



**KAIKHOSRU SORABJI'S
LETTERS TO PHILIP
HESELTINE (PETER
WARLOCK)**

Edited by
Brian Inglis and Barry Smith



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

Two extraordinary personalities, and one remarkable friendship, are reflected in the unique corpus of letters from Anglo-Parsi composer-critic Kaikhosru Sorabji (1892–1988) to Philip Heseltine (Peter Warlock) (1894–1930): a fascinating primary source for the period 1913–1922 available in a complete scholarly edition for the first time.

This volume also provides a new contextual, critical and interpretative framework, incorporating a myriad of perspectives: identities, social geographies, style construction, and mutual interests and influences. Pertinent period documents, including evidence of Heseltine's reactions, enhance the sense of narrative and expand on aesthetic discussions. Through the letters' entertaining and perceptive lens, Sorabji's early life and compositions are vividly illuminated and Heseltine's own intriguing life and work recontextualised. What emerges takes us beyond tropes of otherness and eccentricity to reveal a persona and a narrative with great relevance to modern-day debates on canonicity and identity, especially the nexus of ethnicity, queer identities and Western art music.

Scholars, performers and admirers of early twentieth-century music in Britain, and beyond, will find this book a valuable addition to the literature. It will appeal to those studying or interested in early musical modernism and its reception; cultural life in London around and after the First World War; music, nationality and race; Commonwealth studies; and music and sexuality.

Brian Inglis is Senior Lecturer in Music and BA Music Programme Leader, Department of Performing Arts, Middlesex University UK.

Barry Smith is a former Organist and Master of the Choristers at St George's Cathedral Cape Town and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Music at Cape Town University. He is President of the Peter Warlock Society.

I encourage him to write more and more, since I find his letters most entertaining, and sometimes really interesting, especially when he writes about music.

—Philip Heseltine on Kaikhosru Sorabji (to Frederick Delius,
11 February 1914)

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

**Edited by
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Brian Inglis – To Chris, with love.

Barry Smith – To Dr Donald Hunt (1930–2018), former Organist and Master of the Choristers at Worcester Cathedral; generous friend and kindest of musicians who greatly enhanced my musical life.



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Barry Smith transcribed Sorabji's letters from a copy of the manuscript; Bruno Bower checked the transcription against the original. Brian Inglis wrote the Introduction. Barry Smith and Brian Inglis co-wrote/edited the letter annotations. Barry Smith translated German text, and both translated French texts (with advice from François Evans, to whom thanks are due).

Editorial note

Sorabji's early compositions were and are identified in a number of ways. The composer himself applied opus numbers to some, but not necessarily consistently or chronologically; scores published in the 1920s and 1930s are engraved with numbers preceded by the initials 'K.S'. In this book modern KSS numbers, as applied by the Sorabji Archive (www.sorabji-archive.co.uk), have been

referenced for clarification. They reflect the understood order of composition. For this reason, these numbers do not necessarily align with the KS numbers appearing in period score publications.

Sorabji's early piano concertos offer particular potential for confusion, which the following concordance is designed to mitigate:

Period Title (date; publication status)	Modern Sorabji Archive title/no
Concerto pour Piano et Grand Orchestre Opus III (1916; unpublished)	Piano Concerto No 1 KSS6
Concerto 2 pour piano et grand orchestre, op. 10 (1917; unpublished)	Piano Concerto No 2 KSS14
Concerto pour Piano et Orchestra da Camera (August 1918; unpublished)	Piano Concerto No 3 KSS16
Concerto pour Piano et Grand Orchestre. Sept 1918 (1918; unpublished)	Piano Concerto No 4 KSS18
Concerto for piano and orchestra/Concerto II (1920/©1923; published by F. and B. Goodwin Ltd)	Piano Concerto No 5 KSS27

For complete clarity, Sorabji's early piano sonatas are also itemised below:

Period Title (date; publication status)	Modern Sorabji Archive title/no
Sonata Opus VII (1917; unpublished)	Piano Sonata (unnumbered) KSS9
Sonata no 1 for Piano (1919/©1920; published by London and Continental Music Publishing Co Ltd)	Piano Sonata No 1 KSS20
Sonata II (1920/©1923; published by F. and B. Goodwin Ltd)	Piano Sonata No 2 KSS28
Sonata III (1922/©1925; published by J. Curwen & Sons Ltd)	Piano Sonata No 3 KSS29

An increasing number of Sorabji's works from all periods, both published and unpublished, are now available from the Sorabji Archive in modern critical and corrected editions (*Le Jardin Parfumé*, for instance, was re-released in 2014 in an edition by Jonathan Powell).

Biographical notes

Born in Germany, Brian Inglis is Senior Lecturer and BA Music Programme Leader at Middlesex University. Previously he taught at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance and the Royal College of Music. A composer and musicologist, Brian first studied at Durham University and then completed an MA and PhD at City University London. His music has featured at international festivals ranging from the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival to I Kärlekens Namn (Sweden); has been broadcast on media ranging from BBC Radio 3 to Bayern 2; and has been released on the Nonclassical and Sargasso labels. The latter released his debut solo album, *Living Stones*, in 2017. As a musicologist, Brian works predominantly on twentieth- and twenty-first-century British classical and popular music, focussing particularly on genre and identity. Brian has published chapters on classical music, copyright and collecting societies in *The Classical Music Industry* (Routledge 2018) and on solo/unaccompanied opera for *Music on Stage, Vol. 2* (Cambridge Scholars 2016) as well as articles on aspects of Sorabji's life and work in *Tempo*, *British Music* and *British Music News*. Publications due in 2019 include chapters on musical composition and mystical spirituality, and on John Tavener, for Peter Lang. Brian is a fellow of the UK Higher Education Academy, a trustee of Nonclassical, and a board member of the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*. For further information, see www.impulse.co.uk/brianinglis

Barry Smith was born in Port Elizabeth, South Africa in 1939 and was educated at Rhodes University, Grahamstown and at the Royal School of Church Music in England. For forty years he was Organist and Master of the Choristers at St George's Cathedral, Cape Town as well as Associate Professor in the Faculty of Music at Cape Town University. Besides conducting choirs and orchestras, he has written a number of books on Peter Warlock, among which is a biography to celebrate the centenary of Warlock's birth and a four-volume set of Warlock's letters. He has been honoured with Fellowships from the Royal School of Church Music and the British Guild of Church Musicians. He is also President of the Peter Warlock Society.

Foreword

Enthusiasts of early twentieth-century English music may be surprised to learn that, for the best part of a decade, the composer Kaikhosru Sorabji maintained a regular, often effusive, correspondence with Peter Warlock/Philip Heseltine, a fellow creator who might nevertheless be considered his exact musical antithesis. The publication of this lively and enjoyable collection comes at a great time for the Sorabji-curious in particular. His unique oeuvre is being performed with increasing frequency, skill and understanding; and with much easier access to the published scores, knowledge of the music itself is widening. Peter Warlock's reputation remains in a steadier state: a forward-looking composer whose work is nevertheless not out of place when performed at carol services and royal weddings.

With Philip Heseltine's side of this correspondence not preserved by Sorabji, the editors of this volume have ingeniously interspersed contemporaneous letters from Heseltine to others, allowing us to intuit his response, incredulous at first, to his prolix correspondent. But as the friendship grows, it's striking to sense the warmth engendered by the widely shared enthusiasms – and artistic disagreements – of this unlikely pair. As an important bonus, this is a rare and valuable account of how musical life unfolded (sometimes week by week, thanks to Sorabji's eager chronicle of the concerts he attends) in the crucial artistic and historical period before, during and immediately after the First World War.

Judith Weir
London, October 2018



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Introduction

Brian Inglis

I am very lonely . . . In a former incarnation . . . you must have been closely related to me and the Law of Karma has ordained us to meet in this life . . . laugh, if it pleases you; I don't mind. I have to endure so much derision and insult, that a little harmless laughter won't do me much hurt will it?¹

this creature's mouth makes me think of a baby's bottom or a pair of chicken and ham sausages superimposed lengthwise . . . everyone came swarming round me after expressing the utmost amazement and ébahissement first at the music and then of my playing of it.²

Two pictures of Kaikhosru Sorabji: an over-the-top composer–pianist with a wickedly sharp pen; and, in contrast, an emotionally vulnerable man pouring his heart out to his first true confidant. The second excerpt sees the 29-year old Sorabji describing to his friend Philip Heseltine – two years his junior – a private concert in Vienna in 1922 attended by Universal Edition publishing director Emil Hertzka and his nephew, Alfred Kalmus (the subject of the unflattering simile). It marks almost the end of a decade-long correspondence between the two musicians, spanning the pre-Great War era and the period of inter-war modernity. This was a particularly eventful time for both men, covering Heseltine's provocative editorship of music journal *The Sackbut* and public success (as Peter Warlock) with the Carnegie prize-winning *The Curlew*, and the first forays into musical publication for both composers. It generated Sorabji's first compositions, piano performances and published articles. As we see from the first excerpt, it also generated his first, and perhaps most intense, adult friendship; the period could be seen as the locus of his 'coming out' in social, musical and sexual terms.

Unfortunately, Heseltine's side of this fascinating corpus – published here complete for the first time – has not survived:³ Sorabji tended not to keep letters from his (ultimately numerous) correspondents.⁴ Heseltine's voice is instead here refracted through related correspondence and period publications (see 'Organisation of Materials' below). Primary attention, then, is inevitably focussed most on Sorabji as chronicler of this significant relationship. In itself this presents a valuable opportunity, because Sorabji remains, in the first part of the twenty-first century, a complex and conflicted figure of music history – arguably one of the most enigmatic and intriguing in twentieth-century British music.

2 Introduction

Kaikhosru Sorabji

Since his death in 1988, assessment of Sorabji's *oeuvre* has been compromised by an unhelpful polarisation. This is located between – at one extreme – those who regard him as an inept, even fraudulent composer of music which is (at best) interminably dull and self-indulgent; and a devoted cult following.⁵ Writing online in 2007, Internet commentator 'autoharp' alluded to this polarity in complaining that:

One of the problems relating to Sorabji's music is (still) the lack of any significant body of useful commentary and criticism over and above the merely factual. Those of us who have searched out information about Sorabji over the years have almost certainly been irked by both the hyperbolic praise and bad-tempered condemnation which this composer attracts.⁶

As an example, one commentator characterises Sorabji's best-known work, 1930's *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, as 'music of a massive ego thoroughly unaware of its crushing banality. . . [an] overblown monstrosity, emotionally vacuous (though [it] plays to the gallery plenty, fruitlessly)'.⁷ On the opposite pole, consider the quasi-hagiographic praise offered by Kenneth Derus in introducing his own selected snippets from the Sorabji–Heseltine correspondence:

Most artists and writers are remarkable in spite of . . . their failings as human beings. Sorabji is an exception to this rule. He was not only more intellectually gifted than most great composers: he was also more sweetly ingenuous, and his letters are refreshingly wholesome. This fact does nothing to re-introduce Sorabji to music history – but within the context of a special friendship, it bears on matters of life and death.

(Derus 1992, 196)

Of course, like those of Sorabji's other enthusiasts, Derus's comments can be understood in the context of advocacy for a marginalised figure, and the hyperbole may not be intended to be taken literally. Later in the same volume he makes the grandiose claim that

no composer, of any period, has successfully attacked a musical problem of greater difficulty, or left behind a more valuable set of working methods. This makes Sorabji something other than a fabulous musical outsider. It makes him historically more germane than most of his contemporaries.

(459)

Likewise, online spaces such as those cited above are not necessarily places to find reasoned debate of considered positions, being notorious for facilitating assertions both exaggerated and unsubstantiated.

Sorabji clearly understood himself as an outsider in British society: the son of a Parsi from Bombay and an Englishwoman, he not only identified strongly – if

inconsistently – with the non-English elements of his cultural background but also positioned himself actively against English or British music and strongly resisted any identification with such constructions.

But the unhelpful polarisation of responses goes back, in part, to Sorabji's emergence onto the musical scene in the late 1910s and early 1920s, which we see vividly brought to life in his letters to Heseltine. Contemporaneous critics were often baffled by his music (see for instance Anon 1922;⁸ Williams 1924⁹) owing to its difficulty of execution and unfamiliarity of idiom, despite clear origins in the modern French school of Debussy and Ravel and the more mystically inclined Russians such as Scriabin. This was acknowledged by the more perceptive critics¹⁰ and is evidenced in the letters.

On the fringe of Heseltine's London circle, which also included Cecil Gray and Bernard van Dieren, Sorabji soon attracted further, if qualified, support from (amongst others) Ferruccio Busoni, Alfred Cortot, John Ireland and Joseph Holbrooke.¹¹ Performances of the music were inevitably limited (on account of its difficulty and, occasionally, the lavish resources called for); the nine-year period of the Heseltine letters covers the first three of the twenty-five public premieres of Sorabji's works which occurred during his long life. Coupled with the challenges of assimilating aurally his densely notated published scores, early scholarly assessments of the music tended to restrict themselves to introductory comments on its superficial characteristics, chiefly length and complexity.¹² Following Sorabji's retreat from London to a more reclusive life in Dorset after the Second World War, an aura of (partly self-perpetuated) 'mystique' grew and developed around the composer. What writings and commentaries there were (mainly by friends/associates – a representative example being MacDiarmid 1966) tended to the anecdotal and (sketchily) biographical.

During Sorabji's lifetime, performances of his music were largely reliant on his own involvement, or lack thereof.¹³ Since the 1970s, however, Sorabji's music has been taken up by new generations of performers, including singers Jane Manning and Sarah Leonard, organist Kevin Bowyer and pianists such as Michael Habermann, Marc-André Hamelin, Donna Amato, Carlo Grante and Jonathan Powell. This activity led initially to a more thorough examination of his work in Rapoport's 1992 edited volume. While groundbreakingly valuable, the book is arguably more celebratory than critically penetrating. In the current century, PhD researchers (Abrahams 2002; Owen 2006) have focussed on establishing biographical truths and critical (re-)assessment of his compositional processes, while more recently McMenamin (2016) has focussed on the framing of Sorabji's critical writings as counter-canon and cultural critique. A comprehensive biography has been self-released online by Marc-André Roberge (2017).

Yet Roberge acknowledges even at the end of his substantive tome that there is much work remaining for Sorabji scholars; as he writes, 'Despite the recent flurry of editions and recordings . . . the scholarly world still has a long way to go before it becomes normal to include some lines about him in histories of music' (Roberge 2017, 402). One of the intriguing things about Sorabji – indicative of the way he is problematised – is the amount of writing devoted to him, which

4 Introduction

seems out of proportion to the profile of his actual music, notwithstanding the energetic efforts in recordings and live performances of his handful of modern performer advocates. (Sorabji was and is also known, of course, as a music critic and author.) Sorabji's own sympathisers, both in his lifetime and subsequently, have tended to propagate a specific discourse (in which Sorabji himself is also imbricated) around his music. This discourse exaggerates the music's exceptionalism, primarily of scope and complexity – and thus otherness.¹⁴ This comes at the expense of the contextualisation and critical appraisal which, as Roberge implies, is necessary for a broader understanding of his musical achievements. Systematic critical contextualisation was first essayed by Paul Rapoport in 1978 with his monograph *Opus Est: Six Composers from Northern Europe*, wherein Sorabji is linked with Vermeulen, Holmboe, Brian, Pettersson and Valen through 'symphonic proportions and procedures', as well as lack of public and critical attention. While this volume is notable for being an early postmodern critique of historical teleology and canon-formation, the composers chosen are too diffuse to form a viable (counter-)narrative, even a postmodern non-linear one. A particularly valuable contribution therefore is Nalini Ghuman's work (2014, 2007, 2003 [as Anna Nalini Gwynne]) – which will be drawn on below – placing Sorabji in the broader context of the experience of people with South Asian heritage living in Britain in the early twentieth century. Ghuman further draws on the deconstruction of Orientalist tropes undertaken by Edward Said and others.

Sorabji's extant letters to Heseltine are engaging, stimulating and indeed (in Derus's word) 'refreshing', especially when compared with the bitter tone and verbal aggression of some of Sorabji's published writings (some of which are glimpsed within this edition) and later missives. They therefore offer a compelling alternative to views of Sorabji, partly promulgated and encouraged by himself, as an irascible misanthrope. While trenchant opinions are forcefully expressed, negative criticisms are easily outweighed by an overflow of youthful enthusiasms, progressive liberal views (including abiding concern for the underdog, almost literally), honest and open-minded appraisal, quirkily endearing levity and irrepressible *joi-de-vivre*. Exposure of this side of Sorabji is particularly illuminating as, while Heseltine's personal charm was and is well attested, Sorabji's is less so. More reason to welcome the human warmth displayed in the portrait of him painted by the following letters.

Why are Sorabji and his music important now? Firstly, because Sorabji was a mixed-race composer; and in a context when the racial, gender and class make-up of the art-music composing establishment in Britain has been and is being problematised,¹⁵ a more diverse range of historical exemplars and role models is important. (In this regard, the totality of Sorabji's career may not make him an ideal role model; some of his later views sit particularly uncomfortably in the twenty-first century. Yet rebarbative views do not prevent Wagner's works being appreciated and admired.) Sorabji's works are worth exploring for their own sake; the early compositions arising from the period covered in this volume are some of the most accessible and approachable in his output and are neither as impossible nor as impossibly long as the composer's broader reputation might suggest.