off upon their boob-clientèle as the smartest, the ultraest ever!<sup>4</sup>

Stravinsky's works 'are of an unbelievable stupidity, and look even more ludicrous to aural sight than those Jubilee costume pictures of ladies dressed in the 1910 period, which is ONE disadvantage of being a fashionable *couturier* in music instead of a composer'.<sup>5</sup>

The demand for Stravinsky in London gathered pace in the 1920s. Having made his European reputation in Paris with what Sorabji described as the 'international bastardy' of the Ballets Russe,<sup>6</sup> Stravinsky became the fashionable import *ne plus ultra* in music. His brand of Franco-Russian neo-classicism ousted the maximalism favoured by previous generations of predominantly German composers. There was, as Sorabji remarked, a none-too-subtle post-war ideology underpinning this turnaround. On 'the hoary legend of the "monstrous German orchestras"', Sorabji wrote in 1923 that

Great play has been made of the legend by the commercial travellers of French music – but with those people it is useless to adduce reasoned argument when it is a question of the works of the firm they represent against those of Germania & Co.<sup>7</sup>

In *Around Music*, Sorabji lists some of the diktats of the French School of thought. These explicitly contrasted the virtues of Gallic restraint with the vices of Teutonic excess: 'The school has a number of clichés by which it may always be known – French "sens inné de

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 37-8.

<sup>4</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New English Weekly* (24 September 1936), 394.

<sup>5</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: New Records (Columbia)', *The New English Weekly* (1 August 1935), 315.

<sup>6</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1932), 60.

<sup>7</sup> Sorabji, 'Inflated Orchestras', *The Musical Times* (1 May 1923), 347.

la mesure”, “German developments”, “German sentiments and heaviness”, “monstrous German orchestras”, “Wagnerian noise”, “concision”, are a few of the most bandied about’.<sup>8</sup> The neo-classical sense of proportion came as an antidote to the sheer scale of prior maximalist enterprises. As Edwin Evans explained in ‘The Foundations of Twentieth[-]Century Music’ from 1917: ‘One need only to contrast the turgidness of Reger with the clarity of Ravel to realise in what form the Latin mind is asserting itself. The period of German predominance destroyed the clarity of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. France is restoring it’.<sup>9</sup> This return to clarity was interpreted by Sorabji as not only an artificial caesura in the cumulative historical progress of music but as a cowardly and regressive retreat to uniformity. In the chapter, “‘Although No Longer the Fashion”, with Some Reflections on Modern French Music’, he explains:

In that country a work, no matter how genuine its merits as music, appears to stand little or no chance of winning the suffrages of critical opinion unless it conforms to some accepted current convention or requirement – which brings it about that French advanced musicians are the most narrowly conventional in the world – the fields of unconventionality are carefully delimited beforehand, and no trespassing beyond the bounds are tolerated, bounds marked Stravinsky [...].<sup>10</sup>

Those who strayed beyond this Stravinskian cordon were destined for neglect and obscurity: ‘Masters of real individuality and independence’ – Sorabji namechecks Delius, van Dieren, Busoni and Medtner – ‘stand absolutely no chance of recognition in Paris, where it is damnation for you if you cannot be tacked on to the fashionable “école” of the moment’.<sup>11</sup>

It is significant that, for the most part, Sorabji declined to comment on the substance of Stravinsky’s music, choosing to focus his criticism instead on Stravinsky’s école-founding popularity and fashionableness. Sorabji’s analyses – to the extent that they can be so called – amount to a mostly unsubstantiated claim that Stravinsky did not ‘get’ line, which is to say he eschewed ‘line-drawing’, the ‘interweaving of a number of

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<sup>8</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 143.

<sup>9</sup> Edwin Evans, ‘The Foundations of Twentieth Century Music’, *The Musical Times*, 58/894 (August 1917), 349.

<sup>10</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 142.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-3.

horizontal lines of melody'.<sup>12</sup> Stravinsky did not, in other words, follow that linear-contrapuntal mode of composition which, in excess (as favoured by Sorabji), tended towards turgidity. In this regard, Stravinsky's 'inability to use line makes some of us indeed question his right to be considered a composer at all'.<sup>13</sup> Sorabji heard in Stravinsky's music little other than 'chunk-bombardment',<sup>14</sup> 'wretched little fragments that are hammered at and banged with an implacable insistence that stuns people into acceptance of them',<sup>15</sup> 'the violence with which a great goblet of sound is flung into the auralage, so to speak, of the listener':<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, ears have for so long and so insensitively been battered and bombarded by the Big Berthas of 'modern harmony' culminating in the latest outrages upon the ear of Stravinsky, and his German and Russian toadies, that virtually all power of horizontal listening has been killed except among a few eccentrics who old-fashionedly still persist in regarding music as an affair of line, form, design, and not of brick-bats.<sup>17</sup>

As far as substantive analysis goes, this is about as much as we get in Sorabji's writings on Stravinsky. Stravinsky and his followers had no place in Sorabji's counter-canon: 'It is to me incomprehensible that anyone capable of appreciating the immensely intricate, complex, and subtle structures of the late Sonatas of Beethoven [...] can possibly be taken in by Stravinsky'.<sup>18</sup> Various commentators have noted that Sorabji avoided dealing with any of the compositional specifics pertaining to Stravinsky's works. Herbert Murrill, for example, remarks in his review of *Around Music* that 'Mr. Sorabji ignores any work later than "The Rite of Spring"', thus betraying 'an ignorance of the later work which Mr. Sorabji should blush to confess'.<sup>19</sup> For Murrill, Stravinsky's output 'is completely of the

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<sup>12</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: B.B.C. van Dieren Memorial Concert (Friday, 9 April.)', *The New English Weekly* (22 April 1937), 36.

<sup>13</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 39. The original publication has 'get' line; Sorabji's handwritten amendment suggests 'use'.

<sup>14</sup> Sorabji, 'Music. Mr. Murrill on Stravinsky', *The New Age* (16 March 1933), 238.

<sup>15</sup> 'Music. B.B.C. Mahler Eighth Symphony: Queen's Hall, April 15', *The New Age* (1 May 1930), 7. Sorabji was referring to the 'fate' motif of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony here, but these 'wretched little fragments' are nevertheless 'not surpassed until we come to Stravinsky'.

<sup>16</sup> Sorabji, 'Some Animadversions on Singing in General and Operatic Singing in Particular', *MILO*, 1/1 (October 1929), 20.

<sup>17</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: B.B.C. van Dieren Memorial Concert', 36.

<sup>18</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New English Weekly* (8 December 1932), 183.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert Murrill, 'Stravinsky and Sorabji: A Rejoinder', *The Monthly Musical Record* (February 1933), 36. Murrill is not strictly correct: Sorabji in fact begrudgingly gives some credit to the *soprano leggiero* line in Stravinsky's *Nightingale* (1914). See *Around Music*, 50. Later, however, Sorabji remarks that the uncanny automaton *Petrushka* (1911) 'remains by far and away the best thing the composer has ever done, his later productions being merely stages in an ever more rapid decline' (*Mi Contra Fa*, 212).

twentieth century', and it is in fact 'Mr. Sorabji and his heroes' who 'endanger, by their own insistence upon line-drawing, their own right to be considered composers'.<sup>20</sup> Vague critiques of linelessness aside, Simon John Abrahams has suggested that Sorabji's 'sustained attacks on Stravinsky and his admirers displays an ideological aversion to the latter's anti-Romantic approach, rather than any legitimate criticism of performance or structure'.<sup>21</sup> With the overturning of romanticism and the advances of modernism,

The compositional aesthetics [Sorabji] respected were being left behind, to be replaced on the one hand by the influence of Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School and on the other by Stravinsky and his admirers, leaving him to feel like an unfashionable outsider.<sup>22</sup>

Isolated in this way, Sorabji's response is entirely symptomatic of the defence mechanism of *ressentiment*: his condemnation of the fashionable insiders served to justify his own position as an unfashionable outsider. In critical terms, Sorabji's repudiation of modernism as an 'epidemic vogue'<sup>23</sup> afflicting the fashionable majority was a simple testament to cultural degeneration and, in turn, to the anachronistic timelessness of his most vaunted neglected works. Stravinsky embodied the historical force which was set to banish the late-romantic repertory Sorabji held dear to the margins and into obscurity. But, as ever, there is an animating sense of pleasure in Sorabji's response to this process; it was, after all, that which kept the *monstrum* alive, that which kept this critical *persona ingratisissima* in good employ. As one reviewer of *Around Music* put it,

Fiercely though Mr. Sorabji expresses his contempt for the philistinism about him, he is almost more biting when he comes to composers, of whom Stravinsky is the outstanding example, who have come to terms with the world.

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<sup>20</sup> Murrill, 'Stravinsky and Sorabji', 36.

<sup>21</sup> Simon John Abrahams, *Le Mauvais Jardinier: A Reassessment of the Myths and Music of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji* (King's College, University of London: PhD, 2001), 17.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-4.

<sup>23</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 165.



**Fig. 5 TIME Magazine (26 July 1948)**  
 ‘the unedifying picture of Monsieur Igor (one had almost said Igrigious) Stravinsky’  
 (Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New English Weekly* (24 September 1936), 393).

*Composers who have come to terms with the world*: this is a significant phrase, not least because neither Sorabji nor some of the key figures in his counter-canon achieved any real degree of synchronicity with their times or respective places. We will recall, for example, Mahler’s description of himself as ‘thrice homeless’, or that Reger was ‘painfully caught between a monumental past and a precarious future, brimming with the bile of his time’.<sup>24</sup> Further back still, we may remember the familiar plights of *personae ingratissimae* Busoni and Heseltine. Stravinsky, one of music history’s foremost insiders, stands in stark contrast to these unrepentant outsider figures.

Stravinsky stood as the fashionable figurehead of what Sorabji termed “modernism” ‘in the inverted commas sense’, referring to ‘the fashionable tendencies prompted, publicised and plugged by the various “establishments” revolving around this or that modern composer’.<sup>25</sup> None had a greater centripetal dynamic of influence than Stravinsky. As Constant Lambert remarked, Stravinsky’s ‘various Parisian and would-be Parisian followers [...] with touching unanimity mimic his different movements and changes of style much as the minor painters who group themselves around Picasso automatically switch over from “abstracts” to Ingres, and back again, in accordance with their leader’. Thus ‘Stravinsky stands for more than he himself has achieved, and it is as a group soul or *Zeitgeist* that he is a figure of weight’.<sup>26</sup> This sounds suspiciously similar to

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Anderson (trans. and ed.), *Selected Writings of Max Reger* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), xi.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve), *The Company I’ve Kept: Essays in Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1966), 38-9.

<sup>26</sup> Constant Lambert, *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline* [1934] (London: Penguin Books, 1948), 78.

Cecil Gray's earlier account, in his *Survey of Contemporary Music*, of Stravinsky's demotic symbolism explained by way of Hegel and Kant:

He is so entirely the product of his age and environment that he hardly seems to be an individual at all; and this is only natural, for if he were a strongly individual artist it would unavoidably prevent him from reflecting them faithfully. Stravinsky is simply an impersonal sum-total of existing terms, a synthesis of all the separate and frequently conflicting tendencies which constitute that complex phenomenon we call the spirit of the age. His name is only a convenient shorthand for a complicated mathematical equation or chemical formula. He is not a man, but an idea; in the language of Kant he is an historical postulate.<sup>27</sup>

History has confirmed Gray's philosophic speculations. As Richard Taruskin wrote in 'Stravinsky and Us' at the end of the century, 'When we use the word Stravinsky',

we no longer name a person. We mean a collection of ideas: ideas embodied in, or rather constructed out of, a certain body of highly valued musical and literary texts that acquired enormous authority in twentieth-century musical culture.<sup>28</sup>

Such is Stravinsky's canonic stature today, and it is not much of an overstatement to say that Sorabji deplored Stravinsky and *everything he stood for*, not least his music and that of his countless disciples, 'the numerous offspring of that composer, who, like the sailor, has, if not a wife, certainly musical children in every port' resembling 'boneless foetera'.<sup>29</sup> Stravinsky's celebrity – his *fashionableness* – inspired a discipleship which almost by definition demanded a degree of aesthetic de-individuation and conformity to prevailing (i.e., *Stravinskian*) stylistic tendencies (the 'bounds marked Stravinsky'). In this way he came to represent a central and centralising figure toward and around which less accomplished or less disinhibitedly individual talents could gravitate and orbit in circumpolarity. Viewed in terms of music history, its historiography and canons, there is little that is ex-centric about Stravinsky. Alongside Schoenberg he is a primary agent in the narrative of twentieth-century music and – in Sorabji's opinion – the originary point for an awful lot of fungoid modernism: 'fungus-like the monstrous mushroom – no, toadstool, for

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<sup>27</sup> Cecil Gray, *A Survey of Contemporary Music* [1924] (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 127-8.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Taruskin, 'Stravinsky and Us' [1996] in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 420.

<sup>29</sup> 'Music: Mr. Robert Hull', *The New Age* (1 December 1927), 57. 'Foetera' seems to be a Sorabjism – but its root intention seems to be clear: as composers, Stravinsky's 'offspring' were abortive.

it is definitely poisonous – of the Stravinsky reputation’.<sup>30</sup> Sorabji reserved an impressive volume of venom for composers who abortively kowtowed to this “modern” master’s reputation:

From Hindemiths and Kreneks dribble continuously a succession of works, each more imbecile and idiotic than the ones before it. It is a matter for inexhaustible astonishment that a country whose tradition of great music has been splendidly carried on by such men as Reger and Mahler should be taken in by the impudent grimacings of mentally deficient apes, who, having once seen a Stravinsky, have been trying ever since to see how like a face to his they can pull.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, Bartók’s *Dance Suite*

is disfigured by some too Stravinsky-like tricks quite unworthy of its composer. Bartok is far too big a man to pay any deference to the manneristic airs of the lap dogs [...] and one hopes this is merely a transient current across the face of his work.<sup>32</sup>

Arthur Honegger’s *Le Roi David* is a

very typical specimen of the work turned out by the epigoni of Stravinsky, as textureless and incoherent as the worst works of their master with a crudity and clumsiness of workmanship that goes even beyond his.<sup>33</sup>

Sorabji refers to Arthur Bliss’s ‘post-bellum productions’ as ‘little more than Stravinsky and a great deal of luke-warm water’,<sup>34</sup> whereas he commends Alan Bush as a ‘rather unique’ individual ‘among modern Englishmen’ in that he has ‘not grovelled at the feet of Stravinsky’.<sup>35</sup> Sorabji’s assessment of Bush goes on to highlight his own disdain for trendsetters and their trendy sets, describing Bush as ‘an interesting musical thinker rather than a tom-tom banger’ before castigating said tom-tom bangers as profiting only in metropolitan centres of fashion, ‘*genre rue de la Paix*, or King’s Road, Chelsea’.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Cecil Gray’s Book’, *The New Age* (18 December 1924), 93.

<sup>31</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Sir Thomas Beecham’, *The New Age* (11 March 1926), 225.

<sup>32</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: The Promenades’, *The New Age* (21 October 1926), 289.

<sup>33</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: B.B.C. Concert. Royal Albert Hall, March 17’, *The New Age* (7 April 1927), 273.

<sup>34</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: B.B.C. Modern Chamber Concert. Arts Theatre Club: October 15’, *The New Age* (25 October 1928), 309.

<sup>35</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Wireless’, *The New Age* (28 May 1931), 41.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*



Not only, then, were composers under the influence of Stravinsky a most damnable sort in Sorabji's opinion, but so were those cultural consumers who passively 'bought into' the Stravinskian 'hype'. Sorabji's review of a concert of Manuel de Falla's music neatly sums up the collateral dispersion of Stravinsky's influence:

[de Falla] is a disconcerting example of the deterioration that a mediocre, though very agreeable talent, can suffer under the pestilent influence of Stravinsky. Had de Falla, of course, been a really powerful creative artist, he would not have fallen thus under the sway of the reigning modish smart composer. The audience at the Aeolian Hall were an unpleasant example of the sort of people who listen to (and the fact of whose listening makes) modish composers: which, per contra and consequently, utterly damns them as people with any claims to importance.<sup>37</sup>

De Falla's audience comprised that strain of fashionista Sorabji identified as 'Bloomsbohemian', a portmanteau consisting of the *soi-disant* progressive (to Sorabji, 'pseudo-intellectual'<sup>38</sup>) Bloomsbury set and the affectedly eccentric 'glamorous outcasts' of Bohemian London.<sup>39</sup> Peter Brooker, in *Bohemia in London: The Social Scene of Early Modernism*, explains that the 'Bohemian modernist' emerges from 'the seismic shift of the new century and when the magnetism of the urban metropolis of London was at its strongest'; this fashionable consumer of the newest imports in the arts was 'the very expression of this transition in the cultural sphere'.<sup>40</sup> We will recall Gray's description of the same phenomenon above: when the old *Hotel Splendide* of romanticism had gone into administration, a new set of novelty seekers emerged who would, collectively, only be satisfied by the modernist New. The Bloomsbury Bohemian clung to the vanguardist mirage that the group to which his or her tastes conformed was 'small and eccentric against the big and conventional'.<sup>41</sup> Not so, in Sorabji's view. Witness the irony quotes in his description of 'the modish art Bloomsbohemian' as a 'damply libidinous type of human being who revolves on the fringes of "Society" and "Art" and used to haunt the performances of the Russian Ballet'.<sup>42</sup> One would have to turn to a Busoni or van Dieren to truly occupy these margins. This "modernism", on the other hand, merely presented the

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<sup>37</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: Manuel de Falla (Aeolian Hall, June 22)', *The New Age* (7 July 1927), 418.

<sup>38</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 27. It has not passed unnoticed that this particular source was published in Bloomsbury.

<sup>39</sup> See Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: the Glamorous Outcasts* (London: Tauris Parke, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Peter Brooker, *Bohemia in London: The Social Scene of Early Modernism* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), viii.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>42</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 228.

illusion of eccentric individualism and, in these terms, Stravinsky proved ‘irresistible to Bloomsbohemia’.<sup>43</sup> ‘Chelsea and Bloomsbohemia will revel in [Stravinsky’s] “Duo Concertant”. Let them, they deserve no better’.<sup>44</sup>

Sorabji’s critical assaults on Stravinsky, his epigoni and the Bloomsbohemian follower of fashion all give the lie to Sorabji’s insistence that music does not and cannot express ‘social aspirations and such odd things’.<sup>45</sup> Admittedly, his opinion on the matter was somewhat contradictory. In one piece, for example, he asserts on the one hand that ‘the contention that sociological and economic changes are accompanied by changes in musical manifestations’ is ‘an observation of platitudinous obviousness’.<sup>46</sup> On the other, five pages earlier in the very same chapter (under the title ‘Music and Muddleheadedness’, no less), he asks in reference to Bloomsbohemia,

How on earth can a ‘social condition’ make the existence of a composer, let alone a large number of them, possible? [...] And what is a ‘social demand’ and how does a musician become ‘intent upon satisfying it’; how does he set about doing so? By what means does one provide musical expression, what constitutes the precise musical expression for ‘profound social aspirations’?<sup>47</sup>

The answers can be found in Sorabji’s critiques of inverted-commas “modernism”, that movement which created coteries of composers ‘intent upon satisfying social demand’ and formed those fashionable audiences whose ‘social aspirations’ were met, however transiently, by following it. In this sense – and in spite of its own claims to highbrow socio-cultural capital – “modernism” was a popular artistic manifestation and, as such, played a significant part in the social scene of interwar musical life in London. But we’re not so much concerned here with popular culture and social history as we are with their opposites. How, then, might we discern an unpopular-cultural and antisocial history from Sorabji’s writings on composers and works contemporaneous with, but by no means sympathetic to, the ascendancy of “modernism”? Which composers in Sorabji’s counter-canon repudiated the pull of fashion? Alan Bush doesn’t quite make the cut. Nikolai

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>44</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Columbia’, *The New Age* (15 March 1934), 234.

<sup>45</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 186.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>47</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 27.

Medtner and Sergei Rachmaninov, however, do. Chapter Five gives an account of Sorabji's views and reviews of their music and London reception, showing how these two Russian exiles, steeped in a late-romantic idiom and deeply suspicious of Stravinsky's influence were, as a consequence, seemingly destined for neglect and obscurity. It comes as no surprise that Sorabji would later proudly express his 'great admiration for the work of such *violently unfashionable* composers' as Medtner and Rachmaninov.<sup>48</sup> Chapter Six deals with his critical appraisal of Karol Szymanowski, a composer whose tripartite career indiscreetly traverses the aesthetic transition from late-romantic *Kolossalismus* to a brief period of escapist exoticism to, finally, a "modernism" of the most 'Igrigious' sort. This latter case answers most clearly Sorabji's questions concerning "modern" music and the expression of social aspirations.

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<sup>48</sup> Sorabji, 'Obituary: Clinton Gray-Fisk', *The Musical Times* (July 1961), 445. Emphasis added.



## **Chapter Five**

### **On Medtner and Rachmaninov's Chronic Exile**

There is a burden which age perhaps is laying on my shoulders. Heavier than any other, it was unknown to me in my youth. It is that I have no country. I had to leave the land where I was born, where I passed my youth, where I struggled and suffered all the sorrows of the young, and where I finally achieved success.

The whole world is open to me, and success awaits me everywhere. Only one place is closed to me, and that is my own country – Russia.

SERGEI RACHMANINOV, 'Some Critical Moments in My Career' (1930)<sup>1</sup>

We, exiles scattered all over the world, detached from all heritage and succession, must earn our works of art by hard labour, like miners, and not attempt to pluck them like flowers of the fields, as we saunter through them.

NIKOLAI MEDTNER, *The Muse and the Fashion* (1935)<sup>2</sup>

We will recall Carl Dahlhaus's definition of neo-romanticism as denoting isolated instances of the romantic blossoming in an unromantic age. This holds particularly true in the cases of Nikolai Medtner (1879-1951) and Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943), two very romantic composers in a very unromantic age: Medtner was 'the last of the Russian "Old Guard"',<sup>3</sup> Rachmaninov 'one of the last great romantics'<sup>4</sup> belonging to the 'twilight world of Tchaikovsky, carried to its final conclusions'.<sup>5</sup> From the present perspective, Robert Rimm explains that 'History has cast these two Russian-to-the-core friends as twentieth-century throwbacks to an era of romanticism and nostalgia'. They were 'behind the times' and yet 'railed against modernism [...] closely aware of and repelled by the pull of fashion'.<sup>6</sup> It was precisely this attitude of defiant, unfashionable anachronicity that drew Sorabji to the works of these Russians: Medtner's 'manner of musical speech [...] owes nothing to current *modernistic* fashions';<sup>7</sup> Rachmaninov, a 'consummate master of "old-fashioned" methods' would be 'anything rather than an outright *sans-culottes*

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<sup>1</sup> Sergei Rachmaninov, 'Some Critical Moments in My Career', *The Musical Times*, 71/1048 (June 1930), 558.

<sup>2</sup> Nikolai Medtner (trans. Alfred J. Swan), *The Muse and the Fashion* (Haverford, Pennsylvania: Haverford College Bookstore, 1951), 145.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Holt, 'Nicholas Medtner (1880 [sic]-1951)', *The Gramophone* (December 1951), 149.

<sup>4</sup> David Mason Greene, 'Subject entry: Rachmaninoff' in *Greene's Biographical Encyclopedia of Composers* [1985], excerpted in Robert E. Cunningham, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 52.

<sup>5</sup> Guido Molinari, 'Sergheij Rachmaninov: Nel segno della tradizione russa' [1993], translated and excerpted in *ibid.*, 75.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Rimm, *The Composer-Pianists: Hamelin and The Eight* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 2002), 116, 157-8.

<sup>7</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New Age* (5 April 1934), 273.

“modernist””.<sup>8</sup> One of ‘the most individual and outstandingly impressive figures of the time’, Rachmaninov was ‘far aloof, as a creative artist, from the fads, fashions and follies of contemporary music festivals’.<sup>9</sup> A selection of vignettes drawn from the biographical literature will suffice to illustrate Sorabji’s point that Medtner and Rachmaninov tended to avoid the “modern” scene whenever and wherever possible. Medtner, who was known to walk out of Stravinsky performances,<sup>10</sup> once found himself allocated a seat near Stravinsky at a reception in New York in 1930. Rachmaninov, also on the guest list, leaned over to violinist Fritz Kreisler to sarcastically whisper: ‘Medtner likes Stravinsky very much, and it’s very good that they’re sitting so close to one another!’<sup>11</sup> Very mature: the image of sniggering schoolboys in assembly is hard to scratch. Prokofiev was similarly cold-shouldered, with Medtner and Rachmaninov purposefully avoiding him and opting instead to celebrate New Year in New York in the company of conservative romantic Alexander Glazunov.<sup>12</sup> Earlier, in 1916, Medtner and Rachmaninov were also reported laughing at a concert of Prokofiev performing his own works. According to Prokofiev himself, Medtner announced that ‘If this is music then I am no musician’.<sup>13</sup> But it was Prokofiev who had the last laugh, as he explained in 1927: ‘Medtner commanded neither a large public nor a following among leading musicians – a combination I reaped the benefits of’.<sup>14</sup> Were Sorabji part of Rachmaninov and Medtner’s entourage, we can certainly imagine him steering clear not only of Stravinsky but similarly dodging that ‘diluted epigonus of Stravinsky’, Prokofiev.<sup>15</sup>

A picture of reactionary and revolutionary factions emerges from these episodes, the former marginal (with no definite figurehead, although Rachmaninov and Medtner certainly loom large) and the latter making great gains under the leadership of Stravinsky. What it illustrates is the potential fate of composers who do not follow the currents of fashion or, in this case, toe the party line (those ‘bounds marked Stravinsky’ are once more drawn). For Sorabji, Medtner and Rachmaninov were coursing along the ‘Great Main Stream’ understood as the accumulation and continuation of the nineteenth-century romantic tradition. But the course of history as apprehended at the time suggested they

<sup>8</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: L.S.O. Rachmaninoff. November 18’, *The New Age* (28 November 1929), 44.

<sup>9</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Rachmaninov’, *The New English Weekly* (22 April 1943), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Barrie Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 156.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>15</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Columbia Records’, *The New English Weekly* (23 January 1936), 294.

were in fact floundering in the backwaters of that tradition. Eric Blom transposes the metaphor on to dry land (reeling it in, as it were):

Judging by the extraordinary surety of touch that informs everything Stravinsky does, one feels certain that he will soon find himself at home on the new ground he explores [...]. It is precisely because Stravinsky continues to experiment that he will remain one of the great constructive forces in music. The Russian eclectic school, with Rachmaninov who follows in the wake of Tchaikovsky, and Medtner who pursues the Beethoven-Brahms direction [...] does not promise any future, because such parasite plants can have no independent existence.<sup>16</sup>

Sorabji would not entertain such criticisms of Rachmaninov or Medtner; Blom's was just another example of the 'malignant imbecility and venom of English journalists' when it came to these two.<sup>17</sup> For example, Sorabji writes of 'the utter failure of the mass of English "critical opinion"' to 'understand or appreciate Medtner's music'. Having put Hanlon's razor to good use – which is to say, having assayed whether the opinion in this instance should be attributed to 'malice or sheer stupidity' – he concludes, 'I think malice has it'.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Rachmaninov 'is destined never to get a fair deal from English-speaking musical journalism'.<sup>19</sup> Sorabji writes of 'a national antipathy' in England towards Rachmaninov. Recalling Mahler's plight, 'The case of Rachmaninov and English critics (generally speaking) is analogous with that of Elgar and French and Italian critics'.<sup>20</sup> On 'the attitude taken up in this country to Rachmaninoff as a composer by the critics', he claims that, 'Every performance, every recording of a work by this great and powerful Master is the signal for a chorus of sneers, cheap gibes [and] contemptuous disparagement'.<sup>21</sup>

Sorabji's unwavering advocacy for both Rachmaninov and Medtner was liable to land him in a spot of bother, as was to be the case with the powers-that-were at the *Musical*

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<sup>16</sup> Eric Blom, 'Constructive and Destructive Influences in Music', *The Musical Quarterly*, 9/3 (July 1923), 391.

<sup>17</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: The Porcupine Press, 1947), 173. As noted in Chapter 3, Blom was not English but represented a certain strain of critical-discursive Englishness.

<sup>18</sup> Sorabji, 'The Greatness of Medtner' in Richard Holt (ed.), *Nicolas Medtner (1879 [sic] – 1951)* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1955), 131.

<sup>19</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: B.B.C. Symphony Concert (Queen's Hall, February 10)', *The New English Weekly* (4 March 1937), 415.

<sup>20</sup> Sorabji, 'G. W. and Rachmaninov', *The Gramophone* (July 1941), 39.

<sup>21</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: Rachmaninoff and the English Critics', *The New English Weekly* (18 February 1942), 198.

*Times* in 1941. The editor was compelled to censor Sorabji's and that other 'violently unfashionable' critic Clinton Gray-Fisk's response to a wholly reasonable article by William McNaught, in which he claims that Rachmaninov's First and Second Concertos 'do not fully represent [his] claims to be a composer'<sup>22</sup> (for the sake of balance, McNaught would also point out Medtner's obscurity: 'Medtner's presence in the world of music is apt to be rather shadowy'<sup>23</sup>). Before publishing Sorabji's and Gray-Fisk's responses, the editor is compelled to stop press and intervene:

We believe in the free expression of opinion, and do not deny the claim of these correspondents to be heard. But when they use the words 'insolence', 'impertinence', 'vapid' (Sorabji), 'inept', 'impertinent', 'fatuous', 'impudent', 'spiteful', 'malicious' and 'ludicrous' (Gray-Fisk), they make a further claim that cannot be granted. The tenor of both letters is well described by Mr. Sorabji's words: 'the implication . . . that no other opinion is possible or legitimate'.<sup>24</sup>

Gray-Fisk probably won out, at least in terms of volume of invective (his letter, according to the editor, 'would have occupied three columns of the *Musical Times*'<sup>25</sup>). After a period of repose, Gray-Fisk returns in November to the issue of McNaught's 'temperamental aversion to Rachmaninov's music', and makes a significant – but evidently overlooked – point. On McNaught's contention that "Rachmaninov has a more varied and extensive vocabulary of pianistic means than any other living composer", Gray-Fisk points out that 'This is untrue':

An examination of the works of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji shows very clearly that this composer has carried piano writing to heights undreamt of by any composer of any period. Evidently Mr. McNaught does not know Mr. Sorabji the composer (as distinct from Mr. Sorabji the critic), since his compositions are ignored by Mr. McNaught in his book purporting to deal with 'Modern Music and Musicians'. It is hoped that Mr. McNaught will rectify this omission in the next edition of his primer.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Clinton Gray-Fisk, 'Gramophone Notes: Rachmaninoff's Piano Concertos 1 and 3', *The Musical Times*, 82/1176 (February 1941), 66.

<sup>23</sup> William McNaught, 'Gramophone Notes: Medtner's Sonata in G minor', *The Musical Times*, 84/1210 (December 1943), 368.

<sup>24</sup> Editor, 'Rachmaninov's Piano Concertos', *The Musical Times*, 82/11778 (April 1941), 156.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Clinton Gray-Fisk, 'Rachmaninov', *The Musical Times*, 82/1185 (November 1941), 410-11.



The question, inevitably, is this: who, knowing Mr. Sorabji the critic, would have the temerity to include Mr. Sorabji the composer in a book purporting to deal with *Modern Music and Musicians*? Mr. Sorabji the critic makes it a point beyond dispute that he has no affiliation with the term ‘modern’ (with or without inverted commas – but especially with). Mr. McNaught would no doubt have been only too aware of this fact. It is suggested that to this dissociation from ‘modernism’ as a critic is owed in part his own neglect as a composer in fashionably modern times.

### The lateness of Medtner

In ‘The Greatness of Medtner’, Sorabji claimed to be ‘among the very first in this country to know, admire and appreciate the master’s work’.<sup>27</sup> He recalled searching for a translation of the two Tyutchev stanzas epigrammatically heading Medtner’s ‘Night Wind’ Sonata (Op. 25, No. 2, dedicated to Rachmaninov):

these words I, as a small boy, greatly daring, wrote to the famous Mrs. Rosa Newmarch to ask her to translate for me, which she most kindly did, expressing astonishment that anybody at the time even *knew* of Medtner’s name in this country, let alone was studying his work! . . . This was in 1912.<sup>28</sup>

In early March 1914, Sorabji recommends the Sonata to Heseltine, with the reservation that it ‘is not particularly modern in idiom, but it is intensely Russian and quite individual. It is a strange gloomy work with a curious pianissimo sighing ending’.<sup>29</sup> By 1920, Sorabji was making public claims for Medtner as ‘one of the lesser-known Russians’ whose ‘Night Wind’ Sonata ‘should be more known’, but wasn’t. This – from his *Sackbut* article on ‘Modern Piano Technique’ – is the first instance we find of Sorabji actively enlisting Medtner as a means to critique contemporaneous, which is to say “modern”, trends. For Sorabji, this obscure composer and his unjustly neglected works both gave evidence – albeit in the negative – to cultural decline. Thus Medtner’s ‘remarkable work’ displays a ‘freedom from any of the current cant of the day’. ‘So many of our contemporary note jugglers’, on the other hand, ‘must be like Andersen’s Elf-king and his daughters – masks,

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<sup>27</sup> Sorabji, ‘The Greatness of Medtner’, 122.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>29</sup> Letter dated March [early] 1914.

hollow behind'.<sup>30</sup> Eight years later Leonid Sabaneev, in a *Musical Times* piece (in translation) on 'Nikolai Medtner', issued an appeal to all those musicians, critics and concertgoers 'who have not yet been carried away by the herd sense', by 'collective hypnosis and self-glorification and advertisement', to those who 'have not allied themselves to this so-called "new" art [...] such musicians should at once interest themselves in Medtner'.<sup>31</sup> But not *all* at once! It would not do for Medtner to become *too* popular, let alone fashionable: Sorabji did, after all, need something to complain about. Whatever the response to Sabaneev's plea, his article serves as a sound introduction to Medtner as a 'violently unfashionable' composer with whom Sorabji was set to sympathise. 'Like his friend Rachmaninov', writes Sabaneev, Medtner 'has made no concession to modernity: he has repudiated it' so much so that he and composers in similar vein 'have seemed amazingly old-fashioned and remote'. Indeed, 'deeply romantic in its trend', Medtner's music 'was always markedly behind the times' and, as such, was 'unjustly and strangely allowed to remain in obscurity'. Here is a composer 'estranged and isolated [...] by a complete rupture with the contemporary musical outlook':

On the European horizon his creative work has passed unnoticed; his merits have always been entirely beyond the limits of the crude receptive faculty of the contemporary public and critic, and even of composers and musicians. He and his work belong to another sphere, to another age.<sup>32</sup>

It would surely prove difficult to find a more succinct pronouncement on Medtner's outsidership than that comprising Sabaneev's last sentence. For present purposes, less deft references to Medtner's anatomic and anachronistic eccentricity will have to suffice. As *The Times* reported in 1943, Medtner's work 'is an anachronism [...], it is music that will find little response in a world that has moved through several revolutions of taste'.<sup>33</sup> According to Ernest Newman, Medtner's 'peculiar world' is 'neither of yesterday, to-day nor to-morrow, and so not likely to make many friends among partisans of any school'.<sup>34</sup> But this is all perhaps just as well, since Medtner 'cheerfully admitted that he was something of an anachronism'.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Sorabji, 'Modern Piano Technique', *The Sackbut*, 1/3 (July 1920), 118.

<sup>31</sup> Leonid Sabaneev, 'Nikolai Medtner', *The Musical Times*, 69/1021 (March 1928), 209-10.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Anon., 'The Gramophone', *The Times* (21 December 1943), 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ernest Newman, 'This Week's Music: Medtner', *The Sunday Times* (22 February 1931), 5.

<sup>35</sup> Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, xii.

Sorabji was similarly cheerful about – or at least encouraged by – this state of affairs. Not long at all after the English-language publication of Sabaneev's article (hot on its heels, in fact), Sorabji was writing that Medtner's 'aloofness from the fashionable musical circles of Berlin and Paris [...] is one of the by no means least attractive things about him'.<sup>36</sup> Later he reminds readers that Medtner's 'manner of musical speech [...] owes nothing to current *modernistic* fashions':

As I have had, on other and earlier occasions to point out, he does not so much flout contemporary prejudices, as merely ignore them. The result is in the highest degree interesting and attractive.<sup>37</sup>

Later still, in 'The Greatness of Medtner', Sorabji remarks with tongue-in-cheek that

Medtner has committed the unforgivable sin of expressing himself forcibly and powerfully against many of the fashionable tricks of the time, has shown his complete indifference and aloofness from them, as to all passing winds of musical *coiffure* and *couture*.<sup>38</sup>

How would the metropolitan modernists, accustomed to those gently coif-ruffling gusts whistling through the fashionable quarters of Paris and Berlin, withstand the Siberian squall of Medtner's Night Wind? They merely ignored it. As Robert Rimm notes, Medtner's presence in Paris 'proved inconsequential, as the focus was then on Les Six, Ravel, and other contemporary artists not overly concerned with classical music's past'.<sup>39</sup> Not that Medtner appeared too keen to advertise himself, as his November 1921 letter to Rachmaninov from Berlin indicates: 'I have felt that I have landed myself in a world not my own and that I am absolutely unable to go and pester this world in order to secure some kind of patronage'.<sup>40</sup> According to Richard Holt, 'being an artist who is content to create and leave the result to the world for judgment', Medtner 'is not the man to work of set purpose for popularity'.<sup>41</sup> In 'Medtner and the Music of Our Times', Alfred J. Swan

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<sup>36</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: Medtner Recital. Aeolian: Feb. 16<sup>th</sup>', *The New Age* (15 March 1928), 236-7.

<sup>37</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New Age* (5 April 1934), 273. Emphasis in original.

<sup>38</sup> Sorabji, 'The Greatness of Medtner', 131-2.

<sup>39</sup> Rimm, *The Composer-Pianists*, 123.

<sup>40</sup> 'As for the estrangement you feel', replied Rachmaninov, 'I must say that I feel it here too . . . I see very few real and sincere musicians around! It seems you may be the only one left'. Quoted in Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, 148.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Holt, 'Nicolas Medtner', *The Medtner Society*, Volume I (Middlesex, England: The Gramophone Company, Ltd., 1948), 4.

similarly explains that Medtner ‘refused to make his art a faithful mirror of contemporary psychology [...]. This alone was enough to blind his fashionable critics’:

Those who approach a work of art in an exterior and modish frame of mind, looking merely for exciting novelty, nerve-racking stimulants, and a dose of flattery to prevailing fashions, will be completely disappointed.<sup>42</sup>

The stage was thus set before London’s fashionable critics and concertgoers so reviled by Sorabji. He writes that ‘In this country’,

Medtner’s absolute independence of all the various modish cliques of neo-this, poly- or atonal that, twelve-tone something or other, has deprived him of the organised press-gangs and professional clagues of any of these, mercifully indeed, for the superb artistic and musical integrity of Medtner has *rien a faire* in galleys of *that* sort, to which the striking of an attitude, the assumption of a pose, no matter how extravagant, vulgar and *outré*, is the one indispensable passport to admittance. The quiet dignity of manner and utterance, the weight and import of musical matter in Medtner’s work place it at the very opposite pole to all that kind of thing.<sup>43</sup>

Medtner’s independence from all the tricks of the clearly lucrative “modern” trade granted his music *sui generis* status:<sup>44</sup> ‘it is so individual as to be utterly unmistakable to those who know (and therefore love) its substance’. It is

entirely free from laboured neologisms, from monomaniacal arbitrary mechanical systems that have no conceivable relation with what has gone before, musical language that has not grown and developed naturally and of itself, as all language has ever done in every time and in every place, but is a manufactured monstrosity like those linguistic ersatz horrors, the manufactured ‘international’ languages like Esperanto, Volapuk and the rest of them, and which are so international that only the Esperantists and Volapukists understand them.<sup>45</sup>

Sorabji makes a contentious claim with regard to Medtner’s output that it belonged ‘to the great main stream’, that it

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<sup>42</sup> Alfred J. Swan, ‘Medtner and the Music of Our Times’, *Music & Letters*, 8/1 (January 1927), 47, 54.

<sup>43</sup> Sorabji, ‘The Greatness of Medtner’, 124. Emphasis in original.

<sup>44</sup> Indeed, ‘Medtner’s music is entirely *sui generis*’. See Holt, ‘Nicolas Medtner’, *The Medtner Society*, Volume I, 4).

<sup>45</sup> Sorabji, ‘The Greatness of Medtner’, 122.

has the sweep, power, generosity, copiousness of the main stream, that does not lose itself in a stagnant morass and backwater, music that as plainly and truly belongs to the natural tradition of musical history as Norman Douglas and Stephen Hudson belong to the natural tradition of English literature and as, let us say, Gertrude Stein does not.<sup>46</sup>

It is best left to literary critics and historians to adjudge the relative standing of a Douglas or Hudson next to a Stein in that particular canon. What is of more immediate concern here is Sorabji's conception of the 'great main stream' as an accumulative force in and of music history, one predicated on ever-expanding forms and ever-greater complexity. It is an organicist, evolutionary view which, as considered in Part II, gave rise to the *kolossal* at the turn of the century. But the *kolossal* was alternatively regarded in England as an expired maximalist enterprise, the expression of an outdated, late-romantic ideology discomfitingly redolent of a supposed Germanic superiority. When the 'simplicity fetish' associated with fashionable brands of Franco-Russian modernism supplanted the *kolossal*, Medtner 'resuscitates for us the forgotten silhouettes of the great romantics'.<sup>47</sup> At this juncture it is interesting to note that Medtner was apt to be compared to a key colossalist – he was habitually referred to as 'the Russian Reger'.<sup>48</sup> On this basis, Sorabji explicitly assigns Medtner's music to 'the great main stream'.<sup>49</sup> Others, however, were less optimistic about the repercussions of this likeness: Reger, they knew, represented the end of the line and 'Medtner, though a Russian, belongs to the German school of romanticism in decline'.<sup>50</sup> Naturally enough – and bearing Sorabji's conception of the ever-expanding 'natural tradition' of music in mind – Medtner's works were criticised for being 'too turgid',<sup>51</sup> for having 'too many notes'.<sup>52</sup> Newman, in another direct comparison between Reger and his putative Russian counterpart, complained that Medtner's pianism 'has made him occasionally overload his scores with notes', an elaboration of detail 'that goes beyond what the idea really requires or will really bear'.<sup>53</sup> Watson Lyle comments on Medtner's 'often crowded pages'<sup>54</sup> and, drawing an important distinction to be addressed

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>47</sup> Sabaneev (trans. S. W. Pring), 'Medtner', *Music & Letters*, 8/3 (July 1927), 331.

<sup>48</sup> Holt, 'Nicolas Medtner (1880-1951)', *The Gramophone* (December 1951), 149.

<sup>49</sup> Sorabji, 'The Greatness of Medtner', 123. See also 'Music', *The New English Weekly* (8 October 1936), 435.

<sup>50</sup> Anon., 'Mysore Concert: Nikolai Medtner', *Times* (7 November 1950), 8.

<sup>51</sup> Anon., 'Mr. Nicolas Medtner', *Times* (14 November 1951), 8.

<sup>52</sup> Anon., 'Mysore Concert'. Scriabin similarly dismissed Medtner for having 'too many notes' (Rimm, 135).

<sup>53</sup> Ernest Newman, 'Medtner', *The Musical Times* (January 1915), 10. See also Alfred J. Swan, 'Medtner', *The Musical Times*, 63/955 (September 1922), 618.

<sup>54</sup> Watson Lyle, 'Medtner and His Music', *The Sackbut*, 11/10 (May 1931), 263.

with regard to Sorabji's writings on Szymanowski, Lyle remarks that 'the crowding on the composer's pages' is 'more visual than aural'.<sup>55</sup> The compulsion to 'spawn' notes was, as we know, more in keeping with the monstrous maximalist predilections of the past than to what Sorabji describes as the "modern" 'simplicity fetish' reigning in Medtner's present. And so the comparisons kept coming: in Sabaneev's view, again likening Medtner to Reger, 'both of them turn protestingly to the monumental majesty of the past'.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, having acknowledged Medtner as a platitudinous "'Russian cousin of Reger'" (mark the quotation), Oskar von Riesemann concludes that 'this is just why Medtner cannot be at present considered a composer in sympathy with his time. He resists the current period, and strikes out consciously against it'.<sup>57</sup> For Sorabji, these resonances with Reger are precisely what sweep Medtner along the currents of his particular notion of 'the great main stream'. Of Medtner's Second Piano Concerto, for example, Sorabji writes:

This work is, in my opinion, without any possibility of contestation, the best and most interesting that has been written for the piano since the Reger over twenty years ago. Here is music that is in the main-stream, not in the stagnant bog to which all "progress" for its own sake, in music as indeed in all other matters, infallibly leads [...].<sup>58</sup>

He goes on to mention the Night Wind Sonata as 'one of the greatest of existing piano works, to be classed with the Reger Variations upon a Theme of Bach, and the Fantasia Contrappuntistica of Busoni'.<sup>59</sup> Not, then, the most audience-friendly of compositions. As W. R. Anderson wrote of Reger's output, 'One or two heavy doses of such works, and a recital audience retires discouraged – to the "pictures", maybe. Small blame to it'.<sup>60</sup> More of that in due course.

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<sup>55</sup> Watson Lyle, 'Modern Composers VI: Nicolas Raslovitch Medtner', *The Bookman*, 82/492 (September 1932), 297.

<sup>56</sup> Leonid Sabaneev, 'Medtner', 330.

<sup>57</sup> Oskar von Riesemann (trans. Bianca Karpeles), 'Nikolai Medtner', *The Sackbut*, 5 (May 1925), 303.

<sup>58</sup> 'Music', *The New English Weekly* (8 October 1936), 435.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* This may as well be the moment to disclose that Medtner decided Reger was too decadent for his tastes, and was left 'completely depressed and crushed by this disgraceful phenomenon'. For what it's worth, he also thought Busoni a 'smart aleck'. See Martyn, 45 and 154.

<sup>60</sup> W. R. Anderson, 'The Organ Works of Rheinberger by Harvey Grace', *Musical Times*, 66/992 (October 1925), 911.

‘A largely pointless exercise’: Medtner’s ‘bolts against modernism’

Medtner was not, as it happens, particularly averse to cinema-going. Exiled in London, he might go into Stratford to watch *Lady Hamilton*, *Goodbye, Mr Chips* or perhaps *The Great Mr Handel*, ‘but overall it was inevitably a monotonous life, cut off from the world at large’.<sup>61</sup> ‘I compose every day’, wrote Medtner in 1941, ‘but I do not know for whom or for what purpose’.<sup>62</sup> He was – in the least derogatory and most sympathetic sense of the word – an unpopular composer, refusing to capitulate or simply incapable of ceding to “modern” fashions, swimming against the currents running through the world at large. Sorabji’s writings on Medtner reveal that he sympathised with his unpopularity and unfashionableness and that, as a critic, this sympathy motivated a significant degree of animus against the popular and fashionable. He confidently asserts that Medtner ‘does not so much flout contemporary prejudices, as merely ignore them’, that Medtner shows ‘his complete indifference and aloofness from them’. This is not quite true. Sorabji does not appear to have been familiar with Medtner’s principal literary effort, ‘his war chariot against contemporary music and aesthetic (un)consciousness’,<sup>63</sup> *The Muse and the Fashion*. Released by Rachmaninov’s publishing house Tair in Paris in 1935, it was not until 1951 that it underwent English translation and, even then, that was in North America. There are only two physical copies occupying as many shelves in UK libraries. It seems that Sorabji didn’t know about it (he makes no references to this work); if he did, we can be sure he’d have even greater sympathy for Medtner. The exalted Muse of Medtner’s title is largely a product of nineteenth-century German romantic ideology springing from its progenitor, Goethe; the maligned Fashion is twentieth-century modernism under the leadership of Stravinsky. How could Sorabji have disapproved of such statements as the following?

Latterly one has begun to talk about a return to simplicity, about some sort of ‘neo-classicism’.[...] Those ‘neos’ and ‘isms’ make us suppose in spite of ourselves that this return was dictated by the demands not of the muse, but of the fashion.<sup>64</sup>

Making use of Sorabji’s scare quotes, Medtner asks, ‘What is “modernism”?’ The answer is ‘The fashion for fashion’:

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<sup>61</sup> Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, 237.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>64</sup> Medtner, *The Muse and the Fashion*, 95.

Modernism is the tacit accord of a whole generation to expel the Muse, the former inspirer and teacher of poets and musicians, and install Fashion in her place, as autocratic ruler and supreme judge. But since only what has been begotten by Fashion can go out of fashion, modernists are eternally the victims of her caprices and changes, victims that are constantly doomed by her to 'epigonism'. The appeal of this 'epigonism' compels the cowardly artist to run after Fashion, but she, the artful wench, does not stop in her flight, and always leaves him behind.<sup>65</sup>

The 'routine of fashion' is 'normally established by the majority, that is, by the mediocre and poor minds':

Nowadays the revolutionists are the legions of mediocrities who deliberately cling to fashion, as to a revolutionary red rag, the purpose of which is to cover up their unconscious ignorance, that very middle-class ignorance which is usually called conservatism, but is in reality simply a revolt of conservatory students.<sup>66</sup>

Under the heading, 'The PROBLEMATICISM of CONTEMPORARY ART', Medtner (presumably with irony) writes that 'All those "isms" – devil[s]'s tails that have grown on our conceptions of art – are nothing but preconceived problems':

If there is any kind of 'problem' to be posed in art, the sole problem of every epoch should be the preservation of a continuous connection with the great past. In our contest for a universal cataclysm, in our anxiety to 'create an epoch', we break off all connection with past epochs. And when we notice that nothing has come of our endeavours, we begin to look back and instinctively search for the cut-off thread.<sup>67</sup>

Medtner's war chariot against modernism proved singularly ineffective. As a historical document it is certainly interesting (historical documents always are, to *someone* at least; Medtner's has had some mileage here), if only as a demonstration of how to exclude oneself from common history, leaving barely a trace in the margins of its textbooks. It was simply a symptom of being out of time and place: the ravages of anachronicity and anapocricity. As Barrie Martyn explains, the publication of Medtner's *Muse and the Fashion* at that particular time in that particular place effectively consigned his words to oblivion: its Parisian non-reception 'ensured that it would first be ignored and then

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 129.



forgotten'.<sup>68</sup> Hamish Milne has described it as 'a largely pointless exercise to the world at large, because the battle between modernists and conservatives had long been won and lost'.<sup>69</sup> For Rimm, Medtner's 'bolts against modernism hardly endeared him to cutting-edge musical thinkers or to their influential institutions', and this 'caused many people to see him as a stubborn outsider'.<sup>70</sup> *The Muse and the Fashion* is part and parcel of 'the seemingly preordained Medtnerian fate of neglect and obscurity',<sup>71</sup> and in this light it can be read alongside Sorabji's own anti-modernist pronouncements as similar causes of his own neglect and obscurity. By not aligning with modernity and modernism as expressions of cultural-artistic contemporaneity – not, for example, vying for a place in such a reference work as McNaught's *Modern Music and Musicians* – they both appear first anachronistically and, second – in retrospect – as inassimilable to totalizing historical account of twentieth-century music. Ignored first, forgotten second. In short, neither Medtner nor Sorabji (nor Rachmaninov) ceded to the pull of the historical mainstream and this had, for a time at least, significant implications for their standing as composers.

#### Rachmaninov's Premature Burial: the popularity of the Prelude

Unlike Medtner, who has yet to make any significant inroads into the standard repertory, Rachmaninov has become something of a household name. It might therefore strike us as a little odd that his name should crop up with some frequency in Sorabji's counter-canon of neglected works. But it is worth remembering that Rachmaninov only achieved any real acclaim for his output as a whole posthumously; in his day, he was considered deeply unfashionable. Like Medtner, he was written off as an anachronism, a superannuated relic of nineteenth-century Russian romanticism. His obituaries tend to bear this out. Secure in the knowledge that Rachmaninov would be hard pushed to advance (musically or otherwise) beyond the grave, Edwin Evans, for instance, concluded that he was 'definitely a product of the nineteenth century whom the passing of time had left unchanged'.<sup>72</sup> *The Musical Times* similarly noted that, 'As a composer Rachmaninov is usually put down as a late survivor of the romantic era, for his harmony was of the nineteenth century, and much

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<sup>68</sup> Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, 216.

<sup>69</sup> Hamish Milne, 'Medtner and the Muse' (typescript of lecture given at the University of London, February 2003), 6. [http://www.hamishmilne.com/inaugural\\_lecture.pdf](http://www.hamishmilne.com/inaugural_lecture.pdf) [accessed 20 April 2015].

<sup>70</sup> Rimm, *The Composer-Pianists*, 125.

<sup>71</sup> Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, 229.

<sup>72</sup> Edwin Evans, 'Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)' [1943], excerpted in Cunningham, 897.

of his melody was of an emotional cast favoured by the late romantics'.<sup>73</sup> 'The death of Sergei Rachmaninoff', reported *The Times*, 'severs more than one tie with the recent past. He was a survivor of the old Russia [...]. He belonged to the waning tradition of composer-virtuosi. And he was a romantic untouched by any modernism later than Liszt's'.<sup>74</sup> Whatever claims to modernism might be made on Rachmaninov's behalf,<sup>75</sup> his at the very least remained unencumbered by Sorabji's condemnatory inverted commas: 'Here is music that, in its great sweep, power and real grandeur belongs to the great mainstream – it is in the Royal Line of all great European music of all times and places'.<sup>76</sup> Sorabji's conception of the mainstream was, however, more than a little incongruent with that of the general consensus. Critical opinion at large held that, not only was Rachmaninov a 'late romantic', but that his lateness in this regard considerably overshot the mark. As a 1937 *Times* review of Rachmaninov's setting of Poe's *The Bells* noted, this was one of those 'monsters of orchestration [...] those enormous scores written in the opulent days before the War'.<sup>77</sup> Sorabji adds a corrective to this view, one reminiscent of his defence of Mahler's 'monstrous German orchestra' as allegedly employed in the more-or-less conventionally scored Ninth Symphony: 'In point of fact the score of "The Bells" is written for the normal symphony orchestra of the post-war or pre-war days'.<sup>78</sup> Later, in 1958, Sorabji remarked that 'Niagaras of the dirty and malodorous waters of "modern" music have poured over us since the first London performance of Rachmaninov's Third Symphony twenty or so years ago', but 'nothing has effaced the impression that it is one of the greatest of the post-Mahler symphonies'. Sorabji cites the maximalist credentials of Rachmaninov's Third Symphony – 'its magnificence and spaciousness and grandeur of style, its subdued and sombre richness' – as hallmarks altogether constitutive of the Royal Line or mainstream of music.<sup>79</sup> But, as his reference to the 'Niagaras' of modernism indicates, he was aware that a torrent of new music had swamped the works of one of his favourite post-Mahlerians. They were no longer current, as another *Times* reviewer wrote

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<sup>73</sup> Anon., 'Sergei Vassilievitch Rachmaninov', *The Musical Times*, 84/1202 (April 1943), 128.

<sup>74</sup> Anon., 'Rachmaninoff's Trilemma', *The Times* (2 April 1943), 6.

<sup>75</sup> There haven't been many. See, for example, William Flanagan, 'Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Twentieth-Century Composer', *Tempo*, 22 (Winter 1951-2), 4-8: 'Rachmaninoff's last works suggest a sincere attempt at stylistic revaluation in terms of an age that was leaving him behind' (8). More recently, Charles Fisk concluded that Rachmaninov's music 'not only was written but could only have been written in the twentieth [century]' ('Nineteenth-Century Music? The Case of Rachmaninov', *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music*, 31/3 (Spring 2008), 265.

<sup>76</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: H.M.V. Records', *The New English Weekly* (12 June 1941), 80.

<sup>77</sup> Anon., 'B.B.C. Concert: "The Bells"', *The Times* (11 February 1937), 12.

<sup>78</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: B.B.C. Symphony Concert (Queen's Hall, February 10)', *New English Weekly* (4 March 1937), 415.

<sup>79</sup> Sorabji, 'Broadcast Music', *The Musical Times* (May 1958), 258.

with regard to Rachmaninov's Third Symphony: its composer 'is lingering in the past, and has no message for or comment on the life of to-day'.<sup>80</sup>

The impression given by these accounts would suggest that Rachmaninov was an unpopular composer with nothing relevant to say to listeners in the first half of the twentieth century. Rachmaninov's fame in his own lifetime rested rather on his executive pianism and on the successes of only two works, the Prelude in C-sharp minor and Second Piano Concerto. They were consequently cast aside by Sorabji. In considering his responses to the mass uptake of these pieces, it becomes clear that, for Sorabji, a work's popularity was tantamount to its invalidation as music worthy of his praise. Rachmaninov's Prelude is a particularly interesting case in this regard. Described as 'one of the world's most popular piano pieces', it was far from neglected.<sup>81</sup> The London *Times* charts its reception and rise to fame and eventual infamy, first reporting Rachmaninov's cousin Alexander Siloti introducing this 'difficult and noisy "prelude"' in 1895.<sup>82</sup> From then on, its proliferation was exponential. In 1898 came a report of a concert including 'Rachmaninoff's well-known prelude';<sup>83</sup> the following year it was 'Rachmaninoff's popular prelude';<sup>84</sup> in the next it becomes 'the famous "Prelude" of Rachmaninoff'.<sup>85</sup> During the War it appeared with a sigh of predictability as 'Rachmaninov's inevitable Prelude'<sup>86</sup> and, by 1927, in the *Times*' leader on 'The Classical in Music', its mainstream canonic status was assured.<sup>87</sup> A year later, Sidney Grew remarked that

Rachmaninoff, by reason of the notorious *Prelude in C sharp minor* [...] is as well-known by name as Tchaikowski. Medtner [...] has no similar piece of abounding popularity in the list of his works, and he is therefore not so well known.<sup>88</sup>

And that summarily answers the question of Medtner's neglect. But this is not to overlook the fact that the success of the Prelude had the effect of overshadowing Rachmaninov's

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<sup>80</sup> Anon., 'The Gramophone: Rachmaninoff's Third Symphony', *The Times* (22 April 1941), 6.

<sup>81</sup> Karen Bottge, 'Reading Adorno's Reading of the Rachmaninov Prelude in C-sharp Minor: Metaphors of Destruction, Gestures of Power', *Journal for the Society of Music Theory*, 17/4 (December 2011), 1.1.

<sup>82</sup> Anon., 'M. Siloti's Recital', *The Times* (6 March 1895), 4. Another publication suggests Tobias Matthay gave the Prelude's first London performance in the same year (Anon., "'Rachmaninoff'", Vol. 1', *Musical News*, 12/324 (15 May 1897), 463).

<sup>83</sup> Anon., 'Steinway Hall', *The Times* (1 April 1898), 14.

<sup>84</sup> Anon., 'Miss Heyman's Recital', *The Times* (1 June 1899), 6.

<sup>85</sup> Anon., 'NEW ORGAN MUSIC', *The Times* (26 March 1900), 13.

<sup>86</sup> Anon., 'A Rimsky Korsakov Symphony', *The Times* (18 November 1916), 6.

<sup>87</sup> Anon., 'The Classical in Music', *The Times*, (29 December 1928), 6.

<sup>88</sup> Sidney Grew, 'The Rachmaninov Preludes for Piano Collected Edition', *British Musician*, 4/2 (April 1928), 54.

other efforts, of keeping his development as a composer out of public awareness. In comparison, his remaining output was as good as neglected from the outset, destined – or so it seemed – for obscurity. This imbalance presented Sorabji with an opportunity to make connoisseurial gains, ‘especially knowing the quantity of fine music [Rachmaninov] has written [...] which has been blighted by that accursed shadow’.<sup>89</sup>

To judge Rachmaninoff, to think of him merely as the composer of the C sharp minor abomination, is as inept as to think [...] of Sibelius as the composer of the ‘Valse Triste’, or Elgar of ‘Salut d’Amour’. All Byron is not comprised within ‘Maid of Athens’!!<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, in referring to *the* Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto, Sorabji adds, ‘I say Tchaikovsky piano concerto in the same way that people speak of Rachmaninoff’s “prelude”, most people only ever having heard of one in each case, for all that Tchaikovsky wrote five or six [*sic*], and Rachmaninoff thirty-three [*sic*’.<sup>91</sup> What becomes clear from such statements is that Sorabji equated the popular with a base populism; by denouncing works which gained mass approval, Sorabji was setting himself apart from the masses. It is at root a disagreeable trait, certainly, but it does nevertheless give us an insight to his attitude towards music’s mundane objectification within the social realm and, in turn, to his conception of composition as an act above and beyond worldly concerns. Both the demand for the prelude and its young composer’s naïvety in the matter of publishing rights – so far removed from Sorabji’s imprimatur concerning his own works – meant that it proliferated ‘mushroom-like’, to employ one of Sorabji’s favourite fungalisms: ‘at the age of 20 [*sic*] [*recte* 18] M. Rachmaninoff, the Russian, composed a Prelude which he sold for £4, and which everyone has, at one time or another, heard thumped on all the pianos of the world’, explains the author of a *Sunday Times* piece on ‘The Prelude in C sharp [*sic*]: Composer’s Dislike of Famous Number’.<sup>92</sup> ‘I learned to my surprise’, recalled Rachmaninov, that in England ‘all the young pianists played it [...] every musician knew me as the composer of the C sharp minor Prelude’.<sup>93</sup> To Rachmaninov’s bemusement, the Prelude also did the rounds in bowdlerized forms, colourfully arranged for banjo, organ, brass bands and so on. The prelude had, in other words, become a popular classic. On the subject of ‘Popularity and the Classics’,

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<sup>89</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New Age* (23 October 1924), 308.

<sup>90</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: L.S.O. Rachmaninoff, November 18’, *The New Age* (28 November 1929), 45.

<sup>91</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: New Records. H.M.V.’, *The New English Weekly* (29 October 1942), 14.

<sup>92</sup> Anon., *Sunday Times* (3 November 1929), 19.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Bottge, ‘Reading Adorno’s Reading of the Rachmaninov Prelude in C-sharp Minor’, 1.2

Alexander Brent-Smith explained in 1926 that ‘everyone is aware that the notorious Prelude of Rachmaninov, having broken the heart-strings of countless pianofortes, is now down and out, fox-trotting with some sentimental verse in the shady walks of life’.<sup>94</sup> For his own contribution to the subject of ‘Sentimentality and Contemporaneity’, Sorabji puts the listener of popular music down as ‘the auditory equivalent of a coprophiliac’.<sup>95</sup>

On account of its ubiquity, Rachmaninov’s Prelude was particularly susceptible to sentimentalisation in both verse and prose. ‘Some say it has a programme’ wrote Vivian Carter (it doesn’t<sup>96</sup>), ‘that it portrays the exiles plodding on to Siberia, depicting resignation to relentless fate. Those who like to take their music pictorially will doubtless eagerly devour this suggestion’.<sup>97</sup> If his comments on coprophilia offer anything to go by, it would be safe to assume that Sorabji would devour no such thing:

[...] let us enquire a little into the text and into some general considerations as to the power of music – if any – to ‘express’ precise verbal concepts and ideas. Music is, we are always being told [...], a universal language that all can understand, that appeals to all hearts, and so on and so on, *ad infinitum, languorem et nauseam*. But *is* it; *Does* it? The answer is that it is and does nothing of the sort [...] the music expresses, as someone has well said, nothing beyond itself.<sup>98</sup>

The most commonly attributed verbal concept unofficially attached to the piece in question was one of untimely interment: ‘This wonderful Prelude of Rachmaninoff is a thrilling tone-picture of a man buried alive. The three loud notes represent the knocking at the coffin lid’.<sup>99</sup> It was in response to this fancy that Sorabji described the work as the ‘premature burial (or pre-natal?) Prelude’.<sup>100</sup> Beyond alluding to its putative programme, Sorabji’s twofold meaning is clear: the Prelude sealed Rachmaninov’s fate as a composer in his apprentice period; the programme was another nail in the coffin. Listeners who submitted to the popularising function of extra-musical imagery were to Sorabji no better

<sup>94</sup> Alexander Brent-Smith, ‘Popularity and the Classics’, *The Musical Times*, 67/1004 (1 October 1926), 887.

<sup>95</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 57.

<sup>96</sup> Rachmaninov refuted the notion. See Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music* [1956] (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 296.

<sup>97</sup> Vivian Carter, ‘Rachmaninoff’, *Musical Standard* 16/407 (19 October 1901), 243.

<sup>98</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 20-1.

<sup>99</sup> Harvey Grace, ‘Church and Organ Music. Organ Recital Programmes’, *The Musical Times*, 58/898 (1 December 1917), 543. See Also Anon., ‘Answers to Correspondents [W. Smith]’, *The Musical Times*, 61/931 (September 1920), 638.

<sup>100</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1932), 59.

than Wagnerites losing control at the lovely-deathly climax of *Tristan* ('some of them, we are told, even go home and change between the acts, so embarrassing are the effects'):

They are of a piece, I feel, with the worst type of sentimental amateur who pumps up emotions of moonlight (whatever they may be) when they hear a certain sonata of Beethoven, or who feel they are suffocating when they hear that one equally notorious composition of Rachmaninoff – people who must stick music on as a false caudal appendage to anything else on earth rather than accept it as just music first and last. Psychological metathesis again.<sup>101</sup>

In *Around Music*, Sorabji outlines 'psychological metathesis' (his own term, apparently) as a process 'whereby there is transferred to the music the sexual appeal of the performer, and once this has been done [...] the same music may thereafter produce the same erotic emotions apart from the original performer'.<sup>102</sup> This easy transference of desire is taken up two years later by Adorno – exiled, like Rachmaninov at the same time, in the USA – in 'Commodity Music Analysed' (serendipitously collected in *Quasi una Fantasia*). In this short essay Adorno critiques Rachmaninov's Prelude – that 'colossal bagatelle' – as being little more than kitsch appealing to 'infantile adults': 'It owes its popularity to listeners who identify with the performer. They know they could do it just as well'.<sup>103</sup> Adorno's central complaint with the Prelude was that, with it, Rachmaninov seemed to have commoditised romanticism, he 'threw it onto the market' of the post-romantic world.<sup>104</sup> This was evidently not Rachmaninov's intention, given his resentment of the work and its runaway success. As Harvey Grace reported from a Rachmaninov recital in 1923, he 'knew what was coming if his depressed air was any guide. He had hardly sunk on to the pianoforte-stool when cries of "C sharp minor!" were fired at him'.<sup>105</sup> Sorabji was more likely than not among that particular baying crowd. Having compared Rachmaninov to Busoni, Sorabji recalls:

With an artist of such rank giving them playing of the rarest and highest quality, it was horrible to feel the immense audience attracted by and waiting for one thing only, and so ignorant that they broke in with barbarian applause in the middle of a movement. After this

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 230-1.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>103</sup> Theodor Adorno (trans. Rodney Livingstone), 'Commodity Music Analysed' [1934-40] in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays in Modern Music* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 38.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Ruby Wilmott, 'Rachmaninov's C Sharp Minor Prelude', *The Musical Times*, 64/969 (1 November 1923), 790.

feast they could and did clamour for their vomit, and he gave it to them with an air of infinite weariness and disgust. Probably the thing in itself is not so utterly intrinsically bad, but a thing, no matter how good, cannot be mauled about by the dirty, clumsy paws of the herd without getting finally repulsive and loathsome.<sup>106</sup>

For Sorabji, the commodity status of the Prelude enabled its reproducibility under ‘the dirty, clumsy paws of the herd’. This depreciated whatever intrinsic value the piece may have had to begin with. It had, in Adornian terms, become kitsch, ‘a source of entertainment that triggers “an uncritical and standardized response” from its public’; its presentation of ‘highly charged imagery [...] appeals to mass tastes by repackaging the truth of reality in a counterfeit, albeit gratifying communal experience’.<sup>107</sup> The popularity of the Prelude enabled it to function as a social referent – an item of shared knowledge, a talking point; but, true to the principle of neglect, mass tastes and communal experiences were anathema to Sorabji.

#### Hollywood Moonshine and ‘the mass production of minds’

The parasitic attachment of the Premature Burial programme to the C-sharp minor Prelude – whereby the music devolves to the status of the sentiment’s ‘false caudal appendage’ – is one instance of extra-musical imagery being used to elicit a communal, unisonal listening experience. Another is the case of Rachmaninov’s Second Piano Concerto, melodies of which can be heard repurposed to serve the verses of numerous popular songs from the 1940s.<sup>108</sup> The concerto can also be encountered, however briefly, soundtracking various films shot in the immediate post-war period. As David Butler Cannata notes, ‘There should be a whole chapter on the penetrations of the Rachmaninoff Second Concerto into the movie world, where it becomes the concerto’.<sup>109</sup> For present purposes a subsection will have to do. As with the Prelude, for Sorabji a work’s popularity amounted to a ‘mauling’ which rendered the work devoid of any artistic merit, even if ‘the thing in itself is not so utterly intrinsically bad’. In *Mi contra fa* for example, Sorabji asks, ‘When is a Concerto not a Concerto?’:

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<sup>106</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New Age* (23 October 1924), 308.

<sup>107</sup> Bottge, ‘Reading Adorno’s Reading of the Rachmaninov Prelude in C-sharp Minor’, 2.5.

<sup>108</sup> Bertensson and Leyda, ‘Introduction’, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music*, xlii.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

The answer is: When a film forms all over it, and when it gets struck by the very dangerous Moonshine of Hollywood, and when the great tripe-hearted democracy thinks it is going all classical and highbrow as it sits and listens, in the Palmers Green or Peckham Rye Pallas Athenaeum [...] having had, naturally enough till then, not the slightest idea how nice and easy ‘nice’ music was to listen to.<sup>110</sup>

Sorabji was in fact writing of the audience-friendly nice-and-easiness of Rachmaninov’s Second Piano Concerto long before its employment as a melodramatic-cinematic ancillary. In an early letter to Heseltine, for example, he explains that both Rachmaninov’s Second and Third Concertos ‘are immense favourites of mine’ and that he was due to hear the composer play the solo part in ‘his beautiful Concerto 2’.<sup>111</sup> In his 1924 *Musical Times* article ‘On Neglected Works’, however, he was already bemoaning the popularity of Rachmaninov’s Second Concerto over that of the Third.<sup>112</sup> Later in the same year he explicitly links this popularity to the work’s compositional inferiority: the Third is ‘a work far and away superior to the naturally infinitely more popular Second’.<sup>113</sup> Elsewhere he notes that the ‘tedious and sentimentalistic second Rachmaninoff Concerto, so vastly inferior in structure, musical substance, and resource, and ambiguousness of piano writing to the great third’ is ‘therefore inevitably rated far above it’.<sup>114</sup> The ‘great and very rarely heard Third Piano Concerto [...], so immensely in advance of its far better known earlier companion, the popular Second, is very much uncharted territory as far as the general public are concerned’.<sup>115</sup> In other words, Rachmaninov’s Third – unlike his Second – had not yet been marketised in a post-romantic world (arguably it had to wait until the 1996 release of *Shine*).

On the use of the Second for the soundtrack to *Brief Encounter* (1946) Lawrence Kramer asks, ‘But why just this music? Why this Romantic piano concerto, the very acme of the type?’ The answer is that, in a modern world, this music offers a form of escapism: it is ‘an anachronism, laden with feelings that have long since lost their credibility.[...] The concerto belongs to a vanished world, one that predates the media – both radio and film – that convey it’. There is, potentially, a paradox here. If Sorabji championed the late

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<sup>110</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 17.

<sup>111</sup> Letter dated March [early] 1914.

<sup>112</sup> Sorabji, ‘On Neglected Works’, *The Musical Times*, 65/972 (February 1924), 128.

<sup>113</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New Age* (23 October 1924), 309.

<sup>114</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: British Women’s Orchestra’, *The New Age* (20 November 1930), 32.

<sup>115</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Rachmaninoff: Philharmonic Society’, *The New Age* (24 March 1932), 250.



or neo-romantic, would it not be a cause for celebration that Rachmaninov's anachronicity in the case of the Second Concerto not only spoke to the modern world – that it had a distinct message – but received a fair hearing? Would this not signal a triumphant validation of romanticism over modernism, a valedictory testament to the staying power of the Great Main Stream? It would in fact seem that its popular acceptance, on the contrary, only signalled its counterfeit status, the litmus test being that audiences seemed to *enjoy* it en masse. Kramer explains that, in its indiscreet diegesis, the music transcends the 'tepid modernity' of its lead character, Laura Jesson, and similarly proffers 'utopian hope' to her 'peers in the movie house, those who identify with her desire'.<sup>116</sup> Psychological metathesis yet again: this process of identification between performer and spectator (whether the former is situated before a piano or camera, the latter seated in a concert hall or picture house) binds or sutures the audience in a shared experience. Richard Hoggart, in *The Uses of Literacy*, comments on this communal aspect of cinema-going, noting that pleasure is derived 'from the fact that the "you" who is cajoled, invited to laugh, flattered, is not simply the individual "you", but a great composite "you" of the unexceptionable ordinary folk'. This gives rise 'to a sense of shared pleasure, of pleasure in simply sharing the unifying object, not in the object itself'.<sup>117</sup>

In a comment on 'Modern Popular Music as part of a Plan of Progressive Besotment', Sorabji writes that 'In the Western and ultra-Western worlds' (the latter presumably meaning the US),

the principal incentive towards this mass production of minds, tastes and thoughts comes from the vast – and sinister – combines for the mass-production of various commodities. Any adjunct to the process of benumbing, bemusing and besotment, so that all critical and discriminatory faculties be crushed and one man's meat turned into every man's poison, too, is, of course, welcome, and is sure to find Big Money and the Big Interests eager to make use of it.

As Adorno himself noted, 'Every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse'.<sup>118</sup> The Big Money and Big Interests backing the Big Hollywood productions certainly knew how to engage the collective conscious in a profitable way.

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<sup>116</sup> Lawrence Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 100-1, 102.

<sup>117</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* [1957] (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 188-9.

<sup>118</sup> Richard Leppert, 'Introduction' to Richard Leppert (ed.) and Susan H. Gillespie (trans.), *Theodor W. Adorno: Essays on Music* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002), 48.

The use of high-romantic concerti to shore up the emotional messages those films sought to convey – to suture the audience to a collective audio-visual experience – was for Sorabji yet another sign that twentieth-century modernity was an age of cultural decline and degeneration. Rachmaninov's Second indirectly played a part in this regression as Sorabji saw it. This concerto, as the 'acme of the type', was pressed into service as the prototype for other film-friendly efforts in the genre. One such was Richard Addinsell's bespoke concerto for the 1941 film, *Dangerous Moonlight* (Rachmaninov politely declined the job offer). In a virtuoso display of invective, Sorabji issued the following lines:

This completely preposterous composition, with its enthusiastic emptiness, its shallow, pretentious, pianistic flourishes, its trumpery, vacuous arpeggi as of the piano tuner in an exhibitionistic ecstasy, has everything that explains its frantic success with the musically-mentally deficient.[...] In places it is excruciatingly funny, and one is reminded of someone trying to play by ear, and very badly, some Rachmaninoff of a kind far below the worst Rachmaninoff could ever write.<sup>119</sup>

Sorabji's regular readers would have been familiar with a hatchet job of this calibre, just as they could have reasonably expected the more resplendent prose he held in reserve for those individuals in his favour. Reviews of *Around Music* were quick to comment on this polarising aspect of Sorabji's criticism: 'He is as generous in his enthusiasm as he is vigorous in his dislikes. But where he strikes, he strikes uncommonly hard. Some readers may be inclined to question whether such outspoken expressions of opinion are likely to do much good'.<sup>121</sup> Sorabji, whose 'intolerance of fools is a by-word, is also a hero-worshipper, so that he frequently passes from the extreme of abuse to the highest pitch of praise in a sentence'.<sup>122</sup> Rarely, however, did Sorabji have sufficient cause to switch from levelling such lofty veneration to such unmitigated vitriol at any single individual. This was to be the case with Karol Szymanowski who, on the brink of anachronicity, embraces "modernism" for less than honest reasons. He might have done worse than heed the following words of Rachmaninov, approvingly quoted by Sorabji:

If the critics are not satisfied there is nothing to be done. A composer must write as he feels: he cannot change his style and remain sincere.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Sorabji, 'New Records: Columbia', *The New English Weekly* (24 December 1942), 85.

<sup>121</sup> Anon., 'Music and Musicians: A Composer-Critic', *The Scotsman* (19 January 1933)

<sup>122</sup> Anon., 'A Composer Critic', *The Modern Scot*, 3/4 (1933), 81, 82.

<sup>123</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 177.

## **Chapter Six**

### **On Szymanowski, from Poland to Paris via Persia**

From a vivid poet, with an ardent and flaming imagination, expressed in a language of the most glowing colour and radiant beauty, Szymanowski . . . has shrivelled into one of those wretched post-war ‘pasticheurs’. . . . The complete change of style is of artificial and unnatural violence; there has been, as far as I am aware, no gradual process at work.

SORABJI, ‘Music’ (1934)<sup>124</sup>

The nice thing about an ism, someone once observed, is how quickly it becomes a wasm.

RICHARD TARUSKIN, ‘How Talented Composers Become Useless’ (1996)<sup>125</sup>

Where Rachmaninov and Medtner’s work in many ways resists any straightforward means of periodization – chronically exiled as it was, in the main, to a perpetual state of nostalgic anachronicity – the music of Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937) typically presents no such problems. This is not least because Szymanowski’s self-conscious timeliness led him to conceive of his own output in terms of stylistically delineated phases.<sup>126</sup> Accordingly, Szymanowski’s ‘creative life is generally (and conveniently) divided into three main periods’.<sup>127</sup> What is particularly convenient about this biographical-stylistic tripartition of Szymanowski’s life and works in the present context is that the largely indiscreet aesthetic developments prompting such (autobio)historiographical procedure did not go unnoticed by Sorabji. From first period to last – beginning with opus 1 (1899-1900) and concluding at opus 62 (1933-4) – Szymanowski transitions from a late-nineteenth-century romantic aesthetic preceding the War to an interchangeably neo-classical and nationalistic idiom throughout and briefly beyond the 1920s. This new period was in keeping with flourishing trends of post-War modernism, which is to say “modernism” in Sorabji’s reviled ‘inverted commas sense’. The escapist exoticism characterising Szymanowski’s neo-impressionist middle period coincides directly with the years 1914-18. The Great War thus appears as the pivotal event around which Szymanowski’s three periods are generally structured. Following the arch of this stylistic chronology, the case of Szymanowski offers an instructive index to Sorabji’s late-romantic sensibilities as they came into contact with an

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<sup>124</sup> ‘Sorabji’, ‘Music’, *The New Age* (10 May 1934), 21.

<sup>125</sup> Richard Taruskin, ‘How Talented Composers Become Useless’, *New York Times* (10 March 1996), reproduced in Richard Taruskin, *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2009), 86.

<sup>126</sup> See Jim Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1981), 89.

<sup>127</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Szymanowski* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1983), 21.

unambiguous musical modernism. That this confrontation should have been played out in the works of a single individual presents a unique situation wherein Sorabji's notoriously devout allegiance to certain neglected, obscure or marginalised – in any case, ex-centric – composers becomes strained as their works begin to betray signs of conformity to, or to attain cultural-historical synchronicity with, prevailing modes or *fashions* of composition.

Szymanowski's abandonment of late-romantic and fin-de-siècle approaches to musical expression in favour of a more clear-cut modernist reorientation from the 1920s contributed yet another factor to Sorabji's acute sense of isolation as a composer and critic. Szymanowski, for a while at least, felt similarly ostracised. Alistair Wightman notes that a 'recurring theme in both Szymanowski's polemical writings and his correspondence is his estrangement from Polish musical circles and, at times, Polish society in general';<sup>128</sup> in the composer's own words from 29 January 1920, 'there is no real contact between the Polish public (or at least the Warsaw public) and myself, that for them I am alien, incomprehensible and perhaps even unnecessary within the overall structure of "Polish Music"'.<sup>129</sup> Szymanowski's self-identified exteriority to the capital of Polish national music at this time corresponds fittingly with Sorabji's own position outside the predominantly Londoncentric concerns of the English Musical Renaissance, his being alien, incomprehensible and perhaps even unnecessary within the overall structure of 'English Music'. It is therefore significant and yet unsurprising that Sorabji should have so emphatically identified with Szymanowski's music from the first two decades of the century. The significance of this identification is underlined by the fact that Szymanowski's creativity during the War years came by way of an illusory retreat from worldly concerns, an escapist fantasy actuated through his dreamy idealisation of Sicily and in his intellectual and imaginative immersion in the classical literature and history of Iran, aspects both of which combined to profoundly shape his aesthetic of the time. Aesthetically anachronistic and anatomic, this was to constitute Szymanowski's exploration of an 'exotic of time and space'.<sup>130</sup> Where most commentators objectively designate these years Szymanowski's 'middle period', Sorabji perceived them as constituting his 'Sicilo-Iranian period'.<sup>131</sup> This is, we know, a highly personalised conception and categorisation

<sup>128</sup> 'Szymanowski's Life and Thought' in Alistair Wightman (trans. and ed.), *Szymanowski on Music: Selected Writings of Karol Szymanowski* (London: Toccata Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>129</sup> Letter to Jachimecki, cited in *ibid.*, 44.

<sup>130</sup> Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski*, 76.

<sup>131</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: The Porcupine Press, 1947), 183.

of Szymanowski's wartime *oeuvre*. Sorabji's own claims to Sicilian and Iranian ancestry gave rise to a deeply-felt kinship with the composer of such works as *Le Chant de Nuit*, Szymanowski's Third Symphony set to the words of Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, the thirteenth-century mystic lauded by Sorabji as 'one of the supreme poets of that land of supreme poets – and incidentally the homeland of my own people – Persia'.<sup>132</sup> For Sorabji, middle-period Szymanowski was a 'true brother in spirit to the glowing mystical poets of Iran who were the source of much of his finest and choicest inspiration'.<sup>133</sup>

This fraternal kinship conferred a certain authority upon Sorabji by which he could attest to the oriental authenticity of Szymanowski's personal envisioning of the east. In turn, it also presented an opportunity for Sorabji to comment on what he took to be the uncomprehending occidental insularity of English concertgoers. Szymanowski's Third Symphony, for example, could but only perplex such an assembly, since 'the majority of a London audience do not possess the psychological key to a work like this, of the East, Eastern if there ever were'.<sup>134</sup> Szymanowski may have agreed on more general grounds: 'In essence I do not consider the English to be endowed with excessively musical talents'.<sup>135</sup> In tacit concurrence, Sorabji held out little hope for any greater understanding among Szymanowski's discombobulated London critics. Of the Third Symphony's reception, Sorabji wrote:

The scribes were even more at sea, and babbled of 'impressionism' because they heard a few chords that reminded them of Debussy, and a few instances of devices associated with the name of this composer. What they *could* not see, or rather hear, was that these Debussy-like devices were extended and developed to purposes and an extent beyond Debussy's furthest imagining[...]. How long, one wonders, is musical criticism, particularly that of the English variety, going to continue being obsessed by these entirely superficial resemblances, to the extent of treating them as symptoms of anything more than the most tertiary importance, if even that? The same stupidity makes itself manifest on those rare occasions when a Mahler Symphony reaches an English audience.<sup>136</sup>

Although Szymanowski's English reception was never as markedly hostile as that of Mahler's, he did nevertheless present a sufficiently *outré* character on programmes for the

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<sup>132</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: A few remarks on Szymanovsky', *The New English Weekly* (29 December 1932), 255.

<sup>133</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 186.

<sup>134</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: A few remarks on Szymanovsky', 256.

<sup>135</sup> 'Karol Szymanowski on Contemporary Music' [1922], in Wightman (trans. and ed.), 204.

<sup>136</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: a few remarks on Szymanowsky', 256.

ill-disguised xenophobia of provincial suspicions to be raised regardless. His name – of the east, that is, eastern European – was alone enough to cause puzzlement:

Karol Szymanowsky is a brave, almost a heathen name to find in the prospectus of a Three Choirs Festival. And contemporary English music is not exactly neglected in any scheme which includes works by William Walton, Delius, Vaughan Williams and Holst.<sup>137</sup>

The occasion in question was the September 1932 performance of his *Stabat Mater* at the English choral institution noted. The same newspaper two days later relayed Szymanowski's presence on the bill in similar terms, only with the added local colouring of drizzle to set the scene, and an uppity comment on 'properness' appended to validate the writer's prejudices:

In defiance of a wet morning a large gathering attended the music in the Cathedral, despite also the presence in the programme of the forbidding and almost unpronounceable name of Szymanowski, obviously not the name of any English gentleman educated at the Royal London College of Music to compose works for festivals in the proper spirit and in the proper key or modes.<sup>138</sup>

Apparently the 'almost heathen' name Szymanowsky would do just as well in print as the 'forbidding and almost unpronounceable' Szymanowski. For his part, Sorabji is published as variously referring to Szymanovsky and Szymanowsky, depending on the platform, and these usages – alongside any other cases at odds with today's consensus – are rendered for present purposes according to the standard transliteration.<sup>139</sup> But this clarification is not for the moment to let other notable attempts pass without mention, as several instances from the early 1920s in particular point to Szymanowski's somewhat irksome imposition within Anglophone journalese (with 'Karol' occasionally anglicised as 'Charles'<sup>140</sup>). For example, one writer – in the face of lexicographical adversity – was forced to resort to her phonetic faculties in order to report on a certain 'Shiminofsky' (alas, admits the author, his 'is a name I cannot spell because I have no books of reference here, my whole library

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<sup>137</sup> 'Our Special Correspondent', 'The Three Choirs Festival: A Szymanowsky First Performance', *The Manchester Guardian* (7 September 1932), 6.

<sup>138</sup> 'Our Special Correspondent', 'The Three Choirs Festival: Szymanowski's "Stabat Mater" and Vaughan Williams *Magnificat* [sic]', *The Manchester Guardian* (9 September 1932), 16.

<sup>139</sup> Unconventional spellings of 'Szymanowski' below the footnote separator are, however, retained so as to aid any searches made for the documents in question.

<sup>140</sup> See, for example, 'C.', 'London Concerts: Mr. Arthur Bliss's Songs', *The Musical Times*, 63/948 (February 1922), 116.

consisting of a terrible detective story, a book of auto-suggestion, and *All you need in Italy*').<sup>141</sup> Perhaps less excusable is a 1921 *Musical Times* notice announcing a London concert which was to premiere 'The song of the night' by the forbidding and almost unpronounceable 'Schymaunovsky'.<sup>142</sup>

Putting such editorial blunders aside, this was to be the *world* premiere of Szymanowski's Third Symphony, the performance at which auditors apparently lacked that 'psychological key' necessary to its full appreciation. As Sorabji later recalled, the work 'was greeted with a chorus of contumelious abuse. But . . . "Blessed are ye when all men shall speak evil of you. . . ." so runs it, does it not?'<sup>143</sup> Sorabji's attitude of scripturally legitimated contrarianism here may well have suited early and middle-period Szymanowski, the composer whose works in the first instance pretended to make no concessions to the philistine majority and, in the second, sought to shun the exigencies of society altogether. From around 1920 onwards, however, Szymanowski could no longer maintain this aloof aristocratic indifference to the democratic social obligations of the newly 'liberated' post-War artist. His third-and-final period is consequently characterised by a dubious genuflection to the tastes of the fashionable cosmopolitan majority, discernible in his yielding to the pull of mainstream currents in composition. Here we witness Sorabji's disconsolate response to Szymanowski's alignment with what would ultimately amount to be some of the centralising forces determining the course of twentieth-century music: from 'a vivid poet', Szymanowski had at this point 'shrivelled' into a 'wretched post-war pasticheur'. Szymanowski's turn from an aesthetic of late romanticism through subjective neo-impressionism to epigonal modernism – traceable along the respective trade routes of Poland, Persia and Paris – presents an exemplary case study charting one composer's negotiation of the turning of the nineteenth to the twentieth century in music.<sup>144</sup> Critically, Sorabji was to follow Szymanowski's progress along these

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<sup>141</sup> 'My contributor presumably refers to Szymanowski – ED.' Ursula Greville, 'Music and Interpreters', *The Sackbut*, 4 (September 1923), 25.

<sup>142</sup> Anon., 'The London Concert Season: The London Symphony Orchestra', *The Musical Times*, 62/944 (October 1921), 722.

<sup>143</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 210. Sorabji neglects to mention here that a significant reason behind the failure of the performance – under the baton of Albert Coates in November 1921 – was because vocal resources were critically limited: the all-important chorus was replaced by an organ and the tenor by a solo cello.

Szymanowski was not in attendance; he was too busy gallivanting around the United States. See Palmer, 59.

<sup>144</sup> Another – albeit more compressed – case study of such stylistic transitioning might be that of Hermann Heiss from the mid-twentieth century. Heiss (1897-1966) appears to have proceeded from a programmatic realism epitomised in his pro-Nazi *Fighter Pilot March* (1940) to a neo-classical Sonata for flute and piano (1946) and, finally, to exercising a pseudoscientific abstractionism in such works as *Expression K*, premiered

lines with a keenly discriminating ear and – as we shall also see – equally discriminating eye.

### Monstrum kontrapunktyczno-harmoniczno-orchestrowe: the Polish *kolossal*

When Szymanowski envisioned his First Symphony emerging as ‘a sort of contrapuntal-harmonic-orchestral monster’,<sup>145</sup> there can be little contending the leaden sway that the end-of-century *kolossal* held over his first, formative period of composition. According to Wightman, the ultimately incomplete symphony was ‘heavily scored, even by the standards of c. 1910-1920’,<sup>146</sup> and Jim Samson comments on its ‘somewhat crude and “massive” orchestral style’, its ‘contrapuntal complexities’, ‘textural congestion, unmotivated chromaticisms’ and the composer’s ‘apparent compulsion to saturate the texture further with elaborate accompaniment patterns’, all of which result ‘in some of the most congested scoring in his (or anyone else’s) output’.<sup>147</sup> Critics of Sorabji – who of course had his own Frankensteinian preoccupations – might find cause to disagree with the parenthetical speculation modifying Samson’s last point. Nevertheless, Sorabji’s sympathy for the monstrous and *kolossal* naturally leant itself to an appreciation of Szymanowski’s output from this Germanic phase of his development, a span of creativity attributable in the main to the combined influence of Wagner, Strauss and – of particular significance – Max Reger.<sup>148</sup> Szymanowski’s Second Piano Sonata (Op. 21, 1910-11), for example, has been described by Durval Cesetti as the ‘apex of his neo-romanticism’, a ‘hypertrophic colossus [...] highly indebted to Reger’.<sup>149</sup> This was for Sorabji ‘a work on the largest lines, broad, massive and powerful, fully exploiting, if one may coin such a description, a neo-diatonicism and chromatic diatonicism’:

It is a splendid, bold, strong piece of work, strangely tinged here and there with a sort of pseudo-German Romantic sentiment, but it is none the worse for that. And as in a good

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at Darmstadt in 1953. See Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), 392.

<sup>145</sup> Szymanowski to Hanna Klecniowska, quoted in Stefan Keym, ‘Karol Szymanowski’s First Symphony in the Context of Polish and German Symphonic Tradition’, *Musicology Today*, 5 (2008), 5.

<sup>146</sup> Quoted in Palmer, *Szymanowski*, 24.

<sup>147</sup> Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski*, 51.

<sup>148</sup> See Teresa Chylińska, *Szymanowski* (Cracow: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1981), 34, Samson, 64, Wightman, fn. 4 to Szymanowski’s ‘On the Works of Wagner, Strauss and Schoenberg’, 217 and Durval Cesetti, ‘The Narrative of a Composer’s Biography: Some Aspects of Szymanowski Reception’, *The Musical Times*, 150/1908 (Autumn 2009), 45.

<sup>149</sup> Cesetti, ‘The Narrative of a Composer’s Biography’, 45.



deal of Szymanowski's earlier work, particularly in his elaborate and highly wrought songs, a good deal of Reger[']s influence is to be perceived.[...] The Sonata as a whole is a powerful, nobly-made piece of work, massive in conception and crowded with fine and interesting detail [...].<sup>150</sup>

Sorabji discerned in Szymanowski's early songs, the 'complex and ornate' Second Piano Sonata, and in the 'supreme contrapuntal mastery' of the Second Symphony the unmistakable influence of Reger,<sup>151</sup> so much so that he erroneously supposed Szymanowski to have been one of Reger's protégés.<sup>152</sup> This being a pre-emptive conclusion, we might wonder what purpose its assertion was intended to serve. For example, it would not be out of character for Sorabji to have made the suggestion so as to prepare the ground for Szymanowski's unwelcoming reception in England, and that this would have been implemented as a strategy to preordain Szymanowski's neglect, thereby ensuring the singularity of Sorabji's own counter-canon. In this regard it ought to be remembered that Sorabji so often paired Reger with Mahler as exemplary victims of the exclusionary policies of English concert programming and that their marginalisation on this score was reasoned by way of the seemingly insurmountable demands posed by their instrumental and orchestral writing. It follows that, by attributing the dense textures in Szymanowski's early works to his having been not only under the influence but the *supervision* of Reger, Sorabji was almost predetermining the inhospitable response these compositions would have on the English stage. We may recall from Chapter Four Sorabji's view that, 'By a sort of Pavlovian conditioned reflex, the noise "turgid" is heard whenever the name of Reger is mentioned'.<sup>153</sup> But this hypothesis cannot be adequately tested since only a small number of Szymanowski's early-period works received noted London performances during the interwar years: it would seem that only the *Concert Overture* (Op. 12, 1904-5) and Second Sonata received any press attention. But critical responses to these nevertheless reverted comfortably to type in rehashing some of the complaints redolent of the 'turgidity' of Reger's 'too many notes' and the 'blaring and hootings' of Mahler's 'monstrous German orchestra'. For example, a *Times* critic described the Overture as 'fully, not to say noisily scored for large orchestra',<sup>154</sup> the *Observer* put down

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<sup>150</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1932), 57.

<sup>151</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: A few remarks on Szymanovsky', 255.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. 255-6. Szymanowski never studied with Reger, despite admiring (for a while) much of his music. See Wightman, fn. 4 to Szymanowski's 'On the Works of Wagner, Strauss and Schoenberg', 217.

<sup>153</sup> Sorabji, 'The Silly Season', *Musical Opinion* (November 1954), 79.

<sup>154</sup> Anon., 'Week-End Concerts: the B.B.C. Orchestra', *Times* (11 October 1937), 21.

Szymanowski's Second Piano Sonata as 'mountainous', while another *Times* reviewer wrote of it as 'a big work cast in the old heroic mould of the Romantic', before concluding that 'The finale is a clattering fugue. It is certainly interesting, but hardly a great work, as it lacks emotional impulse'.<sup>155</sup>

In short, Szymanowski's early-period works were grounded in a fin-de-siècle aesthetic of endpoint romantic maximalism, a sublime lateness of nineteenth-century style 'reaching (for) limits'. Both peak and precipice, Szymanowski's music here teeters on the edge of excess, that endpoint after which something had to give. For Sorabji, the Overture 'points a moral with regard to harmonic "advancedness"' for

it is far in advance, with its finely flexible treatment of chromatic harmony and its wonderfully inventive modulation, of any acid, acrid neo-Schönbergisms, or of the primitivist monomaniacal tom-tommings of Bartok and such. If 'progress' connotes limitation, then before very long we shall have 'progressed' back to the stage of organum, nay, if we 'progress' far and fast enough there is even hope that we may regain 'pure percussion'.<sup>156</sup>

True progress was for Sorabji rather an accumulative process, as he wrote of the cragginess of Szymanowski's Second Sonata:

the resources of chromatic harmony are in many places in this remarkable work pushed to their limits [...] it seems almost as if Szymanowski were here stretching tradition to the furthest extent possible, before breaking it.<sup>157</sup>

His keyboard works from this phase do indeed venture into some of the farthest reaches of nineteenth-century piano technique:

Szymanowski is pursuing a line of musical thought and expression in these earlier pieces that continue[s] the so-called 'romantic' Schumann-Chopin tradition, although even as early as this, there is a wholly personal element, both in the musical substance and in the expression thereof, and the keyboard lay-out greatly expands the tradition.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Anon., 'Week-End Concerts: The Pianoforte Society', *Times* (7 December 1931), 17.

<sup>156</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New English Weekly* (21 October 1937), 36. In some respects Sorabji's prophecy came true: if we look at the post-modern canons of minimalism, we can readily see a return to organum in, for example, the works of Arvo Pärt or 'pure percussion' in 'minimalism's first masterpiece', Steve Reich's *Drumming* (1970-1). See Paul Hillier, *Arvo Pärt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 83-4 and Robert K. Schwartz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 73.

<sup>157</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 180, 181.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

Even granting the plasticity of genre (and, in particular, the mutability of nineteenth-century sonata form), there must of necessity remain in place structurally circumscriptive limits to the inherence of formal characteristics beyond which any such ‘stretching’ and ‘expanding’ begins to distort the surety of a work’s generic classification. Samson suggests that Szymanowski’s overreliance on tortuous Regerian devices in the Second Sonata threaten its tonal stability and as a consequence, we might add, a sense of immediate communicability with it.<sup>159</sup> Polish critics responding to Szymanowski’s first efforts as a composer were dismissive of the overwrought Teutonicisms he developed at the expense of communicating an idiosyncratically ‘national’ style.<sup>160</sup> But Szymanowski cared little for the expression of patriotism in his early work; his short-term involvement with the Young Poland collective of artists instead consolidated an attitude of *weltschmerzlich* disaffection with the national-cultural milieu he was expected to represent. Here we can suggest a causal link between the factors informing Szymanowski’s output from this phase and Sorabji’s affinity with them. Artur Górski voiced the Schumannesque-cum-Nietzschean credo of the collective to which Szymanowski belonged at this point:

As disillusionment with the life of society and with its typical product, a modern philistine, grew, ties between the individual and that society loosened, disgust and protest against the banality and soulless existence of the organised mass increased. . . . More sensitive and profound minds, after having lost their respect for the philistine and their sympathy with social movements, began to withdraw from life and look for other, more durable values.<sup>161</sup>

This loosening of ties between artist and public and its attendant de-emphasis on the social obligations of the creative individual fostered the perceived dissolution of the responsibilities of the productive one to the consuming other. In shunning the appetites of the bourgeois philistine, Young Poland artists believed they were in fact shunning the majority, an attitude of connoisseurial exclusivity which kept them at an idealised – not to mention ideological – remove from the ‘organised mass of society’. Needless to say, it’s all very Sorabjian.

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<sup>159</sup> Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski*, 56.

<sup>160</sup> See Chylińska, *Karol Szymanowski*, 34.

<sup>161</sup> Quoted in Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski*, 35.

Following the disbandment of the group, Szymanowski's notably introverted character type<sup>162</sup> further encouraged his engagement with internal as opposed to external – that is, subjective (personal) rather than objective (public) – creative processes. This came as a logical development of the disillusionment inculcated through association with Young Poland. At this transitional moment, Samson writes that, 'One senses that as [Szymanowski's] music increased in refinement and sophistication he grew less concerned with the communication of new musical resources than with their exploration'.<sup>163</sup> This is, furthermore, very much in keeping with the Busonian ethos of consolidation in favour of overturning, conservation as opposed to revolution. The heightened subjectivity of Szymanowski's subsequent middle-period output was borne of the intensification of his formative engagement with the group: these works 'represent a hedonistic "withdrawal from the world" which is very much in the spirit of "Young Poland"'.<sup>164</sup> It is also in keeping with that 'negative music' we find at the heart of Sorabji's counter-canon. The further Szymanowski 'withdrew' from the world, the more his music began to reflect this inward turn through the translation of personal experiences, fantasies and desires into musical impressions uniquely his own – into what Samson describes as an 'interior landscape',<sup>165</sup> Simon John Abrahams a 'private fantasy world',<sup>166</sup> and, for H. H. Stuckenschmidt, an idiom 'accessible to himself alone'.<sup>167</sup> The realisation of these impressions into both sounding and notated musical forms was of significant appeal to Sorabji. Indeed, Szymanowski's increasingly isolationist position bears a striking similarity to the 'strong symptoms of withdrawal from all responsibility, social and artistic' one critic detected in the 'hysterical complexity' of Sorabji's own compositions.<sup>168</sup> In this light, Sorabji's writings on Szymanowski's middle-period works are illuminating for the insight they give to his conception of composition as the fulfilment of personal fantasy, as an act of turning away from the world.

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<sup>162</sup> See B. M. Maciejewski, *Karol Szymanowski: his life and music* (London: Poets and Painters' Press, 1967), 48.

<sup>163</sup> Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski*, 37.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> 'Le Mauvais Jardinier: A Reassessment of the Myths and Music of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji' (PhD: King's College, London, 2001), fn. 47, p. 153.

<sup>167</sup> H. H. Stuckenschmidt, 'Karol Szymanowski', *Music & Letters*, 19/1 (January 1938), 38.

<sup>168</sup> See Chapter 8.

### ‘Of the East, Eastern’: Szymanowski’s Sicilo-Irànian Period

The Second Sonata marks ‘the close of a chapter in the development of Szymanowski’s instrumental music’.<sup>169</sup> Sorabji suggests that, upon completing this work, Szymanowski embarked on a new phase of creativity ‘as a result of contact with the great mystical poets of Iran’.<sup>170</sup> Through this contact, ‘something in him is as it were released into expression that had not shown itself before and from now onwards his creative imagination glows with an ever-increasing radiance’:

One can trace the psychological-spiritual move eastwards in the physiological conformation of Szymanowski’s melodic contours, and in his ever-increasing freedom and subtlety of rhythm as well as in the literary or local provenance of his inspiration; and from Op. 24 onwards (some settings of one of Iran’s greatest poets, one of the supreme poets of all times and places, Muhammed Shemseddin Hafiz of Shiraz), he gravitates between Greek and Saracenic Sicily.<sup>171</sup>

This ‘eastern turn’ inaugurates what Sorabji identified as Szymanowski’s ‘Sicilo-Irànian period’ or, more prosaically, his ‘middle period’ spanning the war years of 1914 to 1918. It was to be Szymanowski’s shortest but most fertile stretch of creativity, seeing the composition of such works as the *Métopes* (1915) and *Masques* (1915-16) (‘These wonderful pieces’, writes Sorabji, ‘illustrate very forcibly the loosening-up of Szymanowski’s technique: the piano writing is much freer, and there is an immense expansion in harmonic treatment’<sup>172</sup>), the *Nocturne* (1915) for violin and piano (which ‘shows especially that pre-occupation with the east the crops up again and again in the work of this composer’<sup>173</sup>) and the First Violin Concerto (1916) (‘The process of rarefaction and transcendentalisation of Szymanowski’s art is here carried still further’<sup>174</sup>). The cycle *Songs of an Infatuated Muezzin* (1918) ‘makes an excursion Eastwards, and again the result is an artistic triumph of the highest order’,<sup>175</sup> and the ‘great allegorical-symbolic opera’ *King Roger*, wherein the eponymous potentate ‘is the great Roger of Sicily’,<sup>176</sup> also belong to this period (though protractedly completed in 1924, it was

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<sup>169</sup> Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski*, 61.

<sup>170</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 181-2.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>173</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New English Weekly* (22 July 1937), 294.

<sup>174</sup> *Mi contra fa*, 184.

<sup>175</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: A few remarks on Szymanowski’, 256.

<sup>176</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 185.

conceived in 1918 ‘after many sessions of reminiscences of Sicily, its natural beauty and its historical relics’<sup>177</sup>).

Sorabji’s most effusive – really quite gushing – praise was, however, reserved for Szymanowski’s Third Symphony, *Le Chant de Nuit*, composed between 1914 and 1916. This is perhaps the seminal work of Szymanowski’s middle period and, as such, is placed squarely between his earlier late-romantic period and later early-modernist period. Jim Samson’s brief comment on a single moment from the opening section of the symphony may serve, by sleight of inductive reasoning, as a characterisation of Szymanowski’s middle period as a whole. After all, ‘If one could speak of a typical “Szymanowski sound” it would be epitomized in the opening bars of this symphony’.<sup>178</sup> Thus, on Szymanowski’s climactic setting of the words ‘Like an eagle fly above, now a hero is your soul in this night’, Samson writes that, ‘If there are late-Romantic (Mahlerian) echoes in the build-up to this climax, the climax itself is uniquely characterised by sustained, static dissonance’.<sup>179</sup> Here Szymanowski has breached the tipping point of romanticism and flown into a kind of freefall, and this impression of suspended motion feels to be true of so much of his middle-period output. No longer in the twilight of romanticism, not yet truly modern and – to do away with the mediatory expediency of a standard third term – exceeding the categorical markers of impressionism,<sup>180</sup> this *sui generis* ‘Szymanowski sound’ emerges as a resonant metaxy between the two poles of nineteenth- and twentieth-century music conventionally construed. It also escapes the attendant geopoliticking of orthodox accounts of emergent European modernism: neither identifiably Austro-German nor Franco-Russian in allegiance (as the predominant Schoenberg/Stravinsky narrative has it) nor resonating sympathetically with outlying national trends, this is a category of music uniquely other, music ‘of the East, Eastern’ – but no orientalist fad at that. As Sorabji remarked of the symphony, ‘the whole work is an evocation of the East, the potency, the intense imaginative power, the radiant beauty of which is unsurpassed, I have no hesitation in saying, in all music’.<sup>181</sup> Here

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<sup>177</sup> Iwaszkiewicz in Chylińska, *Szymanowski*, 91.

<sup>178</sup> Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski*, 122.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>180</sup> The prefix ‘neo-’ does, in this case, make things a little easier since Sorabji explained that such ‘Debussy-like devices’ as found in Szymanowski’s Third Symphony are ‘extended and developed to purposes and an extent beyond Debussy’s furthest imagining’. See ‘Music: a few remarks on Szymanovsky’, 256.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

Szymanowski has taken a poem from the Divàn, a poem celebrating the beauty, the enigmatic and transcendental beauty of an Eastern night, the like of which is to be found perhaps nowhere in Europe except Sicily, which belongs as much to the East as it does to the West. Around this poem, Szymanowski has written music of a radiant purity of spirit, of an elevated ecstasy of expression, music so permeated with the essence of the choicest and rarest specimens of Irànian art [...] that such a feat is unparalleled in Western music.<sup>182</sup>

Christopher Palmer suggests that Sorabji's words on Szymanowski's *Chant de Nuit* are written in 'the language not merely of admiration but of infatuation, of love-passion'<sup>183</sup> and their sumptuousness of expression fairly matches that of the music they describe. For Samson,

The symphony will continue to repel as many as it overwhelms, but few can remain indifferent to it, for it permits no half measures in a listener's response. For such a work the glowing, florid prose of Sorabji seems defensible, perhaps indeed the only way to convey anything of the atmosphere of the music to anyone who has not heard it.<sup>184</sup>

Palmer adds that 'It is beauty which fires [Sorabji] with this passion, its object being not a person but music'.<sup>185</sup> This is open to question: can we so easily discount the importance of Sorabji's identification with the *composer* of this music? Sorabji's acknowledgement of the extra-musical significance of those programmes inspiring much of Szymanowski's Sicilo-Irànian output should not be overlooked. Szymanowski's creative indebtedness, for example, to the historical figure of Roger II, King of Sicily and to the classical Persian texts of Rūmī figures more prominently in Sorabji's evaluations of Szymanowski's opera and Third Symphony respectively than do discussions of the substance of the music emanating therefrom. Sorabji appears to have recognised Szymanowski's narcissistic reflection<sup>186</sup> in the facets of those Sicilo-Irànian cultures from which he himself claimed familial descent. As with the matrilineal significance of Sicily to the integrity of Sorabji's own idealised self-image, Szymanowski wrote in 1910 that 'If Italy did not exist

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<sup>182</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 183-4.

<sup>183</sup> Palmer, *Szymanowski*, 35.

<sup>184</sup> Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski*, 126.

<sup>185</sup> Palmer, *Szymanowski*, 35.

<sup>186</sup> See Stephen Downes, 'Szymanowski and Narcissism', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 12/1 (1996), 58-81. The appeal of the Narcissus myth to Szymanowski was as licence to an ego-fortifying introspection during the loneliness of his middle period, during which 'Szymanowski was working in an artistic medium most often characterized as "inward"' (79-80).

– I could not exist either'.<sup>187</sup> Szymanowski's visit to Sicily the following year further encouraged a reorientation of his self-identity and subjectivity.<sup>188</sup> Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz recalled how this 'mysterious and colourful country' and its cultural relics had 'fascinated Szymanowski so much' that it 'exerted a powerful impression on the young man's mind'.<sup>189</sup> Teresa Chylińska explains that, over the course of the following years, a 'profound and basic change was occurring in Szymanowski's artistic outlook and his creative work'. She attributes this to the impressions made on Szymanowski by his travels and his researches into the history, geography and culture of the Byzantine-Arabic world and to the 'exotic beauty' of medieval Persian poetry: 'these ideas seep into his musical concepts'.<sup>190</sup>

If these ideas can be said to have 'seeped' *into* Szymanowski's musical concepts, it can also be suggested that they seep *out of* the paper on which they were first handwritten and later press-printed: they are graphologically traceable in the distribution of ink on the pages comprising his material scores. Szymanowski's Sicilo-Irānian scores were a source of some fascination for Sorabji, and this fascination with the visuality of Szymanowski's notation – 'his wonderful scores, almost unique in modern music'<sup>191</sup> – abounds in his writings on this composer. For example, Sorabji revels in the 'graphical mastery' of the First Violin Concerto, in the 'intricacy, subtlety and complexity never before seen or approached in a violin concerto';<sup>192</sup> 'the score is almost unprecedented for its elaborateness'.<sup>193</sup>

A score of more wonderful and radiant luminosity I do not know, and with what brilliance and subtlety the solo instrument is treated! How its entries and the 'lay' of the orchestral parts are contrived to tell to the utmost against the elaborate complex weft of the orchestral background! How delicately and exquisitely contrived is that orchestral background only those who know this lovely score can realise [...].<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Letter to Jachimecki (4 December 1910), cited in Chylińska, *Szymanowski*, 42.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 75, 76. See also Samson, 75.

<sup>191</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: Uday Shankar', *The New English Weekly* (2 November 1933), 65-6.

<sup>192</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: Szymanowski: Violin Concerto (Broadcast; March 10<sup>th</sup>)', *The New English Weekly* (6 May 1943), 24-5.

<sup>193</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: A few remarks on Szymanowski', 255.

<sup>194</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: Courtauld Concert: Queen's, March 18<sup>th</sup>', *The New Age* (3 April 1930), 261.



In *Mi contra fa*, Sorabji elevates the concerto as ‘the greatest work of its kind in modern times’; its ‘score seems like an interplay of light translated into sound. Such a score, by the way, never yet was seen in a violin concerto [...] the score is a phenomenon’.<sup>195</sup> As for *Le Chant de Nuit*, ‘The score of this great work can only be described as magical’.<sup>196</sup> Sorabji describes how Szymanowski ‘sets’ Rūmī’s text in the orchestration of his symphony:

The pantheistic mysticism of the wonderful poem is surrounded with a glowing ecstatic score with ‘the light that never was on land or sea’. The score is a technical marvel, a lambent of liquid fire, and the whole work presents that perfect fusion of means and ends that hallmarks the supreme Master.<sup>197</sup>



**Fig. 6 Behzad’s *Advice of the Ascetic* (c. 1500-1550)**

Sorabji’s claim that the scores of both the Violin Concerto and the Third Symphony ‘are among the authentic orchestral miracles of the past forty years, *apart from* the unearthly and fantastic beauty of the music they so perfectly enshrine’<sup>198</sup> indicates quite clearly that he viewed the score and music ‘enshrined’ therein as entities independently un beholden: the score does not simply enable performance. It is *more* than a detailed set of instructions useful only to the trained musician whose primary objective is a faithful, Urtextual musical realization; for Sorabji, the score presents an art form in and of itself. In a particularly revealing analogy

<sup>195</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 184, 185.

<sup>196</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: A few remarks on Szymanowski’, 255.

<sup>197</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 210. The quotation is taken from Wordsworth’s ‘Elegiac Stanza Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm, Painted by George Beaumont’.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 183. Emphasis added.

likening Szymanowski's music-notational imprint in *Le Chant de Nuit* to artefacts of Iranian cultural heritage, Sorabji writes that, in spite of its black-on-white print, 'the whole score glows with gorgeous colour, bright yet never garish nor crude[,] like a Persian painting or silk rug'.<sup>199</sup> Similarly, the score of Busoni's *Indian Fantasy* reminded Sorabji of 'the rich dark glow of colours on some rare old silk-rug from Khorasan'<sup>200</sup> and the 'feel' of Medtner's 'Night Wind' sonata under the fingers 'is like the pile of some richly and sombrely coloured silk Persian rug'.<sup>201</sup> Figures 6 and 7 show typical examples of those Persian painting and rug designs Sorabji likened to the textures especially visible in Szymanowski's Siciliano- Iranian score-writing. Aside from the 'bright, yet never garish nor crude' use of colour, both images illustrate an artisanal preoccupation with the production of an interlocking profusion of detail within the confines of a relatively limited space, and it is not irrelevant here that Persian rugs are typically valued – in an almost Regerian currency – according to the density of knots per square inch.<sup>202</sup> Indeed, in a *Musical Opinion* piece on Reger, Sorabji makes a diversion so as to comment on the relative textural merits of Isfahani rugs (serendipitously also known as 'Polish rugs' on account of their being bartered along Persian-Polish trade routes in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries<sup>203</sup>) and fashionable French silks. The comparison will bring us close to an almost tactile appreciation of Sorabji's disregard for Parisian modernism: 'An



**Fig. 7 'The Emperor's Carpet' (c. 1550)**

This is one specimen Sorabji directly referred to in writing: 'One thinks of the gorgeous rich dark glow of colours on some priceless old Chinese or Persian silk carpet like that presented by the Tsar Alexander to the Emperor Franz Joseph I' (*Around Music*, 29).

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 183-4.

<sup>200</sup> Sorabji, 'Contingencies: Busoni', *The Sackbut*, 1/9 (March 1921), 418.

<sup>201</sup> Sorabji, 'The Greatness of Medtner' in Richard Holt (ed.), *Nicolas Medtner (1879 [sic] – 1951)* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1955), 129.

<sup>202</sup> See Karla J. Nielson, *Textiles: Fabrics, Applications and Historic Style* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2007), 274.

<sup>203</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isfahan\\_rug](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isfahan_rug) [accessed 1 May 2014].

Ispahan [*sic*] silk rug has *a vastly denser and closer texture* than a piece of embroidered mousseline-de-soie'.<sup>204</sup>

Before venturing too far down this route, let us recall Sorabji's description of 'line-drawing' – that which the fashion-conscious ““moderns”” didn't 'get' – as the 'interweaving of a number of horizontal lines of melody'.<sup>205</sup> Descriptions of such an abundance of closely-knit detail appear in evaluations of Szymanowski's sounding music. For example, in reviewing a 1934 BBC recital broadcast with Roman Totenberg and the composer at the piano, G.A.H. writes of Szymanowski's *Mythes* that, 'The material of such music is inlaid with filigree as profuse and as delicate as that in the art of the ancient silversmiths'; Szymanowski 'delights to fill in with a mass of detail'.<sup>206</sup> Although G.A.H. is describing the aurally-perceptible sonic qualities of these 'three elusive movements' for violin and piano, there is nevertheless a signified-sign correlation between such 'filigree' in sound and the 'profuse' and 'delicate' notational instructions on paper which enable their musical realization. Example 3 shows Szymanowski's penchant for 'filling in' the score of the third movement of the *Mythes* with a 'mass of detail', incorporating exacting subtleties of rhythm, dynamics and ornamentation in the presentation of and accompaniment to the wide-ranging chromatic violin melody:

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<sup>204</sup> Sorabji, 'Reger', *Musical Opinion* (November 1951), 77/79. Emphasis added.

<sup>205</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: B.B.C. van Dieren Memorial Concert (Friday, 9 April.)', *The New English Weekly* (22 April 1937), 35.

<sup>206</sup> G.A.H., 'Wireless Notes: A Polish Composer's Music', *The Manchester Guardian* (29 October 1934), 10.



9 Poco più tranquillo.  
pp dolciss. p dolciss. riten.

Poco più tranquillo.  
delicatissimo pp dolciss. ten. riten.  
rubato e capriccioso

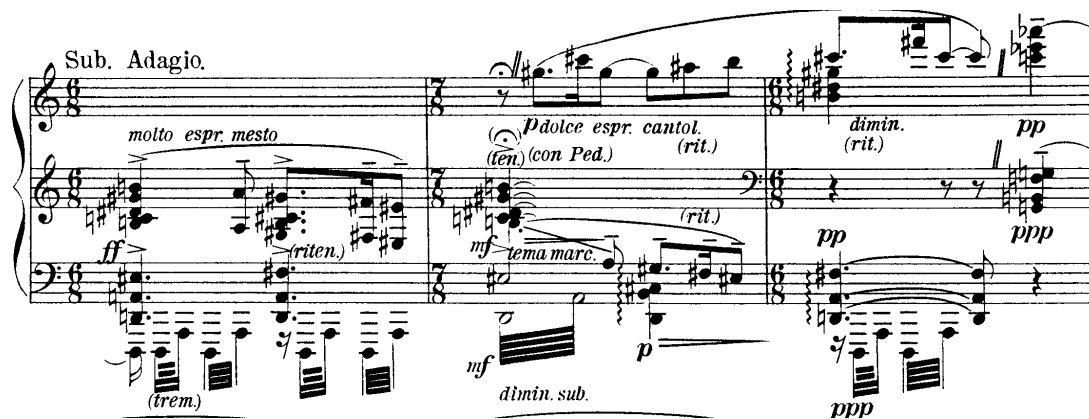
allargando - a tempo  
allargando (capriccioso) pp riten.  
sosten. sosten. pp (capriccioso) a tempo  
(Sutvret)

a tempo (poco più mosso)  
pp a tempo (poco più mosso) ppp cresc. 8  
ppp (scherzando) tr. ppp perdendosi pppp sf poco

Ex. 3 Szymanowski: 'Dryades et Pan' from *Mythes* (Op. 30, No. 3), bb. 93-100.

Similarly, Stuckenschmidt's account of those 'incredibly and fantastically scored' middle-period works is never far from concluding that Szymanowski was at times inclined towards notational excess. In this regard he describes Szymanowski's 'indefatigable enriching of harmony', how he 'generally piles up notes in such a manner as to produce an overloaded chord structure'.<sup>207</sup>

<sup>207</sup> Stuckenschmidt, 'Szymanowski', 38.



Ex. 4 Szymanowski: 'Nausicaa' from *Métopes* (Op. 29, No. 3), bb. 88-90

Szymanowski's melodies are of 'the greatest flexibility and refinement, full of chromatic evasions and saturated with arabesque-like ornamentation'.<sup>208</sup>

sc. Lento assai  
improvvisando (a piacere)

8

accelerando

203

allargando

pesante

39

40

accelerando

cresc.

sul G fi

sf

fff

sf

m

Ex. 5 Szymanowski: First Violin Concerto (Op. 35), solo violin part, bb. 200-214

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

His scores are characterised by ‘rich chromatic decorations’;<sup>209</sup> he ‘liked to alight on a great many different accidentals of any given key and thence to go off into still more remote tonalities’.<sup>210</sup> Szymanowski’s eschewal of diatonic scalar principles called for mediating chromaticisms as, for example, in his use of ‘Spanish-Arabic’ modes in ‘Don Juan’s Serenade’.<sup>211</sup>



Ex. 6 Szymanowski: ‘Sérénade de Don Juan’ from *Masques* (Op. 34, No. 3), bb. 2-11.

Szymanowski shows an almost antiquarian preoccupation with creating scores full of ornamental tracery, evoking the soundscape of some fictitious classical Far East. ‘Schéhérazade’, for example, makes use of ‘arpeggiations of oriental-sounding material’.<sup>212</sup>

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 38.

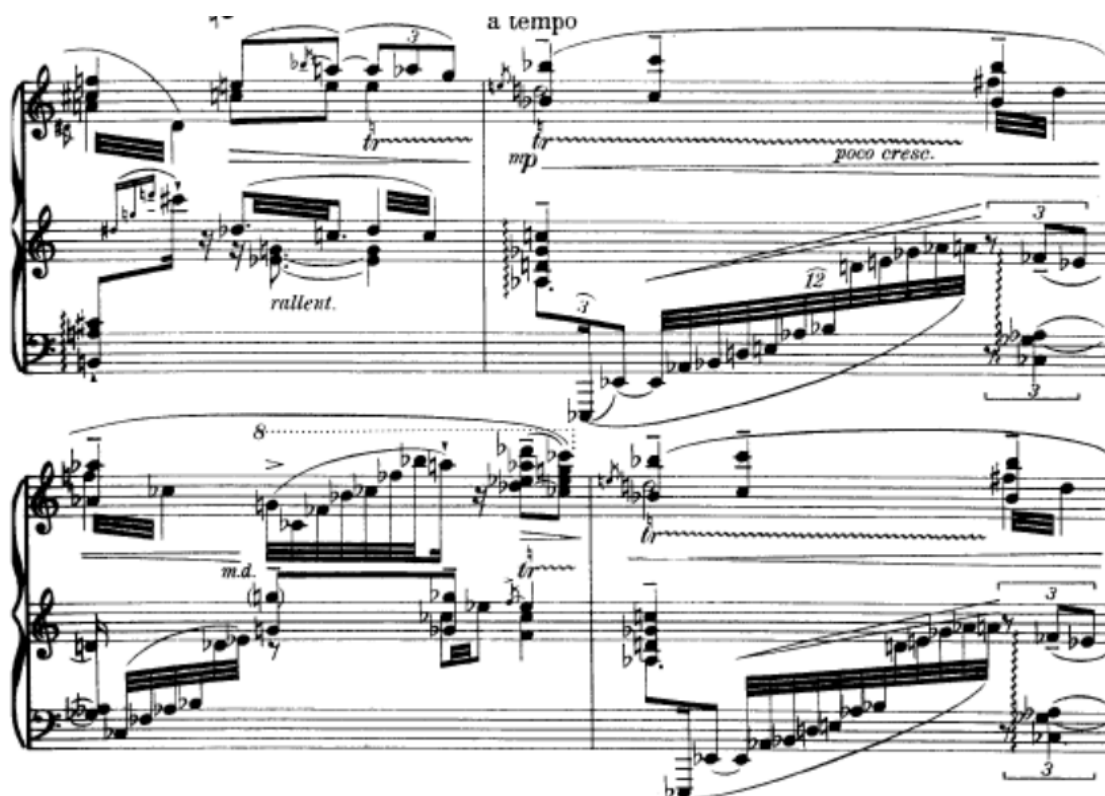
<sup>211</sup> Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski*, 103.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 102.



Ex. 7 Szymanowski: 'Shéhérazade' from *Masques* (Op. 34, No. 1), bb. 311-14.

One of the most common devices of Szymanowski's middle period is the extensive use of trills and tremolos, which are 'employed for their intrinsic quality as *timbre*, as a musical Impressionist translation of shimmering heat or light'.<sup>213</sup> To Stuckenschmidt's ear, however, melodic discernibility is potentially lost in this translation, as 'trills and rapid figurations often complicate the melodic line':<sup>214</sup>



Ex. 8 Szymanowski: 'L'isle des Sirènes' from *Métopes* (Op. 29, No. 1), bb. 21-4.

All these graphic-sonoric devices – Szymanowski's delighting in melodic filigree, the overloaded piling-up of notes, *arabesque* ornamentation, his disorientating use of

<sup>213</sup> Palmer, *Szymanowski* 31.

<sup>214</sup> Stuckenschmidt, 'Szymanowski' 38.

chromaticisms, the abundance of obfuscatory trills and tremolos – together leave a distinctly blackening trace on the physical score: ‘The outward appearance of Szymanowski’s music is nearly always recognizable’.<sup>215</sup>

Stuckenschmidt concludes that Szymanowski’s middle-period scoring was ‘actually intended to produce a certain hypertrophy of sound’.<sup>216</sup> This overwrought tendency on paper and in sound was a quality present in Szymanowski’s Sicilo-Irànian works greatly admired by Sorabji. His appraisal of Szymanowski’s scores deserves attention for the perspective it gives on Sorabji’s evaluation of excess and complexity as a graphical means to an ideal sonoric end. On this point it is telling that, for Sorabji, the finest examples of complexity in art should originate in that polyvalent ‘Orient’ from which he claimed both familial and artistic-cultural descent:

if there is one thing more than another that Oriental art impresses on one, it is that to the Oriental artist the ideal of simplicity is not only utterly meaningless and alien, but scarcely enters his head. The rhyme scheme of Persian poetry, the rubaiyi [*sic*] or quatrain, the designs of Persian carpets, Hindu architecture, Chinese carving, are all remarkable for the [last] intricacy and complexity, things symptomatic of an exuberantly rich and tropically fertile imagination, rejoicing in its own strength and teeming abundance of invention.<sup>217</sup>

It should be pointed out that, of course, such *authentic* complexity was a trait very much un-English, as he makes clear in continuing on from the above:

Needless to say, that by this is *not* meant the soulless and mechanical repetition of one or two decorative conventions to which the English public is accustomed in the ‘arts and crafts’ products exposed for sale in London shops specializing in what they call ‘Oriental goods’, but the rich inventive fancy which finds expression in the prodigious sculptures of the Amaravati tope, the casts of which on the walls up the principal staircase of the British museum can be profitably studied in this connection.<sup>218</sup>

Sorabji is here flaunting his oriental(ist) authority: not only does he dismiss the folksy arts-and-crafts movement as offensively caricaturing the ‘true’ orient, but points his readers in

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 116. The square-bracketed emendation is to be found in Sorabji’s own hand in his corrected copy; the original publication has ‘lush’. Either way, the implication is one of decadent excess.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.





**Fig. 8 Amarāvati Maha Stūpa relief at Chennai Museum, India**

the direction of the British museum for the genuine (albeit ironically reproduced) article. Figure 8 shows a relief of the Amarāvati tope (or stūpa) such as referred to by Sorabji. Its ornate patterning gives a good indication of that ‘lush/last

intricacy and complexity’ of detail he valued so highly in art worthy of the name. We might describe this as a kind of exoticised maximalism whereby a fascination for minutely intricate detailing takes the place of the sheer dimensionality of, for example, Szymanowski’s First Symphony of his earlier period, his ‘harmonic-contrapuntal-orchestral monster’ so indebted to the end-of-century *kolossal*. The exotic maximalism of Szymanowski’s middle period is of a dual nature – both sonic and visual – but it was a quality unsuited to the time. Szymanowski’s Sicilo-Irānian output is like ‘that of the Oriental artist and craftsman’, but ‘an age that really hates fine craftsmanship as does ours, because it is so utterly incapable of it, elevates its incompetence into a dogma’. In order to better understand Sorabji’s aversion to interwar contemporary music, we now turn to his response to Szymanowski’s abandonment of that lavish, line-drawn complexity Sorabji associated with the workings of an ‘exuberantly rich and tropically fertile imagination’ in favour of the ‘chunk-bombardment’ and ‘simplicity fetish’ of “modernism”.

#### Dry rot: the fungoid influence of Stravinsky

I have just received from Max Eschig, of Paris, copies of the ‘Symphonie Concertante’ of Karol Szymanowski, and I can safely say that I have never in my life been so thoroughly shocked at the spectacle of that ghastly dry-rot, that, as Mr. Cecil Gray pointed out in his

admirable and devastating ‘Survey of Contemporary Music’, attacks so many composers of to-day [...].<sup>219</sup>

So begins Sorabji’s *volte face* on the music of Szymanowski. ‘The composition in question’, he continues, ‘is no more than a patchwork of most of the feeblest up-to-the-minute tricks of the Vogue-rue de la Paix composers of Paris’:

Looking at the pages of this work, it is hard to believe that it is the work of the same man who wrote the lovely ‘Song of the Night’, the exquisite cycle, ‘The Love-sick Muezzin’, the wonderful, richly imaginative and subtly coloured piano pieces, ‘Métopes’ and ‘Schéhérezade’. The complete change of style is of artificial and unnatural violence; there has been, as far as I am aware, no gradual process at work (unless dry-rot can be called a gradual process) [...]. A deplorable and depressing exemplar of the effect of the present-day tendencies upon all but the most strong-minded and spiritually independent.<sup>220</sup>

Sorabji’s abrupt change of tone corresponds with Szymanowski’s own stylistic gear-shift as so clearly evidenced in the Op. 60 *Symphonie Concertante* (1932). This neo-classically-refined ‘Fourth Symphony’ appears as the summative moment in Szymanowski’s later career,<sup>221</sup> a third and final period marked by the submission of his ‘spiritual independence’ to those pervasive ‘present-day tendencies’ Sorabji deplored. Sorabji’s primary assessment of this work – revealing its ‘pages and pages’ of ‘bare’ octaves betraying the ‘spectacle of that ghastly dry-rot’ he associated with Parisian ‘epigonomodernism’ *à la mode* – points not only to his dismay with Szymanowski’s apparent conformity to musical trends of the day, but also demonstrates in the negative Sorabji’s graphological appreciation of the musical score as visual art form: just ‘looking at the pages of this work’, Sorabji *sees* that Szymanowski has ‘shrivelled’ from a ‘vivid poet’ into a ‘wretched post-war “pasticheur”’. The *Symphonie*’s opening bars illustrate a new stylistic economy in the paring down and, contravening the principles of ‘line drawing’, ‘verticalisation’ of texture:

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<sup>219</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New Age* (10 May 1934), 21.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Only three new works were subsequently published: the Second Violin Concerto, Op. 61 (1932-3), *Litany to the Virgin Mary*, Op. 59 (1930-3) and Two Mazurkas, Op. 62 (1933-4).



Ex. 9 Szymanowski: *Symphonie Concertante* (Op. 60), bb. 1-6.

For Sorabji, the patent first-page absence of that hypertrophic indulgence of ornamentation, harmonic overloading and tessitura-engulfing sweep evident in Szymanowski's previous works signalled the composer's concession to a more austere post-War medium: from the ecstatic freefall of his middle period, Szymanowski had come to ground with a syncopated bump. Two years before receiving the *Symphonie*, Sorabji already suspected that Szymanowski had succumbed to certain exsanguinating trends within contemporary music, trends fundamentally antipathetic to that oriental complexity or exoticised maximalism characterising the composer's Sicilo-Irànian period:

Unfortunately, in the two volumes of *Mazurkas*, and the *String Quartet*, signs show themselves that Szymanowski has been paying too much attention to the simplicity-maniacs, who have been in the habit, especially in England, of adversely criticising his work on the score of that unnecessary complexity that a critic can always be guaranteed to

discover in a work that sets novel problems [...]. As a result, a nature like Szymanowski's, accustomed to a rich and complex musical expression, full of brilliant and subtle imagery, is necessarily cramped and hampered in its expression, and one misses the splendid, free sweep of earlier work, with its gorgeous language and glowing, impassioned vocabulary.<sup>222</sup>

In conclusion, Sorabji writes: 'One has more than a suspicion that certain French associations have been none too good to him'; they 'have had the effect of producing an appearance of artificial chlorosis, not due to anaemia but to phlebotomy'.<sup>223</sup> The mere mention of 'French associations' within the cultural context of the 1920s is enough to indict that apparently vampiric doyen of Parisian musical life – and Sorabji's *bête noire* – Igor Stravinsky.

'Stravinsky (the one of the Russian ballets) is quite a genius', wrote Szymanowski in 1913: 'I am very impressed by him and par consequence I am beginning to hate the Germans (I don't mean the old ones, of course!)'.<sup>224</sup> It was not, however, until after meeting Stravinsky in 1920 that the younger Russian 'had a decisive influence on the direction the Polish composer was about to take [...] fully justifying Szymanowski's own remark that he had entered a new period in his creative life'.<sup>225</sup> As Samson explains, Stravinsky 'triggered off a new phase of creativity for Szymanowski', appreciable 'in the measure of his abnegation of the world of the exotic which had formerly fed his creative imagination'.<sup>226</sup> In place of the deeply subjective orientation of his *vie intérieure*, Szymanowski had now aligned his compositional methods with contemporary trends which can be broadly categorised as *Stravinskian*. The adjectival suffix here is to cautiously acknowledge that, while certain works are clearly derivative of Stravinsky's own style,<sup>227</sup> we might say more generally that Szymanowski's newly-assimilated anti-romantic neo-classicism (of the first and third movements of the *Symphonie Concertante*, for example) and his growing interest in Goral folk music – 'with the same primitive energy, and "archaic" harmonies which appealed to Stravinsky in some Russian peasant

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<sup>222</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: A few remarks on Szymanovsky', 257.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Letter to Stefan Spiess quoted in Chylińska, 60.

<sup>225</sup> Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski*, 156, 158.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>227</sup> Such as *Słopiewnie* (1921) and the ballet *Harnasie* (1923-31). Ibid., 175.

music'<sup>228</sup> – rather belong to a post-War mood embodied in the figure of Stravinsky as representative of artistic life in 1920s Paris.<sup>229</sup> As Szymanowski himself noted, alongside Schoenberg's, the name of Stravinsky 'has become a symbol of revolutionary musical modernity'.<sup>230</sup> In his 1924 article on Stravinsky, Szymanowski asks,

How was it that such an art [as Stravinsky's] gradually became the ideological point of reference for groups of nebulous, diffuse concepts, and for individual, uncoordinated efforts both to create a new music, clear and unambiguous in form, and to discover a new way through the rubble, splendid though it was, of yesterday's art?

Szymanowski found the answer in Stravinsky:

In those transitional periods which occur in the course of the evolution of artistic ideologies, a powerful, creative figure of great intelligence will suddenly appear, as if conjured up by magic, to concentrate within himself, and also to express in concrete form, the gradually maturing but as yet unvoiced moods and yearnings of the masses.<sup>231</sup>

Stravinsky here appears as a guiding light leading the way through the schismatic paradigm shift of the new modernist episteme in music history and, in the process, supplanting the 'rubble' of the late-nineteenth century and fin de siècle. As Szymanowski recognised, the imitation of Stravinsky promised an expedient and expeditiously reproducible means to post-War artistic recognition:

There is no doubt that it is precisely this tireless search for the shortest and most direct route in pursuit of inner development which holds the secret of Stravinsky's psychological influence over the younger generations of composers in the emergent, newly autonomous musical cultures of the West.<sup>232</sup>

For Sorabji, such shortcuts were anathema to authentic artistic production and were to be discerned (both seen and heard) in that maligned simplicity of texture he linked to fashionable modernism. But, where Sorabji saw only dry rot running fungus-like through the pages of the *Symphonie Concertante*, Szymanowski took an obvious pride in his newly

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>229</sup> When asked by Jerzy Rytard in 1922, 'where then, in your view, is there the liveliest musical activity?', Szymanowski answered, 'France, or rather Paris, still occupies pride of place'. 'Karol Szymanowski on Contemporary Music' in Wightman (trans. and ed.), 203.

<sup>230</sup> Szymanowski, 'On the Works of Wagner, Strauss and Schoenberg', 220.

<sup>231</sup> Szymanowski, 'Igor Stravinsky' [1924], in Wightman, (trans. and ed.), 225.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 227.

acquired clarity and transparency of scoring.<sup>233</sup> Szymanowski's third period is thus delineated by a decisive containment of those excesses characterising his prior phases, a containment which is inevitably made plain on the surface of the physical score. Stuckenschmidt notes in this regard that 'in place of the earlier chromatic and contrapuntal overloading there is now a perfect harmonic transparency' indicating Szymanowski's abandonment of a previously 'over-sophisticated, excessively chromatic and almost morbidly sensitive and nervous style'.<sup>234</sup> Samson similarly comments on Szymanowski's exchange of 'sinuous chromatic melodies' and 'opulent harmonies' for a new 'clarity of texture and an incisive rhythmic drive'.<sup>235</sup> Entirely symptomatic of this is Szymanowski's dismissal, in 1922, of Sorabji's hero Max Reger (who, for the record, was considered 'repellent' and 'dull' by Stravinsky<sup>236</sup>). Szymanowski asserts that the direction taken in the late German's music could but only lead to a hopeless polyphonic impasse; in contrast, 'today's good music has a clear, broad outline which is markedly more transparent than that of the German music of the recent past'.<sup>237</sup> We might add that this transparency was also in marked contrast to the exoticised maximalism informing his middle-period works, those *sui generis* products of Szymanowski's Sicilo-Irànian period so cherished by Sorabji.

#### "Modernism", social contacts and social contracts

Accounts of Szymanowski's third-period stylistic retrenchment consistently return a number of key words. These typically draw attention to his search for a new *transparency*, *clearness* and *clarity* of scoring, the opposite descriptors of which suggest *opacity*, *obfuscation* and *obscurity*. There is, then, a desire for greater *accessibility* and *communicability* in his new music and this is entirely in accord with the increased concern following the War with the newly conceived social responsibilities of music and

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<sup>233</sup> Writing to Jan Smeterlin (20 January 1933), Szymanowski explained that the *Symphonie Concertante* 'differs from the rest of the scores I have sent you already, as it is the most beautifully written'. B. M. Maciejewski and Felix Aprahamian (trans. and ed.), *Karol Szymanowski & Jan Smeterlin: correspondence and essays* (London: Allegro Press, 1969), 54. See also Samson, 198.

<sup>234</sup> Stuckenschmidt, 'Szymanowski', 46, 57.

<sup>235</sup> Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski*, 158, 154.

<sup>236</sup> Robert Craft and Igor Stravinsky, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), Conversation 1 (n.p.).

<sup>237</sup> 'Karol Szymanowski on Contemporary Music', 204. In notes for a chapter provisionally entitled 'German Music, Reger, and Cyclic Form', Szymanowski denounces the influence of Reger and his own earlier reliance on Regerian technique. In doing so he champions the benefits of sparser musical textures. Reger 'gives the illusion of constructionalism' in 'a downright disorderly and alogical way', his music is marred by 'the complete absence [...] of any sort of framework'. See fn. 4 to Szymanowski's 'On the Works of Wagner, Strauss and Schoenberg' in Wightman (trans. and ed.), 217.

musicians.<sup>238</sup> To this political enjoinder Sorabji remained immune, as had Szymanowski throughout the highly cultivated and aestheticized sense of isolation fostering his first and second phases of creativity. In his third period, however, Szymanowski had knowingly aligned with what history would determine to be one of the dominant forms of twentieth-century artistic expression. Sorabji's recognition of Szymanowski's move from the margins to the centre of musical productivity was based on a primary, visual assessment of a number of Szymanowski's scores which revealed, *prima facie*, the 'tricks of the Vogue-rue de la Paix composers of Paris', chief among them Stravinsky. As much as he might have protested against the assertion, Sorabji's criticism of third-period Szymanowski is as much social as it is musical, and begins to illuminate the extent to which his artistic beliefs were predicated on the antisocial and unpopular principles of exclusivity and inaccessibility which went on to inform his curation of neglected works.

There is an underlying (barely) sense that Sorabji resented Szymanowski's post-War social reorientation: certain 'French associations' had tied him to a contract demanding clarity over obscurity of expression (he 'has been paying too much attention to the simplicity-maniacs'). A little investigation shows Sorabji's intuition to have been right and, again, Stravinsky plays a leading rôle as the Parisian Pied Piper, since Szymanowski clearly reaped the benefits of his association – reciprocally musical and social – with him. Indeed, having spent many intermittent years throughout the 1920s frequenting Parisian cultural hotspots – meeting and befriending through Stravinsky's introduction the luminary likes of Diaghilev, Casella, Ravel, de Falla, Auric, Milhaud (and various other hangers-on of Les Six), Bartók, Cocteau, Gide<sup>239</sup> – and eagerly absorbing the city's artistic offerings, Szymanowski was to become the recipient of a number of distinguished awards in 1930. As Wightman notes, these amounted to 'public confirmation of the esteem he knew he had enjoyed in French musical circles since the war'.<sup>240</sup> At the same time, Szymanowski was unanimously elected an honorary member of the International Society for Contemporary Music, joining 'the select company' of Stravinsky (naturally), Strauss, de Falla and Bartók.<sup>241</sup> It looked, in other words, as though Szymanowski was in danger of entering the

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<sup>238</sup> See Daniel Albright (ed.), 'Music, Social Responsibility, and Politics' in *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 337-366.

<sup>239</sup> Chylińska, *Szymanowski*, 137 and Maciejewski, *Karol Szymanowski: his life and music*, 7.

<sup>240</sup> Alistair Wightman, *Karol Szymanowski: His Life and Work* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 361.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

“modern” canon and thereby invalidating his chances of a lasting place in Sorabji’s counter-canon of neglected works and obscure composers. His output from the period did indeed become canonic, at least in an academic, theoretical sense: Nadia Boulanger, in her internationally renowned Paris Conservatoire composition classes, used ‘only’ Stravinsky, Ravel and Szymanowski to demonstrate modern musical techniques to would-be composers.<sup>242</sup> It was this prototypical assimilation into an emerging tradition – with Szymanowski’s works recognised as blueprints for others to follow – that Sorabji detected with some dismay in first encountering Szymanowski’s post-War output. The evidence provided on the basis of this recognition mounts to suggest that, in his appropriation of fashionable Stravinskian stylisations, Szymanowski had translated the largely private symbolism of his interior landscape into a musical language fit to signify elements of the diverse discourses of post-War modernism: as a composer he no longer spoke entirely for himself, but for an artistic movement greater than the sum of its parts. It was precisely this homogenizing de-individuation at the heart of “modernism” that Sorabji set out to critique.

The “modern” composer was one allied to establishments and, of course, Sorabji saw himself as ‘entirely alien and antipathetic to the fashionable tendencies prompted, publicised and plugged by the various “establishments” revolving around this or that modern composer’.<sup>243</sup> These typically included ‘academies and colleges, those hotbeds of cliques, rings and toadies’.<sup>244</sup> As if to prove Sorabji’s point, when the musical headquarters of Szymanowski’s native Poland caught wind of his foreign accolades in the field of modernism, he was immediately offered a professorship at the State Academy of Music in Warsaw. His address as rector (given on 7 November 1930) at the Academy’s opening outlines the ‘ideological framework’ by which the institution strove to cultivate music as a national art, and shows just how starkly Szymanowski’s public rhetoric contrasted with that of the *Davidsbündler*-like creed of his Young Poland neo-romanticism and the personal language of his Sicilo-Irânian neo-impressionism. His concern with the ‘social obligations’ of the contemporary musician gave utterance to a Stravinskian demotic:

I know that in effect I am not speaking in my own name. The great honour has fallen on me to voice ideas common to us all, to be the interpreter of the thoughts of my colleagues and members of the School Council, to be the spokesman and representative of those

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Quoted in Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Company I’ve Kept: Essays in Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1966), 38-9.

<sup>244</sup> Szymanowski, *Around Music*, 170.



Polish musicians who consciously combine their deep love for, and convictions of, the elevating nobility of true art with a sense of social responsibility for the well-being of the nation's culture.<sup>245</sup>

Szymanowski speaks of art as 'a *social matter*, the birthright and property of the general public', of music as 'the most easily attained secret way to an understanding of common artistic experience'.<sup>246</sup> The publication of his article, 'The Educational Role of Musical Culture in Society',<sup>247</sup> later in November (and reprinted in May 1931) consolidates many of his ideas for Poland's musical future as presented in his speech to the Academy. Here he writes of his 'all-embracing musical ideology'<sup>248</sup> of music as 'an elemental force. It penetrates all social strata and satisfies, in the fullest measure, the aesthetic hunger of the masses'.<sup>249</sup> He expresses his wish to see music assume 'its rightful place in our cultural consciousness' as it is 'organically connected with the life of the nation, with society in general, and not just particular social classes or individuals'.<sup>250</sup> 'We are concerned with the channelling of the elemental force of music into a proper riverbed. Its turbulent current has to be harnessed [...]. The uniting of whole groups of people in a commonly shared experience [...] the mysterious crystallization of a unity that is fundamentally above and beyond immediate self-interest [...] the blending together of particular elements [...] their *harmonisation* [...] that ideal *unity* [...] the development of the *supra-individual idea* [...]'.<sup>251</sup>

...and so on. Would it be fair to harbour the inkling that, perhaps, Szymanowski had, as it is formulated in the vernacular, 'sold out'? – that by donning the guise of Polish Professor of Polish Music he was giving in to certain pressures other than those borne of 'creative necessity'? In short, and on both counts, 'yes'.<sup>252</sup> Predictably enough, the truth of the matter can be explained as a monetary one: by the mid-1920s, Szymanowski was

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<sup>245</sup> Szymanowski, 'The Opening of the State Academy of Music in Warsaw: The Rector's Address' [1930], in Wightman (trans. and ed.), 268.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 268-9. Emphasis in original.

<sup>247</sup> In *ibid.*, 281-317.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 283-4.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 289, 307, 308, 309. All emphases in original.

<sup>252</sup> Compare Medtner's speech on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1926 of the founding of the Moscow Conservatoire: 'My wishes for this day of the jubilee of my own *alma mater* are for it to boldly lead the fight against the demands of fashion, the notion of which is more suited to a tailor than an artist but which, unfortunately, like an epidemic, has affected a large part of the musical world'. Quoted in Barrie Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Works* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 187.

broke. Following the expropriation of the Szymanowski family's Tymószowka estate by marauding Bolshevik armies (his two pianos were 'wantonly' thrown in the lake; he would never again be able to afford his own instrument),<sup>253</sup> Szymanowski was soon without a private income to support his art, an unprecedentedly penurious situation further exacerbated by his frivolous and, given the situation, disastrous attitude to money during the highlife of his Paris years.<sup>254</sup> As he wrote to Jan Smeterlin on 22 February 1926: 'The only way out is for me to double, or rather quadruple my output, which is what I really am doing, to near exhaustion [...]. But, alas, I don't expect any great new works'.<sup>255</sup> Writing again to Smeterlin of *Harnaisie*, Szymanowski gives the impression that the composition was not so much a labour of love as a labour of artistic prostitution: 'I am in the midst of writing a horrible little peasant ballet (góralski) both very national and very patriotic, which has been commissioned here by the Warsaw opera. If I become a musical whore, it is because I am poverty stricken. Alas!'<sup>256</sup> In the end, Szymanowski's position at the Warsaw Academy was to little or no avail. In 1932, he explained to Smeterlin that, 'For so many years now I have had to follow the path of duty rather than pleasure!'<sup>257</sup> and writes in criticism of post-War modernist tendencies, 'It seems to me that, as regards music, structures made from reinforced concrete are – in fact – a terrible bore [...]. But this is, after all, a matter of convention. I would like to know how long this "*contrat social*" is going to last in music'.<sup>258</sup> The following year, Szymanowski is reduced to concertizing: 'I have decided to continue my career as a "pianist". I have no option! This will keep the wolf from the door, at least for a while. Otherwise it is complete stagnation'.<sup>259</sup> And the next year we find Szymanowski declaring 'How absurd this all is! To play (badly) instead of being able to compose in peace somewhere (in any case a lot better!)'.<sup>260</sup> In October 1934, Szymanowski expresses to Smeterlin in the most poignant terms the toll this burden of (artistically-relative) hardship had on him: 'I feel I must tell you all this so that you will not be surprised at the ruin of a man you will now have to deal with, when you see how

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<sup>253</sup> Maciejewski and Aprahamian (trans. and ed.), *Szymanowski and Jan Smeterlin*, 24.

<sup>254</sup> See Cesetti, 'The Narrative of a Composer's Biography', 50 and Samson, *The Music of Szymanowski*, 200.

<sup>255</sup> Maciejewski and Aprahamian (trans. and ed.), *Szymanowski and Jan Smeterlin*, 24.

<sup>256</sup> Szymanowski to Smeterlin, letter dated 5 January 1929, in *ibid.*, 32.

<sup>257</sup> Szymanowski to Smeterlin, letter dated 17 July 1932, in *ibid.*, 48.

<sup>258</sup> Szymanowski to Smeterlin, letter dated 26 August 1932, in *ibid.*, 50-1.

<sup>259</sup> Szymanowski to Smeterlin, letter dated 14 June 1933, in *ibid.*, 61.

<sup>260</sup> Szymanowski to Smeterlin, letter dated 14 June 1933, in *ibid.*, 61.

very much life has changed me during these last years, since we met. *I am the mere shadow of the man I once was*’.<sup>261</sup>

Perhaps, then, Sorabji’s ascription of phlebotomy to the composer of the *Symphonie Concertante*, *Harnaisie*, the Mazurkas and Second String Quartet wasn’t too wide of the mark (in metaphorical terms, at least). Sorabji’s thoroughbred ‘Aristocratic Principle’ would not admit such bourgeois, upwardly-mobile socio-cultural instrumentalism as that which led Szymanowski, the fully-fledged *arriviste* “modern”, away from his *vie intérieure* to the fashionable quarters of Paris and, from there, into the central establishment of music education in Poland. As long as Sorabji’s two grand pianos remained on *terra firma* for him to compose in peace – and as long as he remained financially secure – he would never have to make such concessions.<sup>262</sup> In terms of his criticism, all Sorabji really professed to be concerned with was the music itself, the dry rot and not its causes – or so he would have liked his readers to believe. In a noteworthy aside to his assessment of Szymanowski’s Sicilo-Irànian opera, Sorabji declares that the ineffability of music ideally transcends earthly concerns, that any attempt to ‘explain’ it as a product of its composer’s unique situation in the modern world would be an ultimately futile undertaking:

The entire work of *King Roger* is, to one hearer at least, a mysterious indescribable and musical quintessentiation of everything utterly inexpressible, of course, that Sicily and Palermo are to him; what those feelings are, how to describe them, is of course impossible – one would have to leave that to Messieurs Les Doctrinomanes, who know when and how music expresses social aspirations and such odd things. . . .<sup>263</sup>

It is to this attitude that we can attribute Sorabji’s disdain for ‘all things musicological (WHAT a word!)’.<sup>264</sup> But it might be possible nevertheless to argue that Sorabji was here unintentionally adopting the role of one such doctrinaire gentleman. When, for example, he writes of ‘the effect of present-day tendencies’, of ‘certain French associations’ or that Szymanowski ‘pays homage’ to the ‘tom-tom fashions prevalent in certain quarters’ – ‘*rue*

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<sup>261</sup> Letter dated 4 October 1934, in *ibid.*, 73. Emphasis added.

<sup>262</sup> See Abrahams, *Le Mauvais Jardinier*, fn. 47, p. 153.

<sup>263</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 186. ‘Messieurs Les Doctrinomanes’ appears to be neologistic Frenchism of Sorabji’s own devising, but may indicate his attitude towards the gentlemen of academia, including the doctrinaire Mus. Docs.

<sup>264</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music. New Gramophone Records (H.M.V.)’, *The New English Weekly* (20 February 1936), 376.

*de la Paix*, or King's-road Chelsea', for instance – the 'unpleasant [...] sort of people who listen to (and the fact of whose listening makes) modish composer', Sorabji, however unwittingly, is expressing 'when and how music expresses social aspirations and such odd things'. His diagnosis of the causes of Szymanowski's modernist reorientation (the rot setting in) are at base sociological: through his allegiance to Stravinsky and the numerous social contacts that association enabled, Szymanowski had entered a world he had previously considered himself exterior to. No longer was he an outsider not even troubling himself to look in – that is, ex-centric to the prevailing music culture – but an insider partaking of the most up-to-date and then-current fashions. That these homogenizing fashions can be traced through to the graphic appearance of the scores they manifest brings not only the musical but the visual and the material into considerations of Sorabji's total antipathy towards mainstream musical modernism as he saw and heard it. As the 1920s progressed, the fungoid proliferation of "modernism" came to further side-line Sorabji's counter-canon, pushing his most revered works deeper and deeper into neglect and obscurity. Part IV takes us further still into this doom and gloom with Sorabji's writings on that Messianic anti-Stravinskian, Bernard van Dieren.

## **Part IV**

### ***An ultra-microscopic minority***

### **Social and anti-social aspects of Sorabji's isolationism**



## Chapter Seven

### On Alkan ‘from the other side of the looking-glass’

People who like Sorabji always like Alkan and I’m not sure why.  
STEPHEN FRY, ‘Private Passions’ (2004)<sup>1</sup>

As a man and a musician [Sorabji] is so like Alkan that it is often impossible to say where one leaves off and the other begins [...]. The parallels are uncanny.  
KENNETH DERUS, ‘Another Alkan’ (1977)<sup>2</sup>

If these comments offer anything to go by, it would seem that the one could not do nor be without the other. Insofar as the cultural imagination encroaches upon such hinterlands, Alkan and Sorabji are twinned as inseparable: Sorabji and Alkan, Alkan and Sorabji. The apparent blurring of the one and the other in this most curious case prompted Kenneth Derus to suggest in 1977 that the confusion could be reconciled by thinking of the two as one: ‘The circumstances surrounding Sorabji’s birth are as mysterious as the circumstances surrounding Alkan’s death. I am in fact tempted to say that at 164 Alkan is still very much with us. Well. I’ll let you decide’.<sup>3</sup> With the details of Sorabji’s birth no longer in dispute and the mysteries once encircling Alkan’s death put to rest<sup>4</sup> we would ordinarily be wise to do away with any such haunted notion as of an Alkan-Sorabji *Doppelgänger*. And yet the idea of the double persists, presenting a useful concept first for beginning to consider the nature of Sorabji’s identification with Alkan and second for unriddling some of the causes underlying the putative ubiquity of this pairing within a particular aesthetic discourse. Indeed, after Stephen Fry’s quizzical remark it does certainly seem a persistent and yet by no means clearly explicable phenomenon. Ronald Stevenson, however, proposes an answer: ‘If there’s an earlier composer who can focus Sorabji in perspective it is surely

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Fry, ‘Private Passions’, in conversation with Michael Berkeley for BBC Radio 3’s ‘Private Passions’ (26 December 2004), transcribed by Brian Doyle for the Alkan Society Bulletin No. 74 (December 2006), <http://www.alkansociety.org/bulletins.htm> (Accessed 4 December 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Derus, ‘Another Alkan’, Unpublished typescript of a presentation given 21 November 1977 at the House of the Coram Foundation, Brunswick Square, London to members of the Alkan Society, 2 and 9. Courtesy of the Sorabji Archive.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>4</sup> The final word on the matter came from Hugh MacDonald: ‘This is a classic case where the least fanciful story is likely to be the truth’ (‘More on Alkan’s Death’, *The Musical Times*, 129/1741 (March 1988), 120). The popular myth which perpetuated the somewhat macabre thanatographic spectacle of Alkan perishing under a hefty bookcase in his apartment – in some accounts still clutching in *rigor mortis* the missing Rabbinical text he had so fatefully clambered for – is quite likely apocryphal. Rather more mundanely, MacDonald suggests that Alkan in fact died, a wizened old man, on his kitchen floor. As if to give credence to Derus’s speculation, however, it is noted that MacDonald’s findings were published in the centenary of Alkan’s death – 1988 – the same year in which Sorabji, then honorary Vice President of the Alkan Society, died.

Alkan', for 'both had a predilection for the black magic of pianism, improbable, near-impossible virtuosity and monumentalism; and both had an aversion for public performance'. 'It is tempting to draw many analogies between the lives and characters of Sorabji and Alkan', explains Jonathan Powell, and these may be found 'reflected both in their life choices and the music they wrote'. Powell notes that they were both outsiders in their own countries and became reclusive; they grew tired of the contemporary musical trends of their day. Their works demand 'unrelenting virtuosity'; many are of great length. Alkan and Sorabji shared an interest in Faustian ideas and the diabolical pervades their work as a sinister undercurrent.<sup>5</sup>

While there are, to be sure, such pertinent musical and biographical similarities to be found between the two, these do not sufficiently amount to any convincing proof affirming their reputation of inseparability as self-evident. To begin with, Sorabji and Alkan never met. As it turned out, Alkan had been consigned to his Parisian tomb some four years before Sorabji was even born. Sorabji was nevertheless drawn to Alkan's music for its 'delightful, eerie, bizarre, and somewhat eldritch quality'. He was equally in thrall to the Gothic mind whence it came:

It is a mind of the cast of Berlioz and Busoni's – the same preoccupation with the sinister, the macabre, the uncanny, the just-below-the-surface side of things that most people find so repellent and prefer either to ignore or deny – the same suggestions of Black Magic – devilry, sardonic, leering gargoyles that may come to life at any moment, masks of satyrs that may suddenly burst into cackling laughter as soon as your back is turned – the face that may grin grizzly-wise over your shoulder from the other side of the looking-glass.<sup>6</sup>

The specular image of the distorting mirror reflects Sorabji's fascination with the uncanny, with that which pertains to the 'weird', 'mysterious', 'supernatural', 'inexplicable' and 'extraordinary', the 'uncomfortably strange or familiar'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 'Charles-Valentin Alkan and British piano music of the 20th century and beyond', *Alkan Society Bulletin*, 90 (January 2014) <http://www.alkansociety.org/Bulletin90.pdf> 10-24 [accessed 5 September 2015], 15-17.

<sup>6</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1932), 218-9. Wilfrid Mellers similarly notes that Alkan's 'psychological abnormalities are interesting mostly for their bearing on the music' ('Reclusive Revolutionary', *Times Literary Supplement* (October 1987) reproduced in John Paynter (ed.), *Between Old Worlds and New: Occasional Writings on Music by Wilfrid Mellers* (London: Cygnus Arts, 1997), 203. For Ronald Smith, Alkan 'leads us to that frontier where music ends and psychology begins' (*Alkan – Volume Two: The Music* [1987] (London: Kahn & Averill, 2000), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 9-10.



Sorabji's writings on Alkan, alongside those of his on Busoni, best exemplify his fluent command of the language of the uncanny. Beneath his largely vernacular usage, however, lurks Freud's reading of the uncanny as a signalling of 'the return of the repressed', a psychoanalytic reconfiguration of F. W. J. Schelling's definition of *das*



**Fig. 9 One of two known photographs of Alkan.**

'La postérité se passera donc de mes traits sacrés et de mes sacrés traits': 'Although his sly play on words defies translation, the meaning is clear. Posterity would have to do without knowing what Alkan looked like' (Ronald Smith).

*Unheimliche* as 'something that should have remained hidden and has come to light'.<sup>8</sup> At the risk of engendering in the reader an unnerving sense of *déjà vu*, for Sorabji 'the uncanny' belongs to the same category as 'the just-the-below-the-surface side of things that most people find so repellent and prefer either to *ignore or deny*'. This definition might also apply to many of the numbers in Sorabji's canon of neglected works. There is, then, a sense that the uncanny is realisable only through arcane insight, by fleeting glimpses of forbidden knowledge. Sorabji's writings on Alkan perform an uncanny function by bringing an obscure, 'hidden' composer 'to light'. He was certainly pioneering on this front, as various reviewers of *Around Music* noted. 'I confess that I knew nothing of Charles Morhange [Alkan] until I read Mr. Sorabji's essay', wrote one.<sup>9</sup> Another explained that, in this collection of essays, 'a composer, *known yet unknown*, who receives

a separate article is Alkan'.<sup>10</sup> For Harvey Grace, 'Mr. Sorabji is perhaps best when championing composers who, *like himself*, have yet to meet with due appreciation', such as Alkan: 'Mr. Sorabji is especially interesting on this little-known composer'.<sup>11</sup> Alkan

<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud (trans. David McLintock), *The Uncanny* [1919] (New York and London: Penguin Books, 2003), 147, 148.

<sup>9</sup> Anon., 'The Musician's Book-shelf: *Around Music* by Kaikhosru Sorabji', source as yet unidentified.

<sup>10</sup> Anon., 'Review of New Books', *Musical Opinion* (January 1933), 315-6. Emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> Harvey Grace, "'Around Music'". By Kaikhosru Sorabji, *The Musical Times* (March 1933), 232-33. Emphasis added.

was one of the key figures in Sorabji's canon of neglected composers, one 'known yet unknown' (or, more prosaically, 'little known'), a shadowy figure strangely familiar in the gloaming of obscurity. A consideration of Sorabji's writings on Alkan reveals something which has hitherto perhaps only been inferable from a close reading of his studies on other marginal composers, namely that, if he didn't exactly wish to perversely perpetuate their neglect, then he hardly wanted to let the secret out, either. As Antoine François Marmontel, in *Les Pianistes Célèbres* (1887), explained, 'If ever there were a strange, eccentric artistic personality to study, it must surely be Ch.-V. Alkan, in whom interest is quickened by a scree of mystery and enigma which surrounds him'.<sup>12</sup> In *Alkan: The Enigma*, Ronald Smith similarly notes that Alkan is widely regarded as 'a fascinating eccentric – slightly mad, perhaps, whose grotesquery merely provides a smoke-screen for his inherent anonymity'.<sup>13</sup> Sorabji was a key figure in the cultivation of the Alkan 'mystique'; he shrouded Alkan in secrecy, a process of mystification employing all the tropes of the uncanny at his disposal. Although his criticism brings Alkan into the category of the known, Sorabji's prose does so only by presenting him as fundamentally unknowable: Alkan is best kept neglected. It is, moreover, in this esoteric discourse that we find Sorabji's primary point of identification with Alkan and, recursively, the basis for the Sorabji-Alkan or Alkan-Sorabji doubling commonly evoked upon mention of one or the other. As Freud remarked in *The Uncanny*, the double is marked by 'the constant recurrence of the same thing', including the repetition of 'the same characters, the same destinies, the same misdeeds [...] through successive generations'.<sup>14</sup> Sorabji is justly paired with Alkan as a musician who turned his back on the world.

#### 'The neglected, the misunderstood, the all-but-forgotten'

Before speculating further on the reflection of the double and the vicissitudes of fate, it will repay first dutifully (albeit briefly) rehearsing some of the more worldly likenesses between Sorabji and Alkan. Thus: both Alkan and Sorabji wrote prolifically for the piano. Their major compositions for this instrument are marked (some if not most would say marred) by an extreme and unremitting technical complexity executed within the vast

<sup>12</sup> Antoine François Marmontel, *Les Pianistes Célèbres* [1887], excerpted and translated by Peter Grove for the Alkan Society Bulletin, Nos. 58-9 (February-June 2002) <http://alkansociety.org/Publications/Society-Bulletins/bulletin58.pdf> [accessed 5 September 2015].

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Alkan: The Enigma* [1976] (London: Kahn & Averill, 2000), 109.

<sup>14</sup> Freud (trans. McLintock), *The Uncanny*, 142.

confines of imposingly oversized structures. Both were, in other words, maximalists, and both pursued their musical monumentalism against the grain of their times. We know Sorabji pursued a pseudo-Germanic *kolossal* style when such late-romantic means of expression were at the height of unfashionableness. Alkan was similarly indebted to a maximalism at odds with his own age. Where Sorabji adhered to a romantic aesthetic during the period of modernism, Alkan clung to classical formal principles during the period of romanticism. Sorabji can legitimately be considered a neo-romantic composer, but Alkan – for obvious reasons – is best not referred to as neo-classical. He is, in many ways, a *sui generis* composer. Alkan’s music is, according to Smith, ‘rooted in the classics but expanded beyond recognition’.<sup>15</sup> To Hugh MacDonald, Alkan’s works ‘press technical features to the limit and sometimes beyond all reasonable limits’.<sup>16</sup> As with Sorabji’s, ‘The outrageous technical demands of Alkan’s piano writing are well known but still not properly explained. They are the single most astonishing aspect of his music. This applies to the incredible length of many pieces’; even the “smaller” pieces are often surprisingly long.[...] The listener’s stamina is tested no less than the player’s’.<sup>17</sup> Both the ‘epic dimensions’ exploited by Alkan and the ‘major technical problems’ in his writing ‘have to be surmounted before a particular work is willing to reveal its secrets’.<sup>18</sup> ‘By way of perspective’, writes Robert Rimm, ‘Beethoven’s longest piano score, the “Hammerklavier” Sonata, Op. 106, can be entirely contained within the seventy-one pages of the *first movement* of Alkan’s Concerto for Solo Piano’.<sup>19</sup>

It is becoming clear why Sorabji was so drawn to Alkan. Alkan’s propensity to spawn notes – ‘notes, notes and more notes [...] of style and expression, nothing’, complained his contemporary François-Joseph Fétis<sup>20</sup> – had graphical implications. ‘It was Sorabji’, Smith explains, ‘who first drew attention to the extraordinary appearance of Alkan’s music on the printed page’.<sup>21</sup> As Sorabji wrote in *Around Music*, on first confronting Alkan’s scores ‘one does not know at first at which to marvel most, the extraordinary original *appearance* of the music, as of an entirely novel and unfamiliar system of decorative design’ or ‘the amazing fertility of invention, the harmonic

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, *Alkan – The Music*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> Hugh MacDonald, *Beethoven’s Century* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2008), 57.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Alkan – The Music*, i.

<sup>19</sup> Rimm, ‘*Le festin d’Esopo and Other Works for Solo Piano*’, *Notes*, 60/1 (September 2003), 292.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, *Alkan – The Music*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 48

individuality, the boldness, the new and unexpected twists given to apparent, but only apparent, commonplaces'.<sup>22</sup> Jacqueline Waeber has similarly suggested that Alkan uses a process of 'anamorphosis' 'as a means of distorting conventions and genres proper to nineteenth-century musical language', to 'present "convention" in a new and disturbing light'.<sup>23</sup> 'In the vocabulary of visual art', explains Waeber,

anamorphosis is a deformation of visual perception. Its effect is a distorting perspective; anamorphosis can also be generated when the detail of a picture is multiplied endlessly so that it invades the whole picture, as in a kaleidoscope. Virtuosity considered as an excessive treatment of pianistic mechanism can also be metaphorically perceived as a musical anamorphosis – a grotesque deformation of a few details through the paroxystic use of repetition.<sup>24</sup>

Alkan's piano writing can be considered anamorphic by way of a maximalism which 'generates an overloaded texture, an accumulation of sonic events' and by the composer's 'obsessive tendency towards textures made up of several layers'. Ultimately, anamorphosis is a process of 'deformation', a 'distorting mirror'.<sup>25</sup> It has, in other words, an uncanny effect, rendering the familiar strange and the strange familiar. This 'odd', 'disturbing' quality found throughout Alkan's music – his piano works in particular – has relegated him to 'the museum of Romantic curiosities' and his eccentricities, musical and otherwise, have thus seen him 'rejected' from musicological discourse.<sup>26</sup>

For primarily these reasons, champions of both Alkan's and Sorabji's work and receptive audiences have been few and far between. But this was really just as well, for neither Alkan nor Sorabji cared much for earning the critical acclaim of their contemporaries or indeed for garnering the approving judgment of history posthumously. Shunning opportunities for positive self-promotion, both at various points retired from the public glare in seeking the eremite's fantasy of anonymity. Both, in other words, turned away from the world – they were isolationists set a century apart. Sorabji knew this of Alkan, and made a point of letting his readers know:

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<sup>22</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 214. Emphasis in original.

<sup>23</sup> Jacqueline Waeber, 'Searching for the Plot: Charles-Valentin Alkan's *Souvenirs: Trois morceaux dans le genre pathétique*, Op. 15', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 132/1 (2007), 83-4, 85.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 64, 110.

Alkan was himself that type of artist whom one may call an anchorite or hermit. Publicity, notice, applause upon a large scale, the pushing of his work to secure recognition under the noses of indifferent, ignorant, or stupid virtuosi interested him not at all; he was absorbed in his own work and his pupils: lacking in those abilities and that inclination for self-advertisement that already, with the growth of the so-called ‘democratic’ idea, had become almost indispensable to any sort of widespread recognition even by the middle of last century – the process has accelerated by geometrical progression ever since.<sup>27</sup>

Both Alkan and Sorabji were ill at ease with the worlds in which they found themselves and, in reaction, turned their backs on opportunities to positively engage with their respective musical environments.

These are – to a greater or lesser extent – some of the most salient facets of similarity between Alkan and Sorabji.<sup>28</sup> Derus’s short talk – ‘Another Alkan’ – would seem at this impasse a good source for eking out the finer details of this relationship, but for all the promise inscribed in its allusive title, it remains to the end somewhat vague and inconclusive. Derus sets out to deliver a ‘litany of bare facts’ about Sorabji without really relating these to Alkan. Beyond point scoring (‘Alkan wrote one symphony for piano alone. Sorabji has written six so far’. Alkan ‘wrote a concerto for solo piano. Sorabji went a step further’), alongside mention of a general technical complexity in their works and an arbitrary reference to a shared reclusiveness, there is little in the way of comparative substance to go by. Such admissions as, ‘I don’t mean to suggest that Sorabji’s music sounds like Alkan’s. It doesn’t. But the “undercurrents” are often the same. Sorabji’s music does feel like Alkan’s, at least some of the time’, or, ‘It’s in the area of counterpoint and rhythm that Sorabji’s demands differ most from Alkan’s [...] and there is really nothing in Alkan to compare with it’ – these may very well have left any late-arriving audience members pondering his aims. But Derus vetoes any such confusion in his opening disclaimer:

Now then. You might rightly wonder why I’m talking about Sorabji when I should be talking about Alkan. I’ll tell you. One of the nice things about Alkan is that his admirers until very recently have been both few in number and extremely interesting in their own

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<sup>27</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music’, *The New English Weekly* (27 January 1938), 313.

<sup>28</sup> For an only marginally extended treatment of these likenesses, see Robert Rimm, ‘Alkan and Sorabji: Hermetic Genius’ in *The Composer-Pianists: Hamelin and The Eight* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 2002), 17-18.

right. So that we can and should get to know them all. And of these pioneering admirers, Sorabji is without doubt the least known and most remarkable of all. This is reason enough for making him the subject of my talk.<sup>29</sup>

I want to suggest here that Derus, perhaps unbeknownst to himself, points out a central tenet in the discursive relatedness of Alkan and Sorabji, that they are embroiled in a discourse perpetuated through the maintenance of the trope of undue neglect: ‘least known and most remarkable of all’, both composers are subject to the dubious honour of the admirations of the few. As such, they are conceived of as figureheads in an obscurantist aesthetic which (wittingly or unwittingly) privileges canonic peripherality. Such privileging, moreover, serves a microsocial-organizational function: to *know of* Alkan and Sorabji is enough – by virtue of their relative anonymity – to evidence a kind of insider knowledge which in turn ensures a certain degree of exclusivity. This knowledge then goes on to act as an elite code of legitimation granting access to something not unlike a rarefied ‘club’.

In these terms it is now possible to tentatively respond to Fry’s implied question – why do people who like Sorabji always like Alkan? – even if he could probably have made the requisite connections himself, given his record of membership to such clubs as outlined above. In his memoirs he recalled how, in the 1970s, he ‘swam into the orbit of a most extraordinary circle of intellectuals’, who hosted highly exclusive gatherings by the name of ‘Paradox Parties’ in King’s Lynn. Entry was granted through the display of recondite knowledge (‘The very fact that I had heard of [Frederick Rolfe] made me welcome in the circle’) and events were held at the residence of a Baron called Paul who ‘could play the piano extraordinarily well, specialising in *outré* composers like Alkan and Sorabji’.<sup>30</sup> The Paradox Partiers, it seems, appropriated the likes of Rolfe, Alkan and Sorabji simultaneously as tokens of initiation and as a means of ensuring and securing their own insularity. Such processes are, nevertheless, not entirely asocial: terms such as a ‘circle’ or a ‘party’ are constitutive of both the social and the societal. And, no matter how ‘micro’, a society ‘is always greater than a single individual’.<sup>31</sup> It may have been ex-centred from

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<sup>29</sup> Derus, ‘Another Alkan’, 2, 3, 4, 5, 1. Emphasis in original.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Fry, *Moab is My Washpot* (London: Arrow Books, 1999), n.p.

<sup>31</sup> Ian Buchanan, subject entry: ‘society’ in *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 441.

society at large, but it nevertheless congregated as a ‘circle’ with its own ‘orbit’, at the centre of which was Baron Paul, seated at the piano working through Alkan and Sorabji.

Returning to Derus with this in mind, it is of no little incidence that he was addressing in his talk the London-based Alkan Society (and we might therefore infer that his claim that Alkan’s ‘supremely interesting’ admirers ‘until very recently’ had been minimal was a mere gesture ingratiatingly borne of a speaker-to-audience nicety: Society membership in 1977 numbered five<sup>32</sup>) and it goes without saying that – by definition – any such society is founded as a means of corralling those with mutual interests and shared affections. As Gavin Thomas explains, ‘when a group of enthusiasts meet, suddenly there’s a committee, a newsletter, members enrolled – and a new composer society formed’. Thomas goes on to highlight the singularities of societies of such stripe:

Composer societies in Britain tend to favour the neglected, the misunderstood, the all-but-forgotten.[...] Particularly favoured are those Messianic but marginalised composers who have not fitted comfortably into mainstream musical life: the unfashionably individualistic (Robert Simpson), the mildly eccentric (Percy Grainger, Havergal Brian) and the downright potty (Valentin Alkan, Peter Warlock).<sup>33</sup>

Sorabji had noticeable affiliations with three of the figures presented in this hierarchy of increasing ‘pottiness’: Ronald Stevenson had been introduced to Sorabji in 1979 and the two would remain closely acquainted until Sorabji’s death;<sup>34</sup> the formative influence of Heseltine/Warlock on Sorabji only needs acknowledging at this point; and, of course, his strange association with Alkan is presently under consideration. Of those with whom Sorabji was not immediately tied were Robert Simpson at the more pedestrian end of Thomas’s spectrum and Percy Grainger (in Sorabji’s view, ‘of insignificant importance’<sup>35</sup>) gaily gallivanting somewhere left of centre. It is perhaps a little more surprising that the

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<sup>32</sup> Alkan Society Bulletin No. 1 (February 1977), <http://www.alkansociety.org/bulletins.htm> (Accessed 4 December 2011). Admittedly, the Society was only founded in this year; but I think the point remains the same.

<sup>33</sup> Gavin Thomas, ‘Society for the prevention of neglected composers’, *BBC Music Magazine* (February 1996), 19. The author amusingly (one hopes) informs the present writer that, on the publication of this piece, ‘death threats from the Alkan and Warlock societies followed shortly afterwards. I spent the next six months in hiding, concealed underneath the complete piano works of Sorabji’. Gavin Thomas to Sean McMenamin, correspondence by email (21 November 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Alistair Hinton, ‘Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji: An Introduction’ in Paul Rapoport (ed.), *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 45.

<sup>35</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: Porcupine Press, 1947), 70.

monumental symphonic Gothicism of Havergal Brian seems to have escaped Sorabji's attention, but so it is.

Nevertheless, the point remains that Sorabji is enmeshed socially and aesthetically within a discourse partially characterised by what can be perceived not necessarily as 'potty' *per se*, but certainly eccentric, and this eccentricity may be held to account as both the cause and effect of these composers' relative marginalisation in music history. Indeed, a characteristic precondition for the adoption of others into Sorabji's counter-canonic fold was precisely this marginality. His identification with this trait, moreover, was to secure his own and thereby situate him at a distance several removes from the prevailing cultural climate he held in such low regard. Thus Sorabji's identifications with these figures were to fortify his own identity as an outsider *persona ingratisissima* by way of doubling or mirroring. The image of the marginalised composer was for Sorabji a sight of seduction, and in the figure of Alkan we have a prime example of the appeal the archetype of the neglected composer had for him. As Powell shows, Sorabji was prominent among a small number of British composers (alongside later figures such as Stevenson, John White and Michael Finnissy) 'all located outside the mainstream of British musical culture, perhaps consciously so'; they 'stand out not only for their musical "otherness" but also for the fact that they have made the piano the focus of their creative world'.<sup>36</sup> But Sorabji was the first and certainly most vocal to dwell at length on Alkan's undue neglect. To Sorabji's mind, Alkan was 'so little known, so hopelessly misunderstood and belittled'<sup>37</sup> and we might suggest that the concept or percept of neglect in this particular case took on a particularly fetishistic character for Sorabji.

#### Black Magic for 'an ultra-microscopic minority'

Sorabji was to become honorary Vice President of the Alkan Society in 1979. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that at this later stage he was keen or at least willing to contribute to the Society's objective 'to advance the education of the public in the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the life and works of the French composer

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<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Powell, 'Charles-Valentin Alkan and British piano music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond' *The Alkan Society Bulletin*, 90 (January 2014), 23.

<sup>37</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New Age* (28 April 1927), 310.



and pianist, C. V. Alkan (1813-1888)'.<sup>38</sup> There is, however, little indication of such proselytizing in his earlier writings on Alkan; instead, there is a clear sense that Sorabji did not wish for the public to have any positive appreciation of Alkan whatsoever. Sorabji's descriptions of Alkan in the uncanny terms of the sinister and macabre, his embodied connotations of devilry, Black Magic and so on given in *Around Music* were in many ways formulated to make Alkan *unappealing* to the majority:

It must be confessed that these aspects of things do not tempt or seduce the 'healthy, normal mind', but against the healthy and normal mind one can quote one of its own tags with effect – namely, that it takes *all* sorts to make a world, even some of Berlioz's, Busoni's and Alkan's – thanks be to all the gods for such – and that there is such an ultra-microscopic minority of them that the majority need have no fear that it is in danger of catching from them that complaint without which it does so well – an imagination.<sup>39</sup>

If Alkan does not tempt the healthy, normal mind, then the corollary would have to be that he instead seduces only the unhealthy, abnormal mind. This pathologising aesthetic serves two purposes: both to dissuade the wholesome yet unimaginative majority from engaging with this most degenerate music and to enclose that already-infected 'ultra-microscopic minority' within the bounds of the *cordon sanitaire* Sorabji constructed around the reception of Alkan. As of an airborne contagion, the imagination for appreciating Alkan can be 'caught'. And so the quarantine line is drawn, the thresholds of inclusion and exclusion marked: Alkan belonged to the select few and Sorabji sought to keep it that way.

But just who, exactly, constituted the majority from whom Sorabji endeavoured to repel this Alkanian virulence? Sorabji's later iteration of the same theme goes on to give an answer:

It is the actual stuff and substance of his music that is of such startling oddity, such intensely personal and individual quality, shot through with an eerie uncanny feeling that makes it of irresistible fascination to those of us for whom these things are at the very least as interesting as those 'healthy', 'normal' emotions the alleged musical expression whereof seems to some of us to have a place of altogether hypertrophied importance in the minds of most music lovers.[...] A mind that thinks and feels upon lines so far removed from the ordinary-musical-work-a-day world naturally makes a limited appeal, hence the

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<sup>38</sup> Ronald Smith, *Alkan Society Bulletin* 38 (May 1989), <http://www.alkansociety.org/bulletins.htm> [accessed 4 December 2011].

<sup>39</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 219. Emphasis in original.

disrepute, disregard and crass misjudgements under which this great Master's work labours in England, the country where they condemn composers strictly in proportion to their ignorance of them.<sup>40</sup>

For Sorabji it was a national failing of the English that Alkan should have been so unjustly overlooked. By now this is, of course, a common theme: 'Mahler, like that great master of piano music, Charles Victor [*sic*] Alkan, is, as far as England goes, an unknown and ignored quantity'.<sup>41</sup> Such pronouncements encrypt a number of discursive strategies which at one and the same time highlight Sorabji's perception of Alkan's neglect and ensure its perpetuation. This was by no means a straightforward task, as giving voice to the neglected is to threaten its very status as such; in other words, by projecting Alkan as a subject of neglect into the public domain of English letters, there was the very real possibility that Alkan would be positively acknowledged by that country's 'music lovers'. What Sorabji appears to do is act as a cruel dialogical mediator between Alkan and the English listening public: he first presents Alkan alluringly as a fascinating but undeservedly overlooked composer before taking him back as a figure beyond the scope of its appreciatory capacities. For Sorabji, the English are from the outset both aesthetically disinclined and intellectually incapable of 'understanding' Alkan.

Two further examples will suffice to demonstrate this tactic in practice. In a 1928 letter to *The Musical Times*, Sorabji places Alkan alongside two Austro-German composers he perceived to be similarly neglected:

To the multitudinous ignorant ones who sniff when Reger and Mahler, and that earlier and very great genius Alkan, are mentioned (no, Sirs; 'Le Vent' is *not* the only composition he wrote – it may be and probably is the only one of which you have heard, which is a different matter) one must point out that to affect and disregard two composers who are generally recognised as being big figures in music in lands like Holland, Germany, and Austria, is rather silly.<sup>42</sup>

A calumnious combination of ignorance and silliness is at fault here: while Sorabji points out the successes Reger and Mahler enjoyed overseas (by which we might surmise he essentially meant *not in England*), Alkan is given a more intricate treatment (intricate at

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<sup>40</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 203-4.

<sup>41</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New Age* (4 February 1926), 167.

<sup>42</sup> Sorabji, *The Musical Times*, 1 February 1928, 159.

least in terms of inferable intent). The snide aside directed at the editors of the publication evidences the strategy outlined above: Sorabji begrudgingly admits that they may very well know of Alkan's music, but this knowledge is confined to just one of Alkan's flimsier pieces; the 'greater' works will remain out of their comprehension. (H. H. Bellamann explained in 1924 that, on the contrary, not only 'Every pianist knows [Alkan's] name, but no one plays his music' but that 'Le Vent' did not really elicit any mass appeal as Sorabji seems to have wanted to suggest: critics in fact referred to it as an 'obnoxious' composition, 'and it may be justly said that it has rather slight musical value'<sup>43</sup>). Perhaps Sorabji's parenthetical jibe was a little unfair since the public never had any real exposure to Alkan's music. As Humphrey Searle wrote in 'A Plea for Alkan' in 1937, 'If the name of [Alkan] is almost completely unknown, this is hardly the fault of the British public, which has, after all, been given very few opportunities of hearing his music'.<sup>44</sup>

Only six months later, this situation was to be leavened as the BBC broadcast two of Egon Petri's Alkan recitals. Sorabji's review of these broadcasts, which he announced as 'a red-letter occasion to the connoisseur of rare and fine musical sensations [...] events of outstanding musical-cultural interest', provides the second example wherein Sorabji would this time *pre-empt* the failure of Alkan to be positively received:

The Alkan recitals are, I do not hesitate to say, a musical event of major, indeed unparalleled importance, for never, in our times at least, will it have been possible to hear a large and representative cross-section of the creative work of one of the most original, fascinating and powerful minds that has ever expressed itself by means of musical sound, namely Charles Henri Valentin Morhange [*sic*], or Alkan, as he is pseudonymously known.[...] His work, although freely recognised by the finest musical intelligence among his contemporaries to be of outstanding quality is to-day either virtually unknown or utterly misunderstood.

Already Sorabji expresses the not-to-be-missed, never-to-be-repeated significance of the broadcasts before further heightening the anticipation and importance of the events by reference to Alkan's unjust neglect. This is all to develop his concluding forecast of the outcome:

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<sup>43</sup> H. H. Bellamann, 'The Piano Works of C. V. Alkan', *The Musical Quarterly*, 10/2 (April 1924), 253.

<sup>44</sup> Humphrey Searle, 'A Plea for Alkan', *Music & Letters*, 18/3 (July 1937), 276.

But I am afraid that the B.B.C. – who deserve the greatest congratulation for once in a while – must expect the usual chorus of malignant balderdash that is sure to be uttered by those who know nothing and understand even less of Alkan and his works.<sup>45</sup>

There is a certain passive-aggressiveness about this pre-emption, as if Sorabji were setting the stage for a defensive retort in which he would be proved right, that the nays of the naysayers were proof positive of their ignorance and ineptitude all along. In the end, reviews of the recitals confirmed Sorabji's predictions. W. R. Anderson's 'Wireless Notes' for *The Musical Times* provided two instances of sneering critical incomprehension:

I got in one long session with the undaunted Mr Petri at Alkan. It was the so-called 'concerto' of Op. 39 – a session timed for fifty minutes, but mercifully got through in forty-five. The first movement tags out to twenty-four and has the most desperate hurdy-gurdy end you ever prayed for long before its time. The composer was bedevilled (as so often) by the invincible triviality of idea and feeble power of consecution, coupled with a passion for stagey rambling. There is a pleasant, harmless Adagio, and a finale that, amusing enough in its notion of 'barbaresca', allows the work to end in the pure futility of a boredom truly shriek-worthy.<sup>46</sup>

Notably he is criticising here not 'Le Vent' but Alkan's Op. 39 Etudes which, in Sorabji's estimation, 'includes some of his greatest work'.<sup>47</sup> Anderson would later describe Alkan as 'a monumental fraud' whose music was 'nothing more or less than tame salon stuff, which no amount of historical thinking will put higher. I'd be glad to see it put lower, where it belongs, in the grave'<sup>48</sup> (a subterranean ranking, this, given fuller treatment by Bernard van Dieren in his celebratory compendium of neglected composers, *Down Among the Dead Men*<sup>49</sup>). At a slightly later date and with fairer judgement, George Sampson recalled the concerts:

Alkan, though neglected, is not unknown. Egon Petri played a dozen of his preludes and studies a few years ago, without convincing the audience that Alkan should at once be restored to the concert repertory.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Sorabji, Review: 'B.B.C. Broadcast (17 January), *The New English Weekly* (27 January 1938), 313.

<sup>46</sup> W. R. Anderson, 'Wireless Notes', *The Musical Times*, 79/1140 (February 1938), 111.

<sup>47</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 217.

<sup>48</sup> W. R. Anderson, 'Wireless Notes', *The Musical Times*, 79/1148 (October 1938), 751.

<sup>49</sup> See Chapter Eight.

<sup>50</sup> George Sampson, 'Notes on Criticism', *Music & Letters*, 23/4 (October 1942), 314.

The evidence mounts to suggest that Alkan, upon a fair hearing, was destined for the historical ossuary of forgotten composers if not less drastically merely banished to the outskirts of the canon, positions of isolation either of which Sorabji could lay claim to having prophesied. But for Sorabji, Alkan's neglect was peculiar to one nation; it was a characteristic trait of Alkan's English reception in particular. For Sorabji this was, moreover, indicative of the cultural failings of that country's concertgoing public and the wheels within wheels regulating its culture. To what extent this can be said to have actually been the case is another matter; what is more important to note here is his thinly disguised relishing of Alkan's apparent obscurity within England. To put this into a more balanced, empirically considered perspective – to evaluate, that is, the justness of Sorabji's claims within an objective reception history – it remains to be seen as a matter of comparison how Alkan actually fared elsewhere. And which testing ground is potentially more revealing than the composer's native France?

### 'Ou est Alkan?'

The question was asked of Parisian passers-by for *France Musique* in November 1982. None of the accosted seemed to have an answer.<sup>51</sup> Almost a century earlier, the situation was little different. Upon news of his death, one obituarist for *Le Menestrel* wrote:

Charles Valentin Alkan has just died. It was necessary for him to die in order to suspect his existence. 'Alkan', more than one reader will say, 'who is Alkan?' And indeed this paradoxical man is all but unknown to our generation. This incomplete, this interrupted destiny, this living burial of an artist of his calibre . . . are they caused by the very character of this artist, by his own desire, by his faults or even possibly by the exaggeration of his qualities? Or can it be that French soil is unsuited to the development of certain rare artistic plants? I cannot decide.<sup>52</sup>

In truth, Alkan never enjoyed mass popularity or widespread critical acclaim on French soil; in fact, not even *beneath* home turf was Alkan promised any kind of memorial afterlife in perpetuity. City of Paris Authorities served official notice in July 1985 that his

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<sup>51</sup> Anon., 'Ou est Alkan?', *Alkan Society Bulletin* 25 (February 1985). <http://www.alkansociety.org/bulletins.htm> [accessed 4 December 2011].

<sup>52</sup> From Balthazar Claes's apocryphal obituary for Alkan in *Le Menestrel* (1 April 1888), trans. Ronald Smith in Ronald Smith, *Alkan: The Man, The Music* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2000), 13.

tomb was to be demolished under a newly implemented government Act which stated that, if a grave was not kept in good repair, it would be cleared after ninety-nine years to make space for another. It was only through a transnational campaign launched by the Alkan Society of Great Britain that the Montmartre tomb was to be renovated to meet the city's required standards of necropolitan upkeep.<sup>53</sup> Members of the Society were baffled as to why the French would so haphazardly overlook a musician deemed among his British followers to be a key figure in France's artistic heritage; they saw it as an instance of inexcusable national-cultural negligence in need of redress.

A justification of sorts arrived at the desk of the Society's Secretary in the form of 'A Letter from France', penned by M. Ploquin Florent of Duarnenez in the centenary of Alkan's death.<sup>54</sup> Florent proffered what amounted to an apologia for the attitude of the French public with regard to Alkan. He explains that a complex of cultural and historical contingencies inflected and directed the reception of Alkan's music irretrievably away from the course of the mainstream. A number of issues conspired against Alkan securing any kind of lasting fame, not the least of which was the fact that, besides earning the support in his later life of eminent professional musicians such as César Franck and Isidor Phillip, Alkan simply did not kindle the interests of the moneyed, music-loving bourgeoisie – the nineteenth-century's chief arbiters of taste. As Hans von Bülow remarked in 1857:

For the benefit of those dear dilettantes who, in the present climate of taste, believe themselves called above all else to toss off the classics with the least possible effort, quite apart from cultivating flippancy and vulgarity as a refreshing change, so to speak, from insincerity – we must answer in the negative whether [Alkan] reveals material which will qualify him to curry favour as a welcome guest at the loathsome fireside of this kind of individual.<sup>55</sup>

Besides, the unforgiving technical demands placed on the would-be performer of the greater part of Alkan's output exceeded the grasp of the average amateur at whom the

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<sup>53</sup> Anon., 'Alkan's Tomb', *Alkan Society Bulletin*, 27 (October 1985), 2.  
<http://www.alkansociety.org/bulletins.htm> [accessed 4 December 2011].

<sup>54</sup> Polquin Florent, 'A Letter from France', *The Alkan Society Bulletin*, 36 (October 1988), 3-4.  
<http://www.alkansociety.org/bulletins.htm> [accessed 4 December 2011].

<sup>55</sup> Hans von Bülow, 'C. V. Alkan' in *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* [August 1857] (trans. Jean Bartholomew), *Alkan Society Bulletin No. 27* (October 1985), <http://www.alkansociety.org/bulletins.htm> [accessed 4 December 2011].

profitable market for domestic salon music directed its attention. For the convincing execution of an Alkan score, a pianist of extraordinary talent and exceptional tutelage was called for. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, France's musical institutions had little interest in the concerted cultivation of pianistic promise. The Paris Conservatoire, concerned as it most predominantly was with operatic composition and operatic performance, offered little in the way of training for potential Alkanistes. The establishment of the Conservatoire's rival institution, La Schola Cantorum in 1894, might have proven a new opportunity for the rehabilitative promotion of France's neglected composers. In many ways it did, although its illustrious founders, Charles Bordes, Alexandre Guilmán and Vincent d'Indy chose to channel their revivalist interests into the *musique ancienne* of Gregorian chant and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century instrumental music. At the close of the century, then, Alkan's oeuvre was incompatible within the structures of institutional support for music in France.

In the public sphere he fared no better. Florent explains that, while Busoni programmed a number of Alkan's works in a series of 'Historic Concerts' throughout Germany in the early 1900s, 'why Busoni did not play Alkan in Paris remains an enigma, but Alkan's posthumous fate in France was sealed in this period'. Indeed, once turned the new century proceeded apace and quite oblivious to the memory of Alkan. As an emergent and heady modernism infiltrated Parisian musical life – quietly intimated in 1902 by the anti-romantic symbolism of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and riotously affirmed with Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* in 1913 – the forward-facing early years of the twentieth century were marked by an unwillingness – beyond, of course, tartly ironic ventures into neo-classicism – to look back to the more obscure pockets of the past for original musical fodder. The arrival of such anarchic groups as Les Six and the warping influence of La Révolution Surréaliste further fostered an artistic climate in which the austere expansiveness of Alkan's music could but only have been received as irredeemably passé. 'By 1930', concludes Florent,

Alkan had been so misunderstood that he had become almost unknown in his own country, and the position is much the same today. Alkan was the victim of a concurrence of events and not of musicians themselves, even if their attitude helped to relegate him to history's

dungeon.[...] To the French public, a composer fallen into oblivion is not a great musician.<sup>56</sup>

Ronald Smith came to a similar conclusion:

The French do not so easily forgive those who fail to acquit their debt to society. Now they banished Alkan to the archives as one of those ‘interesting historic figures’ whose identities melt so conveniently into the shadows of their immortal contemporaries.[...] If recognition of Alkan’s genius in Britain and America was delayed by nearly a century, as far as his native France was concerned he might just as well never have existed. During this same period of eighty or so years [...] Alkan’s eclipse was total and enduring.<sup>57</sup>

As William Alexander Eddie notes, it was only after a century of ‘the grossest neglect’ that, with the publication of Brigitte François-Sappey’s edited volume of essays on the composer in 1991, French musicians started to pay any significant attention to the legacy of Alkan.<sup>58</sup>

### Victorin

Was Sorabji aware of this situation? Did he know that Alkan suffered greater neglect in his home country than he did in England, that he received greater acknowledgement *there* than he had in France? Probably not. Information was sparse at the time he was so authoritatively writing on Alkan. Despite Alkan’s factually faulty first appearance *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (later and more recognisably *Grove’s Dictionary*) in 1879, it was not until the publication of Smith’s 1976 biography, *Alkan: The Enigma* that any definitive account of his life and works was to be found in any language (that it should have been written by an Englishman in England and distributed by a London publisher offers further proof that there was a viable Anglophone market for such a study).<sup>59</sup> The longstanding ambivalence regarding the clarification of Alkan’s full name is a case in point. Eddie cites in particular the repeated error of expanding the

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<sup>56</sup> Ploquin Florent, ‘A Letter from France’, 3-4. How strikingly this attitude contrasts with the British one and its mania for neglected composer societies – perhaps this is a trait peculiar to ‘the land without music’. Notably, La Société Alkan only came into existence at the behest of the Alkan Society in 1985.

<sup>57</sup> Ronald Smith, *Alkan: The Man, The Music* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2000), 76, 83.

<sup>58</sup> William Alexander Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and His Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 198.

<sup>59</sup> Hugh MacDonald, ‘The Enigma of Alkan’, *The Musical Times*, 117/1599 (May 1976), 401.



abbreviated ‘Ch.’ into ‘Charles Henri’, an erroneous appellation which can be seen in English music dictionaries up to 1954.<sup>60</sup> Sorabji was evidently none the wiser (see Fig. 10). If it can be said that Sorabji was drawing on the same biographical material of Alkan as his detractors – which is to say, as the evidence suggests, that he was privy only to those sources which were made publically available to whosoever sought to investigate Alkan’s life and works – then it can also be argued that there was *something beyond* those texts which held a particular appeal for him. It is certainly revealing that, while he was quite possibly unaware that France was less willing than England to lend an ear to Alkan’s music, he nevertheless latched on to the notion that it was a peculiarly English folly that this should be the case. There is the sense that he maintained an obliviousness to Alkan’s native situation (or, at least, demonstrated an unwillingness to investigate it beyond his own false preconceptions) and that this was in order to focus his criticism – true to form – without argument on the flawed sensibilities of the English. Alkan holds a mirror up to his own sense of persecution: not only was Alkan roundly neglected in England, his chief neglecters were those from whom Sorabji himself felt most alienated. Again, in his writings on Alkan Sorabji was never really proselytizing, he never sought to turn the tide of popular favour in Alkan’s direction. On the contrary, far from letting Alkan disappear completely out of sight, Sorabji instead maintained Alkan’s marginal status at the outskirts of the canon, as being beyond the interests of the ‘music-loving’ majority and just out of the orbit of the critics’ circle. Sorabji portrayed Alkan a romantic archetype of the neglected composer, the persistently misunderstood, denigrated, belittled genius shunned by the masses in their multitudinous ignorance, the coarse rabble which scoffs at that which it does not understand. His presentation of Alkan as a singularly disturbing prospect for musicians and audiences reflects his own self-conception as Machiavellian *persona ingratis*, a

sinister swarthy gaunt *cinque-cento*-faced personage [...] slithering noiselessly about in oddly shaped shoes that must surely contain feet of an Infernal deformity [...] appearing at your elbow the moment after you thought you had watched him turn a corner almost out of sight’.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan*, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 13.

These last four words – *almost out of sight* – return us to the uncanny, the return of the repressed, the strangely familiar or familiarly strange.

[ X X X I ]

ALANTIN  
CHARLES HENRI VICTORIN  
MORHANGE (ALKAN)

**F**EW REMARKABLE and outstanding figures in music have been the subject of such persistent misunderstanding, denigration and belittlement as Charles Henri Victorin <sup>alantin</sup> Morhange—or, to call him by the pseudonym under which he is generally known, Alkan. The extraordinary ignorance of his work that exists among those whom, one would imagine, its fascinating and novel technical problems would have interested, the pianists, is only explicable by the fact that pianists, like other executive musicians, are the most timid and unenterprising of human beings, and that the extremely individual and original quality of Alkan's work, its remarkable 'oddness', which makes it impossible to label it or pigeon-hole it here or there in the customary and conventional groupings, disconcerts and repels them. It must be admitted that Alkan is very disconcerting to those brought up on an exclusive diet of 'classic' and 'romantic', with a slight dash of 'modern' as an occasional treat (or liver pill as the case may be)—as disconcerting and as 'queer' as another great equally misunderstood and belittled genius, Hector Berlioz, with whom he has spiritually a great deal in common. There is the same volcanic personal force, the same fantastic, towering and macabre imagination, the same utter unconventionality and prodigious daring of method, the same complete disregard for what one may call the conversational amiabilities of music. Side by side with and contemporary of Liszt, who greatly admired him, his pianistic technique and

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Fig. 10 First page of Sorabji's chapter on Alkan in *Around Music* (1932)

The emendations were made at a later date in his own hand

As Nicholas Royle explains in his reading of *The Uncanny*:

The uncanny is ghostly. It is concerned with the strange, weird and mysterious, with a flickering sense (but not conviction) of something supernatural. The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced. Suddenly one's sense of oneself [...] seems strangely questionable. The

uncanny is a crisis of the proper: it entails [...] a disturbance of the very idea of personal or private property including the properness of proper names, one's so-called 'own' name, but also the proper names of others [...] its meaning or significance may have to do, most of all, with what is not oneself, with others, with the world 'itself'.<sup>62</sup>

Sorabji's Machiavellian conception of both himself and Alkan was as an evasive, peripheral phenomenon, a disturbance of the norms of the proper.

This is, moreover, a characteristic of eccentricity, of the desire to distance oneself from the canons of the norm and reject the course of mainstream life whether that be construed socially or culturally. Certainly in Sorabji's case, his championship of Alkan came by way of a denigration of English concertgoing culture. As the subject of longstanding neglect, Alkan signified a rallying point for those more inclined to the esoteric than the everyday – recall Stephen Fry and the exclusive Paradox Partiers. Sorabji was, in other words, not alone in turning to Alkan in order to turn away from the world. A final example is offered by the character of Henry F. Quirke, the eponymous homicide in Julius Falconer's detective novella *The Alkan Murder*, who shares many of Sorabji's attributes.<sup>63</sup> Various described as 'wealthy and misanthropic', 'saturnine', 'anti-social', 'a rather difficult man', 'a funny old curmudgeon and a bit of an odd-bod', not to mention 'disagreeable', Quirke 'was resigned to fading away and leaving the world as if he had never been – well, almost: he would leave behind the indispensable guide to the piano music of a sadly neglected composer, grandly titled – this was provisional! – *The Complete Guide to the Piano Works of Charles-Valentin Alkan, with Biographical Notes, Chronology, Analytical Catalogue, Musical Observations and Annotated Discography*'.<sup>64</sup> It was conceived as 'a grand book on a neglected composer', although Quirke's housekeeper failed to see the point of the project: 'Huh, fat load of good that would do anybody. All that footling about on the piano, creating noise no one could make sense of'.<sup>65</sup> Aside from his co-Alkanite Janvrin ('who seems as odd as himself', which is to say like inevitably attracts like), with whom he engages in 'esoteric discussion' about this 'obscure French pianist-composer', Quirke seems quite happy indulging in his obsession alone, oblivious to the indifference of the world around him:

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<sup>62</sup> Royle, *The Uncanny*, 1, 2.

<sup>63</sup> Julius Falconer, *The Alkan Murder* (Kent: Pneuma Springs Publishing, 2012).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 6, 25, 83, 199, 43.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 171, 11.

He stumbled through the fistfuls of chords, torrents of semi-quavers – not to mention the hemi-demi-semiquavers – crossed-hand passages and barrages of arpeggios, octaves and runs as best he could. He enjoyed himself but would not care to have been heard by others. The composer's reclusive life-style in his later years and the brilliance of his compositions both appealed to the anti-social aesthete in Mr Quirke, and it was enough for the latter to make the composer's partial acquaintance without necessarily being able to master them at the keyboard. His interest in Alkan became his life, it also, as you shall hear, became his death.<sup>66</sup>

When asked why he chose Alkan to be the subject of Quirke's hobbyhorse study, the author replied: 'Quirke saw in Alkan in some sense a kindred spirit, a man to whom he could relate and so relieve his own sense of isolation'.<sup>67</sup> It might also be said that Quirke's isolation found legitimation in Alkan's. Sorabji's own anti-social aesthetic was shared by a small number of other composer-critics active in interwar London, all of whose animadversions were largely motivated by the plight of various neglected composers. Of these eccentric 'Isolationists', Bernard van Dieren – who quite possibly first introduced Sorabji to Alkan<sup>68</sup> – was perhaps the centre of gravity. His influence on Sorabji is the subject of the final chapter.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 13, 31, 11.

<sup>67</sup> Julius Falconer to Sean McMenamin, correspondence by email (27 May 2013).

<sup>68</sup> See Powell, 'Charles-Valentin Alkan and British Piano Music', 11.

## Chapter Eight

### **On Bernard van Dieren, ‘Down Among the Dead Men’**

Strange indeed is the case of Bernard van Dieren. Although he was highly respected, at least by a small group, during his lifetime, he has since sunk into total obscurity. . . . Yet we would be ill-advised to dismiss him out of hand.

FRANCIS ROUTH, ‘Bernard van Dieren’ (1964)<sup>1</sup>

It has always seemed strange that a man so highly thought of by such sensitive musicians as Heseltine, Cecil Gray and Constant Lambert, should be completely forgotten.

ALASTAIR CHISHOLM, ‘Van Dieren’ (1964)<sup>2</sup>

May I suggest that the reason for this neglect, and for the equal disregard of Van Dieren’s two disciples Cecil Gray and K. S. Sorabji, can be discovered by reading a single page of any of the books they wrote? The music need not be disturbed.

ARNOLD WHITTALL, ‘Van Dieren’ (1964)<sup>3</sup>

For Arnold Whittall, there is nothing ‘strange’ about the case of the neglect of Bernard van Dieren (1884-1936), nor, for that matter, is there anything unusual about the obscurity his contemporaries Cecil Gray (1895-1951) and Sorabji fell into. As composer-critics, all three effectively wrote themselves out of history: ‘the very quality which made their essays so entertaining was fatal to their music’.<sup>4</sup> By the time Whittall was writing, the scores of all three were out of print and general circulation, and Sorabji’s ‘ban’ had in any case been in effect for some thirty years. Try as one might, it would have proven difficult to ‘disturb’ their music. Nevertheless, Whittall’s point raises important issues which bear upon a cultural-historical consideration of the self-reciprocating causal and effectual processes of ex-centricity and eccentricity. Peter J. Pirie made a similar connection. Writing of Sorabji and van Dieren (and – oddly enough – Alkan) in *The English Musical Renaissance* (Sorabji’s only appearance in at least four books so or similarly titled<sup>5</sup>), Pirie suggests that

It is the fate of some musicians to be more memorable as personalities than as composers; this was for a long time the destiny of Alkan, a composer who greatly interested van Dieren. Bernard van Dieren’s strange personality has persisted as a legend

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Routh, ‘Bernard van Dieren’, *The Musical Times*, 105/1454 (April 1964), 261.

<sup>2</sup> Alastair Chisholm, ‘Van Dieren’, *The Musical Times*, 105/1456 (June 1964), 438.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Whittall, ‘Van Dieren’, in *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Frank Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), Peter J. Pirie, *The English Musical Renaissance* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1979), Michael Trend, *The Music Makers: the English Musical Renaissance from Elgar to Britten* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985) and Meirion Hughes and Robert Stradling, *The English Musical Renaissance, 1840-1940: Constructing a National Music* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001).

into a time when his music is very seldom heard. Van Dieren's music, and that of Kaikhosru Sorabji [...] constitutes a mystery. So eccentric and flamboyant are these two personalities, and so aggressive their approach to all things musical, that they have been consigned to a sort of limbo, with their music as good as dead and only the ghosts of their polemics squeaking and gibbering at posterity. This is a pity, since they both wrote much interesting music.<sup>6</sup>

Whittall and Pirie together identify a direct link between the public expression of Sorabji's, van Dieren's and Gray's opinions in print and their marginalisation as composers. Their essays were 'fatal', their music 'dead', or at least *as good as*:

The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead  
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets<sup>7</sup>

Reverent (or rather revenant) Shakespearean allusions aside, Whittall's hostility towards these three composer-critics enacts a significant discursive function: as a Cambridge musicologist, his view was – for quite possibly many readers – authoritative.<sup>8</sup> Even so, it is somewhat deflating to read his letter as it appeared beneath Alastair Chisholm's on the same page of the June 1964 edition of *The Musical Times*. In appreciation of Francis Routh's article on van Dieren, 'sixth-form schoolboy' Chisholm, of Glasgow (but no relation to the 'other' Glaswegian Chisholm), enthusiastically wrote that, 'It is so good to find that someone still remembers the works of this most interesting composer.[...] I would be most willing to join a Van Dieren Society, though I feel that the public are rather tired of this way of presenting the works of neglected composers'.<sup>9</sup> 'As composers', Whittall responds, van Dieren, Gray and Sorabji 'are rightly forgotten'.<sup>10</sup>

His opinion on the matter was uncompromising. Of van Dieren and his 'disciples' Whittall argues that, 'It's not merely that they protest too much; they are totally disillusioned, unrelievedly negative in their attitude to the present time'.<sup>11</sup> He goes on to

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<sup>6</sup> Pirie, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 95, 96.

<sup>7</sup> *Hamlet*, I.i., 115-6.

<sup>8</sup> Whittall, then 29, had already been published in a number of esteemed periodicals. See Robert Adlington, 'Arnold Whittall: A Bibliography', *Music Analysis*, 14/2 (July-October, 1995), 141-60.

<sup>9</sup> Chisholm, 'Van Dieren', 438.

<sup>10</sup> Whittall, 'Van Dieren', 438.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

argue that this *shared* disillusionment and negativity found expression in the formation of a counter-canon:

They make a point of praising composers who stand outside the main stream of musical development – Busoni, Sibelius, Medtner, Szymanowski. But while in the music of these men, as in other of their idols, from Gesualdo to Meyerbeer and Alkan, one can find a positive simplicity, the music of Van Dieren and his friends, at its most characteristic, is of a complexity which can only be defined as negative – muddled rather than memorable.<sup>12</sup>

As a matter of clarification, it ought to be noted that the four composers Whittall cites above are not equally represented in the writings of van Dieren and his followers. Busoni was a close and mutually-respected acquaintance of van Dieren and Sorabji his unabashedly beatifying idolater. Though all three wrote substantially on him,<sup>13</sup> Busoni ultimately presented little more than an interesting personality to Gray.<sup>14</sup> Sibelius was greatly admired by all three, but it was Gray – having written a 1931 monograph on the Finnish symphonist<sup>15</sup> – who reserved the right to claim Sibelius as a personal friend and hard-drinking companion.<sup>16</sup> Medtner and Szymanowski appear only to have piqued Sorabji's interest.<sup>17</sup> Gray, with co-author Philip Heseltine, published a study of Gesualdo in 1926 – *Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa: Musician and Murderer*<sup>18</sup> – while van Dieren and Sorabji made scant mention of this singularly unhinged madrigalist of modern lore. To varying degrees of appreciation, Meyerbeer is accorded the acclaim of all three

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Van Dieren dedicates a lengthy chapter to Busoni in *Down Among the Dead Men* [London: 1935] (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), 20-101. Throughout Sorabji's writings, Busoni is by far the composer most referred to. A representative account appears in *Around Music* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1932), 21-30. Gray assigns a rather more measured chapter to Busoni in his *Survey of Contemporary Music* [London: 1924] (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 210-20.

<sup>14</sup> In 1922, Gray wrote that audiences 'admire [Busoni] as a pianist and ignore him as a composer – and I am not sure that they are wrong'. Later he comments on 'the basically unsatisfactory nature of Busoni's achievement as a composer'. Both assessments appear in *Musical Chairs or Between Two Stools, Being the Life and Memoirs of Cecil Gray* (London: Home & Van Thal, 1948), 202.

<sup>15</sup> Cecil Gray, *Sibelius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931).

<sup>16</sup> Gray's sozzled confabulations with Sibelius are recounted in *Musical Chairs*, 259-60.

<sup>17</sup> See 'The Greatness of Medtner' in *Nicolas Medtner, 1879 [sic] – 1951* (ed. Richard Holt) (London: Dennis Dobson, 1955), 122-32 and 'Karol Szymanowski' in *Mi contra fa: the Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: Porcupine Press, 1947), 178-87. See also, respectively, chapters Five and Six of the present dissertation.

<sup>18</sup> Cecil Gray and Philip Heseltine, *Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa: Musician and Murderer* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1926).

critics.<sup>19</sup> Lastly, where Gray seems oblivious to Alkan, Sorabji and van Dieren made it their duty to expound on this unduly neglected genius.<sup>20</sup>

There were, then, differences of opinion. But these differences did not prevent explicitly associative comparisons between Sorabji, van Dieren and Gray from being made anyway. A notable instance occurred in December 1927 in the pages of *The New Age*, when Robert H. Hull took issue with Sorabji's review of his recently published *Contemporary Music*.<sup>21</sup> Sorabji criticised 'the major absurdities of this pamphlet' (it stretches a mere forty-five pages), that this 'small book on music is almost as astonishing for what it leaves out as what it puts in'. Sorabji thus took Hull to task for making 'no mention of two of the greatest masters of polyphony in modern times, Bernard van Dieren and Max Reger' and that, 'After this sort of thing one is not surprised that Mr. Hull is taken in by Stravinsky'. Unforgivably, Mahler and Busoni 'are not even mentioned'.<sup>22</sup> A minor spat ensued, with the lambasted author offering a rejoinder in the following issue of *The New Age*:

I enjoyed reading Mr. Kaikhosru Sorabji's review of 'Contemporary Music' almost as much as he enjoyed writing it. It is my misfortune, though not his, that our disagreements are too fundamental to make discussion profitable or possible. In spite of his quaint extravagances, however, Mr. Sorabji clearly retains his sense of humour, which makes the article amusing if uninformative reading. His opinions so clearly reflect those of Mr. Cecil Gray, especially with regard to Stravinsky and Van Dieren that perhaps we need not treat Mr. Sorabji with greater seriousness than Mr. Gray's pitiable and rather ludicrous sketches deserve.<sup>23</sup>

To this Sorabji responded:

For once, Mr. Hull is accurate on a point of fact – our disagreements *are* fundamental – but he cannot keep it up for long. He says that my views 'so clearly reflect those of Mr. Cecil Gray . . .' On three major matters, Busoni, Mahler, and Reger, my views are widely different from Mr. Gray's. When Mr. Hull knows as much as Mr. Gray and I, I hope, have

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<sup>19</sup> For example, see Sorabji, *Around Music*, 17; van Dieren, 'Meyerbeer' in *Down Among the Dead Men*, 142-74; Gray, *The History of Music* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1928), 202-3.

<sup>20</sup> See previous chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Robert H. Hull, *Contemporary Music* (London: L. and Virginia Woolf, 1927).

<sup>22</sup> Sorabji, 'Mr. Robert Hull', *The New Age* (1 December 1927), 57.

<sup>23</sup> 'Sorabji, Contemporary Music', *The New Age* (8 December 1927), 72.



forgotten; when also he has learned to be moderately accurate, it will be quite time enough for him to resort to protests against criticism.<sup>24</sup>

Regardless of such differences, by likening Sorabji to Gray – the former’s opinions ‘so clearly reflect’ the latter’s – Hull was identifying a shared contrarianism: holding to the ‘ludicrous’ assertion that van Dieren should be ranked above Stravinsky in contemporary music divests these critics of any claims to ‘seriousness’.

Whittall similarly groups Sorabji, Gray and van Dieren together on the basis of an obscurantist aesthetic which ensured their collective insularity and singularity – in a word, their eccentricity:

They were isolationists, frightened by the issues of the day so that even if they try to deal with them in their work, they remain outside them, and fail to interest anyone in the result.<sup>25</sup>

If they were ‘isolationists’, then the concession has to be made that they were isolationists *together*, assembled by way of arch-pessimist Philip Heseltine’s introduction.<sup>26</sup> Peter J. Reynolds counts van Dieren, Gray and Sorabji as some of Heseltine’s ‘most immediate friends and associates’ and that, as a collective, ‘They were the complete antithesis of the Vaughan Williams School of thought, for not once does one find a desire on the part of any one of them for a distinctly English style. Indeed, it was their wish to escape from the insularity of English music’.<sup>27</sup> Twenty years after writing in to *The Musical Times* (and apparently untroubled by Whittall’s opinion on the matter), Alastair Chisholm – ‘the leading authority on van Dieren’s life and work’, the blurb for his book on the composer informs us – puts forward the argument that ‘Perhaps [van Dieren’s] most important influence was on the culture of England’. Unerringly, Chisholm explains that Dutch-born van Dieren (he relocated to London in 1909) ‘was one of a series of musicians, exiled from their homelands, who tried to woo the English from their smug insularity’; he offered ‘a real alternative to the outmoded Brahmsian world of the academics, and to the home-spun

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Whittall, ‘Van Dieren’, 438.

<sup>26</sup> See Marc-André Roberge, *Opus Sorabjianum: the life and works of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji*, Version 1.01 (Québec: 2013), 58-60.

<sup>27</sup> Peter J. Reynolds, ‘Peter Warlock: His Contemporaries and Their Influence’, *British Music Society Journal*, 8 (1986), 48-9.

dullness of the composers of the Folk-Song Revival'.<sup>28</sup> Taking these aspects of van Dieren's outlook into consideration, we might ask to what extent he and his followers really were in fact 'frightened' and not just 'totally disillusioned' with and 'unrelievedly negative' towards the impinging nationalistic culture promoted by the composers and critical administrators of the twentieth-century English musical renaissance.

The question must have given Whittall pause for further thought as, two years after the publication of his letter to *The Musical Times*, he wrote an article for *Music Review* entitled 'The Isolationists' which set out to assay the issues raised by Heseltine, his affiliates and milieu.<sup>29</sup> The sketches Whittall provides are bleak. For Heseltine, 'maturity was impossible [...]. He could not accept responsibility for himself, and when Philip Heseltine proved to be a failure, Peter Warlock was created to redress the balance.[...] Warlock was just as immature as Heseltine'.<sup>30</sup> Cecil Gray's 'literary style was aggressive'; he 'wrote to create a sense of security for himself, not to convert others to his cause. It was safer to be in a minority, to feel that the secret could not be shared'.<sup>31</sup> Van Dieren 'failed because of some deep-seated need, like Alkan and Busoni, to be misunderstood'.<sup>32</sup> For Cyril Scott (1879-1970), as for Sorabji, 'emotional exaltation and simplicity were contradictory. Potency and complexity were identical'. Although Scott is somewhat anomalous here (since he had no immediate connection with van Dieren's circle) he nevertheless 'joins hands with Gray in his suspicion of composers who are immediately understood by critics – he disarmingly points out that Jesus wasn't!'.<sup>33</sup> Whittall came to the conclusion that, of all the so-called isolationists shunning the realities of the interwar period, it was in fact Sorabji who was most representative, with the excesses of his works passive-aggressively exemplifying all the traits characteristic of social and artistic isolationism:

The most complete condemnation of Scott's advocacy of hysterical complexity is provided by the music of Sorabji, which creates much the same impression as a child throwing everything within reach in order to draw attention to himself. Sorabji, entirely convinced of his own greatness and necessity, is the *reductio ad absurdum* of all this

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<sup>28</sup> Alastair Chisholm, *Bernard van Dieren* (London: Thames Publishing, 1984), 10.

<sup>29</sup> Arnold Whittall, 'The Isolationists', *Music Review*, 27/2 (1966), 122-9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-9.

self-centred bombast, which cloaks, ineffectively, strong symptoms of withdrawal from all responsibility, social and artistic.<sup>34</sup>

The following pages will address some of the ways in which Sorabji's association with and admiration for Bernard van Dieren nurtured these 'symptoms of withdrawal' and how this came to inform his opinions on the virtue of the neglected work.

### Epigoni: van Dieren's disciples

Lewis Foreman has suggested that it is possible to take 'two diametrically opposed views on van Dieren':

On the one hand he was venerated by a small circle of admirers: a devout Catholic who though often bedridden and in intense pain produced wonderful music. On the other hand he is seen as a persuasive but essentially destructive influence, and in this view it is noted that many of his admirers came to grief at a comparatively early stage.<sup>35</sup>

That van Dieren was deeply admired by a select group only has been generally accepted, in part because acceptance of van Dieren's exclusivity was often all one *could* do. As 'B.V.' found in 1925: 'this composer has been something of a Bunbury, in that his friends have talked freely of him as a genius, whilst others have had little or no chance of making his acquaintance'.<sup>36</sup> This was so much so that Vaughan Williams even pondered whether the elusive 'Bernard van Dieren' was not in fact a pseudonym under the aegis of which Gray and Heseltine presented some of their more outlandish compositions.<sup>37</sup> A critic for *The Musical Times* explained in 1936 that 'For the last twenty years [van Dieren] has been an enigmatic and portentous figure in the background of English music, his reputation

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>35</sup> Lewis Foreman (ed.), *From Parry to Britten: British Music in Letters, 1900-1945* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1987), 308.

<sup>36</sup> B. V., 'New Music: Songs', *The Musical Times*, 66/992 (October 1925), 907. Bunbury appears in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Or, to be more precise, the character of Bunbury doesn't really appear at all: he is the invalid 'friend' whom Algernon Moncrieff creates as a means of escaping wearisome social obligations. The doubly- or meta-fictional 'Bunbury' is thus used as a shorthand for alibi. As Algernon explains in Act I, 'Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's to-night, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week'. Lady Bracknell, however, had her reservations: 'I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is absurd. Nor do I in any way approve of the modern sympathy with invalids. I consider it morbid. Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life'.

<sup>37</sup> Chisholm, *Bernard van Dieren*, 26.

being made by the advocacy and prophecies of his supporters rather than by the effect made by his works when they have been brought into the open'.<sup>38</sup> Van Dieren was not so much seen (let alone heard) as a composer as he was invoked as a most peculiar individual on the very margins of English musical life: 'As a personality van Dieren was, and still is, regarded as rather mysterious outside the small group of friends and admirers who had close contact with him'.<sup>39</sup> For Foreman, the very strength of van Dieren's personality – at least for those who came under its sway – brings into question the true motives of some of his followers: 'It is very difficult to decide whether Heseltine's enthusiastic hero-worship of van Dieren was the result of a genuine admiration for the music, or was primarily engendered by van Dieren's magnetic personality and his unbroken spirit in the face of illness'.<sup>40</sup> Chisholm notes that van Dieren's often debilitating ill-health, stemming from the recurrence of kidney stones, and his efforts to work despite this ailment 'won admiration from all'.<sup>41</sup> For his followers, however, this stoical aspect of van Dieren took on a quasi-religious symbolic significance. As Stradling and Hughes explain, 'Sick and bed-ridden, he became an alternative martyr-hero to Butterworth for *The Sackbut's* fraternity and others who were suspicious of national music'.<sup>42</sup> There can be little doubt that van Dieren's Catholicism and chronic suffering inflated his passionary credentials in the estimation of his supporters. He presented 'a minor threat to the Anglo-Protestant ascendancy of national music in the 1920s';<sup>43</sup> he has been similarly described as 'That supreme threat to the Anglo-Saxon establishment', with 'his high aesthetic sense and disdain for the mainstream of the English musical renaissance'.<sup>44</sup> Whether a 'minor' or 'supreme' threat, the fact that van Dieren was perceived to present a threat at all to the hegemonic, Protestant mainstream of English music-making made him a particularly seductive figure for composers, critics and artists disaffected with the nationalistic cultural climate of the interwar period.

Van Dieren's subversive reputation can be traced back to a chamber concert of his works – just a couple: the *Overture* and nearly two-hour long *Diaphony* – organised and promoted by Gray and Heseltine on 20 February 1917 in London's Wigmore Hall. The

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<sup>38</sup> Anon., 'Bernard van Dieren', *The Musical Times*, 77/1120 (June 1936), 561.

<sup>39</sup> Hywel Davies, 'Bernard van Dieren (1887-1936)', *The Musical Times*, 128/1738 (December 1987), 678.

<sup>40</sup> Foreman, *From Parry to Britten*, 110.

<sup>41</sup> Chisholm, *Bernard van Dieren*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Stradling and Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 212.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Mark Connelly, *Christmas: A Social History* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 79.

occasion was ‘financially disastrous’, making receipts of £5 against expenses of £110.<sup>45</sup> As Gray later recalled:

Seldom has critical and enlightened opinion achieved a more impressive unanimity of opinion than on that occasion. Practically without exception the representative leaders of musical opinion of every tendency and persuasion, from extreme left to extreme right, burst out into a simultaneous howl of execration [...].<sup>46</sup>

Gray gives an account of a fracas which took place following the concert. If Gray’s is true, then there is a potentially revealing discrepancy between his rehearsal of the incident and Sorabji’s. Gray recalls:

shortly after the concert, Philip and I were sitting talking and drinking, as was our wont, in the Café Royal, in the company of some friends, when Edwin Evans, the eminent music critic, complete with frock coat and silk top-hat, entered the premises and sat down at another table not far off. Since he had been one of the many hostile scribes on the occasion, Philip could not resist the impulse to join him at his table and tell him a few things about himself. After a short spell of this, Edwin Evans lost his temper at what was, no doubt, a more than usually offensive observation on the part of my bellicose friend, and struck him in the face. This was the signal for a general mêlée, including, besides the principals in the dispute, a number of waiters, members of the management, and various artists who, without knowing what it was all about, were determined not to be left out of the proceedings. The chief recollection I preserve of the occasion was the spectacle of a little Mexican painter, a friend of mine, named Benjamin Coria, bouncing up and down with an expression of blissful ecstasy, on the stomach of the by then recumbent Edwin Evans.[...]

The chief cause of the hostilities, it subsequently appeared, lay in the fact that Philip, after a few preliminary insults, had announced our intention of giving a concert devoted to the music of Béla Bartók; in reply to which Edwin Evans retorted that if we dared to attempt to perform the works of an enemy subject in time of war – and which, in any case, were not worth performing – he would personally bring a contingent of drunken Australian soldiers to wreck the hall.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Foreman, *From Parry to Britten*, 108.

<sup>46</sup> Gray, *Peter Warlock*, 141,

<sup>47</sup> Gray, *Musical Chairs*, 112-3.

Note that Gray describes these events as occurring ‘shortly after the concert’ and that Edwin Evans’s pugilistic outburst was in response to the brazenly unpatriotic suggestion of staging a concert of Bartók’s music. The *threat* of a marauding horde of Australian soldiers gate-crashing the proposed event was just that. Sorabji’s account in *Mi contra fa*, while sharing some of the essentials of Gray’s, arranges the facts so as to paint a different picture of the incident:

There were vile rumours sedulously propagated by certain English ‘musicians’ (!), one of whom doubtless smarted under van Dieren’s description of him as a ‘sentimental amateur’ [...]. This personage brought along a gang of drunken Australian soldiers in an endeavour to create a disturbance and break up a concert of van Dieren’s organised by some friends towards the end of the 1914-18 war, having already prepared the ground, in his rag, by waging a campaign of calumnious abuse against van Dieren and the organisers of the concert as being pacifists, conscientious objectors, pro-German, and so on; any single one of which was a sure guarantee of mob-violence in those years.<sup>48</sup>

There is no evidence to suggest that Sorabji was present at the concert in question or the Café Royal thereafter; we accordingly should take Gray’s version of events as the more reliable of the two (since not only was he in attendance, he was also co-organiser). Gray’s retelling was published in *Musical Chairs* in 1946, whereas Sorabji’s appeared a year later in *Mi contra fa*. While it would be as ungenerous to suggest Sorabji deliberately misconstrued the facts as it would be disingenuous to put his depiction down to misremembrance, we can argue either way that his account achieves two connected goals. First, by asserting that the smarted ‘personage’ (Edwin Evans, according to Gray) did in fact bring along a disruptive band of soldiers to imperil the performance, Sorabji intensifies his claims for van Dieren’s persecution at the hands of English irony-quote-unquote musicians (plus parenthesized exclamation mark, for good measure). Second, this came as the direct result of ‘a campaign of calumnious abuse against van Dieren’ which was, moreover, conducted on a nationalistic principle: his reference not to 1917, the year of the concert, but to ‘the 1914-1918 war’ situates the event within a particularly significant period during which time the integrity of national interests was at stake. Supporters of van Dieren’s music were therefore no better than treasonous ‘conscies’ – opponents to the heightened claims for a cultural and political Englishness. Gray similarly

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<sup>48</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 153.

acknowledged that the staging of the performance was viewed in pressingly political terms:

the van Dieren concert, devoted to works composed by a neutral, was darkly hinted at as being a sinister form of defeatist, pro-German propaganda, patronized by an audience consisting chiefly of pacifists and conscientious objectors whose sexual morality, in addition, was more than suspect.<sup>49</sup>

Taken together, these aspects of the incident serve to configure van Dieren's followers – prominently including Sorabji according to his own narrative of the event – outside mainstream national(ist)-cultural concerns.

Hywel Davies has elaborated further on possible reasons behind van Dieren's appeal to such individuals. Although Davies's argument is applied specifically to Gray and Heseltine in the context of the 1917 concert, it will be sufficiently clear that the explanations he provides are just as discernible in considering the impetus for Sorabji's own admiration of van Dieren. Firstly, Davies notes that van Dieren's followers tended to be 'angry, highly opinionated young men eager to make their mark and to rebel against the Establishment'. As such, 'van Dieren was an ideal, almost symbolic figure, and the manner of their promotion of him made it inevitable that they would arouse the wrath of those that they most wanted to attack'.<sup>50</sup> Those in question by and large consisted of London's musical elite and the city's modish concertgoers (as Gray recalls, his and Heseltine's publicity campaign for 'such an obscure artistic event in time of war [...] certainly succeeded in its main purpose, for the hall was filled by a large and fashionable audience'<sup>51</sup>). Secondly, van Dieren's obscurity presented a means to herald the arrival of an erstwhile neglected genius: 'They probably felt that they had discovered a new and previously unheard-of composer who, through this association, had a good pedigree: to promote his works would be to do music and the musical world a great favour and would also be a coup for them'.<sup>52</sup> Thirdly, there was a reactionary aesthetic motivating van Dieren's music which appealed to the world-weary sensibilities of Gray, Heseltine and later Sorabji, namely van Dieren's attempted preservation of tradition in the face of an apparently *popular* musical modernism which seemed to have severed all contact with the

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<sup>49</sup> Gray, *Musical Chairs*, 114.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>51</sup> Gray, *Musical Chairs*, 113.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

late nineteenth-century romanticism they held dear: ‘They regarded van Dieren as a composer whose music represented what the “modern spirit” in music should be – the new growing out of the old’.<sup>53</sup> Finally, to make anything of their association with van Dieren which would amount to something more than a vague claim to personal acquaintance, ‘they *had* to promote Van Dieren’s works’ simply because the composer would not or could not do so himself: ‘Throughout his career as a composer he maintained a rigorous attitude of anti-commercialism, refused in any way (theoretically at least) to promote his own works for performance, and was prepared to suffer the consequences of his intransigence’.<sup>54</sup> This patrician stubbornness rings remarkably true of Sorabji’s own isolationist position from the mid-1930s following the self-imposed ban on performances of his music. It will be seen that van Dieren was personally instrumental in this development.

Given van Dieren’s recalcitrance in the matter of composition (he ‘worked in a recondite, “expressive” style, which made no concessions to English tastes’<sup>55</sup>), his refusal to personally court publicity and the generally baffled reception of his works when they were ‘brought into the open’, it was necessary for his followers, if they were to gain from their affiliation with him, to tout van Dieren in a manner perhaps disproportionate to the evaluations any objective account of his abilities as a composer would or could admit. Martyrological recourse to van Dieren as a misunderstood genius suffering the malign indifference of his age was a tactic thus adopted by his followers as a means of drawing attention away from the perhaps dubious quality of his works and on to his purportedly saintly character. Accounts of van Dieren by his admirers have consequently tended towards a questionable hagiography which raised the suspicions of those who were left untouched by his personality or music: ‘Previous writings on Bernard van Dieren have been of little use to anyone seriously interested in the fabric of the music’, consisting as they typically did of ‘elaborate apologia and glowing, and one suspects at times exaggerated reminiscence; others have contained quite fundamental errors’.<sup>56</sup> It is not surprising, then, that his supporters have been dubbed in the most religious terms of epigonism. Whittall describes Sorabji and Gray as van Dieren’s ‘disciples’;<sup>57</sup> Edwin Evans

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Stradling and Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 212.

<sup>56</sup> Davies, ‘Bernard van Dieren (1887-1936)’, 675.

<sup>57</sup> Whittall, ‘Van Dieren’, 438.



wrote of Gray and Heseltine as his ‘enthusiastic apostles’;<sup>58</sup> together they assumed ‘the roles of prophets, whose task it was to announce the coming of a new artistic Messiah’.<sup>59</sup> The Essex-based American sculptor Jacob Epstein (triumphantly described by Gray as ‘the object of an unremitting hostility on the part of the general public, malevolently fomented by the popular press’<sup>60</sup>) took this last notion to a degree of iconoclastic devotion. Like Cyril Scott’s underrated Jesus, van Dieren was in Epstein’s view a ‘genius neglected, misunderstood. One whose work will have to wait in our welter of vulgarity, noise and opportunism before it comes to be understood for qualities our age does not care for’.<sup>61</sup> When ‘inspired by the sight of him in pain’, Epstein wrote that ‘the desire came over me to work from him’:

I made a mask. The mask was filled with suffering, but it was so noble and had such a high quality of intellectual life, I thought of him as the suffering Christ, and developed the mask into a head, then into a bust with arms and extended it again and so made my first image of Christ in bronze.<sup>62</sup>

And so Christ was Risen – in Essex:



**Fig. 11 Jacob Epstein’s *The Risen Christ* (1917-19)**  
Incidentally, Epstein used Cecil Gray’s hands and feet on which to model  
Their Saviour’s extremities.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Edwin Evans, ‘Bernard van Dieren’s Music’, *The Musical Times*, 58/890 (April 1917), 166.

<sup>59</sup> Reynolds, ‘Peter Warlock: His Contemporaries and Their Influence’, 57.

<sup>60</sup> Gray, *Musical Chairs*, 206.

<sup>61</sup> From Jacob Epstein, *Let There be Sculpture: an autobiography* (London: 1940), 96; quoted in Reynolds, 57.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Chisholm, *Bernard van Dieren*, 16.

<sup>63</sup> Gray, *Musical Chairs*, 206.

With perhaps the deifying exception of Epstein, Sorabji's contribution to this Messianism reveals him to be as 'devout' a 'disciple' of van Dieren as anyone else could lay claim to be. Only in Sorabji's writings on Busoni do we find a higher pitch of veneration, as his obituary for van Dieren in *The New English Weekly* testifies:

No worse loss has befallen music since the equally untimely death of Busoni some years ago than that of Bernard van Dieren on Friday, April 24 [1936], at the cruelly early age of 48.[...] van Dieren was not only a musician of immense powers, a creative genius in sound, he was perhaps one of the most astonishingly gifted human beings who have trod the earth since the universal geniuses of the Renaissance.<sup>64</sup>

As any martyr worthy of the name should, van Dieren suffered for his cause:

The incredible malignity of the persecution that van Dieren had to endure [...] what unheard of depths of rascality the henchmen of nonentities and mediocrities will descend in order to ruin and wreck a great figure. Hell hath no fury like a nonentity outpassed!<sup>65</sup>

Sorabji's idolatry continues undiminished in *Mi contra fa*, wherein van Dieren is portrayed as

one of the most remarkable artistic personalities of this or of any other age [...], so vast the scope and grasp of his prodigious intellect, so profound his knowledge in the most widely diversified and disparate fields, that to find others of his order one has to go to such superhuman men of the Renaissance as Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo Buonarotti.<sup>66</sup>

Van Dieren's qualities were, for Sorabji, of a 'superhuman' order. Not only was van Dieren ill, his was an ailment few mortal bodies could withstand:

A martyr in the latter years of his prematurely shortened life of fifty-two [*sic*] years to renal calculi and to agonising physical suffering – his case was almost a clinical *locus classicus*, and he must have endured a sum total of pain that appals the mind – his astounding fortitude was on a par with the greatness of his personality as a whole.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Sorabji, 'Music: Bernard van Dieren', *The New English Weekly* (14 May 1936), 92, 93.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>66</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 149.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

Sorabji goes on to give a first-hand account of van Dieren's suffering. In doing so he is complicit in the continuance of a martyrological discourse built upon the romantic trope of adversity overcome – *per aspera ad astra*:

The most terrible and moving experience I think I ever had was sitting at his bedside just as he had passed through an intense spell of suffering.[...] I found him holding what was very much like a *petit lever* of the time of Louis XIV. There was a regal grandness of manner about everything that he was. With some half a dozen of us sitting around his bed, he wasted, worn and racked with pain like an El Greco saint, so that one could hardly bear to look at him for distress, the while holding all of us fascinated by a flow of the most brilliant and witty talk that it has ever been my good fortune to hear; in between whiles playing a game of chess with his son, whom he would from time to time correct in a false or ill-judged move, showing him a series of possible replies to his own, or his proposed replies to hypothetical moves on his son's part. This done, he would resume his dazzling flow of conversation, so that it seemed that one was witnessing a triumph of mind over bodily suffering that could hardly be equalled.<sup>68</sup>

Sorabji is here paying his dues to a distinguished history in the construction of genius. A brief comparison with music history's undisputed (or – more cautiously – undisputedly constructed) genius will prove instructive. Ludwig van<sup>69</sup> Beethoven's final hours were recounted by Anselm Hüttenbrenner, who recorded a violent storm raging on the eve of Beethoven's passing: 'A loud clap of thunder accompanied by a bolt of lightning illuminated the death chamber with a harsh light [...]. Beethoven opened his eyes, raised his right hand and, as his fist clenched, looked upward for several seconds with a very grave, threatening countenance, as though to say, "Defy you, powers of evil! Away! God is with me"'. In another account, Hüttenbrenner elaborates: 'It seemed that Beethoven was at his last gasp, one eye already closed. At the stroke of lightning and the thunder peal he raised his arm with a doubled-up fist; the expression of his eyes and face was that of one "defying death" – a look of defiance and power of resistance'.<sup>70</sup> Tia DeNora has

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 149-50.

<sup>69</sup> Unlike van Dieren, Beethoven's 'van' was no titular birthright. Beethoven's early substitution of his inherited and humdrum German 'von' for the aristocratic Dutch predicate 'van' was part of what Maynard Solomon calls his 'nobility pretense', revealing Beethoven as having a hand in the manipulation of his own artistic identity. See Maynard Solomon, 'The Nobility Pretense' in *Beethoven Essays* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990), 43-55.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Christopher H. Gibbs, 'Performances of Grief: Vienna's Response to the Death of Beethoven' in Scott Burnham and Michael P. Steinberg (eds.), *Beethoven and His World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 233.

investigated how such accounts contributed and continue to contribute to the idea of Beethoven as a universal genius, arguing that,

As part of our cultural common sense, Beethoven's identity as an exceptional musician appears transcendent. Beethoven is the quintessential genius of Western culture, and the history of how his reputation became established should interest sociologists, social psychologists, and cultural historians, because that history cannot be addressed fully by conventional musicological discourse alone.<sup>71</sup>

The idea of van Dieren's genius, on the other hand, is an affront to cultural common sense; unlike Beethoven, he has no standing in the orthodox hierarchy of canon: musicological discourse 'alone' has signally failed to find a place for him. Van Dieren does, however, epitomise in simulation one aspect of Beethoven's legacy. DeNora charts how Beethoven's reputation 'contributed to the initial emergence of an ideology of "serious" (as opposed to light) music' against the prevailing 'amateur-oriented, dilettante musical values'. With Beethoven's late style, these values 'were increasingly challenged and obscured from within by a connoisseur culture of musical production and consumption'.<sup>72</sup> It is to this 'connoisseur culture' that van Dieren belongs. We might recall on this point Schoenberg's institution of the insular Society for the Private Performance of Music,<sup>73</sup> or his later elitist dictum that, 'If it is art it is not for everybody; if it is for everybody it is not art'.<sup>74</sup> By this logic, van Dieren's *sui generis* art is of an esotericism by which the commonplace notion of 'connoisseurship' falls short. For Gray, van Dieren's 'is not an art which stands the smallest chance of ever becoming popular. At best it can only hope to attract a few. Nevertheless, only these few really matter'.<sup>75</sup> Heseltine explains that opinion was divided on Van Dieren between 'those who do not know his works disputing the judgements of those who do'.<sup>76</sup> For Sorabji, 'the immense importance of van Dieren is no longer in dispute among those who *know*. The concert-going and concert-giving rabble, of course, know him not; he is not for they'.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Tia DeNora, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792-1803* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), xi.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>73</sup> See Charles Rosen, *Arnold Schoenberg* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1976), 72-8.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, Vol. 4, 'Music in the Early Twentieth Century' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 353.

<sup>75</sup> Gray, *Survey of Contemporary Music*, 222.

<sup>76</sup> Heseltine, 'London Concerts: Bernard van Dieren', *The Musical Times*, 67/995 (January 1926), 45.

<sup>77</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 156. Emphasis in original.

The account given above should adequately substantiate the first of the two ‘diametrically opposed views’ Lewis Foreman outlines as pertaining to considerations of van Dieren, namely, that he presented a martyr figure never fully appreciated in his own lifetime, one who inspired the admirations of a select and robustly vociferous minority of artists. The second view – that van Dieren was ‘a persuasive but essentially destructive influence’ and that thereby ‘many of his admirers came to grief at a comparatively early age’ – presently remains to be seen. There is certainly something at work in van Dieren’s reputation which would prompt Foreman – an otherwise impartial chronicler of British music and archivist of its sources – to remark elsewhere that van Dieren exerted ‘an evil influence’.<sup>78</sup> Although it would be excessive to talk of a van Dieren ‘curse’, the evidence does suggest that trouble followed in his wake. For example, van Dieren’s input as an intelligence officer in the early years of the Great War ‘led directly to the deaths of [allied] soldiers’;<sup>79</sup> according to the coroner’s report in the case of Heseltine’s suicide, van Dieren admitted to being the last person to see him alive<sup>80</sup> (Nigel Heseltine – the composer’s son – would attempt to incriminate van Dieren with murder<sup>81</sup>). Edward Cronshaw suggests that van Dieren’s book on Epstein did more harm than good to the sculptor’s reputation,<sup>82</sup> and the *Times* obituary for Cecil Gray recorded that he ‘belonged to the ill-fated circle whose centre was Bernard van Dieren’.<sup>83</sup> It would seem that no one uninitiated wished to be around van Dieren, as a report from November 1930 confirms:

It is difficult to realise at this time of day that but twenty years ago the name of Bernard van Dieren was used to frighten little musicians in the same way as Oliver Cromwell’s, in a previous age, was invoked to frighten little Irish children. Yet, it is reported, on good authority, that in the early ‘thirties a mere casual reference to this dreaded name would cause a shudder to pass through any musical gathering. Composers would talk even louder, bearded and oracular critics would turn scarlet and try to remember where they left their umbrellas, and pale and eager tuft-hunters would gather their fluttering mothers about their

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<sup>78</sup> Lewis Foreman and Susan Foreman, *London: A Musical Gazetteer* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 231.

<sup>79</sup> Davies, ‘Bernard van Dieren, Philip Heseltine and Cecil Gray: a Significant Affiliation’, 30.

<sup>80</sup> Gray, *Peter Warlock*, 292.

<sup>81</sup> Foreman and Foreman, *London*, 231.

<sup>82</sup> Jonathan Lee Cronshaw, ‘Carving a Legacy: the Identity of Jacob Epstein (1880-1959)’, PhD thesis (Leeds University: September 2010), 91.

<sup>83</sup> Anon., *Times* obituary for Cecil Gray (19 September 1951), cited in Pauline Gray, *Cecil Gray: his Life and Notebooks* (London: Thames Publishing, 1989), 83.

skirts and blanch at the thought of what they had escaped. People said it reminded them of ‘The Masque of the Red Death’.<sup>84</sup>

These words, published in *The Musical Times*, were penned by John Goss under the Italianate pseudonym Giovanni Gazzoni (a fictional critic-from-the-future, writing from the distant date of ‘April 1952’) and satirises van Dieren’s unsettling presence in polite musical circles. Goss’s tell-tale reference to Edgar Allen Poe’s short story<sup>85</sup> points to the heart of the matter. Poe’s eponymous ‘Red Death’ (‘No pestilence had ever been so fatal, so hideous’<sup>86</sup>) is brought into fashionable high society in the host of an uninvited mummer: ‘the rumour of this new presence having spread itself whisperingly around, there arose at length from the whole company a buzz, or murmur, expressive of disapprobation and surprise – then, finally, of terror, horror, and of disgust’.<sup>87</sup> The haemorrhagic fever takes hold and – as these things tend to go – the entire party ends up a bloody mess and ‘Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all’.<sup>88</sup> Of course, van Dieren’s ‘destructive influence’ can in no way be measured by the gruesome standards of Poe’s fictional plague. If anything, Goss’s invocation of the Red Death serves as an indicator of the uncanny, gothic imagery which stalks (squeaking and gibbering) van Dieren’s reputation in accounts of English music in the first half of the century. We have already seen how the language of the uncanny and gothic was used by Sorabji as a pathologising means of maintaining Alkan’s obscurity. The same rhetorical techniques can be discerned in use against van Dieren by his detractors. The true measure of his ‘destructiveness’ is therefore to be gauged in the hostile reactions to Heseltine, Gray and Sorabji’s unwavering defence of van Dieren as not only an unclassifiable composer, but as a composer considered by the majority as being hardly even worth the effort of classification.

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<sup>84</sup> Giovanni Gazzoni [John Goss], ‘Bernard van Dieren’s “The Tailor”’, *The Musical Times*, 71/1053 (November 1930), 999.

<sup>85</sup> Edgar Allen Poe, ‘The Masque of the Red Death’ [1842] in David Galloway (ed.), *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings: Poems, Tales, Essays and Reviews* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 205-11.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

‘those mysteriously unacceptable works...’: van Dieren, *sui generis*

The epigonism inspired by van Dieren’s personality typically took the form of an uncritical hagiography which tended to assume his musical (even polymathic) genius as beyond question or dispute, at least ‘among those who *know*’. As such, Davies has complained that ‘previous writings on Bernard van Dieren have been of little use to anyone seriously interested in the fabric of the music’<sup>89</sup> to the effect that, as a composer, ‘van Dieren’s credibility has been seriously undermined’.<sup>90</sup> It is noteworthy in this regard that Sorabji’s eulogistic chapter on van Dieren in *Mi contra fa* makes no reference to any single one of his works, focusing instead on his intellectual forbearance under the pall of chronic physical suffering and on the gross indifference of the public to his (unspecified) art. Perhaps, then, Davies was right: not even his most vocal supporters were inclined to offer up substantive commentaries on his music. If this really was the situation with his closest affiliates, then the remaining majority of critics inured to the allure of van Dieren’s saintly character had little hope of profitably or even adequately acquainting themselves with his works. For example, following the 1917 van Dieren concert one critic remarked that ‘we are so dazed by the new music that we cannot pretend to offer a criticism’ (aside from it all being ‘very long [...] puzzling and dull’).<sup>91</sup> Twenty years later the situation was little different: ‘There is, perhaps, no modern composer so difficult to discuss, pen in hand, as van Dieren’.<sup>92</sup> This difficulty is chiefly attributable to the incompatibility of his works within any conventional stylistic taxonomy. Henderson L. Williams neatly summarises the critical consensus when he writes that ‘van Dieren’s music will not go into any nicely prepared pigeon-hole’,<sup>93</sup> and Sorabji predictably enough lauded van Dieren in these terms: ‘van Dieren was as unpigeonholeable, as unclassifiable, as Busoni himself’.<sup>94</sup>

It is worthy of observation that, when van Dieren’s music could not be fathomed (as was so often the case), commentators regularly resorted to a kind of self-reflexive mode of writing in many ways at odds with methods typical of the prevailing empiricist tradition underpinning discursive constructions of cultural Englishness at the time. As Edgar Davis wrote in 1938, ‘Critical opinion, in the face of van Dieren’s music, has

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<sup>89</sup> Davies, ‘Bernard van Dieren (1887-1936)’, 675.

<sup>90</sup> Hywel Davies, ‘Van Dieren’, *The Musical Times* 129/1744 (June 1988), 282.

<sup>91</sup> Anon., ‘Music: the Diaphony of Mr. van Dieren’, *The Observer* (25 February 1917), 166.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Henderson L. Williams, ‘Van Dieren’, 325.

<sup>94</sup> Sorabji, ‘Music: Bernard van Dieren’, 92.

invariably confounded itself. This exceedingly complex and individual art cannot be file-indexed'. His works thus 'defied the systematists', and so 'In orientating van Dieren, the usual set of terms and comparisons, it must once again be insisted, cannot be invoked'.<sup>95</sup> In other words, and according to 'N.C.' in 1925, 'van Dieren is hard to place in any known school [...] here is a language *sui generis*'.<sup>96</sup> Writing in 1934, an anonymous reviewer similarly claimed that van Dieren 'is the most remote from the ordinary paths of music. He has no affinities with any group, whether moderate or extreme, romantic or cynical'.<sup>97</sup> Another noted in 1936 that 'he wrote music that belonged to no school or fashion';<sup>98</sup> yet another, two years later, explained how van Dieren's works had a 'freedom from any contemporary "-isms" or "-alities"'.<sup>99</sup> In Heseltine's exasperated *précis* of these attitudes, van Dieren 'cannot be classified, he belongs to no particular school, and as each of his works actually sounds quite different from any of the others, he is said to have no style'.<sup>100</sup>

Or, some said, talent. Van Dieren's suspected incompetence as a composer was given damning evidence early on. After receiving the manuscript of van Dieren's *Ten Dutch Melodies* in 1918 (finally published in 1927 by Oxford University Press – with the addition of two extra pieces – under the title *Netherlands Melodies*: regional nuance clearly wasn't an issue), publisher Winthrop Rogers presented them to a panel of some key figures behind the English Musical Renaissance. 'I showed them at separate times to John Ireland, Frank Bridge, Anthony Bernard, and Roger Quilter', explains Rogers. 'I made no comment or expression of opinion to any of the above four, but they all felt exactly as I do about Van Dieren's work':

First, that his workmanship is shockingly bad. Second, that the harmonic scheme is in bad taste, especially so because it is impossible to hear the melodies in the midst of errors of harmony. Third, because the whole scheme is quite the opposite of what one understands by the "modern spirit", and is more in the musical class of the mediocre Germans of the middle nineteenth century. One of the four said at once 'This is the work of a sick man'. I write all the above quite frankly, because it is no use to beat about the bush in such matters . . . I feel sure we are not mistaken in Van Dieren's case. I know that great talents have

<sup>95</sup> Davis, 'Van Dieren', 169, 171, 174.

<sup>96</sup> N.C., 'Bernard van Dieren', *The Manchester Guardian* (25 November 1925), 10.

<sup>97</sup> Anon., 'Van Dieren' (1934), 745.

<sup>98</sup> Anon., 'Bernard van Dieren' (1936), 561.

<sup>99</sup> E.R., 'Van Dieren', 362.

<sup>100</sup> Heseltine, 'London Concerts: Bernard van Dieren', 44.



often been misunderstood, but the fact should not make one timid especially when one sees clear evidence of inferior musicianship.<sup>101</sup>

Note here that ‘one *sees*’ van Dieren’s musical failings – the mute score is enough to disconcert the critical eye; the music need not be disturbed. Others commented similarly on the perplexing graphical aspects of van Dieren’s notation. ‘B.V.’, for instance, wrote that ‘The look of the music, owing to the number of accidentals, is alarming’.<sup>102</sup> What Williams described as ‘wanton difficultness’<sup>103</sup> Reynolds designates ‘excessively complex and overcrowded’.<sup>104</sup> Patrick Riley shared this evaluation: ‘I agree that van Dieren’s notation is needlessly complicated’; to reiterate, his scores demonstrate a ‘needless complexity’.<sup>105</sup>

Van Dieren’s notational excesses – particularly his reliance on an apparent surfeit of accidentals – may be justified as a consequence of his music’s fraught and often insecure relationship to tonality. But, for B.V., this is an insufficient excuse: van Dieren’s works are ‘unsatisfactory’ precisely because, ‘while he seems to be tending to atonality, [he] is yet clinging to a definite key system’. B.V. cites the end of van Dieren’s song ‘Les Contemplations’ as an instance:

It is easy to follow the drift of the last two lines if we regard them as being frankly without feeling of key. But when in the last bar the thing is jerked back sharply, with a thoroughly hackneyed chromatic cadence, into A major, it makes the preceding lines sound aimless – and not intentionally, successfully aimless, but just incompetently so.<sup>106</sup>

This is partly because the ‘essence’ of van Dieren’s music is manifest in ‘a peculiarly fluid counterpoint on a chromatic basis, copious in detail, weighty and austere in effect’.<sup>107</sup> For Davenport, ‘the texture seems morbidly thick; in spite of the inventive logic of the counterpoint, it is blurred by endless chromaticism’.<sup>108</sup> Not for nothing, then, did Ernest

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<sup>101</sup> Letter in British Library, Add. MS 57794, cited in Davies (1988), 42.

<sup>102</sup> B.V. ‘New Music: Songs’, 907.

<sup>103</sup> Williams, ‘Van Dieren’, 328.

<sup>104</sup> Reynolds, ‘Peter Warlock: His Contemporaries and Their Influence’, 54.

<sup>105</sup> Riley, 51, 52.

<sup>106</sup> B.V., ‘New Music: Songs’, 907.

<sup>107</sup> Anon., ‘Bernard van Dieren’, 561.

<sup>108</sup> John Davenport, ‘Bernard van Dieren’, *The Musical Times*, 96/1346 (April 1955), 189.

Newman criticise van Dieren's 'very late German music' for being 'almost purer Reger than Reger himself' which, as a consequence, 'we instinctively feel to be un-English'.<sup>109</sup>

The closest we come to finding Sorabji discussing the substance of van Dieren's music is in his evaluations of the outward appearance of the composer's scores. 'If ever there was a master of complex and intricate musical thinking', wrote Sorabji, 'it was Bernard van Dieren'.<sup>110</sup> For Sorabji, 'complexity and intricacy' in music bear a definite graphical imprint. Thus Sorabji describes van Dieren's manuscripts as 'marvels, calligraphic works of art, that in any future collected edition of his works should be reproduced in facsimile' (adding that, 'His letters too – several of which are a most prized possession of my own – were inimitable'<sup>111</sup>). We know from his writings on Szymanowski's middle-period works just how much Sorabji valued complex notation as an artistic end in itself, which is to say he treasured the score independently as an *objet d'art* un beholden to the music it inheres. On the one hand, then, the striking visuality of van Dieren's scores – their *complexity*, needless or otherwise – admits a certain extra-musical aesthetic; on the other, and from a formalist-empiricist perspective whereby notation is held as a necessary mediating means to the presentation of the music 'itself', van Dieren's elaborate notation obscures from within any clearly communicable musical intent.

This returns us to van Dieren's *sui generis* inaccessibility so highly touted by his followers. Sorabji explains how such generic eccentricity made the outright critical dismissal of van Dieren's music light work:

The difficulty, indeed the impossibility, of 'placing' or 'pigeon-holing' van Dieren, as of Delius, is not the least important of the reasons why both are denied the homage that is their due by those who have no room or use for what they cannot label with a convenient catch-phrase that helps them to lump a number of more-or-less nonentities into one inchoate mass. And this saves them the trouble of trying to think intelligently about the matter. Van Dieren [...] stands outside and aloof from all the fashionable musical movements of the day, as did Busoni.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Anon., 'Van Dieren', *British Musician and Musical News*, 13/127 (July 1936), 161.

<sup>110</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 151.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>112</sup> Sorabji, 'Music', *The New Age* (23 April 1925), 308.

Similarly, in *Mi contra fa*, Sorabji explains that van Dieren presented

An artistic figure of complete independence, proudly yet naturally aloof, it was impossible to label him with the Impressionists, Neo-Impressionists, atonal, Schönbergian, linear-contrapuntal labels [...]. He was thus a source of constant irritation and annoyance to those who regard the existence of any independent artistic personality whom they cannot pigeon-hole and label, as a personal affront.<sup>113</sup>

Attempts to liken van Dieren's music to existing terms ultimately came up short, with the resulting ascriptions of stylistic miscegenation unhelpful at best. When, for example, 'B.V.' rebuked van Dieren for what can best be described as a kind of epigonal somnambulism by warning that 'One ought not to fall asleep a pupil of Grieg, and wake up a pupil of Schoenberg',<sup>114</sup> Sorabji had an unorthodox and counter-canon refutation to hand. Van Dieren – autodidact *par excellence* – owed nothing to Schoenberg, having in fact 'anticipated by some ten years or so certain of Schönberg's later developments', only 'without ever becoming monomaniacally hag-ridden by them like Schönberg himself'<sup>115</sup> (that might imply a degree of consistency). If anything, Sorabji argues, Schoenberg was indebted to van Dieren. In his 1920 article on 'Modern Piano Technique' (asserting, among other things, Reger's supremacy over Brahms), Sorabji notes that 'Schönberg in the third of his piano pieces has probably come nearer than anyone to treating the piano in a new way with the exception of the very remarkable Dutchman, Bernard van Dieren'.<sup>116</sup> Van Dieren was indeed *exceptional*: Schoenberg's advances in this medium were, according to Sorabji and seemingly no-one else, already to be found in the piano writing of van Dieren. Sorabji would not even admit that an acknowledged *protégé* (since 1904) of Schoenberg was uninfluenced by van Dieren. On Alban Berg's 'strange, interesting' piano sonata in B minor, Sorabji writes that, 'Apart from its own merits, it is remarkable in that it shows very plainly, not the influence of Schönberg, but of van Dieren'.<sup>117</sup> Berg completed the sonata in question in 1909; van Dieren's first published work appeared in the same

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<sup>113</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 152.

<sup>114</sup> B.V., 'New Music: Songs', 907.

<sup>115</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 152.

<sup>116</sup> Sorabji, 'Modern Piano Technique', *The Sackbut*, 1/3 (July 1920), 117. It is not clear which of Schoenberg's *Klavierstücke* Sorabji is referring to. Of Schoenberg's then-published collections comprising three or more piano pieces, Sorabji would have been familiar with the *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op. 11 (1909) and *Sechs Kleine Klavierstücke*, Op. 19 (1911). Schoenberg's early (1894) set of *Drei Klavierstücke* was published without an opus number. However, given the particular interest of the Op. 11 set – its breakthrough expressionist idiom and the unique technical challenges (and attendant graphical intricacies) posed by the last piece – it may be on the third number contained therein that Sorabji remarks so positively.

<sup>117</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music* (London: Unicorn Press, 1932), 57.

year (*Song from the Cenci*, for voice and string quartet, as to be found in the ensemble of Schoenberg's Second Quartet of 1908). It is therefore unlikely that van Dieren exerted any influence over Berg; indeed, scholarly literature on the latter has declined to flag any association of this kind.<sup>118</sup>

Is it possible that, in making such bold claims, Sorabji was attempting to shield (anxiously, agonistically, in Bloomian terms) van Dieren from accusations that perhaps he was *influenced* by contemporary trends? This would be to discredit the rule that the *sui generis*, eccentric composer is by definition without predecessors or successors. As 'G.A.H.' remarked in 1932, van Dieren 'so firmly resolved to avoid all danger of cultivating a style that might "place" him immediately that he is for ever drifting between the impressionist school and a drastic ultra-modern art. He is as elusive as a ghost'.<sup>119</sup> Similarly, one anonymous reviewer fifteen years earlier generously proposed that, at the very least, 'One must grant Mr. van Dieren a knowledge of the elements that have made music an artistic speech; otherwise he would not have been capable of so deliberately avoiding every constituent and appurtenance that has hitherto disciplined and systematised his art both in the past and in the present day'.<sup>120</sup> Without, then, any easy route into 'understanding' van Dieren's music (by reference, for example, to already-extant schools or fashions, '-isms' or '-alities'), the experience of hearing his works in performance left many cold. As one writer in 1936 put it, 'It is not that the music is hard to realise in detail, simply *as music*'.

The trouble is rather the difficulty of discovering why the composer does what he does, and what he is aiming to express. That is to say, the trouble is the difficulty of forming an image of his conception, and from this entering into his own mind – the sole process by which you can 'understand' art, since it is the sole process by which you can bring yourself into harmony with it.

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<sup>118</sup> For example, Douglas Jarman, *The Music of Alban Berg* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), David John Headlam, *The Music of Alban Berg* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1996), Bryan R. Simms, *Alban Berg: A Research and Information Guide*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009) and Christopher Hailey (ed.), *Alban Berg and His World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010) all boast van Dierenless indexes.

<sup>119</sup> G.A.H., 'The van Dieren Recital: Contemporary Music', *The Manchester Guardian* (26 November 1932), 12.

<sup>120</sup> Anon., 'Music: the Diaphony of Mr. van Dieren', *The Observer* (25 February 1917), 5.

Comparing van Dieren's works to the obscurantism of 'the later Beethoven', the author proceeds to assert that van Dieren 'leaves the normal student with a feeling of blankness':

The average student therefore has to come to this decision: that van Dieren's music requires for its appreciation a special type of mind, and that mind must be stimulated by extra-musical considerations – chiefly those of a determined 'cult'.<sup>121</sup>

William McNaught (who, we may recall, pilloried Mahler for the 'hidden virtues' of his 'unenjoyable' music<sup>122</sup>) acknowledged in 1921 that, while 'Much has been written about Mr. Bernard van Dieren as a musical freethinker, an innovator, a technician, a composer *sui generis*',

When it came to hearing his music played it was a great disappointment to find that such qualities could go with so little inspiration [...] its hidden meaning had to be taken as read, and that is not how music is understood or enjoyed.<sup>123</sup>

The cryptic nature of van Dieren's musical utterances was likened by an anonymous reviewer in 1926 to 'sentences in cipher' which 'are not intelligible to the general ear'.<sup>124</sup> In 1934, one critic, reviewing the BBC's broadcast of van Dieren's *Diaphony*, wrote that 'An atmosphere of the problematic lay about the whole thing, of big issues latent, of messages confused by their wording, of some difference of angle or dimension. Such an atmosphere does not make for friendship between composer and audience'.<sup>125</sup> For another in 1936, van Dieren's music 'lacks the explicitness that enables auditors to be aware of the composer's visions as he conceived them'.<sup>126</sup> 'This is why van Dieren seems fated to remain a composer for the few', commented another in the following year, adding that 'A constant flow of subtleties unrelieved by concessions to the mean sensual man is eloquent only to the elite of listeners, who will never be numerous enough to justify the inclusion of such a work [as van Dieren's *Chinese Symphony*, broadcast in 1935] in the repertoire'.<sup>127</sup> On account of such *obscurity*, van Dieren's music was generally received as strangely inaccessible or – in Davenport's words – 'mysteriously unacceptable': 'the public

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<sup>121</sup> Anon., 'Van Dieren', *British Musician and Musical News*, 13/127 (July 1936), 158.

<sup>122</sup> See Chapter Three.

<sup>123</sup> McNaught, 703.

<sup>124</sup> Anon., 'Van Dieren Concert', *The Musical Times* (February 1926), 160.

<sup>125</sup> Anon., 1934, 745.

<sup>126</sup> Anon., 1936, 561.

<sup>127</sup> Anon., 1937, 555.

remained – it still remains – indifferent to this highly individual music’.<sup>128</sup> But for van Dieren’s supporters – Sorabji chief among them – this was just as well: ‘public indifference’ to ‘highly individual’ music was, after all, the tenet by which their connoisseurial contrarianism and elitist isolationism could be safeguarded. Van Dieren’s neglect was an assurance of his greatness.

### The not-always-gentle art of making enemies

It is probably within good reason to say that Heseltine, Gray and Sorabji made few friends in their aggressive publicity campaigns for van Dieren’s music. This may very well have been their intention, for it is notable that both Gray and Sorabji refer approvingly in their prose to James McNeill Whistler’s *Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1890),<sup>129</sup> a diverting collection of this once neglected<sup>130</sup> painter’s vitriolic writings, witticisms and fallouts with the art-critical establishment as they appeared in the press. Whistler dedicates his gentle art to ‘The rare Few, who, early in Life / have rid themselves of the Friendship / of the Many’. The Whistlerian critical tradition continued into the 1930s, described by Michael Trend as a decade ‘when various music writers sharpened their pens to keen points’, citing van Dieren’s own compendium of neglected composers, *Down Among the Dead Men* and Gray’s unorthodox and contrarian *Survey of Contemporary Music*.<sup>131</sup> Trend omits mention of *Around Music*, Sorabji’s 1932 collection of essay which had less use for pointy pens than it did for more severe – albeit metaphorical – tools, as Scott Goddard, in reviewing this book, suggested: ‘These are the outspoken comments of a critic with a hundred axes to grind, an activity which he unblushingly pursues without counting the cost’.<sup>132</sup> Van Dieren played a critical role in the entrenchment of this position following the publication of *Around Music*. In a letter to Sorabji, van Dieren praises his friend’s obstinate refusal to conform to mainstream cultural trends and pleads that he continue to do so. Sorabji reproduces this recommendation in full in his chapter on van Dieren in the later *Mi contra fa*. His transcription of van Dieren’s handwritten letter (dated 8 June 1933) for publication

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<sup>128</sup> Davenport, ‘Bernard van Dieren’, 188.

<sup>129</sup> James M. Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, (London: Heinemann, 1994). Sorabji’s reference can be found in *Mi contra fa*, 193, Gray’s in *Musical Chairs*, 270.

<sup>130</sup> Ian Irvine and Pierre Vinken write that the 1994 exhibition of Whistler’s work was the only major one since 1905. ‘Preface’ in Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, i.

<sup>131</sup> Trend, *The Music Makers*, 176. It is an oversight on the author’s part to claim that Gray’s contribution belongs to the 1930s. Having been published in 1924, it doesn’t. Nevertheless, Trend’s point remains, even if it is not quite as keen as those on the pens of the composer-critics he enlists.

<sup>132</sup> Scott Goddard, ‘Reviews of Books: *Around Music* by Kaikhosru Sorabji’, *Music and Letters* 14/3 (July 1933), 288.

presents a noteworthy instance of his acknowledgment of van Dieren's influence on him as a critic and composer. Van Dieren confesses that he has 'read and re-read' *Around Music*, and highlights 'The concentrated bitterness, vitriolic acidity, the explosive violence, the surgical incisiveness and many more extreme qualities' he had first seen in Sorabji's articles. He praises the 'convincing mastery of self in the course of pages of vituperative intensity and heroic partiality. [...] To be so partisan with so much good judgment, to be so incandescent with so much calm generalship, to be so antithetic with so much sense of unity, must surely be a unique achievement'. Van Dieren wishes to tell Sorabji 'how greatly I value your criticism and what a very high opinion I have of your literary powers not to mention your musicianship and erudition [...] it would be hard to laud your achievement beyond its merits. [...] All possible power to you for all possible length of time!'<sup>133</sup> Having thus faithfully reproduced van Dieren's letter of praise and encouragement, Sorabji relays his response in conclusion: 'Such words from such a man are not only an immeasurable encouragement to pursue one's path determinedly, but to do it from a granite tower, and go on doing it from a granite tower. But of that, more is found elsewhere'<sup>134</sup>

That 'elsewhere' is to be found in the preceding chapter of *Mi contra fa* entitled '*Il Gran Rifiuto*' – Sorabji's great refusal establishing three tenets of his misanthropic outlook:

- (i) Reasons for not going to Concerts
- (ii) Reasons for having nothing to do with Musicians
- (iii) Reasons for living in a Granite Tower

The last-listed is a cumulative and logical response to the first two. By 1947 (the year in which *Mi contra fa* was published), Sorabji no longer attended concerts simply because he could not abide the company of unacquainted others: 'The sight of them in their various degrees and kinds of physical and mental ugliness is a distasteful and humiliating reminder that I am one of them; that displeases me'.<sup>135</sup> As for avoiding musicians, Sorabji enlists the advice of an old friend: 'Bernard van Dieren used to say that music was the last refuge of the feeble-minded' and that 'the conventionality and timidity of the ordinary musician's

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<sup>133</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 155-6.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 142.

outlook in matters of general import is deeply depressing'.<sup>136</sup> Finally, Sorabji's ultimate statement of social and artistic isolationism – his reasons for living in a Granite Tower:

One hears a lot about the *tour d'ivoire* as the spiritual home of those creative artists who say with Horace 'Odi profanum vulgus, et arceo' – the implication being that their seclusion, while it may be very decorative and graceful, is fragile and brittle like ivory. It is an unfortunate simile, having I think very little relation to the truth of the matter: speaking purely for myself, I want no 'ivory tower', but a Tower of Granite with plentiful supplies of boiling oil and molten lead to tip over the battlements on to the heads of unwanted and uninvited intruders on my privacy and seclusion. Not nearly enough has been said – if anything at all – in favour of the creative artist, provided he be so minded, deliberately withdrawing from contact with his fellows, eschewing the society alike of his colleagues the other composers, who make music (sometimes), and of those who still more often mar it, the performers.<sup>137</sup>

Incidentally, that line from Horace quoted above – 'I hate the unholy rabble and keep them away' – is inscribed in Alkan's *Esquisse* No. 34.<sup>138</sup> Nevertheless, Sorabji is right in saying that little favourable is usually associated with the deliberate withdrawal of the artist in order to create. This may in part be as a result of the popularisation of images drawn from the gothic literary tradition, wherein such individuals are portrayed as sociopathic, sinister, not to be trusted. Beyond the influence of literature of a decidedly fictional sort, Anthony Storr, in *Solitude* (first published in the year of Sorabji's death under the title *The School of Genius*) suggests that since Freud's researches and especially following the Anglophone succession of the object-relations school of psychoanalysis, popular opinion on the matter had contributed in the twentieth century to a general culture in which it was believed that interpersonal relationships and individual contributions to society (construed by definition as a fundamentally *social* entity) were key to human happiness and productivity. 'Conversely', writes Storr, 'it is widely assumed that those who do not enjoy the satisfactions provided by such relationships are neurotic, immature, or in some other way abnormal'.<sup>139</sup> Sorabji's artistic and social isolationism – respectively marked as positions of ex-centricity against the dominant culture of the period and a refusal to partake in society at large – has accordingly been transmuted into an eccentric reputation for

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 143, 145.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>138</sup> Ronald Smith, *Alkan: The Music* (London: Kahn and Averill, 2000), 49.

<sup>139</sup> Anthony Storr, *Solitude* (London: Harper Collins, 1988), 5-6.



reclusiveness (with ‘isolationism’ and ‘reclusiveness’ arguably semantically interchangeable). Steven Poole’s 2003 *Guardian* article ‘on the life of a reclusive genius’ plays this reputation up under the title ‘Mr. Miseryguts’.<sup>140</sup> It begins:

He was notorious as the Howard Hughes of music. Cut off from the world and supported by a private income, he composed dauntingly huge pieces which were regarded as all but unplayable. He forbade the performance of his music lest inferior musicians ruin it. He remained alone, despising the trivial productions of others, in his artistic castle of ideal, Platonic complexity, a lone voice in the wilderness until his death.<sup>141</sup>

As sensationalist and alluring an opening gambit this may be, Poole immediately thereafter concedes that, ‘Such, at least, is the legend that surrounds one of the most intriguingly strange of English composers, Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji’. Poole invokes Sorabji’s ‘reputation for crotchety isolation’, his admission of ‘a mania for privacy’ and, ‘doubtless with no little ironic self-awareness’, the ‘Tower of Granite’. ‘But none of this quite makes Sorabji the mad misanthrope of myth’, and Poole consults Jonathan Powell (the article was published in advance of Powell’s performance of *Opus clavicembalisticum* in London’s Purcell Rooms, 16 September 2003), who explains even-handedly and without journalistic rodomontade that Sorabji

was very private and pretty reclusive [...] but he was not anti-social. He had quite a number of close friends over many decades – he knew Sacheverell Sitwell for 70 years. The problem is that this reputation can infect one’s opinion of his music; if he was this cold, inhuman figure, one could think that the work is also inhuman, which it isn’t.<sup>142</sup>

Be this as it may, the popular Sorabji ‘mystique’ – a reputation of his own creation, his automythopoesis – is clearly not so easy to shake, as the *Guardian*’s publication of Poole’s piece attests. As such, Powell’s sympathetic corrective perhaps came too late in an article which promotes over and above all else the sensationalist aspect of Sorabji’s reclusiveness as symbolised in his idealised granitic dwelling.

The image of this structure is certainly forbidding, and not one susceptible to easy dismissal. For example, even the ‘superinsistent musical detective’ Nicolas Slonimsky fell

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<sup>140</sup> Steven Poole, ‘Mr. Miseryguts’, *The Guardian* (12 September 2003)

<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2003/sep/12/classicalmusicandopera1> [Accessed 2 August 2013]

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

prey to the misleading mythological potential of Sorabji's Tower. In his edition of the seventh *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* (1984), Slonimsky informs his readers that Sorabji 'took refuge far from the madding crowd in a castle he owned in England'.<sup>143</sup> This, as we will see, is a hyperbolic conflation or confusion of facts pertaining to Sorabji's relocation far from the madding *London* crowd in the latter in the 1950s. It is worth, then, considering the image of Sorabji's Granite Tower as the sturdier equivalent of the more traditional ivory tower for, in dreaming up such a lofty hideaway, Sorabji was drawing from a rich symbolic tradition. Katarzyna Murawska explores the historical significance of the tower as 'an image of mysterious wisdom won by toil', a 'symbol of philosophic isolation'.<sup>144</sup> It was also a symbol of retreat and escape:

The lonely tower dweller, whether an eccentric nobleman, or a hero in a novel – even if imprisoned – is there of his own free will, and he retreats from public life on his own accord for the cause of the *vita contemplativa* in order to devote himself to his own fancies and obsession in contemplative isolation. This isolation from the cares of the world has two different aspects: one of retreat, the other of escape. These two aspects are represented respectively by the figure of the lonely searcher after ultimate knowledge, and by that of the dreamer, retreating from the world. These two figures combine in such a way that it is often difficult to tell which of the two is in fact dominant.<sup>145</sup>

These two interconnected aspects of the contemplative life of isolation were already discernible in van Dieren's aloofness from mainstream society. Of the tower as van Dieren's means of retreat, Gray wrote that, 'In the midst of all the spiritual ferment and restlessness of our time van Dieren stands almost alone, a figure apart, like de Vigny, remote and inaccessible in his *tour d'ivoire*'.<sup>146</sup> Although van Dieren's medical treatment 'meant that he was unable to circulate in the artistic, intellectual and social circles of the day [...] this enforced reclusion may not have been totally unwelcome' as 'The overall impression gained from van Dieren's writings is that of a reactionary who saw no good in the society or art of his day and who was preoccupied with regressive fantasies of organic wholeness in the past.[...] he displays a total apathy towards the art and society of his day

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<sup>143</sup> Nicolas Slonimsky, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* [1984] (New York: Schirmer, 1984), 2167-47, cited in Paul Rapoport, "'Could you just send me a list of his works?'" in Paul Rapoport (ed.), *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 103.

<sup>144</sup> Katarzyna Murawska, 'An image of a mysterious wisdom won by toil: The Tower as Symbol of Thoughtful Isolation in English Art from Milton to Yeats', *Artibus et Historiae*, 3/5 (1982), 141.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>146</sup> Gray, *Survey of Contemporary Music*, 238.

in an unashamedly reactionary way, and is utterly pessimistic about the future of art and society'.<sup>147</sup> Furthermore, Davies compares van Dieren to the figure of the decadent hero, citing George Ridge Ross's *The Hero in French Literature* as 'a peculiar introvert – dreamy, listless, sophisticated, his face etched with the sad knowledge of life and the world. He is in short a cerebral hero *par excellence*. Unlike the dynamic hero the decadent hero is the ideal man of passivity and inactivity'.<sup>148</sup> – hence, perhaps, the campaigns of Heseltine, Gray and Sorabji. Murawska explains that, although the image of the tower as a symbol of isolationism extends into early Christian iconography, 'the tower as a secure place of shelter for a disaffected misanthropist does not appear until the end of the eighteenth century when it has decidedly secular characteristics'.<sup>149</sup>

Not only is the tower a retreat for the misanthropic, it also has a notable attachment to the concept of genius neglected. Anna G. Piotrowska writes that the 'splendid isolation' of tower-dwelling entailed a 'lack of contact with the public, and the lack of appreciation often connected with it' and, quoting M. Mozna-Stankiewicz, 'one of the leitmotifs connected with the reflection on the reception of the genius's works was the belief that his greatness was usually underestimated by his contemporaries'.<sup>150</sup> Piotrowska quotes Anton Webern: 'It's always the same; mediocrities are over-valued and great men are rejected'; and Hindemith, who holds that this neglect has always attended true genius: 'The great geniuses lived and died unrecognised [...]. The creator of the surviving and significant works may not be recognized in his own time'.<sup>151</sup> Finally, Piotrowska cites Roberto Gerhard, who wrote that a composer 'not knowing for whom he writes, not being able to pretend to please anybody in particular, he has decided, rightly or wrongly, to please himself. One can only see too clearly how this gradual loosening of his social attachments favours the composer's emancipation from every kind of traditional conventions'.<sup>152</sup> This last thought bears significantly on the isolationist and *sui generis* characteristic of the genius ascribed to van Dieren by his followers. Storr writes that: 'People often express the idea that they are most themselves when they are alone; and creative artists especially may believe that it is in the ivory tower of the solitary expression of their art that their

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<sup>147</sup> Davies, 'Bernard van Dieren', 678.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Murawska, 'An image of a mysterious wisdom won by toil', 143.

<sup>150</sup> Anna G. Piotrowska, 'Modernist Composers and the Concept of Genius', *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 38/2 (December 2007), 235.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

innermost being finds its completion. They forget that art is communication, and that, implicitly or explicitly, the work which they produce in solitude is aimed at somebody'.<sup>153</sup>

In this way isolationism leads to that crypticism and 'baffling originality' critics of Bernard van Dieren charged him with. That van Dieren actively encouraged Sorabji to maintain such an ex-centric position is in no way insignificant; that Sorabji construed van Dieren's recommendation in these terms as an injunction to take up residence in a symbolic tower of granite draws upon a rich history of reclusiveness associated with neglected genius; that Sorabji remained for the time being in a terraced London flat<sup>155</sup> matters not: as Murawska explains, by the twentieth century, the image of the tower 'loses its physical dimensions and exists in an idealized space as a wholly sublime concept'.<sup>156</sup>

It was perhaps necessary for Sorabji to seek voluntary isolation in the sublime concept of his Tower of Granite in order to compose in defiance of an indifferent, even hostile, world he had spent his career as *persona ingratisissima* railing against. But the foundations of his fortress were built on his criticism. By romanticising the figure of the outsider artist in his eccentric counter-canon of neglected works and obscure composers, Sorabji was insulating his own output and marginal position against what seemed to be an inevitably unfavourable reception. This was not least because he assimilated those aspects of his favourite composers' works which saw them neglected (the occultic obscurantism of Busoni, the colossalism of Mahler and Reger, the intricate line drawing of middle-period Szymanowski) into the fabric of his own music. The failure of these composers to be positively appreciated was, in Sorabji's view, a damning indictment of a culture in the latter stages of irremediable decline and degeneration, its concertgoers an undeniable symptom. He makes this position known from the outset of his published writings, as reflected in the epigraphs chosen by Sorabji to greet the reader of his two books. Sorabji's truculence towards the masses is exhibited in the *Entête* heading the essays comprising *Mi contra fa*. Here Sorabji reproduces a *Schadenfreudig* extract from Norman Douglas's *Alone*:

Consider well your neighbour, what an imbecile he is. Then ask yourself whether it be worth while paying any attention to what he thinks of you. . . . Were the day twice as long as it is, a man might find it diverting to probe down into that unsatisfactory fellow-creature

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<sup>153</sup> Storr, *The Integrity of the Personality* [1960] quoted in *Solitude*, 147.

<sup>155</sup> 175 Clarence Gate Gardens, London, NW1 6AR.

<sup>156</sup> Murawska, 'An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil', 159.

and try to reach some common root of feeling other than those physiological needs which we share with every beast of earth. Diverting; hardly profitable. It would be like looking for a flea in a haystack or a joke in the Bible – they can perhaps be found; at the expense of how much trouble!

Therefore the sage will go his way, prepared to find himself growing ever more and more out of sympathy with vulgar trends of opinion, for such is the inevitable development of thoughtful and self-respecting minds. He scorns to make proselytes among his fellows: they are not worth it. He has better things to do. While others nurse their grief he nurses his joy. He endeavours to find himself at no matter what cost, and to be true to that self when found, a worthy occupation for a lifetime.<sup>157</sup>

Prefacing the first collection of essays, Sorabji takes as his inspiration the following lines from the third book of Milton's *Paradise Regain'd*:

And what the people but a herd confused,  
A miscellaneous rabble who extol  
Things vulgar, and, well weighed, scarce worth the praise?  
They praise and they admire they know not what  
And know not whom, but as one leads the other;  
And what delight to be by such extolled,  
To live upon their tongues and be their talk,  
Of whom to be dispraised were no small praise?<sup>158</sup>

This last line – a kind of contrarian's calling card – finds perfect expression in the forbidding dedication inscribed in the score of *Opus clavicembalisticum*:

**To the everlasting glory of those Few  
MEN –  
Blessed and sanctified in the Curses and Execrations  
of those MANY –  
Whose Praise is Eternal Damnation.**

Sorabji, *persona ingratisissima* did not wish to be praised by the many: he welcomed his own neglect.

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<sup>157</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 11.

<sup>158</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music*, 15.



**Envoi**

***The Scottish Connection***

**or**

**Kairos in Glasgow**





You know these Londoners are a foul crowd after your nice Glasgow people – brutal callous beasts in looks hog-like in manners, swinish and soulless – so below beasts – that it is an insult to the animal creation to compare them with them.

SORABJI to Erik Chisholm (undated letter)<sup>1</sup>

For a critic who spent his career denigrating the musical life of England and what he saw to be the corrupt culture of London, it was perhaps only natural that as a composer-pianist Sorabji was more at ease playing his own works elsewhere. Where else, then, should Sorabji have preferred to perform than Glasgow? Under any other circumstance it would seem an unusual destination for a musician already situated in London, the capital city where all sensibly aspiring composers and performers hoped to be heard and acclaimed, but Sorabji's case was different: we should not overlook the simple fact of Sorabji's border crossing, for the 'frontier between England and Scotland', wrote Sorabji, was 'a matter of psychological and spiritual reality'.<sup>2</sup>

The Celtic fringe was the internal exotic, a nation ex-centric to the Anglocentricity of the United Kingdom. Alan Riach writes that, in post-Union Britain 'Anglocentrism continued to be normal for the English' whereas the 1707 Treaty of Union had "'decentred" all Scots'; while 'the political and economic centre of the United Kingdom was located in London and in England [...] Scotland and the Scots were "eccentric" to it'. Riach continues: 'Those Scots eccentric in the context of such constitutionally legitimated eccentricity were liable to be eccentric in a more radical way than their English counterparts'.<sup>3</sup> In this eccentricity there was, moreover, something uncanny about Scotland. As Nicholas Royle explains:

The 'uncanny' comes from Scotland, from that "auld country" that has so often been represented as "beyond the borders", liminal, an English foreign body. The 'uncanny' comes out of a language which is neither purely English (as if there could be such a thing) nor foreign. The poetic roots of the modern sense of this word in Scots present a vignette of the uncanny: uncertainties *at the origin* concerning colonization and the foreign body,

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<sup>1</sup> In John Purser, *Erik Chisholm, Scottish Modernist 1904-65: Chasing a Restless Muse* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2009), 62.

<sup>2</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: Porcupine Press, 1947), 217.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Riach, 'Survival Arts' in Hugh MacDiarmid (ed. Alan Riach), *Scottish Eccentrics* [1936] (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 322. [321-36]

and a mixing of what is at once old and long-familiar with what is strangely ‘fresh’ and new [...].<sup>4</sup>

These might well serve to account for the ‘psychological and spiritual’ threshold Sorabji perceived as separating England from Scotland. But the more obvious reason for Sorabji’s attraction to Scotland was that he had established a closely-knit network of support in the personages of Hugh MacDiarmid (the literary pseudonym for Christopher Murray Grieve), Francis George Scott and Erik Chisholm.

MacDiarmid – author, happily enough, of such works as *Scottish Eccentrics* (1936) and *The Uncanny Scot* (1972) – was instrumental in seeing *Around Music* through publication.<sup>5</sup> He became the dedicatee of Sorabji’s *Opus clavicembalisticum* and, later, the *Fantasiettina sul nome illustre dell’egregio poeta Christopher Grieve ossia Hugh M’Diarmid* (1961). A key figure in the nationalist Scottish Renaissance, MacDiarmid declared his pastime as ‘Anglophobia’,<sup>6</sup> his contrarian objective being ‘to find out what the English do and do the opposite’.<sup>7</sup> Both Sorabji and MacDiarmid were maximalists of different sorts, the one in music the other in literature. ‘No ambition, it seems, can be too gigantic for him’, Norman MacCaig writes of MacDiarmid – ‘his motto might well be “Excess is not enough”’.<sup>8</sup> In MacDiarmid’s own words: ‘My job, as I see it, has never been to lay a tit’s egg, but to erupt like a volcano, emitting not only flame but a lot of rubbish’.<sup>9</sup> In his memoirs, *The Company I’ve Kept*, MacDiarmid described Sorabji as ‘a great composer, a great critic, and a prince among men’:

I estimate him extremely highly for the simple reason that he stands in such radical opposition to the whole tendency of the age, where you’ve got the emphasis on mass man, on the desirability of being comprehensible to the mob and so on. There’s nothing like that about Sorabji, and that’s the virtue of the man’.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Marc-André Roberge, *Opus Sorabjiano: The Life and Works of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji*, Version 1.10 (Quebec, Canada: 2014), 185.

<sup>6</sup> Adam and Charles Black (eds.), subject entry: ‘Grieve, Christopher Murray’ in ‘Who Was Who’, Vol. VII (1971-80) (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1981), 319.

<sup>7</sup> Norman MacCaig, ‘A Note on the Author’ in Hugh MacDiarmid (ed. Alan Riach), *Scottish Eccentrics* [1972] (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993) ix.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid [C. M. Grieve], *The Company I’ve Kept* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1966), 70, 42-3.

MacDiarmid valued the eccentric, and issued a plea for greater eccentricity in the arts not dissimilar to that of Heseltine's as read by Sorabji at the outset of his formative period in 1913:

It will be ever increasingly necessary to find  
In the interests of all mankind  
Men capable of rejecting all that all other men  
Think, as a stone remains  
Essential to the world, inseparable from it,  
And rejects all other life yet.  
Great work cannot be combined with surrender to the crowd.<sup>11</sup>

In his memoirs, MacDiarmid recalls how he encouraged Sorabji 'to go for bigger and bigger forms and not in any way play down to the masses. He has kept on doing that'.<sup>12</sup>

F. G. Scott – another member of the company MacDiarmid kept – was a minor, which is to say neglected, composer whom Sorabji would devote a chapter to in *Mi contra fa*. Here Sorabji writes that 'the indifference of his own countrymen, wounding and unjust though it may be, is a thousand times preferable to the bleatings and gibberings of approval from the "musical" gang here [needless to say, Sorabji is referring to London and/or England]'. Sorabji continues: 'This must, of course, not be taken to imply that Scott has no recognition among his fellow-countrymen. He has, and it is a select and highly cultivated if small chorus, very much a *corps d'élite*'.<sup>13</sup> Again, Sorabji makes a claim which elevates the neglect of a composer by way of an appeal to a superior minority interest. R. Crombie Saunders' review of *Mi contra fa* for the magazine *Scottish Art and Letters* wonders what factors lay behind the association between Sorabji and these two Scotsmen:

There is clearly some principle which unites the sympathies of such independents as Hugh MacDiarmid and Francis George Scott in Scotland, Kaikhosru Sorabji in London. The mutual respect felt and expressed by such artists is more than that which is the familiar and often suspect characteristics of self-styled groups. It is more than friendship that has so often brought this lively trio to the counter attack when one of them was under fire; and while one can understand the solidarity between MacDiarmid and Sorabji, who are more united by their respect for the colossal than disunited by their political differences, it is not

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>13</sup> Sorabji, *Mi contra fa*, 222-3.

so apparent why a superb song-writer and miniaturist like Scott should evoke the enthusiasm of the composer of the ‘Opus Clavicembalisticum’.

Partly it may be that both composers are rebels in an unconventional direction. Scott is frankly sceptical about the more radical aspects of modern music and equally so of the conventional radicalism of modern life. Sorabji is a confirmed ivory [*sic*] tower dweller, with the utmost contempt for the ignorant mob that mills round his barricaded door.

Both are unpopular positions, leading direct to the wilderness.<sup>14</sup>

Their neglect was in this sense predetermined. On the same point, Wilfrid Mellers in his review of *Mi contra fa* asks ‘whether belief in oneself and one’s friends, carried to such extremes, is not in itself a kind of cliquedom’. C. M. Grieve and F. G. Scott are ‘names that crop up so repeatedly in these pages’, but ‘one does not admire them because they affect to be proud that no one admires them, a childish attitude which has an obvious advantage for men of smaller calibre. One admires them for what they have accomplished in verse and prose. Or at least one would admire Mr. Sorabji had he not, from his Granite Tower, forbidden us to do so’.<sup>15</sup>

Then there was Erik ‘MacBartók’ Chisholm, remembered by Ronald Stevenson as ‘a very unusual, eccentric and imaginative’ musician; ‘He and Sorabji were very great friends. I think now that he exaggerated Sorabji’s importance’.<sup>16</sup> As Sorabji wrote from his Granite Tower in Corfe, Chisholm was ‘preaching the gospel according to Kakodaemon Corfiensis wherever he goes [...] declaiming aloud about my supreme genius . . . as if I fucking well didn’t know that MYSELF . . . Bless me!’<sup>17</sup> All the evidence suggest Sorabji fell deeply, painfully in love with Chisholm; but Chisholm did not reciprocate – it all seemed to be a messy affair.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Chisholm maintained a significant degree of respect for Sorabji, and invited him to perform at his Glasgow-based Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music. But this was not, in the main, a festival of “modernism”. Sorabji would count himself in good company among other outsider figures drawn to the work of the Society, with Honorary Vice-Presidents including Nicolas

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<sup>14</sup> Crombie Saunders, ‘Diabolus in Musica. MI CONTRA FA: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician, by K. S. Sorabji’, *Scottish Art and Letters* (n.d.), 56.

<sup>15</sup> Wilfrid Mellers, ‘Review of Books: *Mi contra Fa: the Immoralizings of a Machiavellian Musician*. By Kaikhosru Sorabji’, *Music and Letters*, 29/2 (April 1948), 204-5.

<sup>16</sup> Chris Walton and Ronald Stevenson, ‘Composer in Interview: Ronald Stevenson: A Scot in ‘Emergent Africa’, *Tempo*, 57/225 (July 2003), 29. [23-31].

<sup>17</sup> Sorabji to Frank Holliday in 1957 in Roberge, *Opus Sorabjianum*, 165.

<sup>18</sup> See Purser, *Chasing a Restless Muse*, 59-67 and Roberge, *Opus Sorabjianum*, 162-4.

Medtner, van Dieren and Sorabji's long-term correspondent Philip Heseltine in his admittedly less amiable guise as Peter Warlock. The concert programmes billed a significant number of composers, works and performers populating Sorabji's counter-canon, including Szymanowski, Medtner, van Dieren (all three of whom travelled to Glasgow to perform their own works or, in the case of the last named, listen to them performed), Delius, Busoni (played by Egon Petri), Sibelius, Florent Schmitt and Chisholm's own Mahler arrangements. Chisholm was also interested in Alkan, and would arrange Alkan's Op. 39 Etudes for performance (in 1937, again in Glasgow) for a number of different ensembles.<sup>19</sup> Chisholm recognised in Sorabji another Alkan, a negative-romantic isolationist. As Chisholm wrote in a lecture: 'Sorabji is an extreme case of an anti-social composer, in his affluence, entrenched in his ivory [*sic*] tower, he writes just what he wants to write, he writes for himself alone, utterly indifferent to performance, public appreciation, or publishers: his creative work his is own private affair'.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, John Purser notes that Sorabji had suffered much humiliation 'at the hands of racist and social snobs in England and perhaps found in the aficionados of the Active Society [...] an acceptance and a respect which had nothing to do with the colour of his skin or hair and which evoked in him a particularly effusive gratitude'.<sup>21</sup> The stage was thus set for Sorabji to perform his own works. As Sorabji wrote to *The Musical Times* of the Society and of Chisholm:

The remarkable comprehensive nature of the scheme, its complete freedom from the revolting party spirit and clique-mongering that are so distressingly familiar in anything of the kind with which we of London are familiar, at once leapt to the observant eye.

And when I add that this admirable and Jihad-inspired young man is deliberately braving the odium, and flouting deeply-rooted prejudices in devoting three entire programmes to my own work, the astonishing uniqueness of the phenomenon becomes even more startlingly apparent.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Alkan Society, *Bulletin* 77 (December 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Erik Chisholm, Second Sorabji Lecture (n.d., unpublished). Courtesy of the Sorabji Archive ([www.sorabji-archive.co.uk](http://www.sorabji-archive.co.uk)).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Sorabji, 'Concerts of Contemporary Music at Glasgow', *The Musical Times*, 71/1051 (1 September 1930), 837.

Sorabji had already played his Fourth Sonata at the Society (in advance of which he was billed ‘THE GREATEST MUSICAL ENIGMA OF ALL TIME’<sup>23</sup>). He was yet to perform *Opus clavicembalisticum* on 1 December 1930, the Nocturne *Jāmī* on 29 April 1931 and the Second Toccata on 16 December 1936.

Sorabji’s critical preoccupation with neglected works and obscure composers as well as his attachment to Scotland as the eccentric, uncanny other to England contributed to the ideal conditions for his own reception. This proposition can be understood in terms of *Kairos*, ‘a passing instant when an opening appears which must be driven through with force if success is to be achieved’.<sup>24</sup> Kathleen Coessens, in her 2009 article on ‘Musical Performance and “Kairos”: Exploring the Time and Space of Artistic Resonance’ adds the dimension of cultural space to the temporal domain of *Kairos*, and highlights the importance of the semiosphere to this expansion of the concept as the ‘realm of context in which interconnected systems of signs, symbols, codes and significations permit its members to communicate with others, to express themselves’.<sup>25</sup> Sorabji’s performances at Chisholm’s Active Society can thus be understood to have, in a sense, reconciled the feelings of outsidership Sorabji projected through his critical writings: his belief in his anatopic and anachronistic standing – that he was in the world but not of it, as he might have said – found a positive synthesis on the stage of Stevenson Hall in Glasgow. In this way, positive expression for a mostly negative man became positive. Alistair Hinton explains that Sorabji ‘felt as warmly disposed to Scottish audiences as the particular Scottish audience that had received him so favourably felt towards him’. Sorabji told Hinton that they were ‘the most intelligent listeners I have ever encountered en masse’ and went on to declare that he had felt “‘less uncomfortable” performing his music at ASPCM concerts than in any other circumstances’.<sup>26</sup>

To despatch, here is Diana Chisholm’s recollection of Sorabji performing *Opus clavicembalisticum*, taken from the typescript of Erik Chisholm’s unpublished second lecture on Sorabji.<sup>27</sup> It will not pass unnoticed that her description of the ‘terrifying’ nature of the music, of Busoni’s *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* seemingly child’s play next to its

<sup>23</sup> Purser, *Chasing a Restless Muse*, 59.

<sup>24</sup> E. C. White, quoted in Kathleen Coessens, ‘Musical Performance and “Kairos”: Exploring the Time and Space of Artistic Resonance’, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 40/2 (December 2009), 271. [269-81]

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>26</sup> Alistair Hinton, ‘Kaikhosru Sorabji and Erik Chisholm’, *Jagger Journal*, 10 (1989/1990), 24.

<sup>27</sup> In Chisholm, Second Sorabji Lecture.

progeny, the ‘floods of notes’, the sweat, misery, twiddling fingers, mile-long fugues, fear and frustration, how ‘it went on and on’. . . These are all aspect of the neglect in the works of his counter-canon Sorabji seems to have welcomed for himself in his *Opus*:

The music, so unlike anything I had ever heard before was literally terrifying. Busoni’s *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* – played at an earlier concert by the great Dutch pianist Egon Petri – in Schönbergian idiom was the nearest approach I could think of to this fantastic opus, though believe me, the Busoni piece would have been as sweet in my ears as Mendelssohn’s ‘Spring Song’ if I had heard it that night. Floods of notes, cascades of arpeggios, fugal subjects a mile long, yet all conjuring up the most fantastic pictures in my mind, but there was nothing I could understand.

After about ten minutes of this, I found myself sitting twisting my fingers in sheer misery [...] it went on and on. The whole audience was spellbound. Never have I known such absorbed listening [...] the performance had been in progress for two hours and five minutes (never have I looked at my watch so assiduously) [...]. The old proverb ‘It is always darkest before the dawn’ was definitely proved to me on that memorable evening.[...] a strange sense of fear and frustration; in some ways I think it must have been the same sensation you would expect to feel if a snake had you hypnotised and you were completely unable to break the spell.[...] at last with one mighty cataclysmic sweep Sorabji finished playing his first and only performance of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*. There was an utter stillness in the hall and then a tremendous applause broke out.<sup>28</sup>

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On Tuesday 10 March, 1936 at 8:30 pm, the little-known English pianist John Tobin was to take a seat at the piano in London’s Cowdray Hall and play the first performance in England of Sorabji’s *Opus clavicembalisticum* (Part I). The audience included such English composers as Edmund Rubbra, Alan Rawsthorne and Alan Bush as well as Ralph Vaughan Williams. The influential critics and writers on music, Ernest Newman, William McNaught, Edward Evans, Clinton Gray-Fisk and A. H. Fox-Strangways also witnessed the premiere. Frank Howes – the first major chronicler of the English Musical Renaissance – was also in attendance (although he turned up late).<sup>29</sup> Sorabji himself always denied being present (‘I

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> A list of certain audience members present made by Felix Aprahamian. Courtesy of the Sorabji Archive ([www.sorabji-archive.co.uk](http://www.sorabji-archive.co.uk)).

refused to be associated with the occasion or to endorse it by being present’),<sup>30</sup> although there is new evidence suggesting that he *was* in fact there in the company of Mervyn Vicars.<sup>31</sup> Whichever opinion was taken, the performance was an unmitigated disaster: for Sorabji’s few supporters, Tobin’s inadequate technique was to blame (it took him over twice as long to perform the *pars prima* of the composition); for his many detractors, it was the music itself which was unbearable. *The Times* reported that, ‘It just goes on. And on... It was all intelligible in the way that Schönberg and Bantu dialects are not intelligible to the ordinary Londoner... Yet it was not atonal. It was continual, and that is all that can be said about it’.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Ernest Newman noted ‘the prevailing monotony of the music and the fatigue induced in the audience’<sup>33</sup> and ‘E.R.’ of *The Musical Times* wrote that ‘long before the end of the performance those of the audience whose limbs and thought were not drugged into inactivity by the Babel of sounds escaped from the hall’.<sup>34</sup> A certain ‘J.A.W.’ (Jack Alan Westrup?) was most scathing in his review:

In an introductory discourse [Tobin] referred with enthusiasm to the composer’s contrapuntal ingenuity and gave a reasoned explanation of some of his harmonic devices. What he omitted to mention was the cruel, unutterable, insupportable tedium of this monument of desiccation. The children of Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness, but they reached the Promised Land at last. From the wilderness of Mr Sorabji’s imagination there seems to be no escape.

Parts of this work are said to be unplayable. That is a small matter. The more serious question arose whether it is not a pity that any of it can be played at all. Never did shipwrecked mariners greet a rescuing bark more gladly than last night’s audience observed the turning of the final page.<sup>35</sup>

In comparison with his relative success in Glasgow – the *Kakakairos* to his *Kairos* in Scotland – the catastrophic London reception of *Opus clavicembalisticum* greatly contributed to Sorabji’s disdain for the English musical scene, leading directly to his decision to impose a ban on the public performance of all his works without his express consent. He explained his decision for the self-imposed ban with an indirect reference to

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<sup>30</sup> Sorabji, ‘A Disclaimer’ in *The Musical Times*, January 1937, 60.

<sup>31</sup> Sean V. Owen, *Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji: an Oral Biography* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Southampton, 2008), 229.

<sup>32</sup> Anon., [no title], *The Times* (13 March 1936), 12.

<sup>33</sup> Ernest Newman, [no title], *Sunday Times*, 15 March 1936, 7.

<sup>34</sup> E.R., [no title], *The Musical Times*, April 1936, 369.

<sup>35</sup> Unidentified source.



Tobin's failed attempts: 'Why do I neither seek nor encourage performance of my works? Because they are neither intended for it, nor suitable for it under present, or indeed any foreseeable conditions: no performance at all is vastly preferable to an obscene travesty'.<sup>36</sup> Again, the conditions for adequate performance and reception were not right: his work would have to remain neglected in obscurity until such fitting time came round.

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in MacDiarmid, *The Company I've Kept*, 39.



## Conclusion

### **Sorabji and the (very) long nineteenth century**

There must be many music-lovers who, though knowing his name, have never heard any of Mr. Kaikhosru Sorabji's music. They may, on the other hand, have read his stimulating book, 'Mi contra fa', and in that case they will know that his musical opinions differ not only from those of the majority but from those of all the many minorities which Music comprehends in her ample bosom; and that they are held with extreme and exclusive violence.

'EDITOR'S NOTES' (1954)<sup>37</sup>

I should be that thrilled to know just one of 'all' those minorities (as well as majorities) from whom your charmingly rhapsodical and 'fantaisiste' note says my opinions differ, for they seem to me depressingly like those of quite a lot of people. Thus, I'm a fanatical Mahlerite, Regerite, Alkanite, Busoni-ite and have been for twenty years before it became the fashion.

SORABJI, 'Letter to the Editor' (1954)<sup>38</sup>

Exactly thirty years after his article 'On Neglected Works' appeared, and in the same publication, Sorabji declared that some of the key figures in his counter-canon had entered the mainstream: Mahler, Reger, Alkan and Busoni had, in Sorabji's view, become fashionable. While Mahler's success was a sure thing after the Second World War, the same cannot be said for the other three composers Sorabji lists. Nevertheless, the point remains that Sorabji felt that some of the key works in his canon had become shared among both music's majorities and minorities – no longer did they belong to an exclusive 'ultra-microscopic minority'. A main theme running throughout Sorabji's corpus of maligned works is the assertion that those he most cherished were some of the most unpopular – hence the much advertised neglect. Without this, Sorabji's counter-canon would lose its critical impact; Sorabji's critical *persona ingratisissima* would become a spent force.

A number of key terms have appeared as particularly apt in discussing the qualities shared among the numbers in Sorabji's canon of neglected works: 'negative romanticism' (Arnold Whittall), 'negative music' (Wilfrid Mellers), 'late style' (Edward Said), 'neo-romanticism' (Carl Dahlhaus) and 'maximalism' (Richard Taruskin) have all in some way contributed to an understanding of the nature of Sorabji's eccentric critical canon. Two further terms present themselves which, while they might not exactly situate Sorabji's

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<sup>37</sup> The Editor, 'Editor's Notes', *The Musical Times*, 95/1331 (January 1954), 12.

<sup>38</sup> Sorabji, 'Letter to the Editor', *The Musical Times* 95/1332 (February 1954), 90.

criticism within the musicological mainstream, could at the very least potentially lift his writings out of obscurity. In *Soundings*, Glenn Watkins describes a superannuated form of romanticism which persisted in small pockets of the twentieth-century canon, seemingly oblivious to the revolutions of modernism. However, ‘the degree to which the Romantic Agony lingered on is seldom dwelt on in the writing of the history of twentieth-century music’. By considering Sorabji’s counter-canon as a coherent body of music sharing many (mainly maximal) traits, we might be able to trace that ‘limited number of works’ which ‘tend to stand out as emblematic of the more general crisis that seemed to suggest the final overthrow of the Romantic Age’.<sup>39</sup> Walter Frisch writes that ‘Romanticism is seen to be coextensive with the nineteenth century, modernism with the twentieth’; the in-between stage – that fin-de-siècle crisis of history – is all too often treated merely as ‘transitional’, appearing under the rubrics of, for example, the ‘Twilight of Romanticism’ or the ‘Dawn of Modernism’.<sup>40</sup> Frisch describes an ‘ambivalent modernism’ which is used by Charles Edward McGuire to refer to ‘the works of those artists and composers who were poised on the tightrope stretching between Romanticism and Modernism’.<sup>41</sup> This perhaps best describes the majority of those whom Sorabji champions in his critical writings; yearning anachronistically for the romantic status quo ante in modern times, Sorabji’s attachment to such ‘lingering romantics’ or ‘ambivalent modernists’ (more like the ‘ultra-modernists’ of his early period; definitely not “modernists” ‘in the inverted commas sense’) poses a challenge (a minor, marginal one at that but a challenge nonetheless) to the orthodox historiography of twentieth-century music.

A point made in Part II in regard to the *kolossal* bears repeating here: in his *History of Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, Richard Taruskin could have done better than to enlist Havergal Brian as the exemplar of maximalist limit testing; Sorabji would have served his purpose far more effectively. The link between Sorabji’s critical and compositional aesthetic has only been touched upon in this thesis (it is left to the better-equipped analyst to deal with the forbidding fabric of Sorabji’s music). Nevertheless, the case studies presented in these pages mount to suggest that Sorabji assimilated those aspects which directed the composers and works in his canon away from the course of the

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<sup>39</sup> Glenn Watkins, *Soundings: Music in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 170.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Frisch, *German Modernism: Music and the Arts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>41</sup> Edward McGuire, ‘Edward Elgar: “Modern” or “Modernist”? Constructions of an Aesthetic Identity in the British Music Press, 1895-1934’, *The Musical Quarterly*, 91 (1-2) (2008), 11.

historical mainstream and, from there, into a state of neglect and obscurity. From this angle, a study of some of Sorabji's larger works (the *Messa alta Sinfonica* springs immediately to mind) would suggest that he maximalised late-nineteenth century forms well into the twentieth century. As a critic, his curation of a counter-canon of neglected works served to validate his eccentric enterprise as a composer.



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