

## *Producing Evidence for the Beatification of a Composer: Sorabji's Deification of Busoni<sup>1</sup>*

BY

MARC-ANDRÉ ROBERGE

There has been in recent years an upsurge of interest in the music of a number of nineteenth and twentieth-century composer-pianists who have long been considered outsiders in European music history, such as Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813–88), Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924), Leopold Godowsky (1870–1938) and Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892–1988). Their status as outsiders resulted mainly from the length and complexity of several of their works and from the lack of clear boundaries between original composition and transcription, in which they had a marked interest. Their works, even though they still appear but rarely on concert programmes, are now performed with increasing frequency. First editions or reprints of their music are issued with some regularity, as are books and articles; furthermore, several enterprising pianists are now recording interesting works and masterpieces long kept in the shadow for lack of suitable performers.

As I have shown elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> all these composers are part of an extensive "Busoni network", *i.e.* a group of composers and performers who can be linked in one or more ways to Busoni and, to a lesser extent, to Sorabji: they had studied with Busoni or with one of his pupils; they had performed works by Busoni or Sorabji; they had written about either composer; they had transcribed or edited one or more of their works; finally, they incorporated quotations from their works into their own compositions or used them as models. To this core group of (mostly English-speaking) composers could be added numerous editors, musicologists and writers (also mostly English-speaking) as well as friends and disciples of the composers of the network. It is fascinating to see how virtually anyone who is interested in the music of one figure of the network is also a champion of the music of the other composers. Indeed, it is to the existence of this network that we owe this renaissance of interest in a group of composers who were formerly relegated to the footnotes of history or not mentioned at all. As already mentioned, transcription plays a very important role in the creative activity and interests of these composers and performers. Homage, in the form of quotations or pastiche, is also a significant feature of their music.<sup>3</sup>

This article concentrates on the two central figures of the network and, more

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<sup>1</sup> I should like to thank Professor Paul Rapoport (McMaster University, Hamilton) and Mr. Alistair Hinton (Sorabji Archive, Bath), who read a preliminary version of this article and made many helpful suggestions. I am also indebted to Paul Cadrin (Université Laval, Québec) for help in deciphering Sorabji's handwriting.

<sup>2</sup> Marc-André Roberge, "The Busoni Network and the Art of Creative Transcription", *Canadian University Music Review*, no. 11/1 (1991): pp. 68–88.

<sup>3</sup> The following musicians, listed here in alphabetical order, are all part of the network, though with varying degrees of importance: Denis ApIvor, Kevin Bowyer, Winifred Burston, Bernard van Dieren, Percy Grainger, Carlo Grante, Michael Habermann, Marc-André Hamelin, Alistair Hinton, Gunnar Johansen, Geoffrey Douglas Madge, John Ogdon, Egon Petri, Alan Rawsthorne, Larry Sitsky, Yonty Solomon, Ronald Stevenson, Carlos Vasquez.

specifically, documents the peculiar nature of Sorabji's relationship to Busoni, which is characterized by such a boundless admiration as to suggest that Sorabji was producing documentation for the beatification of Busoni (some would probably say canonization). Sorabji may have appeared to be a crackpot—or at the very least a pretty odd figure—to several of the readers of his critical writings in *The New Age* and *The New English Weekly* for his constant championship of composers who were not recognized for their true worth, such as Alkan, Busoni, Mahler, Metner, Reger, Skryabin and Szymanowski. However, the status that these composers now enjoy proves him to have been right in repeatedly drawing his readers' attention to them.

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji has long been a shadowy figure in the history of European music. Data about his life and works have up to very recently been extremely sketchy and often marred by mistakes.<sup>4</sup> The most important contribution towards an understanding of his personality and music is a collective volume entitled *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, edited by Paul Rapoport of McMaster University (Hamilton, Ontario, Canada) and published in 1992, the centenary of the composer's birth.<sup>5</sup> Sorabji's music has always been in the background, since very little of it was available in print. Furthermore, the vastness and complexity of many of his works have made performances very rare. Indeed, works for solo piano are frequently written on four staves and feature virtuoso writing that leaves far behind the most advanced examples from the standard (and less standard) repertory and takes up hundreds of densely packed pages in score. Things dramatically improved in 1988 with the establishment in Bath of the Sorabji Music Archive (renamed Sorabji Archive in 1993), which was founded and is single-handedly operated by the Scottish composer Alistair Hinton (b. 1950), Sorabji's closest friend during the last fifteen years of his life and the sole heir to his works. The Archive has been making available bound photocopies of the composer's manuscripts and of out-of-print editions as well as of his writings.<sup>6</sup> This availability has prompted several enterprising musicians and musicologists to prepare computer-produced or calligraphed editions of previously unavailable works, which have led to an increasing number of performances and recordings. Various research tools meant to ease access to the large body of critical writing produced by Sorabji during his long career have also been prepared. Finally, building on the pioneer work laid out in Rapoport's book, the first biography of the composer—by the present writer—is currently in preparation.

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Sorabji may have first heard of Busoni, or heard Busoni himself or one of his works, during the regular London visits the Italian composer made, any time from about

<sup>4</sup> For an example of a recent, yet inaccurate, article in a well-known reference work, see "Kaikhosru Sorabji", in *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, 8th edn., rev. Nicolas Slonimsky (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), pp. 1746–47, in which it is said that Sorabji "took refuge far from the madding crowd in a castle he owned in England", whereas he lived in a house located in the village of Corfe Castle.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Rapoport, ed., *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Scolar Press, 1992), 512 pp. (see also the revised printing published in 1994). The book contains among other contributions a "complete provisional" chronological catalogue of Sorabji's compositions (pp. 109–75).

<sup>6</sup> About the Sorabji Archive, see Alistair Hinton, "The Sorabji Music Archive", in *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, pp. 486–87 (Appendix 3); and *idem*, "A Note on Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji and the Sorabji Archive", *Brio: Journal of the United Kingdom Branch of the International Association of Music Libraries, Archives and Documentation Centres*, 31, no. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1994): pp. 1–3.

1898 onwards; at that time, Sorabji had begun taking piano lessons from his mother and might have been taken to concerts. He may well have attended the first London performance of Busoni's Concerto for piano, orchestra and male chorus, BV 247, which was given on 8th June, 1910 by Mark Hambourg (1879–1960) and the New Symphony Orchestra conducted by the composer.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in 1930, in a review of a Busoni recital by Philip Levi, Sorabji wrote: "I have known it for well-nigh twenty years—the towering grandeur and massive magnificence of the conception are impressed on me more and more every time I play it through".<sup>8</sup> Before his first (and, as far as is known, only) meeting with Busoni in 1919, he may have encountered some of his important original works on at least three occasions: (1) *Berceuse élégiaque*, BV 252a, 5th June, 1912, Queen's Hall Orchestra, conducted by Busoni; (2) violin Concerto, BV 243, 24th September, 1913, Arthur Catterall, Queen's Hall Orchestra, conducted by Sir Henry Wood; and (3) *Sarabande et Cortège*, BV 282, 22nd November, 1919, Queen's Hall Orchestra, conducted by Busoni. Another indication of Sorabji's early awareness of Busoni is a passing mention in his first letter to Philip Heseltine, written in 1913.<sup>9</sup>

It is not known how extensive Sorabji's collection of music by Busoni really was. Apart from several transcriptions and editions of works by Bach, only the following original works were found in his library at his death: *An die Jugend*, BV 254; *Fantasia contrappuntistica*, BV 256b (version for two pianos); four of the six Sonatinas (between BV 257 and 284); *Tanzwalzer*, BV 288 (in Michael von Zadora's piano transcription); *Albumleaves*, BV 289; *Prélude et étude en arpèges*, BV 297; and *Klavierübung* (without number).<sup>10</sup> Sorabji must have had a much wider collection of Busoni scores since he was, as is shown by his writings, fully aware of his available works; furthermore, he often gave scores and books to friends. It is clear that he must have spent considerable time studying Busoni's music and writings. Since he did not have any formal training in music other than from a rather obscure Charles A. Trew (1854–1929), one may consider that Busoni, through his creative work, was his *magister in absentia*, to use an expression coined by Ronald Stevenson (himself a specialist on both Busoni and Sorabji) to refer to what Busoni meant to him.<sup>11</sup>

We know from a typewritten account by Sorabji that he met Busoni in mid-November, 1919 at the home of the dancer Maud Allan (1883–1956) in Regent's Park, where Busoni often stayed when he was in London.<sup>12</sup> The meeting must have taken place before 25th November, 1919, when Busoni conducted his own *Sarabande et Cortège*, BV 282, at Queen's Hall. A few months earlier, on 5th

<sup>7</sup> The work had received its first English performance at the Newcastle Festival on 22nd October, 1909 by Egon Petri and the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Busoni.

<sup>8</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Music: Busoni and Philip Levi: March 7", *The New Age*, 46, no. 20 (20th March, 1930): p. 237.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Sorabji to Philip Heseltine, 3rd October, 1913, British Library, Ms. add. 57963, p. 4. An edition of the correspondence between Sorabji and Heseltine will be found in Kenneth Derus, "Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine", in *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, pp. 195–255. The passage in which Busoni is mentioned is omitted in this edition.

<sup>10</sup> Communication from Alistair Hinton.

<sup>11</sup> See "Composer[']s Anthology: 3. Ronald Stevenson", *Recorded Sound*, nos. 42/43 (April–July, 1971): pp. 747–57; 749; see also Malcolm MacDonald, *Ronald Stevenson: A Musical Biography* (Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1989), pp. 19–29.

<sup>12</sup> Sorabji was himself living nearby at the time. He shared a flat with his mother at 175 Clarence Gate Gardens (between Gloucester Place and Baker Street, north of Marylebone Road).

August, 1919, Sorabji had completed his Sonata no. 1 for piano and wished to obtain a recommendation from the master. It is not known how and through whom the meeting was arranged. Sorabji's account reads as follows:

When I got to the "West Wing" in the outer circle of Regent's Park – to that part of a large house in which Maud Allan lived – I was shown into a very large overheated room – obviously Miss Allan's practice room – and in a few minutes he came in as quietly as a cat and shook hands with me with the courteous grace of manner impossible to the Northern Barbarians. He drew out the manuscript of the First Sonata and said "I want you to play me this" . . . I was APPALLED. I said "Signor Maestro, this is terrible . . . I am no pianist . . . and to ask me to play in front of YOU . . . besides, I am in the third day of a long fast". "Never mind, do what you can; music is, after all, to be heard, and I cannot play it". Well, I sat down and got through it, trembling and pouring with sweat. When I had finished he said "I could not have played it better . . . what would you like me to do?". I said "Give me a letter which will help me to get it published". "I will do that", he said. But do you say that this music was written in this country? . . . THIS country?", he repeated, 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 forest". I of course took good care to tell him that there was nothing, but *nothing* English about me. He smiled, and when I said I might give him the manuscript (I had a copy), he said he would very much appreciate it, and would I please write on it "given to Signor Busoni" . . . which of course I did. I walked away back to the flat in a sort of ague, trembling from head to foot. That same afternoon I had been invited to see dear Blanche Marchesi (I was with Busoni in the morning) and when she knew I was fasting and wouldn't break my fast until six o'clock (the canonical hour, you know), she wouldn't let me out of the house until she had seen me eat something! . . .<sup>13</sup>

Busoni gave Sorabji the letter he had requested but unfortunately did not date it in full. He wrote the letter in French, a language that both he and Sorabji handled quite well.<sup>14</sup> It is reproduced here in English translation:

Mr. Kaikhusru (*sic*) Sorabji had the kindness to play for me at the piano a *Sonata* he composed. Judging from a first impression—quite surprising at that—Mr. Sorabji's talent finds itself at home amid a kind of profusely ornamental harmonic complexity that seems to come easily and naturally to him. The freedom inherent to his style still appears at this time disorganised and exuberant. His music, though consciously written, is unconscious of its own irregular features, especially as regards proportions; in disregarding tradition it crosses a threshold that is no longer European, producing a quasi-exotic kind of vegetation (not in the sense of our "charming" Oriental dances, however!).

<sup>13</sup> "Meeting with Busoni", undated; typescript (1 p.) by Sorabji and corrected transcription (eliminating the myriad typing mistakes) by Alistair Hinton; reproduced by kind permission of the Sorabji Archive. Also reproduced in the liner notes to the recording of Sonata no. 1 by Marc-André Hamelin, released in 1990 (Altarus AIR-CD-9050). Sorabji's account was written down in the '70s for Alistair Hinton. The typescript continues with an apparently unrelated paragraph, which, Sorabji said to Hinton, referred to Stravinsky: "A certain minimaster of our times has said that one must be stingy with music . . . He certainly is . . . But do you think that exhortations for chastity by a eunuch are all that convincing? . . . What about the tailless fox?".

<sup>14</sup> This is corroborated by a postcard and a letter Sorabji wrote in French to Philip Heseltine on 17th and 23rd March, 1916 (these two items are not reproduced in Derus's edition). Furthermore, Sorabji had set to music several texts in French during the preceding four years.

Overall: a totally new kind of young talent that gives one pause and makes one feel hopeful . . .<sup>15</sup>

As part of a controversy caused by the critic Ernest Newman's failure to review scores by Sorabji and van Dieren sent by Philip Heseltine, Sorabji wrote a letter to the *Sunday Times* on 18th May, 1920. Since the newspaper did not publish the letter, Heseltine decided to reproduce it in *The Sackbut*, together with the original Busoni letter. Sorabji's open letter concludes with a reference to his meeting with Busoni, which he appears to have embellished slightly to suit his purpose:

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 he expresses himself greatly interested in what I had played him, describing at some length the qualities in my work that had seized his attention.<sup>16</sup>

On 25th November, 1919 (hence the latest date on which the meeting can have taken place), Busoni, in a letter to his wife written from London, did put things a little more bluntly yet let shine through a certain attraction to Sorabji's music:

Kaikhusru [sic] Sorabji turns out to be an Indian, quite young. I gave him a letter of introduction for which he asked me. A fine, unusual person, in spite of his ugly music. A primeval forest with many weeds and briars, but strange and voluptuous.<sup>17</sup>

A few days later, in a letter to his disciple Philipp Jarnach, Busoni wrote: "New composers: Bernard van Dieren, Kaikhosru Sorabji (Indian)".<sup>18</sup> About a month later, in a letter to Emil Hertzka, the owner of the Vienna publishing firm Universal Edition, he added the following after saying that his London visit had brought the dedication of a work by Bernard van Dieren: "At the same time I became the dedicatee of a piano sonata (from the pen of a 20-year-old Indian, Kahushru Sorobdji [sic]) with tropical ornamentation, luxuriant foliage, absorbing".<sup>19</sup> It is obvious that a towering figure like Busoni must have been harassed by countless young composers in search of a recommendation. Even though he could not remember the spelling of Sorabji's name (which is curious, since he could speak and write several languages), he was nevertheless struck enough by his musical language to mention him at least twice in his correspondence.

<sup>15</sup> Ferruccio Busoni, letter of recommendation to Sorabji, London, November, 1919, 1 p.; translated by Marc-André Hamelin in the liner notes to his recording of Sorabji's Sonata no. 1 on Altarus AIR-CD-9050 (reproduced by kind permission of the translator). For a more literal translation, see Derus, "Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine", in *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, p. 254. Another translation is Busoni, *Selected Letters*, trans. and ed. Antony Beaumont (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1987), p. 300n3 (English translation).

<sup>16</sup> "Ille Reporter", *The Sackbut*, 1, no. 2 (June, 1920): pp. 53–56; 56. The controversy is dealt with in Derus, "Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine", in *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, pp. 252–54 (as part of an appendix entitled "Newman and Busoni").

<sup>17</sup> Busoni, *Briefe an seine Frau*, ed. Friedrich Schnapp (Erlenbach-Zürich and Leipzig: Rotapfel-Verlag, 1935), trans. Rosamond Ley as *Letters to His Wife* (London: Edward Arnold, 1938; repr. edn., New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), p. 289.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Busoni to Philipp Jarnach, London, 1st December, 1919, in Busoni, *Selected Letters*, p. 300 (no. 281).

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Busoni to Emil Hertzka, Zürich, 5th January, 1920, in Busoni, *Selected Letters*, p. 303 (no. 283). Sorabji was actually 28 years old at the time.

In the winter of 1921 (or in April, at the latest), London and Continental Music Publishers issued Sorabji's Sonata no. 1, a 42-page work in one movement. The manuscript, which is located at the Library of Congress in Washington (to whom Sorabji gave it in 1928), bears the dedication "all' Illustrissimo Maestro Signor Cavaliere Ferruccio Busoni". The published edition, however, omits the dedication altogether for reasons the composer gave in a letter he wrote in English to Busoni on 18th April, 1921:

Dear Signor Busoni:

I am sending you a copy of my Sonata no. I, now published, which will you do me the favour of accepting.

If you remember I asked you when you were in England some time ago if I might dedicate this work to you but you did not give me a definite consent and I did not dare to put your name on it without this, for fear of presuming too much, and offending you, who have been so kind to me. I send you also with Sonata I a manuscript copy of Sonata II, which I hope to publish shortly . . . This work I think shows great changes from no. I and much greater maturity . . . Will you give me permission to dedicate this work to you? I should so appreciate if you would and it would give me an opportunity of showing my gratitude and respect towards you.

May I hope to have your consent quite soon?

With sincere admiration and profound homage.

Kaikhosru Sorabji<sup>20</sup>

The Sonata no. 2 mentioned in the letter was completed on 24th December, 1920 and was published by F. & B. Goodwin in 1923. This 63-page sonata, also in a single movement, bears the dedication "To Signor Busoni in profound veneration".<sup>21</sup> On subsequent pages, Sorabji uses the following forms: "To Signor Busoni in profound veneration and homage" and "al [*recte* all'] illustrissimo Maestro Signor Ferruccio Busoni con somma venerazione e omaggio. Il Autor [*recte* L'autore] K.S.". The manuscript sent to Busoni, now in the Busoni-Nachlaß of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, is a copyist's copy with annotations by Sorabji (Sorabji's autograph manuscript is in the Library of Congress).

Sorabji did not have any other documented contact with Busoni after that letter of 1921. He dedicated posthumously another work to him, namely, his *Variazioni e fuga triplice sopra "Dies iræ" per pianoforte* (1926; 201 pp.), which comprises sixty-four variations followed by a triple fugue. The dedication is the most flowery Sorabji ever wrote: "Alla santissima memoria dell'ingegno trascendente e sovrumano del divino Maestro Busoni, colla somma umiltà[,] fede e devozione dello scrittore [*recte* dell'autore]".<sup>22</sup> Realizing later (c. 1975) that he had overdone it, Sorabji wrote a note for the attention of Alistair Hinton on the title-page of the manuscript: "EXAGGERATED AND EXCESSIVE but in the XVIII[th]-century flowery Italian tradition of dedications to some great person: cf. the great [Luigi] Rossini's engraving of St. Peter (you know it in my sitting room) and the very fulsome dedication to 'Henry IX'

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Sorabji to Busoni, London, 18th April, 1921 (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Busoni-Nachlaß, Mus. ep. K. Sorabji 1). Reproduced with kind permission of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Musikabteilung mit Mendelssohn-Archiv, and of Alistair Hinton from a copy owned by the Sorabji Archive. Orthography and punctuation slightly altered to eliminate mistakes.

<sup>21</sup> No extant letter by Busoni giving Sorabji permission to dedicate the work has yet been discovered.

<sup>22</sup> "To the holiest memory of the transcendental and superhuman genius of the divine master Busoni, with the supreme humility, faith and devotion of the author".

the *Cardinal Duke of York*. You can lay it on yards thick in Italian!! In English it sounds just goddam silly!”

After the November, 1919 meeting, Sorabji had at least three opportunities to see and hear the great virtuoso, either as pianist or conductor, in London. On 22nd June, 1920, Busoni played his *Indianische Fantasie*, BV 264, at Queen's Hall with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Julius Harrison and took the baton for his *Brautwahl Suite*, BV 261. On 19th February, 1921, Sorabji attended a recital at Wigmore Hall, at which Busoni played his *Carmen Fantasy*, BV 284, and his *Toccata*, BV 287; a week later, on 26th February, he heard him play his *Indianische Fantasie* with the New Queen's Hall orchestra conducted by Sir Henry Wood. Two effusive paragraphs from the substantial review he wrote for *The Sackbut* are reproduced below:

Once again the incomparable, the unapproachable Mahatma of the piano has been with us, showing us a splendour of intellect, a re-creative power, and spaciousness of style that no other living artist possesses. It matters not a bit that what Busoni plays sounds totally different from what it does under the hands of other great pianists—the most exalted of whom stands far below Busoni—that a childish and ridiculous little Weber sonata is transmuted into an epic, that the B Minor sonata of Chopin assumes under those marvellous fingers a volcanic power and a steel-like strength which generations of pianistic sentimentalists have taught those among us sufficiently foolish to accept the teaching is foreign to the “real genius” of Chopin. Along comes Busoni who alone, it seems, has the power and courage to dissipate those languishing erotico-sentimental miasmata that have hung stagnantly about the music of this composer, and that Rosenthal among innumerable others does his best to thicken still more.

The *Toccata*, the *Fantasia da Camera* on *Carmen*, and the *Indian Fantasy* of Busoni . . . I have no hesitation in ranking among the most important and significant works of our time, and with them, Busoni definitely takes his place with the five or six really great figures in contemporary music. All the qualities of Busoni as interpreter are revealed again in his compositions—aristocratic dignity, austerity and aloofness coupled with a creative individuality of a rarity, fastidiousness and absolute originality in the highest degree remarkable.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, on 18th February, 1922, Sorabji may have attended at Wigmore Hall a performance of the two-piano version of the *Fantasia contrappuntistica*, BV 256b, given by Busoni and his disciple Egon Petri, who shared (and later continued) the massive and dignified pianistic style put forward by his master. Sorabji later reviewed several London recitals by this other important member of the Busoni network and often referred to him in his writings. His review of a recital given at Aeolian Hall on 2nd February, 1928 contains the following description:

The programme consisted entirely of Busoni transcriptions of Bach—and it is safe to say that since Busoni himself no Bach comparable to this has been heard in London. The whole organism of the music becomes a vivid living thing under M. Petri's masterful fingers; the phrases unfold one from another with the natural and inevitable movement of the earth itself: the dazzling clarity and amazing control are never lost for a moment, . . . all these things make of M. Petri the perfect living example of the *great manner* in piano playing. One longs yet to hear M. Petri in a recital of Busoni[']s original works, among them the

<sup>23</sup> Sorabji, “Contingencies: Busoni”, *The Sackbut*, 1, no. 9 (March, 1921): pp. 417–18.

great “*Fantasia Contrappuntistica*”—which he is probably the one living pianist to interpret authoritatively.<sup>24</sup>

Sorabji’s wish to hear Petri play the *Fantasia contrappuntistica* came true at Wigmore Hall on 9th November, 1929—a performance that took place one week after a recital by Eduard Steuermann (another Busoni pupil) featuring that very work. It will be noted how Sorabji compares music-making by Busoni and Petri to a religious experience.

... Petri made one realise that, meritorious as was Steuermann’s performance, it scarcely skimmed the surface, compared with his own amazing reading of the great work. . . . But 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 the 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>25</sup>

Five years later, Sorabji pulled all the stops when reviewing at length Petri’s performance of the Concerto for piano, orchestra and male chorus (conducted by Sir Adrian Boult):

The performance, by Egon Petri, ranks with those very, very few supreme musical experiences that are to be had in a lifetime. Of a technical mastery that was staggering, of an insight and understanding of the innermost nature of the music, of a diversity of tone colour, of a magnificence of style and greatness of spirit such as no living pianist can give us, it was Petri at his greatest; never, indeed, in all my experience of this noble and grand artist have I known him greater. Even Dr. Adrian Boult rose quite nobly to the tremendous occasion.<sup>26</sup>

Some correspondence between Sorabji and Petri, ranging from 1932 to 1957, has been preserved, and there is a possibility that they met at the earliest in 1937.<sup>27</sup> The extant letters do not make it possible to say whether they actually talked to each other *di viva voce*. In March, 1932, Sorabji presented Petri with an inscribed copy of the published score of his *Opus clavicembalisticum* (1929–30; 253 pp.), which had been issued at the end of 1931. In April, 1949, he completed what is considered by some to be his greatest work, the *Sequentia cyclica super “Dies iræ” ex Missa pro defunctis* (343 pp.) and dedicated it “To Egon Petri:—the greatest and most powerful intelligence[,] the most transcendental Master among living Pianists. [I]n deepest admiration and regard”. In 1953, Petri paid homage to Sorabji by signing, together with twenty-two other friends and admirers, a collective letter in which Sorabji was asked to record some of his works.

<sup>24</sup> Sorabji, “Music: Egon Petri (Aeolian: 2nd.)”, *The New Age*, 42, no. 17 (23rd February, 1928): p. 198.

<sup>25</sup> Sorabji, “Music: Egon Petri. Wigmore, November 9”, *The New Age*, 46, no. 3 (21st November, 1929): p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> Sorabji, “Music: The Busoni Concerto—B.B.C., Feb. 21”, *The New English Weekly*, 4, no. 21 (8th March, 1934): pp. 495–96; 495. This is followed immediately by a review of a recital given by Petri at Grottrian Hall on 24th February and featuring works by Mozart-Busoni, Bach-Busoni, Beethoven and Brahms.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Egon Petri to Sorabji, Zakopane, Poland, 30th March, 1937 (Sorabji Archive). Sorabji said to Alistair Hinton that he had known him since c. 1929 or 1930.



Petri obviously represented for Sorabji the continuing presence of his *magister in absentia*, a way of keeping in touch with the mystical figure of Busoni; this explains why it is essential to devote a few paragraphs to Petri in a discussion of the links between Sorabji and Busoni. Petri was for Sorabji the true successor, the great keyboard artist who stood above the uncultivated masses by the seriousness of his playing and the grandeur of his conceptions—and by his championship of Busoni.

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Sorabji's activities as a music critic and author gave him several opportunities throughout his long career to promote various composers he held in high esteem, among whom Busoni held a special place. His 600-odd concert, broadcast and record reviews, as well as letters to the editor published in *The New Age* (between 1924 and 1934) and *The New English Weekly* (between 1932 and 1945), contain many references to Busoni (54 and 68 respectively), as do his two books of collected essays, *Around Music* (1932) and *Mi contra fa* (1949).<sup>28</sup> Sorabji's most complete statement about Busoni is the obituary he wrote in 1924 and expanded (in March, 1932 at the latest) for inclusion in *Around Music*. Sorabji begins by characterizing Busoni as a pianist and then surveys his most important piano works and operas. Two passages, typical of the author's unique style, will be quoted: one near the beginning of the essay, the other near the end. Both passages are quoted from the revised version and are virtually identical to those in the early one. Busoni appears as a supernatural creature, an *Übermensch*:

In his playing[,] that immense lofty aloofness, that curious sense of existence in some superhuman Deva-chan world (to borrow an idea from Brahmanic thought), that extraordinary cold white fire of intellectualized and sublimated emotion, emotion so great, so intense, and at once so intellectualized and sublimated as to transcend and wholly obliterate the commonplace physical and nervous sensations that are dignified by the name, that almost terrifying personal and mental power all made together of Busoni, compared with other pianists, what one feels a great Brahmin Rishi would be, alone in his Himalayan heritage, compared with the peripatetic yogis, fakirs and jugglers, who will perform their tricks, mystifying and marvellous enough for what they are, where and whenever there is prospect of reward. To attempt to describe, or even give a faint hint of one's reactions when listening to Busoni is the most difficult thing in the world—and yet one feels one owes it to his memory and to the almost religious reverence his name inspires in all those of us who knew and appreciated his genius, to make an attempt however lame. . . .

. . . Merely to see Busoni come on a platform, but, above all, to stand in his presence and speak with him, was to feel oneself in the presence of an artistic and intellectual Titan like those divine men of the Renaissance, Da Vinci or Buonarroti—men so great that they cease any more to be human beings, and to whom the application of conventional human standards is like trying to measure the lightnings by an electric light meter.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Sorabji, *Around Music* (London: Unicorn Press, 1932; repr. edn., Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, 1979), 250 pp.; *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: The Porcupine Press, 1947; repr. edn., New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 247 pp. See also Roberge, *Annotated Indexes to "Around Music" (1932) and "Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician" (1947) by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji* (Bath: Sorabji Music Archive, 1992), xviii, 47 pp.; and *idem*, *An Annotated Bibliography of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji's Collected Published Writings* (Bath: Sorabji Archive, 1993), xiv, 141 pp. The number of references to Busoni in Sorabji's reviews is derived from an unpublished index of names prepared for the Sorabji Archive by George A. Ross (Spokane, Wash.).

<sup>29</sup> Sorabji, "The Death of Busoni", *The New Age*, 35, no. 16 (14th August, 1924): p. 189; expanded version as "Busoni", in *Around Music*, pp. 21–30; 21–22, 30. Another extended statement about Busoni will be found in the essay "Metapsychic Motivation in Music", in *Mi contra fa*, pp. 193–216; 213–15.

As mentioned earlier, Sorabji often referred to Busoni in his writings. Without quoting excerpt after excerpt, one may give a few examples of the kind of comments that he customarily made. He could say there is no greater pianist than Rakhmaninov now that Busoni is dead; that a composer like van Dieren stands aloof from the fashionable movements of the day as did Busoni; that Busoni was the first to grasp the greatness of the fugue from the *Hammerklavier* Sonata; that a pastiche of Clementi by a certain composer could be cleverly done but that Busoni would create something much more dazzling; that Busoni's work is held in intense admiration by a cultured circle of serious musicians; that Busoni's name was unfortunately not mentioned in a recent book about music; that Busoni had been ill-treated in an article and so forth.

It is obvious that Sorabji, in his writings, was not striving after objectivity. For him Busoni could do no wrong. As Antony Beaumont noted about the authors of several essays on Busoni, "they would employ a mystical language reeking of pretentiousness and sycophancy: his deficiencies were silently passed over".<sup>30</sup> But one should not forget that Sorabji had been admiring Busoni and other composers for decades when they began to win some recognition. As he wrote in 1954, "I'm a fanatical Mahlerite, Regerite, Alkanite, Busoni-ite and have been for twenty years before it became the fashion".<sup>31</sup> 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 had to suffer. It is true that Sorabji seems never to have seen faults in Busoni himself or in his works, but he was mostly discussing his masterpieces, like the Concerto for piano, orchestra and male chorus, the *Fantasia contrappuntistica* and the opera *Doktor Faust*. Some of his readers may have found that he often made a fool of himself by describing Busoni's playing or his music as a religious experience; in this respect, he is no more guilty than countless devotees of Wagner were in the late nineteenth century. The same readers probably felt the same about Sorabji's criticism of those composers he did not like; indeed, figures like Stravinsky, the dodecaphonic Schönberg and Hindemith, to name only major modern composers, could be subjected to showers of invective couched in the most acidic language.<sup>32</sup> But Sorabji had always been a man of extremes, as much in his writings as in his music, which ranges from short statements of one or two systems like the 104 *Frammenti aforistici (Sutras)* (1962-64, 1972?; 37 pp.) to massive orchestral works as long as Wagnerian operas, such as the Symphony [No. 3], *Jāmī*, for large orchestra, wordless chorus and baritone solo (1942-51; 824 pp.).

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A study of Sorabji's musical style goes much beyond the scope of this article.<sup>33</sup> It may be summarized, though, as a very personal and original synthesis of the impact

<sup>30</sup> Antony Beaumont, "Ferruccio Busoni: Composer and Bibliophile", *Librarium: Zeitschrift der schweizerischen Bibliophilen-Gesellschaft*, 26, no. 2 (October, 1983): pp. 119-34; 119.

<sup>31</sup> Sorabji, "Letters to the Editor: A Disclaimer", *The Musical Times*, 66, no. 994 (February, 1954): p. 90.

<sup>32</sup> For a few examples, see Nazlin Bhimani, "Sorabji's Music Criticism", in *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, pp. 256-84; 263-65.

<sup>33</sup> An excellent description will be found in Michael Habermann, "Sorabji's Piano Music", in *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, pp. 333-89; 333-45.

of a number of nineteenth and early twentieth-century composers for whom he had a profound admiration. His piano-writing is the extension to the utmost limits of the virtuoso tradition of Liszt, Alkan, Busoni, Godowsky and Rakhmaninov—witness his *100 Études transcendantes* (1940–44; 456 pp.). His sonorities and refined textures of superimposed florid lines are an intensified version of the sensuousness one finds in Ravel, Debussy and Szymanowski—more specifically in their works inspired by the Orient; in this respect, *Gulistān: Nocturne for Piano* (1940; 28 pp.) is unique. His complex counterpoint as well as his frequent use of fugue, theme and variations and passacaglia are an extension of Reger's procedures; the *Toccata quarta* (1964–67; 149 pp.) is an example of a work that contains all of these (like *Opus clavicembalisticum*).

As was mentioned at the beginning of this article, the technique of transcription, as in the works of Liszt, Busoni and Godowsky, holds a very important place in Sorabji's music. Indeed, eight pieces for piano are transcriptions, arrangements or pastiches. Much as in the case of Busoni and Godowsky, one can speak of "creative transcription", since Sorabji does not simply transcribe for another instrument or medium but totally absorbs the original and transmutes it entirely by means of his prodigious imagination in such a way that a totally new work is created in the process.<sup>34</sup> What he himself wrote with regard to Godowsky may well be applied to his own works:

Indeed, so complete is Godowsky's recasting and remoulding of the works out of which he evolves his wonderful transcription-compositions, as I feel inclined to call them, partaking so much, as they do, of original creation, that they can hardly be regarded as merely transcriptions, but take on the aspect of new works built on and around an older core, much in the same way as the perpendicular splendours and glorious tracery of the later parts of Winchester Cathedral are built on, around and out of the older Norman structure.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, a number of links can be made between Busoni's music and Sorabji's. The *Pastiche on the Habanera from "Carmen" by Bizet* (1922; 6 pp.) was obviously suggested by Busoni's *Chamber Fantasy on Bizet's "Carmen"*, BV 284.<sup>36</sup> The celebrated *Opus clavicembalisticum* (1929–30), as Sorabji himself indicated, "is admittedly an essay in the form adumbrated by the immortal BUSONI in his great FANTASIA CONTRAPPUNTISTICA which, with the Hammerklavier Sonata and the REGER Variations on a theme of BACH are three of the supreme works for the piano".<sup>37</sup> Both works are in twelve sections and contain variations and several fugues. The second section of Sorabji's work, which is entitled "Preludio-Corale", uses a theme quite similar in melodic outline to that of Busoni's own "Preludio corale", which is a variant of the chorale *Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr'*.

<sup>34</sup> For an application of this principle to Sorabji's *Pastiche on the Hindu Merchant's Song from "Sadko" by Rimsky-Korsakov* (1922), see Roberge, "The Busoni Network and the Art of Creative Transcription", pp. 74–82.

<sup>35</sup> Sorabji, "Leopold Godowsky as Creative Transcriber", in *Mi contra fa*, pp. 64–65.

<sup>36</sup> With regard to these two works, see Glenn David Colton, "The Art of Piano Transcription as Critical Commentary" (M.A. thesis, McMaster University, 1992), pp. 121–45.

<sup>37</sup> Sorabji, "Shortform-Analysis of Opus Clavicembalisticum" (remarks added at the end of the manuscript), reproduced in the booklet accompanying John Ogdon's recording of the work (Altarus AIR-CD-9075), 21–27; 22. About the links between these works, see Marjorie Maulsby Benson, "The *Opus clavicembalisticum* by Kaikhosru Shapurji [sic] Sorabji: An Analysis, with References to Its Model, the *Fantasia contrappuntistica*, by Ferruccio Busoni" (D.M.A. diss., American Conservatory of Music, 1987).

The *Transcription in the Light of Harpsichord Technique of the Chromatic Fantasia of J. S. Bach, Followed by a Fugue* (1940; 15 pp.) is based on Busoni's edition of the work and uses not the fugue found in the model but another fugue in D minor (BWV 948). Busoni did consider the original one much inferior to the Fantasy and Sorabji, in his "Prefatory Note", called it a "dull mechanical jog-trot fugue". The Prelude in E flat major (1945; 4 pp.) is a transcription of the first movement of the variant *French Suite*, BWV 815a, by Bach; it uses the same techniques that Busoni had developed in his well-known transcriptions of Bach's organ works. A late work, the *Passeggiata arlecchinesca sopra un frammento di Busoni* ("Rondò arlecchinesco") (1981-82; 16 pp.) uses as its basis the twelve-note theme that opens Busoni's orchestral work.

With regard to pianistic writing, one notes that the complex, fluid and freely chromatic runs that so often grace the pages of Sorabji's works, especially those in the nocturne style, can be traced back to what has come to be called "Busonian figurations", as in the Sonatina no. 1, BV 257 (1910).<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Sorabji's very frequent use of the piano's middle pedal first manufactured by Steinway obviously ties him with Busoni, who was probably the first composer to write a piece depending on its use—namely, the seventh piece from his *Kurze Stücke zur Pflege des polyphonen Spiels*, BV 296 (1923), which is entitled "Mit Anwendung des III. Pedals (Steinway & Sons Sustaining-Pedal)". Finally, Sorabji often writes low notes available on the Bösendorfer Imperial 96-key piano; Busoni, once again, appears to have been the first composer to call for these notes—in the third movement of his Concerto for piano, orchestra and male chorus (1904).<sup>39</sup>

Other characteristics of Sorabji's music point to Busoni's Concerto. Like Busoni, who had provided this work with a title-page written in his mother language, Italian, and used a Roman numeral for the *opus* number (Opera XXXIX), Sorabji very often used Italian for titles of works and sections of works; indeed, more than 20 of his 111 titles are in that language.<sup>40</sup> The following examples, among others, can be given: *Concerto da suonare da me solo e senza orchestra, per divertirsi* (1946; 70 pp.); *Fantasettina sul nome illustre dell'egregio poeta Christopher Grieve ossia Hugh M'Diarmid* (1961; 10 pp.); and *Il gallo d'oro da Rimsky-Korsakov: variazioni frivole con una fuga anarchica, eretica e perversa* (1978-79; 93 pp.). Sorabji also wrote several interpretative directions in Italian; they are often associated with sensuousness, delicacy and warmth. For example, the tenth variation from the *Sequentia cyclica super "Dies iræ" ex Missa pro defunctis* is marked *Il tutto in una sonorità piena, dolce, morbida, calda e voluttuosa*; and the "Notturnino" from the *Passeggiata veneziana* (1955-56; 24 pp.) bears the indication *Sonnolento, languidamente voluttuoso. Sonorità sempre piena e calorosa*. Interpretative directions written in Italian in a more stylish manner than usual are also found in Busoni, notably in his piano Concerto: *morbidissimo, più ampiamente e sempre patetico, più trattenuto e*

<sup>38</sup> See especially bars 198-99 and 251-55 (respectively pp. 13 and 17-18 of the Breitkopf & Härtel edition).

<sup>39</sup> Busoni also used these low notes near the end of his transcription of Bach's Prelude and Fugue in E flat major, BWV 552 (BV B 22). It has not been possible to ascertain whether they already appeared in the original 1890 Rahter edition or were added in the new edition issued in 1914 by the same publisher. Busoni also calls for the Bösendorfer keyboard in his Toccata (1920).

<sup>40</sup> Sorabji also used Roman numerals to date the completion of his works.

*fantasticamente* and *ondeggiando calmo*. Sorabji's use of the Italian language (or, more exactly, foreign languages, since he also used French and Latin extensively), though sometimes not entirely correct in the manuscripts, is an essential element that contributes to the whole picture: it adds culture and refinement and emphasizes the highly evocative character of the works. Finally, five of Sorabji's sectional works are divided into large sections labelled with variants of the "prima pars", "altera pars" and "ultima pars" of the third (slow) movement, entitled "Pezzo serioso". These works are: *Variazioni e fuga triplice sopra "Dies iræ" per pianoforte* (1923-26; 201 pp.); *Opus clavicembalisticum* (1929-30; 253 pp.); *Sonata V (Opus archimagicum)* (1934-35; 336 pp.); second Symphony for piano (1954; 248 pp.); sixth Symphony for piano (*Symphonia claviensis*) (1975-76; 270 pp.).

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The preceding pages have offered ample proof that Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji is a most striking example of a composer—and no mean composer at that—who succumbed to the powerful personality of another composer to such an extent that he constantly felt the need to proselytize, to produce evidence for an eventual beatification. Like several people who approached Busoni, Sorabji was a prey to the *Busoni-Zauber*. The "beatification", to a certain extent, has finally taken place, since Busoni is increasingly recognized as an important force in the music of the early twentieth century. This recognition, however, is of course not only the result of Sorabji's championship. His action, through his writings, was limited to one country (England) and, more specifically, to one readership (the subscribers of magazines devoted to the propagation of the doctrine of Social Credit) during a specific period (roughly 1925-45). Furthermore, it is quite likely that several of Sorabji's readers, for whom Busoni was an unknown quantity other than as a pianist and who had almost no opportunity of hearing his music, must have paid little attention to his repeated pleas. His frequent denial of the artistic validity of works by composers who were recognized as "important" by the (serious) musical establishment must have reinforced several readers in their opinion that Sorabji's writings, especially those dealing with his favourite composers, had to be read *cum grano salis*.

Sorabji must have felt a profound kinship with Busoni. The Italian composer has always been an isolated peak in twentieth-century music, a towering personality who not only was great as pianist and composer but also as transcriber, editor, writer and teacher and yet who, despite his great qualities, was not universally admired but venerated only by a select few. Busoni, at least, was a visible peak; Sorabji, on the other hand, hid himself from the musical world. However, the numerous links between his own music and that of Busoni, which have been outlined earlier, have remained virtually unknown, since very few people have so far had access to his mostly unpublished works. Both Busoni and Sorabji were to a certain extent foreigners in their country of activity: Busoni, an Italian living in Germany; Sorabji, a Parsee living in England, with a dark complexion and an Indian-sounding name. They were both pianist, composer and writer in one person. Their readings covered myriad topics; indeed, one only has to scan Sorabji's writings in order to come across countless references to works by a wide variety of authors in several fields of activity: economics, history, literature, politics, psychology, social sciences, *etc.* To quote

from his obituary of Busoni, reproduced earlier, Sorabji may well be, to a certain extent, "an artistic and intellectual Titan like those divine men of the Renaissance". This, to be sure, will become increasingly apparent as his works become more available and more widely known. As in the case of Busoni, those who have taken the time to discover (or at least to look for) the riches of Sorabji's garden—be it *Le jardin parfumé: Poem for Piano Solo* (1923; 16 pp.), "The Garden of Irān" from the *Symphonic Variations for Piano and Orchestra* (1935–37; 484 pp.)<sup>41</sup> or *Gulistān: Nocturne for Piano* (1940; 28 pp.), which means "The Rose Garden", or any other work for that matter—are convinced of the artistic validity of his creations.

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<sup>41</sup> "The Garden of Irān" is no. 27 (pp. 117–44) from a three-volume work containing 81 variations. Despite its title, the work exists in the form of a solo piano score and forms a complete, free-standing composition. The composer later wrote a version for piano and orchestra of the first volume (1935–37, 1953–56; 540 pp.).