

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**

FACULTY OF LAW, ARTS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

School of Humanities

**Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji: an Oral Biography**

By

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

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KAIKHOSRU SHAPURJI SORABJI: AN ORAL BIOGRAPHY

by Sean Vaughn Owen

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892-1988) was one of the twentieth century's most prolific composers, a major contributor to the piano repertoire, a fiercely witty writer of essays and musical criticism, and an unarguably fascinating personality. Although he composed roughly 16,000 pages of music his legacy has been largely neglected, the causation for which is three-fold: one, his self-imposed ban on all public performances of his music; two, the majority of his compositions were never published, existing only in manuscript form, the calligraphy of which is not legible for performance purposes and is even difficult to decipher for casual analysis; and three, in the absence of a thorough biography, enquirers of Sorabji's life have been fed more myth than reality, resulting in a general perception that is somewhat akin to the mad scientist. Fortunately, the constraints of these barriers are being transcended: Sorabji took the impetus to relax his ban in the 1970s and after his death numerous musicians of exceptional talent have arisen who exist as a kind of new vanguard for the proliferation of his compositions; the titanic task of editing his manuscripts into functional performance editions has been carried out at a surprisingly rapid rate by various contributors around the world; and finally, the present work lays the foundation for the writing of a more complete and accurate biography of Sorabji the man, not the myth. This latter task was accomplished using a

combination of archival research and, more predominantly, the interviewing techniques of oral history. More specifically, after briefly outlining the biography of Sorabji that has, until now, generally been accepted, an immediate argument is posed questioning the authenticity of basic assertions that have previously been stated as fact. In particular, the identification of his mother's birth certificate initiated a series of new formulations; she was not Sicilian-Spanish and by extension, neither was Sorabji; rather she was English. Further genealogical research demonstrated a pattern of deception on the part of his mother, a habit that was passed to her son who in turn developed throughout his life a complex sense of otherness - that is to say he represented himself to others in a manner that was not in keeping with reality. The technique of oral history, which in the case of the current dissertation focused on those who knew Sorabji during the last 40 years of his life while he was living in Corfe Castle, provides further examples of Sorabji's contradictory posturing of otherness; and finally, most importantly, the interviews, correlated with archival research, demonstrate that there were often hidden circumstances that necessitated both his intense reclusive behaviour and his fabrications. The various interviews provide perspective on this much misunderstood composer and show that when one dispels the myths, the realities that we are left with are often just as fascinating.

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Although the dissertation is formally an oral biography, the earlier chapters draw heavily upon archival research, which was not always straightforward and often required deductive questioning, and I would like to acknowledge the various informational depositories and their helpful archivists, librarians, and specialists: The British Library, the Newspaper Branch of the British Library in Colindale, the Dorchester Reference Library, Guildhall Library, The Family Records Centre, James Peters (archivist at the University of Manchester), Keith Moore (archivist at the Institution of Mechanical Engineers), Beth McNeice (archivist at the Institution of Civil Engineers), the Probate Service at the Principal Registry of the Family Division, Richard Edgcumbe of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Anabel York of Sotheby's London, the London Metropolitan Archives, the Family Health Services Agency of Dorset, the Public Record Office in Kew, and of course a very special note of recognition to Alistair Hinton, who is not only the curator of the Sorabji Archive in Bath, but also a tireless promoter of Sorabji's legacy. Alistair Hinton's assistance with my research was concrete at so many different levels that it is impossible to imagine that it could have existed at all without his generous support.

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## INTRODUCTION

When I first visited Corfe Castle it was an occasion of leisure, but the choice of this idyllic village, nestled in the county of Dorset, was purposeful and not without great personal fascination, as this was the home for many years of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892-1988), whose stylistically unique compositions and mysterious life had been the foremost occupation of my thoughts. For those that are not familiar with this beautiful part of England, it should be said that Corfe Castle is the name of both the dramatic castle remnants that sit proudly upon its hill and the ancient village that is nestled below it.<sup>1</sup> I found it very interesting that nearly every Corfe Castle local whom I spoke with either had recollections of Sorabji or had at least, for the younger generation, heard of him. This observation was the little seed for my dissertation, for I realised then that in this close-knit community, where, to be frank, most of the citizens are elderly, there was a great possibility that many individuals would have useful things to say about Sorabji or perhaps even possess items that he had given to them: letters, books, pictures, gifts, scores, etc. I was immediately reminded of Vivian Perlis' excellent book, *Charles Ives Remembered: an Oral History*<sup>2</sup> and it seemed to me that a similar project could be carried out with great success using Sorabji as the subject.

With the aid of the appropriate regional Postal Address Book, cross-referenced with the Royal Mail's website, which has a complete residence listing for streets in the country, organised by postal code, I was able to retrieve every postal address in Corfe Castle. As the addresses numbered only 830, it was viable to send a cordial letter of enquiry to each household in the village, in the hope that I would receive replies from individuals who could offer information about Sorabji. My letter of enquiry was very brief: it explained the purpose of my research, requested interviews with those that had stories to share, and included a questionnaire, which was to be returned to me. The

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to make this distinction that Corfe Castle is the name of both the ruin and the village, for it has been published in two different sources that Sorabji actually lived in a castle, an absurd notion that is not only blatantly false, but also an implied exaggeration of his reputed wealth. In the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, Nicolas Slonimsky wrote, 'Sorabji took refuge far from the madding crowd in a castle he owned in England.' Similarly in Norman Lebrecht's *The Companion to 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Music*, '...while living in a castle in Dorset.'

<sup>2</sup> Vivian Perlis, *Charles Ives Remembered: an Oral History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

questionnaire essentially collected the contact details of the potential interviewee and the nature of their information, i.e. personal stories, letters, material objects, etc.

When the mass mailing was finally posted in early March 2001 there was a great sense of apprehension, as it was impossible to predict how many responses my letters would elicit. Conscious as I was of Sorabji's reputation for being reclusive, it seemed possible that I would receive absolutely no letters at all or perhaps only responses with puzzled and unhelpful replies. But, quite unexpectedly, my letter seemed to have caused quite a stir in the village and soon the citizens of Corfe were talking amongst one another and spreading my cause to other neighbouring towns, such as Wareham, Swanage, and even as far as Salisbury, where past Sorabji associates were known to live. The responses were plentiful, warranting the continuance of and the validation for my proposed direction of research: in all over forty individuals contacted me via the phone, post, and e-mail. At least a quarter of the responses were ends within themselves, that is to say they offered interesting information, perhaps a single story or impression, but by their own account, they were unable to help me any further, so it would not be necessary to interview them. But the vast majority were highly relevant contacts who had meaningful interactions with Sorabji, and with these individuals I arranged to have interviews.

The first week of April, but a month after the original mass mailing, turned out to be a convenient time in which all of the individuals that I had arranged to interview would be available, so it was then that I travelled to Corfe Castle, a brief and pleasant two-hour train journey from London. With a daily schedule already arranged and many opportunities to meet others spontaneously, I interviewed a total of 18 wonderfully receptive people. From these meetings I obtained various leads, which materialised in future interviews in a number of locations around England and a second round of interviews on the Isle of Purbeck. The transcription of these conversations constitutes the main body of this dissertation and as a result the formal nature of the dissertation is that of an oral biography. From a technical perspective the oral biographer must uniformly commit to a specific methodology for the editing or lack of editing utilised in transcribing the recorded interviews. The colour of an individual's personality, as it is captured and then defused, is a large part of what makes oral biography so potent and interesting; for

this reason I refrained from editing the interviews, with the exceptions of omitting tangential conversations about matters wholly unrelated to Sorabji and occasionally correcting sentences where the meaning of the interviewee was ambiguous. As well, by presenting the interviews more or less unadulterated, the reader can perceive a glimpse of the regional Dorset accent, which, with its rich use of language and figures of speech, would have been the accent that entreated Sorabji's ear while living on the Isle of Purbeck.

Although oral history, as a research technique, is still rather rare in the realm of musicology,<sup>3</sup> it has been well established and championed for decades by sociologists and political historians. One of the great virtues of oral history is that it constitutes a primary source of information which is not static, like a manuscript or letter; there is a dynamic of question and answer that allows the scholar to probe his interviewee. That is not to say that one should, at all times, strictly guide the course of the interview for, left to their own accord, interviewees will very often present unexpected information that can potentially give rise to new revelations.

Because oral history is an interactive process, one obtains a double perspective on the subject's biography. On one hand you learn stories about the life of your subject, actual occurrences that can be substantiated by cross-referencing information obtained through established scholarship or the testimonies of other interviewees. This is perhaps the most obvious perspective that one would hope for, enabling the reconstruction of a life, story by story, like the construction of a puzzle, piece by piece. Yet oral history presents another facet to biographical research, for the interview reveals as much about the individual being interviewed as about the subject. This has been particularly important in my research, for Sorabji, despite being seen as a recluse who was without social graces, did, especially in Corfe Castle's close-knit society, interact with the townspeople, and their recollections of these meetings reveal how other people responded

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<sup>3</sup> There are two notable exceptions, the already mentioned *Charles Ives Remembered: An Oral Biography* by Vivian Perlis and Joan Allen Smith's *Schoenberg and His Circle: A Viennese Portrait*. *Ravel Remembered* by Roger Nichols and *Purcell Remembered* by Michael Burden are oral biographies that draw upon published testaments and do not involve (obviously so in the case of Purcell) a process of interviews; they are thus a variant of the oral history technique used by Perlis, Smith, and myself in the present work. Perlis, in particular, has been an important supporter for the use of oral history as a legitimate musicological method, both in her own publications and as founding-director of Oral History, American Music (OHAM), an archive dedicated to oral history at Yale University.

to his personality and unique mannerisms. It is impossible to construct an absolute biography, in the sense of one that recreates with complete exactitude the nature of the individual: such is only ever expressed once and that is, quite literally, the life that was lived by the subject. Writing a biography is rather an interpretive exercise, where the character and life of the subject are fused, inevitably, with the conscious workings of the author or, in this case, author and interview contributors. Therefore oral history is a very potent biographical tool, as it assembles an aggregate of many personal accounts and from this pool of data a vision of depth can be portrayed that is impossible to obtain in any other way. In addition its collectivism safeguards against the sometimes overwhelming arbitrariness to which traditional biographical interpretation is prone.

There is another inescapable characteristic of oral history, which in the case of Sorabji has proven to be quite refreshing, and that is its humanity, or more specifically the humanising elucidations about the subject that arise when the knowledge is drawn from a sentient source, i.e. the recollections of the interviewee. Many received aspects of Sorabji's personality, as those who have written about him have delineated it, have finally been placed into perspective; the specific details of this will be introduced and explored later, but let it suffice here to say that such a perspective has been sorely overdue. Sorabji is generally unknown in the musical world, despite the fact that there is more interest in his music now than ever before. Those that are familiar with his works generally fall into two polarised camps, those that adore him and those that dismiss him altogether. Such extremity of opinion is seemingly appropriate for a man who embodied extremity in most of his pursuits: for example, his piano compositions can be bewilderingly gargantuan, like the 336 page Sonata V '*Opus archimagicum*' (1934-35), or incredibly minute, such as his *Frammenti aforistici* (1962-1964, 1971, 1977), several of which can fit onto a single page; his published writings, especially his musical criticism, are a seesaw of deifications and condemnations, placing upon ever higher pedestals composers like Busoni and Medtner, while relentlessly excoriating the names of Stravinsky and Holst.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A very thorough study of Sorabji's praise of Busoni can be found in Marc-André Roberge, "Producing evidence for the beatification of a composer: Sorabji's deification of Busoni," *Music Review* 54 (1993): 123-136. Specific instances in Sorabji's own writings of his enthusiastic praise of Busoni are too numerous to mention here in any comprehensive form and are instantly obvious to anyone making the briefest of

I am not suggesting that Sorabji's output is lacking in compositions of conventional length or writings that are moderate in their constructive criticism, for there are examples of both, but it is his extremities which seem to stick in the minds of Sorabji sceptics. Therefore, the humanising effects of oral history can only benefit the propagation of Sorabji's music, for it brings into perspective the nature of his often extreme personality, which up until now has simply been taken for granted and presented as part of Sorabji's mystique. If perspective dissolves mystery it is plausible, by this process, that Sorabji as a composer will become more attractive to the musical world at large, for when questioned as to the nature of their dissension, most of his critics that I have spoken to describe Sorabji as a quack who revelled in extremities as a form of musical mockery and contempt for the musical establishment, all the while failing to create cohesive art. Such remarks are not fair to Sorabji or his compositions, yet that will remain the opinion of many until the time comes when his creativity can be understood in its proper perspective.

It is the nature of my research that it has been concerned less with Sorabji's music and more with the man himself. But how much more do we appreciate Mozart's music when we are fed stories about his prodigious youth and incessant feats of compositional and instrumental virtuosity? Do we not revel at Beethoven's romantic temperament and daring individuality and then proclaim it a miracle that he should bring forth such powerful music while simultaneously wrestling with his utter deafness? Knowledge of a composer's life enriches the appreciation of his or her art, for it provides a living and expressive context that makes sense out of a medium that is by nature abstract. Sorabji's reputation is hinged upon his reclusive behaviour, the ban that he placed on all performances of his music, the uniqueness of his seemingly exotic ethnic background, and the literary and compositional extremities that I have already mentioned. There is plenty here to attract the attention of those that are pleased by the esoteric, but there is also a plethora of questions that are inevitably posed and for which there have not been

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perusals through Sorabji's collected writings, but a useful starting point would be the chapter entitled "Busoni" in *Around Music*: 21-30; in the same book, pages 132-137, there is a chapter dedicated, with much approval, to Medtner. For Sorabji's harsh treatment of Holst and Stravinsky, see Nazlin Bhimani, "Sorabji's music criticism," in *Sorabji: a Critical Celebration*: 276-278; Sean Owen, "Sorabji's Musical Criticism of Stravinsky," unpublished dissertation, New England Conservatory of Music, 2000 and by the same author, "Antithetical Reception of *Le Sacre du Printemps* by French and British Composers," unpublished dissertation, King's College London, 2001.

any convincing answers. Therefore, I would like to hope that this oral biography on Sorabji will appease the sceptics, recognise the unanswered questions, bring tangibility to obscure mystery, and, in short, portray the many sidedness of this most extraordinary man.

This dissertation is divided into three general sections, the first of which acts as an extended introduction to the ensuing two, which are essentially organized around interview transcriptions. Section One is subdivided into four chapters, each of which explores in the manner of an essay a specific facet of Sorabji's biography. The first chapter presents a brief biographical sketch of Sorabji and his creative accomplishments, emphasising 'facts' about his life that have generally been accepted as truth by writers and lexicographers, many of which prove to be incorrect. The material in this chapter that is biographically correct serves as a reference point for readers who are not generally familiar with Sorabji's life, while the incorrect material will be put right in the dissertation through the process of distinguishing Sorabji the man from the fanciful mystique of Sorabji the infamous. The second chapter reacts immediately to one of the more basic but psychologically complex aspects of Sorabji's biography and that is his genealogy and ethnic background, from which an extended argument develops that challenges and reunites this portion of Sorabji's biography. The third and final chapter of this section discusses Sorabji's relationship with Reginald Norman Best and the ramifications that this relationship had on their life in Corfe Castle and on Sorabji's personality in general.

The second section of the dissertation gives a brief history of Corfe Castle as a backdrop for the locale where the majority of the interviews for the oral biography took place and where Sorabji made his home for the last 40 years of his life. The collected interviews in this section consist of various individuals whose relationship with Sorabji was not specifically musical. The organisation of these interviews falls into six different theme-oriented chapters, which include The Eye (Sorabji's home in Corfe Castle), his neighbours, local acquaintances and helpers, John Dean (a close friend of Sorabji's who lived in nearby Swanage), *The Swanage Times* (the local newspaper to which Sorabji contributed a vast number of letters-to-the-editor), and Marley House (the retirement home where Sorabji lived out the last few years of his life).

Interviews with musically gifted friends of Sorabji's constitute the substance of the third and final section of the dissertation. In two of the four chapters within this section - those dealing with Mervyn Vicars and Gola Martin-Smith, both of whom are now deceased - the use of an explanatory essay and supportive additional interviews were necessary in order to reconstruct relationships that can now only be related at second hand. The remaining interviews, with Anthony Burton-Page and Alistair Hinton, bring the main body of the dissertation to a close; a short coda, the conclusion, summarises the more important issues that have been raised in the dissertation, offering either a correct context or, where there is still ambiguity, a suggestion for future research.

I feel that I have produced not a biography of activities, but rather a biography of personalities. I am not so concerned here with the development of Sorabji's musical talent, the drama of his career, or the episodes of his life; I do not wish to portray a lifeline from those two polarised and defining moments, birth and death. These aspects of traditional biography are very important and highly interesting, but they constitute a wholly different exercise from the one that I have undertaken. What I am interested in are Sorabji's mannerisms, his personality, his tastes, his interaction with humanity, and to some extent his thoughts; these are the details that make reality, that define us as individuals, and that add colour to the typical black and white, fact and fiction of traditional biography.

## SECTION ONE

### Chapter One – Biographical and Artistic Survey

Without attempting a comprehensive account of Sorabji's life, in the manner of a conventional biography<sup>5</sup> – it is imperative for three reasons to provide a brief account of the more infamous aspects of his biography, those that have been seized upon by authors and critics for the presentation of this much misunderstood composer. Firstly, for those who are unacquainted with Sorabji, his music and world, it is necessary to provide essential background material, so that basic references to his life in what follows will not be unfamiliar. Secondly, the vast majority of the interviews constituting the main body of this oral biography are concerned with the later period in Sorabji's long life when he lived in Corfe Castle: to establish the chronology and significance of the latter part of his life it is necessary to give a glimpse of the more crucial events Sorabji experienced prior to leaving London. Thirdly, there are certain fundamental details regarding Sorabji's biography that have been endlessly related as truth, yet which are in fact inaccuracies largely born out of Sorabji's own misleading self-stylisation and his failure to correct the false statements that were made about him. Many of these inaccurate notions, some quite surprising and significant, are challenged and dissolved in the ensuing chapters of this dissertation, but it is necessary first to present the source of what is being disputed; this chapter serves that purpose.

An individual's date of birth is an unoriginal but effective starting point for a biography, but in the case of Sorabji, it is here that many writers of the past first stumbled. In one of the rare instances of admonishment to those who would be misguided by printed 'knowledge' Sorabji had this to say:

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<sup>5</sup> The distinguished Canadian musicologist, Marc-André Roberge, has been working for over a decade on the first 'critical' biography on Sorabji, which is apparently nearly finished, but has not yet been published. More information on Roberge and his research can be found on his faculty biography at the University of Laval's website.

TO THOSE WHOM IT MAY CONCERN, IF ANY, AND OTHERS WHO MIND ANYBODY'S BUSINESS BUT THEIR OWN. Dates and places of birth relating to myself given in various works of reference are invariably false.<sup>6</sup>

The direct reference here is not clear, but is very likely a response to Percy Scholes who sought, much to Sorabji's annoyance, certain biographical details about the composer for inclusion in his *Oxford Companion to Music*.<sup>7</sup> The accusing finger must point sharply at Sorabji when one ponders why such basic lexicographical information should be so varied, as is clearly explained in a letter Sorabji wrote to the unfortunate Scholes:

Formerly I used to consider it enough when dealing with these stupid and impudent enquiries from lexicographical persons, deliberately to mislead them as to dates and places. This is a mistake: their enquiries should either be ignored or refused.<sup>8</sup>

As far as I am aware, it was not until the fifth edition of Nicolas Slonimsky's *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*<sup>9</sup> that, with the aid of a birth certificate, someone correctly stated in print that Sorabji was born in 1892, as opposed to 1895 or 1900 as was commonly suggested.<sup>10</sup> Discrepancies regarding Sorabji's name and ethnic background form the primary focus of the following chapter, but let it suffice here to say that he was generally perceived as being of mixed race, with a Parsi father and Sicilian-Spanish mother.

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<sup>6</sup> Sorabji would occasionally have dictums such as this printed onto small pages or cards to pass off to his various correspondents or to editors within whose journals or newspapers he was seeking to submit an article or "letter-to-the-editor."

<sup>7</sup> Percy Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938). This encyclopaedia passed through many editions and eventually evolved into *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music* (London: Oxford University Press).

<sup>8</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, letter to Percy Scholes, 22 February 1952. Reprinted in the preface to Nicolas Slonimsky, ed., *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Schirmer, 1978), x.

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Slonimsky, ed., *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Schirmer, 1958), 1539.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Rapoport explored a rather radical explanation for Sorabji's misleading tendencies regarding the true date of his birth, suggesting that accurate astrological data could provide an individual with ill intentions the means to place a curse upon Sorabji. Although Sorabji was fascinated with the occult and acquainted with scholars on the subject, there has never been any documented evidence to support this interesting hypothesis. Paul Rapoport, "Sorabji: A Continuation," in *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994), 58-66.

Very little is known about Sorabji's childhood and early schooling, although it is typically accepted that he had a private education, supplemented only by the London Organ School for his musical tuition with Charles A. Trew.<sup>11</sup> The earliest substantial insight into Sorabji's life is provided by his correspondence with Philip Heseltine, which began in 1913 when Sorabji was already 21 years of age. In parallel with this new friendship Sorabji initiated the two activities that were to dominate the remainder of his life, musical composition and the submission of articles to various periodicals. In 1914 Sorabji composed his earliest mentioned work, a piano transcription of Frederick Delius' *In a Summer Garden*, which is a point either of congeniality with or influence of Heseltine, who maintained throughout most of his life an immensely close relationship with Delius. From this time onward Sorabji's prolific musical imagination was markedly clear, especially during the decade of 1921-31, in which he composed a string of compositions including songs, solo piano works, a piano quintet, an organ symphony, and a piano concerto.

Each subsequent publication was received by the London critics with amused interest and scepticism. Their reactions and opinions, in other words the evaluations of the established English musical scene, to this new and highly original composer brought into existence what was to become the Sorabji mystique, echoing his exotic background and apparent oriental affinities, and in a sense whetting the appetite of the music world's curiosity. More practically, the critics adopted a tone of admonishment and emphasised the challenge presented to any would-be performer. The immense technical difficulty of Sorabji's compositions baffled his critics and many deemed the works unplayable. These remarks may have intrigued the more progressive musical figures in London, but in the minds of the more traditional readers, one could imagine the formation of sceptical conclusions as to Sorabji's intentions; he was seen as creating complexity for its own sake.

One such critic was Harvey Grace of the *Musical Times*, who followed Sorabji's early career with what seemed like a very open and receptive mind, yet was equally unabashed in expressing what he viewed as impossible obstacles in Sorabji's

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<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately the London Organ School, founded by Frederick Scotson Clark, no longer exists and its student records, if they are extant at all, have as yet not been found. The details of Sorabji's education with Charles Trew are completely unknown.

compositions and offered without hesitation his professional advice to the composer. Of course the advice given would not only have irritated Sorabji (while perhaps pleasing his vanity), but would also have fallen on deaf ears. As a reaction to the recently published Sonata No. 1 (1919),<sup>12</sup> Harvey Grace had the following to say:

I seem to remember receiving a prospectus in which we were told that the Sonata is so difficult that it cannot be memorised. Certainly Mr. Sorabji is entitled to such credit as is due to the composer of what is probably the most difficult pianoforte work in existence. But music of this type should be written for an automatic instrument, not one calling for the agency of human fingers. Mr. Sorabji would have done better to publish it straight away as a player piano roll. I hear that a Sonata No. 2 is on the way, so perhaps he will consider the suggestion...I note that Mr. Sorabji has thoughtfully – perhaps ironically – reserved the right of performance.<sup>13</sup>

Needless to say, Sorabji did not take Grace's advice, resulting in a continuation in the same vein upon the publication of the *Sonata seconda for Piano* (1920):<sup>14</sup>

The music is unplayable for all but virtuosi; it is of such complexity that mental hearing of it is impossible save in brief passages; and a painful reading of it at the keyboard is useless, because music so dissonant cannot be judged when played at any but its right speed, when the various conflicting elements fall into their place instead of sticking out. At times Mr. Sorabji appears to ask of the instrument rather more than it can do with clarity, but here again one speaks with diffidence. Perhaps in such passages clarity is not required. After looking at these bewildering pages one can only say that the proper medium for such music is the player piano. If Mr. Sorabji wishes to write for the ordinary pianoforte, he should express himself in such a way that the ordinary, keen player should be able to tackle the result with at least as much success as he is able to achieve in tackling

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<sup>12</sup> Sonata No. 1 was published in 1921, two years after the date of its composition. Sorabji played the Sonata to its dedicatee, Ferruccio Busoni, in 1919 and from that occasion the young Sorabji procured from his idol a letter of recommendation for the publication of his compositions. For a translation of the letter, which was originally written in French, see the liner notes to Marc-André Hamelin's recording of the Sonata, Altarus AIR-CD-9050 or Kenneth Derus, "Sorabji's letters to Heseltine," in *Sorabji: a critical celebration*, 253-254.

<sup>13</sup> There was typically a delay of time between the date in which Sorabji's composed a piece of music and when it was actually published, which should explain the distinction in dates between the composition date of Sorabji's music and the date in which Grace wrote his article. Harvey Grace, "New music: pianoforte music," *The Musical Times* (1 November 1921): 781.

<sup>14</sup> The *Sonata seconda for piano*, composed in 1920, was published in 1923; it was dedicated and then given to Busoni, presumably as an expression of gratitude for Busoni's letter of recommendation. If there were any other secret desires built into the gift of the *Sonata seconda*, an invitation for tutelage for example, they remained unspoken and were never realised.

the classical pianoforte repertory. At present Mr. Sorabji is holding us at arm's length; if he has anything good to say, we want to come in and share it.<sup>15</sup>

Despite such warnings of musical isolationism, resulting from the alienation of all but the most titanic of pianists, Grace was never harsh in his treatment of Sorabji's music and modestly admitted that the sensuality of his soundworld surpassed his own musical understanding. The following review of *In the Hothouse* and *Toccata* (1918, 1920)<sup>16</sup> acknowledges, as it must, the 'fiendishly difficult' nature of the compositions, but Grace admits, upon seeing with his very eyes the realisation of the miracle, that Sorabji's compositions are actually playable:

The present writer has had the pleasure of hearing him play these works, and so is able to testify that they really do 'come off.' It is impossible to give any idea of this extraordinary music without copious use of examples, which considerations of space forbid. It must suffice to draw attention to the pieces for the benefit of pianists who want something really craggy at which to throw themselves.<sup>17</sup>

Grace's optimism for the realisation of Sorabji's 'difficult' music was short lived, being completely obliterated by the arrival of what Sorabji considered his first mature work, the *Symphony No. 1 for organ* (1924, published 1925):

Organ technique has made such astonishing advances during recent years that one has to be wary in the use of the term 'unplayable.' Yet I think it may be safely applied to Kaikhosru Sorabji's *Symphony*, just published by Curwen...I have dealt at some length with the *Symphony* because, having so often pleaded the cause of the organ as a medium of serious works by contemporary composers, I cannot in fairness take the easy line of ignoring or pooh-pooh-ing this extraordinary effort merely because of its extreme dissonance and its difficulty. I have a fancy that some day Mr. Sorabji will write more simply. If so, let us trust he will not forget the organ. A composer with his unusual mental gifts and contrapuntal skill should find a good outlet in the instrument. But I hope he will be content to write for ordinary players, not for supermen. After all, the average good player can tackle anything of Bach, and he is naturally inclined to point out that if such a giant as John Sebastian can express himself in reasonably negotiable terms, smaller men

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<sup>15</sup> Harvey Grace, "New music: pianoforte music," *The Musical Times* (1 June 1924): 520.

<sup>16</sup> *In the Hothouse* and *Toccata* were published in 1921 under the unassuming joint title 'Two Piano Pieces.'

<sup>17</sup> Harvey Grace, "Pianoforte music," *The Musical Times* (1 September 1922): 640.

should not make immensely larger technical demands unless the result is at least equally worth while.<sup>18</sup>

That the Symphony No. 1 is a practical impossibility was refuted by the immense efforts of the English organist Kevin Bowyer who recorded the composition in 1988,<sup>19</sup> admittedly after the work had protected its reputation for over 60 years.<sup>20</sup> Grace was also wrong concerning the role of simplicity within Sorabji's future output, the complexity of which continued to escalate, culminating with the appearance of his infamous 253 page *Opus Clavicembalisticum* for solo piano, the last of his works to be published as a result of his own efforts.<sup>21</sup> Sorabji appears to have heeded the advice of his friend, the poet Hugh MacDiarmid, when composing what was to be his largest composition to date:

Many years ago now – forty years perhaps – he [Sorabji] was involved in one of the common controversies in *The New Age*, when people who were baffled by his big works said, 'Let him give some proof of his ability by doing a few song settings or something of that kind' – something within our own compass. I strongly advised him not to do anything of the kind, if he was tempted at all. He wasn't tempted, but I strongly advised him, on the contrary, to go for bigger and bigger forms and not in any way at all to play down to the masses.<sup>22</sup>

Sorabji was from the very beginning of his compositional career particular regarding who should perform his music, desiring players with sufficient intellectual and technical capacity to grasp the essence of his compositions.<sup>23</sup> In his early publications he

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<sup>18</sup> Grace's critical tone regarding the complexity and playability of Sorabji's music was fairly typical in regards to how the composer's music was received by the general musical establishment. Harvey Grace, "New music: organ music," *The Musical Times* (1 July 1926): 615-617.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Bowyer, *Kaikhosru Sorabji: Organ Symphony No. 1*, Continuum CCD 1001/2, 1988, compact disc.

<sup>20</sup> E. Emyln Davies gave a partial performance of the organ symphony, specifically the second movement, in London on the 17 May 1928.

<sup>21</sup> Donald Garvelmann and Ronald Stevenson were responsible for the publication of two piano works much later in Sorabji's life, respectively his Pastiche on Chopin's Valse, Op. 64, No. 1 (1922) in 1969 and the *Fantasiettina sul nome illustre dell'egregio poeta Christopher Grieve ossia Hugh M'Diarmid* (1987), published in the same year.

<sup>22</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, John Ogdon, and Ronald Stevenson, "Sorabji Symposium," *Gambit: Edinburgh University Review* (Summer 1965), 6. This article was reprinted and integrated into Hugh MacDiarmid's *The Company I've Kept* (London: Hutchinson, 1966). *Opus Clavicembalisticum* was dedicated to Hugh MacDiarmid.

<sup>23</sup> Early performances of Sorabji's compositions were very rare, but besides being his own champion in the early 1930s, acquiescing to the request of his friend Erik Chisholm that he should play for the Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music, there were other performances by Marthe Martine,

merely had printed, ‘All rights including that of performance reserved by the composer.’ This reasonable concern evolved by the time of the publication of *Opus Clavicembalisticum* into a more sensitive, barbed, and absolute defence mechanism, presenting sheer irony for the musicians who purchased and quite naturally may have had ambitions to perform the work: ‘Public performances prohibited unless by express consent of the composer.’ Sorabji premiered what was at the time the longest non-repetitive piano composition written, *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, on 1 December 1930 in Glasgow for the Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music, but it was not long before the alluring challenges of the composition seduced another pianist, John Tobin, to attempt a performance of its massive structure, or at least part of it. This now famous performance took place in London’s Cowdray Hall on 10 March 1936. Tobin elected to perform only the *pars prima* of the composition, essentially the first 94 pages of the published score, but committed himself to tempi that were considered too lethargic, resulting in a performance duration of 80-90 minutes, as opposed to Sorabji’s suggestion of a mere 40 minutes. Sorabji tried to distance himself from what he deemed an appalling realisation of his music and subsequently insisted that he had not been present at the concert. This of course was not true, for his friend Mervyn Vicars attended the performance with him and made this little fact known to Alistair Hinton after the composer’s death.<sup>24</sup> Although the psychological impetus for the shift in Sorabji’s attitude regarding performances of his own music should not be over-simplified, Tobin’s disastrous performance has generally been regarded as the catalyst for Sorabji’s next major decision, to ban all public performances of his music.

The ‘ban,’ as it has come to be called, was not legally enforceable, nor would there have been dire consequences for anyone who infringed it. It was a declaration made verbally and in correspondence with such vehemence and finality that Sorabji more or less achieved his aim of having complete control over the performance of his compositions; in particular it delayed the gifted English pianist, John Ogdon, who had known *Opus Clavicembalisticum* since 1959, from performing it until 1988, at the very

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Harold Rutland, and E. Emlyn Davies, all of whom were exceptional musicians and close friends of Sorabji’s.

<sup>24</sup> This story was related to me in conversation on two separate occasions, once by Alistair Hinton and a second time by Mervyn’s widow, Denise Vicars.

end of the composer's life. Although Sorabji did not attempt to suppress the accessibility of those of his compositions that were already published, after *Opus Clavicembalisticum* he saw no reason to have any further works printed and presented so nicely to the public. It is difficult to understand the reasons that led Sorabji to prevent his compositions being performed, while at the same time continuing to compose prolifically. The 'ban' is perhaps best seen as an example of musical escapism that preceded Sorabji's corporeal escapism - that is, his moving from London to Corfe Castle and - although his friends respected his decision to retain his art for himself, they did not necessarily comprehend his intentions or agree with them. As Sorabji's dear friend Clinton Gray-Fisk once wrote:

I myself deplore Sorabji's attitude over his music and his complete withdrawal from musical life, and have told him so.<sup>25</sup>

A few months later he reiterated this idea with even more poignancy:

It is an unfortunate and regrettable attitude, but there it is – that's him [Sorabji].<sup>26</sup>

Gray-Fisk's comments pertain to a very specific and arduously developed event that attempted, with eventual success, to overcome Sorabji's isolationist attitude from which the ban sprung. There was an increasing concern amongst Sorabji's close friends and admirers regarding his ever growing and unperformed oeuvre. Nobody knew what would come of his manuscripts and his legacy, so in 1952, in an attempt to break the silence, Frank Holliday initiated a scheme that would allow Sorabji to record some of his music within the comfort of his own home.<sup>27</sup> It took ten years of preparation and persuasion, but Sorabji did eventually relent and from 1962-68 he recorded a number of

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<sup>25</sup> Clinton Gray-Fisk, St. John's Wood, to Mervyn Vicars, Swanage, 1 October 1952, letter typed by Clinton Gray-Fisk, private collection.

<sup>26</sup> Clinton Gray-Fisk, St. John's Wood, to Mervyn Vicars, Swanage, 13 December 1952, letter typed by Clinton Gray-Fisk, private collection.

<sup>27</sup> The official letter that was sent to Sorabji requested that he record some of his own compositions and for this end a cheque was included that would cover the cost of the process. It would seem that Sorabji eventually agreed to the idea, being persuaded and flattered by the inclusion of 23 signatures from friends and admired colleagues who participated in this scheme: York Bowen, H. J. Cooper, Frank Holiday, John Ireland, Norman Peterkin, Alec Rowley, Osbert Sitwell, Mervyn Vicars, Dion Byngham, E. Edroff-Smith, Paul Howard, Clinton Gray-Fisk, Egon Petri, Harold Morland, George Richards, Frida Kindler-van Dieren, Erik Chisholm, Norman P. Gentieu, Philip Mairet, Harold Rutland, Roger Quilter, Denis Saurat, and Bernard Stevens.

his solo piano works.<sup>28</sup> Sorabji was quite elderly at the time, which could partially explain the varied performance standards of the recordings, but despite their inaccuracies they do offer a sense of Sorabji's interpretive soundworld. Perhaps more importantly, his succumbing to the recording invitation was the first sign of an attitudinal shift regarding performances of his music in general.

It was an Anglo-American virtual simultaneity that finally brought about the cessation of the ban in the early 1970s. Donald Garvelmann in the U.S.A. and Alistair Hinton in the U.K. were instrumental in promoting two pianists, Michael Habermann and Yonty Solomon respectively, who became the first individuals to obtain Sorabji's blessing to play his music before an audience.<sup>29</sup> The efforts of these two capable and ambitious pianists sparked renewed interest in Sorabji as a composer and personality, inspiring premieres of his music, musicological enquiries, and concrete methods for preserving his manuscripts.

By the time of his death on 15 October 1988, Sorabji had formed a gargantuan body of creative work amounting to roughly 16,000 pages of musical manuscript. Yet his productivity was not limited to composition: he was also a gifted writer with a highly individual voice – once one has read an article or letter by Sorabji one can always identify his style, so individual was his approach to language. He published two books of essays, *Around Music* (1932) and *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (1947),<sup>30</sup> as well as a plethora of articles and letters-to-the-editor for such

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<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately the location of the recordings that Sorabji made with Erik Chisholm in London in 1962, which included *Passeggiata veneziana* and the Third Symphony for Piano Solo, is currently unknown and presumably they are lost. But the Frank Holliday sessions, which took place in Sorabji's home in Corfe Castle, do exist, held in a collection at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada and include *Concerto da suonare da me solo e senza orchestra, per divertirsi, Gulistān, St. Bertrand de Comminges: "He was laughing in the tower," "Quære reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora*, the Second Symphony for Piano, the Fourth Symphony for Piano, *Jāmī*, and a dozen of the *Études transcendantes*.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Habermann ended the ban with an authorised performance of *Fantaisie espagnole* on the 12 July 1973 in New York, while Yonty Solomon gave the first authorised performance in Britain on the 7 December 1976 in London at the Wigmore Hall. Solomon's recital included *Fantaisie espagnole*, Two Piano Pieces (*In the Hothouse* and *Toccata*), and *Le jardin parfumé*. The permission to allow Solomon to perform in England is significant, for when Habermann was granted the privilege of lifting the ban, Sorabji placed upon him one important stipulation; that he was not to perform his music in England. At that time Sorabji had yet to efface his loathing of the London music scene.

<sup>30</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, *Around Music* (London: Unicorn Press, 1932, reprint, Westport: Hyperion Press, 1979); *Mi contra fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: Porcupine Press, 1947, reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1986).

diverse periodicals as *The Musical Times*, *The New Age*, *The Catholic Herald*, and the *Occult Review*. The literary aspect of Sorabji's creative profusion was highly regarded, especially his concert reviews, which earned him a considerable following as a music critic in London. His tastes were antipathetic to the canonic musical figures of the first half of the century, Britten, Holst, Hindemith, Schoenberg, and most venomously, Stravinsky:

Stravinsky...is a personality fundamentally raw, crude and coarse-fibred, expressing itself at times with a clumsy, brutal, but compelling power – a musical nature that is never capable of attaining to line-drawing at all, but which achieves its effects by the violence with which a great gobbet of sound is flung, so to speak, into the aural eye of the hearer. His inability to get line makes some of us indeed question his right to be considered a composer at all.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, he had endless praise for the works of Busoni, Medtner, Delius, Szymanowski, as well as both Mahler and Rachmaninov at a time when they were almost wholly neglected in England.

All in all, Sorabji was in life a fascinating personality, who had exceptional talents both for music and letters, who strove against mediocrity without clinging to the safety net of the established musical canon and who, under other circumstances, might perhaps have been deemed one of the great masters of twentieth-century music. Such thoughts were vividly clear in the mind of Alistair Hinton, Sorabji's trusted friend and heir, who after the composer's death formed the Sorabji Archive, a depository of Sorabji related information and artefacts, which supplies musical scores and biographical resources for both musicians and scholars. From this central base of influence, along with Hinton's tireless enthusiasm and advocacy for bringing enhanced recognition to Sorabji's work, a procession of important musicians has arisen, vanguards for the presentation and recording of Sorabji's music: Marc-André Hamelin, Donna Amato, Jonathan Powell, Kevin Bowyer, and Fredrik Ullén, to name but a few.

Although the musicological exploration of Sorabji's life and music has been rather limited, there does exist – in addition to the dozen or so 'musicological' articles –

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<sup>31</sup> Sorabji, "Animadversions on singing in general, with remarks on the misuse of the term *coloratura*," in *Around Music*, 39. A particular composition was not in Sorabji's mind when this statement was penned, for he disliked Stravinsky's art in general.

three major works that have greatly added to our understanding of Sorabji. On the specifically musical side, Michael Habermann's dissertation on the composer's nocturnes, which although focused upon *Le jardin parfumé* (1923), explores Sorabji's piano style in general and includes a useful compilation of signature compositional techniques exhibited in his oeuvre; Simon Abrahams' more recent dissertation explores the myths and realities of Sorabji's performance capacities and compositional abilities, including useful essays on Sorabji's notation and musical language.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the single most important volume dedicated to Sorabji, however is *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, edited by Paul Rapoport, which combines the efforts of eight contributors who explore and relate various aspects of Sorabji's world, including biographical sketches, individuals' recollections of the composer (essentially oral biography), an invaluable and complete catalogue of Sorabji's compositions, discussions of his music, both theoretical and interpretive, samples from his correspondences and examples of his musical criticism.<sup>33</sup> Further biographical elucidation will surely be obtained with time, but, until then, this dissertation will assist in remedying the established falsehoods that surround Sorabji's life, while at the same time constructing new perspectives for a more thorough understanding of the realities of his existence.

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Habermann, "A style of the nocturnes for solo piano by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji with special emphasis on *Le Jardin Parfumé*" (Ph.D. diss., The Peabody Conservatory of Music, 1984); Simon Abrahams, "*Le mauvais jardinier*: a reassessment of the myths and music of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji" (Ph.D. diss., King's College London, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> Paul Rapoport, ed., *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994). The eight contributors to this impressive work of 512 pages were Paul Rapoport, Alistair Hinton, Frank Holliday, Kenneth Derus, Nazlin Bhimani, Michael Habermann, Geoffrey Douglas Madge, and Marc-André Roberge.

## Chapter Two – Genealogy and Ethnicity

Those who have written about Sorabji either in passing, in brief, or in extended depth, have always regarded it as necessary to place the name Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji into an ethnic context. Sorabji himself often declared that his father was a Parsi and that his mother was mixed Sicilian-Spanish. In Corfe Castle he often spoke with the villagers and published letters in the local paper about the prestige of his mixed ethnicity, the antiquity of Zoroastrianism, the spirit of Moorish Spain, and his influential ancestry in Sicily. This self-delineation was expressed in his intellectual pursuits and physical mannerisms; behavioural proofs, if you will, as to the authenticity of his claim. If we examine these three specific strands of ethnicity individually - Parsi, Spanish, and Sicilian - the first is the most convincing, for it was conveyed in his name and in the eloquent familiarity with which he wrote about Zoroastrianism; his appearance too, indicated his Indian ancestry, where the Parsis have flourished for the last 1300 years, after fleeing Islamic persecution in their native Persia (present-day Iran).

Sorabji's mother, as depicted in the few extant photographs, had dark hair and dark eyes, that is to say, she did not necessarily look English at all: she had one of those appearances that could suggest any of a number of European, especially Mediterranean heritages. Yet we are told specifically that she was Spanish and Sicilian. The influence of Spain on Sorabji is most notable in his compositions,<sup>34</sup> many of which pay homage to Spanish musical culture by evoking familiar Spanish dance forms and exhibiting distinctly Spanish-like melodic contours and rhythmic patterns. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a vogue for Spanish composers such as Albéniz, Granados, and de Falla, and Spanish music was emulated by foreign composers like Bizet, Debussy, Ravel, and Rimsky-Korsakov. Sorabji admired this musical genre and by asserting a blood relation to Spain he could claim a degree of artistic credibility and authenticity denied to the latter grouping of composers, who according to such criteria must be deemed as imitators.

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<sup>34</sup> For example, *Quasi habanera*, Op. 8 (1917), *Fantaisie espagnole* (1919), *Fantasia ispanica* (1933), *Études transcendantes*, No. 84: *Tango habanera* (c. 1944), *Sequentia cyclica super "Dies iræ" ex Missa pro defunctis*, No. 15: *Hispanica* (c. 1948).

Whereas the Spanish connection was only occasionally alluded to in his lifetime, Sorabji's Sicilian background was incessantly, assertively, and dramatically pronounced in various ways. Sorabji was a talented linguist, with varying degrees of fluency or familiarity in Latin, Spanish, French, and German, but arguably, English aside, he was most comfortable in Italian, with which he peppered many of his letters and which he adopted for the titles of many of his compositions.<sup>35</sup> His ability to speak Italian, considering his isolation in England, could quite convincingly be attributed to the influence of his mother. Also from his mother or rather more specifically through his mother, Sorabji supposedly inherited the massive and visually stunning ring that adorned his hand and was observed with much attention and curiosity by all whom he met. This ornate gold ring with its sizeable intaglio amethyst was often described by Sorabji as the property of one of his Sicilian ancestors, who was a Cardinal in line for the papacy. The ring had subsequently become a family heirloom, which eventually found its way to Sorabji, a sign of Catholic pedigree that was flaunted on his finger.

Parsi, Spanish, and Sicilian: this is what Sorabji wanted his observers to believe; it is perhaps what Sorabji wished to believe; but the reality of his family background is actually quite different from his life-long self-representation. To begin with, Sorabji's ring, which symbolised the essence of his elite Sicilian heritage, was such an intriguing artefact that Alistair Hinton and I spent a day in London talking with specialists from Sotheby's and the Victoria & Albert Museum,<sup>36</sup> who, upon investigation, concluded that the ring was actually found to be a relatively modern piece of London craftsmanship. The hallmarks on the setting date the ring to 1914,<sup>37</sup> made of 18ct. gold, with the makers initials of "A.P.," suggesting the London based firm of Paton & Co.<sup>38</sup> With one

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<sup>35</sup> For example, *Cinque sonetti di Michelagnolo Buonarroti* (1923), *Un nido di scatole* (1954), *Passeggiata veneziana* (1955-56), *Rosario d'arabeschi* (1956), *Benedizione di San Francesco d'Assisi* (1973), and *Villa Tasca* (1979-80), to name but a few.

<sup>36</sup> I am most grateful to Anabel York at Sotheby's and more particularly to Richard Edgcumbe of the Victoria and Albert Museum for their assistance in identifying the nature of Sorabji's ring.

<sup>37</sup> Although the hallmark simply authenticates the gold and does not necessarily indicate the year of the ring's construction, it should be observed that the force required to stamp the hallmark into the ring would have slightly marred the delicate filigree on the underside of the setting and, in the case of Sorabji's ring, the filigree is in perfect condition, thus confirming that in this case, the hallmark does signify the date of the ring's creation. Richard Edgcumbe of the Victoria and Albert Museum made this insightful observation.

<sup>38</sup> At the time of the ring's creation in 1914 Paton & Co. was known as Paton, Mege & Warwick. They had two sites from which they worked: 31 Gerrard Street, Soho, West London and 10 Great Pulteney Street,

exception, the symbol of unknown origin and meaning carved into the gargantuan amethyst, the piece of jewellery is in the style of a bishop's ring and may actually have been in the possession of a bishop at one time. But at this point the lack of evidence detailing exactly how and when Sorabji came to own this beautiful item forces one to wonder whether it was given to Sorabji at the passing of a friend who happened to be a bishop, which seems a rather unlikely option; whether he commissioned the piece for himself as a young man of 22 years of age; or, more likely, whether he simply purchased the ring at some point after 1914, was attracted to its Christian physical suggestions, had the stone engraved, and then conceived the magnificent fiction about his Sicilian relative who was in line for the papacy. These observations regarding the ring bring into question the authenticity of Sorabji's ancestral claim, yet as an isolated embellishment it does not challenge in any conclusive manner the notion of his Sicilian background. Further evidence has emerged however, which does precisely that.

In the liner notes to Jonathan Powell's recording of Sorabji's *Villa Tasca and Passeggiata veneziana*,<sup>39</sup> there is an excellent essay, accompanied by supporting photographs, that details Sorabji's enthusiasm for Italian culture, his sojourns in that country, and his maternal relationship to Sicily. Powell explains, as it has generally been accepted, that 'Sorabji's mother was apparently Sicilian by birth, and although she seems to have been adopted by an English family in the 1870s she described herself as Spanish-Sicilian in origin. Her family name – Malvitano di Sanctis – is not uncommon in the Palermo district and she told her son that the noteworthy church La Martorana, situated in the centre of old Palermo near the Quattro canti, was the one her family attended.'

This has been the predominant view regarding Sorabji's mother: that she was indeed of mixed Sicilian-Spanish blood and that the explanation for her presence in England is due to her being adopted by an English family. Never mind the fact that the circumstances of her adoption, and what became of her natural parents, has never been described; perhaps Sorabji did not know. My research into the various biographical mysteries and unexplained details surrounding Sorabji's mother, began from the

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Golden Square, Soho, West London. John Culme, *The Directory of Gold & Silversmiths: Jewellers & Allied Traders 1838-1914* (Suffolk: Woodbridge, 1987), 359.

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Powell, *Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji: Villa Tasca & Passeggiata veneziana*, Altarus Records AIR-CD-9067, 2002, Compact Disc.

observation of a curious contradiction. From the Family Records Centre in London I was able to procure her marriage and death certificates. According to the certificate of her marriage to Sorabji's father on 18 February 1892,<sup>40</sup> her name was Madeline Matilda Wortley and she was 21 years of age at the time, which, coupled with Sorabji's own assertion that his mother was born on 13 August<sup>41</sup> (a day before his own birthday) would have placed her birth year as 1870. Incidentally the marriage certificate also stated her father's name (I assumed at the time her adopted father), Francis John Wortley. Yet her death certificate, 5 May 1959,<sup>42</sup> which named her Madeleine Marguerite Mathilde Shapurji Sorabji - already presenting a conflict in name - stated that she was 85 years of age at the time of death, suggesting a birth year of 1873. I also noticed that in Sorabji's own birth certificate, his mother's maiden name was not given as Wortley, but rather as Worthy.<sup>43</sup> More than the discrepancy of her Christian names, which might simply be accounted for by the whims of taste (it was not uncommon for an individual to alter their name nor was it illegal to do so in England), I was struck by the difference in Madeline's given birth years. It seemed to me logical that the years 1870 and 1873 could not both be correct. Therefore either one of the given years was the true year of her birth or, quite possibly, neither one of them was accurate. It has been said that Madeline was adopted; therefore it was not surprising that a search, through the birth records in the Family Record Centre for a Madeline with the surname of either Wortley or Worthy under the years 1870 and 1873, resulted in nothing. Yet I could not comprehend the reasoning behind the age difference in the certificates: was it simply a mistake or was it indicative of some form of deception? To the latter possibility, I began the highly time-consuming process of scouring through the birth certificates in search for Madeline, beginning quite arbitrarily in the year 1875 and working backwards chronologically. After two full days of unsuccessful page flipping I finally found what I had been looking for but never expected to find.

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<sup>40</sup> Marriage certificate for Shapurji Sorabji and Madeline Matilda Wortley, 18 February 1892, Family Record Centre, London.

<sup>41</sup> This month and day was provided by Sorabji in a letter to Kenneth Derus, 31 July 1976, and was confirmed by the information provided on Madeline's passport.

<sup>42</sup> Death certificate for Madeleine Marguerite Mathilde Shapurji Sorabji, 5 May 1959, Family Record Centre, London.

<sup>43</sup> Birth certificate for Leon Dudley Sorabji, 14 August 1892, Family Record Centre, London.

Sorabji's mother did indeed have a birth certificate: she was born Madeline Matilda Worthy on 13 August 1866 in Camberwell, Surrey.<sup>44</sup> Therefore she was 25 years of age, not 21, when she married Shapurji Sorabji, and 92, not 85, when she passed away. Her father's name was Francis John Worthy, a messenger for the Admiralty, and her mother's was Sarah Matilda Wood. The discovery of this record is of immense importance for it reveals that she was not adopted after all, and her mother's name - Wood, a distinctively English family name - dispels the notion that she was of Sicilian-Spanish heritage, at least in any immediate sense. Madeline was not just born in England, she was English and by extension, Sorabji himself was half English.

With the names of Madeline's parents it was possible to construct a limited family tree using the International Genealogical Index (IGI), a family research database provided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The IGI revealed the places where seven out of the eight children of Francis John and Sarah Matilda Worthy were christened. The majority of the children, including Sorabji's mother, were christened at St. Stephen on Coleman Street in London, which unfortunately no longer exists. This church was destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666, rebuilt by Christopher Wren and then badly damaged during a German bombing raid in 1940. The ruin of the church was demolished and the site sold for modern development; no physical trace of it survives. Fortunately the christening and baptismal records survived and were deposited in the Guildhall Library. Although it is possible that Madeline may have converted to Catholicism later in her life, from which Sorabji could have obtained his sympathetic partiality to the Catholic religion, it is important to point out that St. Stephen was an Anglican church.<sup>45</sup>

The baptismal records for St. Stephen<sup>46</sup> provided the birth dates for the majority of Madeline's siblings and this information then allowed me to obtain the appropriate birth certificates from the Family Record Centre. In total, with an arduous search for the eldest child and the details for the youngest child provided by Alistair Hinton from the

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<sup>44</sup> Birth certificate for Madeline Matilda Worthy, 13 August 1866, Family Record Centre, London.

<sup>45</sup> Madeline's parents were both christened in Anglican churches as well, her father at St. Mary's in Portsea, Hampshire and her mother at St. George the Martyr in Southwark, London. This information was obtained from the IGI terminals at the Family Record Centre, London.

<sup>46</sup> Baptismal Records for France Caroline Worthy, Madeline Matilda Worthy, John Ethelbert Edward Worthy, Leon Adonis Worthy, Lionel Claude Worthy, and Frank Geoffry Worthy, Ms. 4454/3 1840-1873, p. 200, Guildhall Library.

Sorabji Archive,<sup>47</sup> it is now clear that Francis John and Sarah Matilda Worthy had eight children, or, as it pertains directly to Sorabji, he had on his mother's side of the family five uncles and two aunts:

TABLE 1  
THE CHILDREN OF FRANCIS JOHN AND SARAH MATILDA WORTHY<sup>48</sup>

<b>Name</b>	<b>Birthplace</b>	<b>Birth Date</b>
<b>Colin Manly</b>	Hull	17 September 1860
<b>Frances Caroline</b>	Whitechapel	5 September 1862
<b>John Ethelbert Edward</b>	Camberwell	14 June 1864
<b>Madeline Matilda</b>	Camberwell	13 August 1866
<b>Leon Adonis</b>	Newington	21 July 1869
<b>Lionel Claude</b>	St. Saviour	22 March 1871
<b>Frank Geoffry</b>	City of London	30 May 1873
<b>Blanche Winifred</b>	St. Olave, Southwark	6 March 1875

Sorabji's maternal grandfather, Francis John Worthy (ca.1822-1879), seems to have been from Hampshire. His christening took place at St. Mary's church in Portsea.<sup>49</sup> Nothing is known about his youth or the number of siblings he may have had, but ultimately he followed his father's example and joined the Navy.<sup>50</sup> He married Sorabji's maternal grandmother, Sarah Matilda Worthy, née Wood (1833-1915) on 3 August 1856. It is interesting to note that Francis and Sarah were married in the Anglican Church, St. George the Martyr, in Southwark, London, which seems to have been Sarah's family church, for it was also the location of her christening.<sup>51</sup> Francis and Sarah may have

<sup>47</sup> The Sorabji Archive possesses a birth certificate, baptismal record, and Will for a Blanche Winifred Dieckmann, the last referring to Kaikhosru Sorabji as her nephew. Since the Worthy connection had yet to be established in relationship with Sorabji, these legal documents were seen as great unanswered questions, which have only now been answered.

<sup>48</sup> Birth certificates for Colin Manly, 17 September 1860; Frances Caroline, 5 September 1862; John Ethelbert Edward, 14 June 1864; Madeline Matilda, 13 August 1866; Leon Adonis, 21 July 1869; Lionel Claude, 22 March 1871; Frank Geoffry, 30 May 1873; Blanche Winifred, 6 March 1875; Family Record Centre, London.

<sup>49</sup> Birth records at the Family Record Centre do not extend back to the years that would have provided the exact date of Francis John Worthy's birth. Fortunately the place and date of his christening was found on the IGI. His death certificate was readily available from the Family Record Centre. Francis John Worthy, United Kingdom death certificate, St. Olave, 1879, Family Record Centre, London.

<sup>50</sup> Francis John Worthy's marriage certificate, 1856, reveals that his father, John Worthy, was in Her Majesty's Navy. The IGI provided the name of Francis's mother, Mary Ann Worthy, although nothing more is known about her, neither her dates nor her maiden name.

<sup>51</sup> The location of Sarah Matilda Worthy's christening and her parents' names were retrieved from the IGI, which also provided the names of her parents, John and Sarah Wood. Sarah Matilda's marriage certificate states that John Wood was a tailor by profession. Francis John Worthy and Sarah Matilda Wood, United Kingdom marriage certificate, St. George the Martyr, 1856, Family Record Centre, London.

known one another for some time prior to their wedding, as they were already living together at the time of their marriage.<sup>52</sup>

It appears that Francis obtained orders from the Navy to move north to Hull, where Colin Manly Worthy (1860-1937), their first child, was born.<sup>53</sup> But they did not remain there very long, since their second child, Frances Caroline Worthy (1862-?), was born in London but two years later. Francis' role in the Navy changed from being an active seaman to a messenger for the Admiralty, a position that he was to maintain throughout his active service.<sup>54</sup> Although the family stayed in the greater London area, their actual residence changed every couple of years. The cause for this seems to have been one of practicality, for they constantly required greater space for their quickly growing family.

TABLE 2  
RESIDENCES OF THE WORTHY FAMILY<sup>55</sup>

<b>Date of Residence</b>	<b>Address</b>
<b>17 September 1860</b>	6 Vicars Lane, Hull
<b>5 September 1862</b>	88 Leman Street, Whitechapel
<b>14 June 1864</b>	15 Marlborough Road, Old Kent Road, Camberwell
<b>13 August 1866</b>	28 Victoria Terrace, St. George's Road, Camberwell
<b>21 July 1869</b>	32 Carter Street, Walworth
<b>22 March 1871</b>	44 Edward Street, Newington
<b>20 May 1873</b>	13 Great Seven Alley, Moorgate Street, London
<b>6 March 1875</b>	27 Queens Street, St. Johns, Southwark

27 Queens Street remained the family's household until at least September 1879, as stated in the Will of Francis John Worthy, who died two months earlier from an

<sup>52</sup> The marriage certificate, under the column "Residence at the time of Marriage," states that Francis and Sarah were both living at the same address in Suffolk Street.

<sup>53</sup> Colin Manly Worthy's birth certificate states that his father, Francis John, was a seaman on the H.M.S. Cornwallis. The H.M.S. Cornwallis was a 200 horsepower, screw steam ship, with a capacity of 60 crewmembers, which in 1860 was a Coast Guard vessel. The 1861 census shows that Francis and Sarah, along with their six-month old child, were still living in Hull, but it also provides the birthplace of Sarah Wood, Sarah Matilda's mother and Sorabji's great-grandmother, who was a visitor in the Worthy household at the time of the census. Sarah Wood was born in Whimple, Devon.

<sup>54</sup> There is no evidence to support Madeline Matilda's claim in her marriage certificate that her father obtained the rank of Captain.

<sup>55</sup> The addresses were obtained from the birth certificates of Francis and Sarah's eight children.

abscess in the liver at the age of 57.<sup>56</sup> Sarah Matilda Worthy never remarried and outlived her husband by 36 years, finally succumbing to ‘senile decay’ on 19 May 1915 at Tooting Asylum, London.<sup>57</sup> Sorabji was 24 at the time of his grandmother’s passing, but unfortunately Sarah Matilda did not leave a Will, which would have been one of the few documentary sources that could have made an active connection between Sorabji and his grandmother.

Although there are no documents that can illustrate how close-knit the sense of family unity was between the various Worthy children, material does exist which suggests that Sorabji was in contact with at least one of his uncles and both of his aunts; these documents confirmed that the direction of the genealogical research was not misguided. Located within Sorabji’s address book is an entry for his uncle Claude Worthy, who lived in Adelaide, Australia.<sup>58</sup> This address was scribbled out and not updated, but within Claude’s Will we learn that he returned to London, where he died in Guy’s Hospital on 7 October 1955.<sup>59</sup> Also within Claude’s Will his occupation is identified as a retired ship’s carpenter, a career that may have been the motivation for his transient move to Australia.

The youngest of the Worthy children, Blanche Winifred, appointed ‘my nephew Kaikhosru Sorabji’ as the Executor of her Will, also bequeathing him £100. But in addition, Blanche’s Will refers to Madeleine Worthy and C. L. Worthy; the latter can presumably be identified as her brother Claude Lionel.<sup>60</sup> The connection between Sorabji and his other aunt, Frances Caroline, emerges from a ‘Successions to Personal Property’ form, which was granted to ‘Madeline Matilda Sorabji’ after the passing of her husband,

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<sup>56</sup> The Will of Francis Worthy states that he had a personal estate of under £200 and did not possess any leaseholds. Francis John Worthy, Probate registry, 1879, Principal Registry of the Family Division, Probate Department, London.

<sup>57</sup> Sarah Matilda Worthy, United Kingdom death certificate, Wandsworth, 1915, Family Record Centre, London.

<sup>58</sup> Private address book for Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji. Sorabji Archive, Bath.

<sup>59</sup> Claude Lionel Worthy, Probate Registry and Will, 1955, Principal Registry of the Family Division, Probate Department, London. It should also be stated that although his name appears on his birth certificate as Lionel Claude, forever after, it seems, there was a tendency to switch the order of these two names, hence Claude Lionel.

<sup>60</sup> Blanche Winifred Dieckmann, Last Will and Testament, 1936, Sorabji Archive, Bath. The alternative spelling of Madeline’s Christian name, i.e. Madeleine, is notable, particularly in view of the frequency with which (as explained below) her name was altered in various legal and casual documents.

Shapurji Sorabji, on 7 July 1932.<sup>61</sup> It appears that Frances bore witness to this specific event, signing her name as Frances Caroline Mabel Ide of 5 Richmond Mansions, London; the address and the inclusion of the name Mabel are both relevant in relation to other sources of information (the address for example is identical to that which is cited in Blanche Winifred's Will, three years later, as her last place of residence, suggesting possibly that the two sisters lived together for a time). Whether Sorabji had any interaction with his other uncles is completely unknown, but at least it can be established that as far as familial relationships were concerned, he was not isolated from Claude, Blanche, and Frances.<sup>62</sup>

The appearance of the name Mabel is important, for it reinforces the evidence as to the true identification of a very unusual, but suggestive, census entry. All official English certificates, whether marriage, birth, or death, include the current or last address of the mentioned individual, and Madeline's marriage certificate to Shapurji Sorabji states that just prior to her wedding, on 18 February 1892, she was living at 4 Lodge Road, Regent Park, London.<sup>63</sup> A national census is conducted every ten years in England and fortunately the last census prior to Madeline's marriage was in 1891. The census information for 4 Lodge Road includes a music student by the name of Madeline Kingston, who was 20 years of age, which would be consistent with the false age given by Madeline Matilda for her marriage certificate, and states that she was living with a domestic servant and her older sister, a widow 'living on her means' by the name of Flor

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<sup>61</sup> Account of the succession to personal property from Shapurji Sorabji to Madeline Matilda Sorabji, 13 February 1933, Sorabji Archive, Bath. The particular spelling of Madeline's Christian names is true to that of her birth and marriage certificates, which is not surprising since Shapurji Sorabji would have provided this spelling of her name to his solicitor.

<sup>62</sup> Very little is known about the other siblings and whether or not they maintained a relationship with their nephew Kaikhosru Sorabji. The eldest of Francis and Sarah's children, Colin Manly, who does not appear in the 1871 census, perhaps because he was in boarding school or living with a relative, passed away on 12 March 1937, leaving an estate worth £1206 to his wife, Jane "Florence" Worthy, and his two sons (Sorabji's cousins), Francis Colin and Leonard Paul Worthy. Colin Manly Worthy, Probate Registry and Will, 1937, Principal Registry of the Family Division, Probate Department, London. The fourth child of Francis and Sarah, Leon Adonis Worthy, died on 3 March 1942, leaving an estate worth £866 to his wife Mary Ann Worthy; it is curious and perhaps significant that Sorabji, being named at birth Leon Dudley, shares his first name with that of his uncle Leon Adonis. As for John Ethelbert Edward and Frank Geoffry Worthy, nothing more is known.

<sup>63</sup> Marriage certificate for Shapurji Sorabji and Madeline Matilda Wortley, 18 February 1892, Family Record Centre, London. Madeline's use of the name Wortley was not restricted to her marriage certificate: she also used it as her maiden name on her passport, issued in 1939. Madeleine Shapurji Sorabji, née Wortley, United Kingdom passport, no. 196356, Sorabji Archive, Bath.

L. Mabel Douglas, who is said to be 24 years of age.<sup>64</sup> Curiously the given age difference between the sisters in the census information is identical to that between Madeline Matilda and her older sister Frances Caroline, who was 29, not 24, in 1891. These age similarities cannot be dismissed as a coincidence since fortunately the census information also provides the birthplace of each individual mentioned and the birthplaces for the sisters coincide with the birthplaces for Madeline Matilda and Frances Caroline.<sup>65</sup> An investigation at the Family Record Centre did not reveal a single individual by the name of Madeline Kingston who would have been 20 years of age in 1891 and, as stated above, the name Mabel reappears in relationship with Frances Caroline. These further points of supporting evidence aid the unmasking of the aliases within the census information, revealing that the two sisters were living together just prior to Madeline's marriage to Shapurji Sorabji, and pose the question: why did the sisters feel that it was necessary to provide false information on a government document? Or, more importantly, what persuaded Madeline to falsify her personal data on so many legal documents?

This is an extremely difficult question to answer, and one that has thwarted extensive archival research. It seemed plausible that the root of the matter could have originated in a scandal, for example a criminal conviction, or a family or societal prejudice towards her interracial relationship with Shapurji Sorabji and their subsequently bearing a mixed-race child. As for the first possibility, there were no criminal records to be found in the Old Bailey records at the Public Record Office or the Sessions of the Peace court records at the London Metropolitan Archives for either a Madeline Worthy, Madeline Wortley, or Madeline Kingston. This does not eliminate the presence of illegal activities in Madeline's life; it could simply mean that she was never convicted. Although it is an unflattering line of enquiry to explore the possibility of Sorabji's mother being a 'criminal,' it is impossible to ignore, since active deception on government documents is highly suspicious, suggesting that one does not wish to be found. There could be an alternative explanation for her behaviour, one that is perfectly sound and

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<sup>64</sup> Census information for 4 Lodge Road, London, 1891, Reg. 103/93, p. 16.

<sup>65</sup> That is to say, by comparing the census information with the sisters' actual birth certificates, Madeline Matilda and Madeline Kingston were both said to have been born in Camberwell, while Frances Caroline and Flor L. Mabel Douglas were both said to have been born in Whitechapel.

legal, but until the truth is known it would be unscholarly to neglect avenues of research simply due to their being controversial or potentially defamatory.

It is still not known exactly how, when, or where Madeline met Shapurji Sorabji and how long they had known one another prior to their marriage. However, given Sorabji's birth date, 14 August 1892, it is evident that Madeline was three months pregnant when she entered into matrimony on 18 February 1892. Therefore they were definitely acquainted at the end of 1891, the year of the census in which Madeline assumed the surname of Kingston and committed her first falsification on a legal document. Viewed chronologically, after the 1891 census, she also falsified her marriage certificate, claiming to be younger than she really was, to have the maiden name Wortley, and belonging to a social class indicative of her father possessing the high military rank of Captain, even though the evidence reveals that Francis John Worthy's true ranking in the Navy was that of seaman and later a messenger. As an alternative to the theory of illegal behaviour, perhaps Madeline was seeking to obscure her true identity so as to assume another, one of greater mystique and higher social class than her humble working class background. The motivation for this may have lain in her relationship with Shapurji Sorabji, who was from a different ethnic background and a different, much more elevated, social bracket.

Important aspects of Shapurji Sorabji's life, due to his success as an engineer and businessman, have been recorded in a few published biographical sketches.<sup>66</sup> His family was immensely prosperous, beginning with his great-grandfather, the composer's great-great-grandfather, Shapurjee Cooverjee Sorabjee, who in the 1840s was a head of department for the Government Gun Carriage Factory in Bombay. These were the surroundings in which Shapurjee Sorabjee<sup>67</sup> senior, the composer's great-grandfather, was to obtain his practical knowledge of engineering and iron founding, and from which

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<sup>66</sup> "Shapurji Sorabji," in *Proceedings*, vol. 123, July-Dec 1932, for the Institution of Mechanical Engineers (London: Institution of Mechanical Engineers), 841-842; "Shapurjee Sorabjee," *Indian Biographical Index* (London: British Library); "Messrs. Sorabjee Shapurjee & Co.," *Cyclopedia of India, 1907-1909*, 378; John Pullin, *Progress through Mechanical Engineering: The first 150 years of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers* (London: Quiller Press, 1997), 83-84; "Mr. Shapurjee Sorabjee: A Pioneer of India's Industrial Development," *The Textile Mercury* (1 April 1905).

<sup>67</sup> Depending on the source the names can either be spelled Shapurji Sorabji or Shapurjee Sorabjee. For the sake of clarity, the composer and subject of this dissertation will be referred to as Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, his father, Shapurji Sorabji, and his great-grandfather, Shapurjee Sorabjee senior.

he was to evolve into an important pioneer in the establishment of the engineering and iron trade in India. Shapurjee Sorabjee senior was immensely ambitious, achieving within his lifetime a multitude of important industrial accomplishments in India. In 1850 he set up the first iron foundry in India, which initiated a number of other enterprising ventures, including the first flourmill in India and the introduction of machines that could open and clean wool. He travelled to the United Kingdom in the late 1860s, prior to the opening of the Suez Canal, procuring important business connections in Manchester and Glasgow. Then Shapurjee Sorabjee senior returned to Bombay and began importing all sorts of British-made machinery into India. As if his fortune was not diverse enough, he also developed at this time the first machine-powered brick-making plant in his country.

Shapurjee Sorabjee senior had but one child, a daughter named Hirabai who was married to Hormasji Cawasji Shroff, the composer's grandfather. Although they in turn had several children – five to be specific – it was their eldest son, Shapurji Hormasji Shroff, the composer's father, born in Bombay on 18 August 1863, who was from the time of his birth adopted by his grandfather and thenceforth known as Shapurji Sorabji. Young Shapurji was primed with an education that was suitable and appropriate for the eventual heir to the family business, which was fortunate indeed, since his grandfather died at the very young age of 40, which transferred control of the business to his father, who in turn died suddenly in 1876 at the age of 36. Shapurji was but thirteen when his father passed away and was as such not suitably ready to take control of the business, but within three years, after passing his matriculation exams at the University of Bombay, he did just that, seizing the reins of the family business and returning it, after a three-year period of decline, to a state of economic stability and profitability.

In 1884, so as to expand his practical knowledge, Shapurji moved to England and obtained an apprenticeship with Messrs. Hick, Hargreaves and Co. of Bolton.<sup>68</sup> Simultaneously he attended evening classes at Owens College in Manchester, where he received the Ashbury Scholarship in 1886.<sup>69</sup> He then moved to London, where he earned

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<sup>68</sup> While in England, Shapurji's business partner and brother-in-law, Ratanshaw Dadabhoy, managed the affairs of the family business in India.

<sup>69</sup> The Ashbury Scholarship or Ashbury Exhibitions were awarded to evening students in Engineering. There were two prizes, one for civil engineering and the other for mechanical engineering. £10, a fairly substantial amount of money at that time, was awarded for the best examination performance at the annual

a first-class honours degree in mechanical engineering at the City and Guilds of London Institute. In 1887, just prior to returning to India, he joined two prestigious clubs in Westminster, as a member of the Institute of Mechanical Engineers and an associate member of the Institution of Civil Engineers. It is amusing to note that on his application for the Institution of Civil Engineers he stated his birth date as 18 August 1861,<sup>70</sup> a little white lie that enabled him to surpass the 25 years of age prerequisite for becoming a member.

His career blossomed after this period, resulting in his representing several English engineering firms in India.<sup>71</sup> He returned to England on many occasions for business purposes, including in 1889, at which point he may have met Madeline Matilda and together they had a son, Leon Dudley Sorabji, i.e. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji. Regrettably Shapurji abandoned his new English family - and it is not exactly clear why - but by 1896 he was again in Bombay where he established the Globe Mills and continued his work as owner of the Bombay Foundry and Iron Works and importer of general machinery. He was appointed by the Indian Government as the first chairman of the Versova Beach Sanitary Committee in 1922 and also became interested in suburban lighting schemes. This illustrious career came to an end on 8 July 1932, when Shapurji Sorabji passed away in Bad Nauheim, Germany.<sup>72</sup>

Kaikhosru Sorabji must have had a strained relationship with his father, who he once referred to as ‘the worst human man in Bombay.’<sup>73</sup> As stated above, Shapurji abandoned his wife and son, but would now and again reappear in their lives<sup>74</sup> and

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sessional examinations. Eligibility for the award required that the student enrolled in no fewer than three engineering courses and that they had at no time been full-time day students at the college.

<sup>70</sup> Shapurjee Sorabjee, Associate Membership Form for the Institution of Civil Engineers, Form A, London, 1887.

<sup>71</sup> Shapurji imported to India ‘revolving flat cards’ from Mr. Elijah Ashworth of Manchester, engines, gearing, and boilers from Messrs. John Musgrave & Sons of Bolton, over 1 million ‘ring spindles’ from Messrs. Brooks & Doxey, Ltd (late Samuel Brooks), and thousands of looms and ‘preparatory machines’ from Messrs. Butterworth and Dickenson of Burnley. “Mr. Shapurjee Sorabjee: A Pioneer of India’s Industrial Development,” *The Textile Mercury*, 1 April 1905.

<sup>72</sup> Shapurjee Sorabjee, German death certificate, Bad-Nauheim, 8 July 1932, Sorabji Archive, Bath.

<sup>73</sup> Television, 11 June 1977, cited in *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, 215.

<sup>74</sup> In a letter to Philip Heseltine, 8 September 1914, Sorabji refers to his father leaving England and the presence of his family so as to obtain treatment in Bad Nauheim for a heart condition; apparently he left three weeks prior to the outbreak of war and had to return to England before completing the treatment. Bad Nauheim is of course where Shapurji Sorabji was to die 18 years later, although it is not clear if there is any significance to this apparent coincidence. Heseltine letter cited in *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, 215. The original letter is in the British Library, London.

continued to assume financial responsibility for their well being, including their housing in London, the monetary backing of Sorabji's early music publications, and after his passing, access to a trust fund worth a lump sum of £2,756 with an additional £1,850 paid annually for the rest of Madeline's life. Shapurji could provide money, but family stability and interaction he could not, and this was not due merely to his highly active and international business career. In Pondá, India, on 17 June 1929, Shapurji Sorabji bigamously married Nobubai Visvonata Catcar and it was to her that the vast majority of Shapurji's wealth was bequeathed, as Sorabji was only too aware:

His Indian whore and a set of rascally Indian lawyers rooked me and my beloved mother of what should have been ours.<sup>75</sup>

In 1935, three years after her husband's death and suffering the humiliation of abandonment and infidelity, Madeline Matilda, with the help of her son, initiated a court action of marital annulment against Nobubai. Fourteen years later and after writing reams of judicial polemic, the bigamous marriage was finally annulled on 26 July 1949,<sup>76</sup> but the financial assets of the 'late and wholly unlamented'<sup>77</sup> Shapurji Sorabji could not be retrieved.

Sorabji's Parsi lineage, although removed from Bombay to London and scarred by the neglectful and harmful actions of his father, was authentic, unlike his maternal claims of Spanish-Sicilian heritage. One could assume that this cultural and racial reality served as a strong focal point for Sorabji's early self-definition as an individual, which is reflected in the alteration of his name. Sorabji had an important correspondence with Philip Heseltine that lasted from 1913 until 1922 and one can perceive, by the way in

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<sup>75</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, letter to Kenneth Derus, 4 June 1983, cited in *ibid.* After Sorabji's death a hand-drawn outline of his paternal family tree was discovered, where Sorabji accurately refers to his mother's maiden name, Worthy, but interestingly describes her as Shapurji Sorabji's second wife. If this document is correct, which it appears to be, then Shapurji was originally married to a woman named Navajbhli L. Batliboi, whose death preceded Shapurji's marriage to Madeline Matilda. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, outline of paternal family tree, in the hand of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Sorabji Archive, Bath.

<sup>76</sup> Madeline Matilda Sorabjee v. Nobubai Visvonata Catcar, Copy of Decision of the Supreme Court of Justice, Supreme Court of Justice of Lisbon, Suite No. 53936 (26 July 1949); Madeline Matilda Sorabjee v. Nobubai Visvonata Catcar, "Pleading of the First Respondent Madeleine Matilda Sorabji," Supreme Court of Justice of Lisbon, Revision Appeal No. 53936 (17 June 1948); "To all whom it may concern," *The Times of India* (30 December 1949), reprinted, London: George Pulman and Sons. Sorabji Archive, Bath.

<sup>77</sup> This phrase was apparently a common reference that Sorabji used for his father. Cited in *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, 215.

which Sorabji signs his name at the end of each letter, a gradual but clearly documented evolution. Although the name upon his birth certificate is given as Leon Dudley Sorabji,<sup>78</sup> he was already experimenting with the inclusion of his father's name, Shapurji, in his first letter to Heseltine, signing it Dudley Sorabjî Shapurjî. In February of 1914 the signature C. L. D. S. Sorabjî appears,<sup>79</sup> the initial C possibly representing the name Cyrus, which is an anglicised version of Kaikhosru.<sup>80</sup> The C disappears altogether in January 1915,<sup>81</sup> replaced from that point on by the initial K. Already the form of his eventual name is solidifying, although it is not until 1917 that he abandons the representation of his birth names Leon Dudley and seems to have settled upon Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji.

By altering his name from Leon Dudley to Kaikhosru Shapurji, Sorabji initiated a very real shift in the way in which he was to be perceived by his peers, critics, supporters, and essentially anyone who was to have contact with him: that is to say, he was, presumably by the conviction of his own desires, distancing himself from being labelled as English and perhaps psychologically from everything within him that was English. His new name mystified those that wrote about him and the issue of race and nationality, as it related to Sorabji's biography, was to be a continuous seesaw of fallacious assumptions. He despised being labelled as Indian, and had the following message printed upon a card that he would occasionally, when necessary, deliver: 'Mr Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji wishes it to be known that he emphatically contradicts and repudiates certain completely inaccurate and objectionable public references to himself as an "Indian" composer.'<sup>82</sup> He was often quite correctly deemed to be of mixed race, although the nature of the mixed heritage had a few variables, consisting always of a Parsi father, but of a mother who was either purely Spanish or herself a mixture of Spanish and

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<sup>78</sup> Leon Dudley Sorabji, United Kingdom birth certificate, Epping, 1892. Family Record Centre, London.

<sup>79</sup> C. L. D. S. Sorabjî, London, to Philip Heseltine, March 1914, letter in the hand of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, British Library, London.

<sup>80</sup> This interpretation is supported by that fact that on 1 March 1933 Sorabji delivered to his mother Form No. 5 of his father's succession duty, in which he is referred to as Cyrus Dudley Sorabji, a name that his father would have given to the lawyer handling his Will. Shapurji Sorabji, Succession of Property to Madeline Matilda Sorabji, form 5, Inland Revenue, file 70168, 1933, Sorabji Archive, Bath.

<sup>81</sup> D. K. Sorabji, London, to Philip Heseltine, 24 January 1915, letter in the hand of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, British Library, London.

<sup>82</sup> Sorabji put a great number of these cards into circulation and many of them still exist, both in private collections and the Sorabji Archive, Bath.

Sicilian. Sorabji never contradicted these descriptions, for they were in accordance with his own construction of an alien identity, but he resented being referred to as English: ‘I am BY NO MANNER OF MEANS NOR IN ANY WAY ENGLISH. I have not one drop of “English” blood in my veins. My racial, ancestral and cultural roots are in civilisations with more millennia behind them than Anglo-Saxondom has centuries. The description “English” is thus doubly derogatory and offensive.’<sup>83</sup>

Sorabji could have never so easily and devastatingly dismissed his English associations with the name Leon Dudley, which, to the ear and the mind, is a typical specimen of English representation. As Kaikhosru Shapurji he could succeed in the accentuation of his father’s heritage, the ancient Parsi lineage, which was, as seen above, a source of great personal power and self-esteem. The intimations of mystery and elitism could not help but be transmitted to his readers, but more than that was the notion of otherness, specifically of something outside of Europe. Sorabji and by extension Sorabji’s compositions were very often associated with oriental learning and tendencies, which, although attractive as a hybridisation or marriage between East and West, is actually quite far from the reality, considering that Sorabji had very little contact with true Eastern culture, especially its music (and what few experiences he did have, in the form of sojourns to India for the futile observance of his father’s Will, were extremely brief). Nevertheless, the ideas of orientalism and exoticism did persist while Sorabji was alive and they were concepts that suited both Sorabji and his new name.

Within his writings, the cultural heritage of his racial background was also a typical justification for his claiming to have an outsider’s perspective on any given English concern. He was from London, born in Chingford, but not of London. He could see the world through British eyes, but was keenly perceptive of the realm beyond the British peripheral. Notions of this description were not truths of his intellectual capacity or experience: more accurately, they were delineations of an attitude, one that he developed from a very young age, perhaps first instructed by his mother’s example, and maintained until the last day of his life

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<sup>83</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Garrard Macleod, Michigan, 1975, cited in *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, 24.

### Chapter Three – Reginald Norman Best

Reginald Norman Best (1909-1988), generally referred to simply as Reggie, was famously known in Corfe Castle as the long term, unusually quiet companion and housemate of Sorabji's, but the exact nature of Mr. Best's relationship with Sorabji was a confused issue and a consensus amongst the local villagers was never obtained. Their assumptions were formed largely by personal impressions, visual observations, and misleading explanations offered by Sorabji. Views of the relationship varied: the villagers saw Reggie as Sorabji's manservant,<sup>84</sup> his godson,<sup>85</sup> his cousin,<sup>86</sup> his friend,<sup>87</sup> or his homosexual partner.<sup>88</sup> The identification of Sorabji's sexual orientation is in fact clear from the handful of articles that he published, in which he elucidated for his readers the condition of homosexuals in England and abroad, touching upon various issues pertaining to homosexuals' social, physiological, and psychological realities,<sup>89</sup> while Reggie identified his sexual orientation in an amusing story related by a Corfe Castle resident and long time acquaintance, Cecil Stockley:

I [Cecil] started laughing when she [Cecil's wife, Violet] said, 'Do you know Reggie Best?'  
'Yes,' I said.  
She said, 'He is gay.'  
I said, 'Who bloody told you that?'  
She said, 'He did.'<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Those of this view who are included in this dissertation include Ken Miller, John Stockley, Jo Lawrence, Brenda Chappell, Bert and Ann Johnson, Jill Nice, Daniel Macrae, Pete Frost, Ken Williams, Doreen Green, and Mrs. Kirkwood.

<sup>85</sup> Dorothy Fooks, Bernard and Kathy Williams, and Judith Squarey.

<sup>86</sup> Valerie Lloyd.

<sup>87</sup> Molly Moss, Barbara Canning, Liz Agnew, Mrs. V. M. Ford, and Peter and Frances Hardman. The terms 'friend' and 'companion' have a rather ambiguous quality and it is not clear whether those individuals, in using these terms, were simply being sensitive to what might be seen as a private issue, i.e. homosexuality, or honestly believed that there was nothing more to the relationship than friendship.

<sup>88</sup> Vic Bennett, Cecil Stockley, Gerald and Judith Squarey, and Denise Vicars.

<sup>89</sup> Sorabji's articles on homosexuality: "Sexual Inversion," *The Medical Times* (October 1921): 148-149; "The Psychology of Sex," *The Occult Review* (2 January 1929); "Christianity and Homosexuality," *The Catholic Herald* (26 January 1954); "Homosexuality," *The European* (February 1956): 61-62; are all contained within in the *Collected Published Writings of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji*, vol. 1, *Book Chapters, Articles, Essays and Notes, Letters-to-the-Editor* (Bath: The Sorabji Archive, 1995).

<sup>90</sup> Cecil Stockley, interview by author, 6 April 2002, Corfe Castle, England.

That Sorabji and Reggie were actually in a relationship is the unanimous view of all of those who knew them on something more than just a professional level. With these facts established it becomes less surprising that Sorabji should have been dishonest with the local villagers regarding Reggie, for it should not be forgotten that homosexuality or sexual inversion was explicitly illegal in England when they first moved to Corfe Castle, after the Second World War, and remained so until 1967.<sup>91</sup> Therefore one can assume that Sorabji's introducing Reggie as his godson or cousin is indicative of their desire to be discreet with a relationship that might not only incur the prejudice of the village, but also the inconvenient scrutiny of the law. Sorabji was sensitive to the ramifications of both social and legal discrimination, and it is highly plausible that at a psychological level his and Reggie's natural inclination towards reclusion was partially shaped by these concerns, as he wrote:

Society demands of the invert, under pain of severest legal and social penalties, an asceticism it asks of no normal individual.<sup>92</sup>

The term invert is here derived from Havelock Ellis, the definition of which is in general keeping with what today is termed homosexuality. The influence of Ellis upon Sorabji's thoughts and self-definition, in terms of his own sexual orientation, is starkly evident from the above quotation. Even the notion of the homosexual as a social ascetic is borrowed from Ellis:

A strictly ascetic life, it needs scarcely be said, is with difficulty possible for all persons, either homosexual or heterosexual...The invert has the right to sexual indulgence, it may be, but he has also the duty to accept the full responsibility for his own actions, and the necessity to recognise the present attitude of the society he lives in. He cannot be advised to set himself in violent opposition to that society. The world will not be a tolerable place for pronounced inverts until they are better understood, and that will involve a radical change in general and even medical opinion.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> On 27 July 1967 the Sexual Offences Act was passed in England and Wales and legalised private homosexual activity between two consenting adults who had attained the age of 21. This brought an end to 72 years of incrimination against male homosexuality – the majority of Sorabji's life - which the vague wording of the Labouchere Amendment of 1885 supported, most famously, in 1895, against Oscar Wilde.

<sup>92</sup> Sorabji, "Sexual Inversion," *The Medical Times*: 148.

<sup>93</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 2, *Sexual Inversion* (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1901; reprint, 1921), 342-3.

Although many of Ellis' views seem incompatible with modern tolerance and understanding of homosexuality, they were in the days of their genesis extremely liberal and bold, influencing and giving confidence to a whole generation of homosexuals, including Sorabji, and providing 'science' as an ally for their cause against social injustice. Yet Ellis was still, when compared to the uninhibited polemics of today, a conservative, non-revolutionary intellectual, and one can almost imagine Sorabji acquiescing to the advice:

The method of self-restraint and self-culture, without self-repression, seems to be the most rational method of dealing with sexual inversion when that condition is really organic and deeply rooted.<sup>94</sup>

The influence of Ellis on Sorabji was not restricted to the latter's publications, for it is clear from extant correspondence that Sorabji had been personally acquainted with Ellis from 1922 and perhaps slightly earlier.<sup>95</sup> Sorabji's 'respectful admiration...and gratitude' for Ellis' assistance, in matters that are unknown but probably associated with Sorabji's sexual awareness, came to fruition in the form of his *Simorg-Anka* Piano Concerto, which was completed in 1924 and dedicated to Havelock Ellis.<sup>96</sup>

But none of this was known to the villagers of Corfe Castle, and whereas some of them had suspicions about a sexual relationship between Sorabji and Reggie, more assumed a master/servant relationship. The reason for this did not lie in Sorabji's behaviour: he never subjugated Reggie with subservient titles and he never referred to him as a manservant or butler. The conclusion was born from the villagers' reactions and impressions of Reggie's own behaviour, which is not fully explained by considerations of the legality of his relationship with Sorabji. If an individual was to deliver an item or service to The Eye, it was almost certainly Reggie who received them at the door,

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<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, 341.

<sup>95</sup> Havelock Ellis, London, to Kaikhosru Sorabji, London, 20 July 1922, transcript in the hand of Havelock Ellis, The Sorabji Archive, Bath. The content and language of this letter suggests that Sorabji and Ellis had previously been acquainted, thus suggesting that they may have first been introduced in early 1922 or even sometime in 1921.

<sup>96</sup> The complete dedication reads, "To Dr. Havelock Ellis – in respectful admiration, homage and gratitude." Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, *Concerto per pianoforte e piccola orchestra*, "Simorg-Anka," score, 1924, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University, Syracuse University, New York.

inviting them inside with a manner that intimated his being a butler. This image of Reggie was enhanced by his attire, which seems to have always been dark, relatively formal wear:

His manservant was always in attendance... I never quite got a hang of what the relationship was, but that is how he liked it to be seen, because the guy always wore a dark coat when he came to answer the door. He always wore a dark coat, dark trousers, as though he was somebody that was looking after him. He never gave the impression ever of being anything else than someone who worked for him.<sup>97</sup>

The impression of subservience was also perceived in public, for when Sorabji and Reggie walked through the village, Reggie always maintained his position a few steps behind Sorabji, never directly beside him:

And because he had the unfailing acolyte walking a few steps behind him all the time, in his long black overcoat in winter and a long mackintosh in summer, very silent and lugubrious, the two of them did make rather a comical, strange spectacle in the village.<sup>98</sup>

Reggie was regarded in the village as being unusually reserved and uncommunicative, bearing a visage of troubled melancholy:

Kathy Williams: Mr. Best was as dour and as glum looking as anyone that I have ever seen. Mr. Best looked very miserable.

Bernard Williams: When he came in [to the post office] on his own, he came in and spoke ever so quietly. You were too embarrassed by his silence more or less – I was anyways.<sup>99</sup>

Sorabji was generally considered a recluse, but even his behaviour seemed gregarious compared to the extreme solitude that Reggie harboured for himself, with the exception of whatever interaction that took place between Reggie and Sorabji when there were no observers present. When it was necessary for Reggie to stroll into the village, he

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<sup>97</sup> Jill Nice, interview by author, 3 April 2002, Swanage, England.

<sup>98</sup> George Willey, interview by author, 25 February 2003, Swanage, England.

<sup>99</sup> Bernard and Kathy Williams, interview by author, 5 April 2002, Corfe Castle, England.

would not acknowledge those that he passed and when forced to speak he was soft voiced and brief. He was often spotted strolling alone through the Commons, which is a vast meadow at the southwest end of Corfe Castle, directly to the rear of The Eye. There was something deeply sad about Reggie Best, the exact nature of which was often felt although never known by the villagers:

If that was part of the relationship, that Reggie was there to do the cooking and walked two paces behind, what does that say about the more intimate relationship? At that point I feel, Oh dear, I hope he didn't have to walk two paces behind in that. If he did, that is making enormous demands on him. What kind of person was he, who was presumably there rather than being somewhere where he didn't want to be? I feel there is an element of sadness, if not tragedy, in the story.<sup>100</sup>

Very little is known about Reggie's story, but that there is an 'element of sadness,' is both correct and partially explainable. He was born in Cardiff on 25 September 1909. His father, George Best, was a railway engine shunter and his mother, Ellen Best, née Wright, was, presumably, a housewife.<sup>101</sup> Nothing is known about his education or his development as a young man, but it appears that he eventually obtained employment as a reader for a publishing house, perhaps based in London.<sup>102</sup> It is not known when and under what circumstances Reggie first met Sorabji, but Anthony Burton-Page was told by Sorabji himself that their mothers were friends and that before Ellen Best passed away, she asked Madeline if she would look after Reggie, to which Madeline consented. This responsibility of being Reggie's caretaker was then passed on to Sorabji after his mother's death in 1959. Sorabji did not explain why it was that Reggie required looking after, but the few words that Anthony Burton-Page shared with Reggie hinted at the answer:

'How are you?'

'Oh my nerves aren't very good,' that is all that he said.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Gerald Squarey, interview by author, 10 July 2002, Salisbury, England.

<sup>101</sup> Reginald Norman Best, United Kingdom birth certificate, Cardiff, 1909, Family Record Centre, London.

<sup>102</sup> Reginald Norman Best, United Kingdom death certificate, Poole, 1988, Family Record Centre, London.

<sup>103</sup> Anthony Burton-Page, interview by author, 22 April 2003, Fontmell Magna, England.

While living in Corfe Castle, Reggie's doctor would periodically have him sent to the now defunct Herrison House in Dorchester, which was a well-known mental hospital. The chilling reality of his visits to Herrison House is that he went there to receive treatment in the form of ECT, Electroconvulsive Therapy. Unfortunately Reggie's medical records have been destroyed<sup>104</sup> and as a result the precise nature of his diagnosis is unknown, but considering that ECT was originally intended for schizophrenics and has also been used for severe depression and suicide prevention,<sup>105</sup> the list of possible diagnoses is tellingly limited. The ECT was intensely disturbing for Reggie and after treatment he would require a long period of rest so as to ease his anxiety.<sup>106</sup> Sorabji was deeply upset by Reggie's suffering – by both his mental disorder and the barbaric 'medical' treatment that he received for it. One can imagine that coupled with the need to conceal their homosexual relationship, these issues would have inevitably enforced a certain degree of austere isolation from normal activity in the village. It is true that Sorabji and Reggie were withdrawn from Corfe Castle society, but it should be known that the causation for this behaviour was far more complicated than mere elitism or hermit-like tendencies.

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<sup>104</sup> In the county of Dorset all medical records for deceased patients are forwarded to the Family Health Services Agency, but unfortunately, prior to 1991, a lack of physical space required that all records were held for only a brief period of time and then destroyed. This was the fate of Reginald Norman Best's personal medical record.

<sup>105</sup> Lucy Johnstone, "A Shocking Treatment?" *The Psychologist* 16, no. 5 (May 2003): 236-239.

<sup>106</sup> This anecdote was shared with me in conversation with Sorabji's dear friend, Denise Vicars.

## SECTION TWO

### Chapter Four – Corfe Castle and The Eye

The backdrop to a great majority of the interviews contained within the body of this dissertation is the idyllic village of Corfe Castle, which is located on the Isle of Purbeck in the south eastern corner of Dorset, England. The northeast and northwest of the village are cut off dramatically from the rest of the Isle of Purbeck by the Purbeck Hills, which rise to a height of 600 feet, but, directly north of the village, where the hills are cleft by what is known as Corfe Gap, are the remains of the once strategically important Corfe Castle. The castle was the property of the crown from the time of William the Conqueror until 1572 when Queen Elizabeth I sold it to Christopher Hatton for the princely sum of £4761.<sup>107</sup> Despite the royal connection, Corfe Castle was not a location for great festivities and knightly parades: rather it served more often than not as a gaol for high-profile prisoners of war and perceived traitors to the crown.

So as to contextualise Sorabji's Dorset environment and to better understand the local references that periodically arise within this dissertation, it is important to introduce some of the more notable incidents and personalities that define Corfe Castle's history, the stories of which would have presumably inspired great fascination in Sorabji's mind. Although there are many stories of great interest and cruelty that arose during this period, let it suffice to relate, in a manner of brevity, the two most famous incidents to have taken place at Corfe Castle, the one prior to the castle's creation and the other relevant to its demise. From King Edgar's first marriage was born Edward, who after the untimely death of his father in 975 became King at the age of thirteen. Edgar's second wife, Aelfthryth,<sup>108</sup> also bore a son, Ethelred, and it was her design that her natural son should become King. As a result, in 978, at her home at Corvesgate, she murdered or had a guard murder – depending upon which chronicler one believes – the young King Edward, who subsequently was known as Edward the Martyr. This villainous deed is said to have taken place on the site where the castle ruin now stands and there is some evidence to

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<sup>107</sup> Later to be known as Sir Christopher Hatton, Lord Chancellor. Thomas Bond, *History and Description of Corfe Castle* (London: Edward Stanford, 1883), 26.

<sup>108</sup> Also known as Elfrida.

support this notion.<sup>109</sup> The body of the dead King was immediately, though temporarily, discarded in a nearby home where, according to legend, there lived a blind woman whose sight was restored when the entirety of the home was miraculously flooded with light. The Queen, fearing the discovery of her act, had the body relocated to a remote marsh, but the concealment was not to be permanent, as those fervently loyal to the King searched the area and again, as legend has it, a miracle occurred: a column of fire descended from the heavens, marking the location of the King's corpse. Edward the Martyr's body was taken to nearby Wareham where it was buried at the church of St. Mary,<sup>110</sup> but it was exhumed and re-interred with the appropriate ceremonies at the abbey of Shaftesbury. The site of the blind woman's home, which served as the first depository for the dead King, was used by the late King's faithful subjects for the erection of a chapel and is probably the same location where the Parish Church of St. Edward the Martyr in Corfe Castle stands today<sup>111</sup> - and also, incidentally, where Sorabji's funeral service took place on 24 October 1988.

The second story for which Corfe Castle is famous dates from the Civil War, when, in the absence of her husband, the royalist Lady Bankes, commonly referred to as Brave Dame Mary, defended Corfe Castle against multiple siege attempts by the Parliamentary forces. By October 1645, after Bristol fell to the Roundheads, there were no garrisons remaining between London and Exeter that were loyal to the crown, with the single exception of Corfe Castle. The castle was virtually impregnable and the besieging artillery used by the Parliamentary forces was hopelessly inadequate, but the mighty walls of the fortress could not withstand the onslaught of deception. Corfe Castle yielded on 27 February 1645 after a sufficiently large group of Parliamentary forces disguised as reinforcements stole into the castle through the treachery of Lieutenant-Colonel Pitman. A week later on 5 March 1645 the House of Commons passed a vote that Corfe Castle

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<sup>109</sup> Vestiges of buildings that predate the castle were discovered in 1950-52 by archaeological excavations upon the site, which could possibly have been those belonging to Aelfhryth. Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, "Excavations in the West Bailey at Corfe Castle," *Medieval Archaeology* 4 (1960): 29-55.

<sup>110</sup> Incidentally, this is the same church where Rev. Peter Hardman, one of the interviewees in this dissertation, was Parish priest from 1979-2000.

<sup>111</sup> Bond, *History and Description of Corfe Castle*, 5-9. Rev. Gerald Squarey, another of the interviewees in this dissertation, was Parish priest in Corfe Castle at the Church of St. Edward the Martyr from 1972-1990.

should be demolished to such a degree that it could not be reconstructed and more importantly reused as a defensive fortress by future private owners, and this was effected with slighting and gunpowder explosions.<sup>112</sup> In retrospect it seems a shame that this once magnificent and invincible castle had to be ruined, but as moral consolation and an epitome for the castle's history and fate Thomas Bond was most poignant and eloquent:

When we look at the castle in its present state – the victim of civil commotion, an emblem of the overthrow of feudal tyranny – however we may lament the destruction of so noble a building, we are almost tempted to palliate the Nemesis which at length reached the scene of so much misery and wickedness.<sup>113</sup>

Sorabji had a great fondness for Corfe Castle and one can imagine that the romantic irony of its preserved destruction must have stirred his aesthetic and intellectual sensitivity. In the 1930s he vacationed with his mother in the village for entire summers, where they would stay at the local Bankes Arms Hotel. Not to be separated from his instrument for so lengthy a time, Sorabji had his piano brought to Corfe Castle by train and continued his compositional activities in a makeshift studio in the hotel, much to the delight and perplexity of those villagers passing his window who were treated to his playing. Sorabji and his mother remained in London throughout the Second World War, living as they had since 1916 off the south-western corner of Regent Park at 175 Clarence Gate Gardens, Glentworth Street. They survived the Blitz, although vast areas in the surrounding area did not fare as well, but decided after the war that they could no longer live in London. Sorabji had lost all enthusiasm for the musical scene in the capital city and his latent reclusive nature was longing for a quieter, less hectic life. Therefore sometime in the latter half of the 1940s, Sorabji and his mother, after four decades of residency, left Clarence Gate Gardens and directed their steps to the much loved atmosphere of Corfe Castle.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 29-44; Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *An Inventory of Historical Monuments in the County of Dorset*, vol. 2, *South-East* (London: Unwin Brothers Limited, 1970), 64. It is another fascinating relationship between the history of the Isle of Purbeck and the participants interviewed in the present dissertation that Gola Martin-Smith, and by extension her daughter Mary Jakobson, are descendants of Brave Dame Mary.

<sup>113</sup> Bond, *History and Description of Corfe Castle*, 4.

<sup>114</sup> It is unclear when exactly in the late 1940s that Sorabji moved to Corfe Castle. He finished composing the *Concerto da suonare da me solo e senza orchestra, per divertirsi* on 20 July 1946 and dedicated the work to his dear friend Norman Peterkin, signed 'Corfe Drop.' Corfe Drop was a typically used and

It was once again at the Bankes Arms Hotel that Sorabji and his mother were to stay, and apparently for quite a considerable amount of time, but definitely by 14 December 1951 and presumably for at least a year up to that point, Sorabji was living in Rowbarrow,<sup>115</sup> a house at the end of East Street on a little lane that is now known as Townsend Mead. It is at this time or possibly slightly earlier that Sorabji, for the first time in his life, parted from his mother, purchasing for her a small home at 128 High Street in nearby Swanage. In 1953 Sorabji purchased two adjoining plots of land at the top of a nearby road, which is now known as Higher Filbank, and with the assistance of two local architects, Bernard Malcolm Goodwin and John Lawrence, began developing the plans for a new home. In May 1956, Sorabji was still living at Rowbarrow, but by December he had moved to The Eye,<sup>116</sup> as his new home was called.

Aesthetically, the Eye is consistent with Corfe Castle's town planning, in that local Purbeck stone was used for the building material, but architecturally it possesses a few subtle characteristics that are distinctive and suggestively meaningful to Sorabji, although the precise interpretation of that meaning is unclear. In a letter from John Lawrence's widow, Jo Lawrence, the unique characteristics of The Eye are described:

I don't think there are many of us left who remember him [Sorabji], as the village has changed greatly since he lived here. My late husband, John Lawrence, designed Mr. Sorabji's house 'The Eye' for him, and the house was built around the two grand pianos, which were installed before the house could be completed. The most important feature of the house was the upper window, which had to be in the shape of an eye. Sorabji was a very private person, and everything was dark in and around him. He was always accompanied by his man who looked after all his needs. Women were not any part of his life and never admitted to his presence.<sup>117</sup> I believe he was a Parsee and a brilliant musician, and in his later years seldom left his house, working on an incomprehensible composition.<sup>118</sup> The only time I was admitted to his house was after he was taken ill and I took 'meals-on-wheels' for the two of them. The house interior was dark and gloomy and

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typically humorous pen name that Sorabji adopted while living in the village. Therefore it seems plausible that Sorabji began moving to Corfe Castle in July 1946, but was perhaps engaged in a gradual process of relocation, since there are extant letters for the following year, again to Norman Peterkin, that were written in London.

<sup>115</sup> This information is derived from a letter that Sorabji wrote to Mervyn Vicars, dated 14 December 1951.

<sup>116</sup> This information was obtained through the observance of Sorabji's letters to the Swanage Times, all of which identify the address of origin.

<sup>117</sup> Women were actually very prominent in Sorabji's life, but the notion that Sorabji was a misogynist is a common theme amongst the Corfe Castle villagers.

<sup>118</sup> Not one 'incomprehensible composition,' but many.

airless, and seemed to be hung with Indian rugs and tapestry and dark and heavy furniture. I wish I could tell you more, but my knowledge of him was mostly second hand.<sup>119</sup>

Unfortunately the other architect of The Eye, Bernard Goodwin, is also deceased, but his daughter, Barbara Goodwin, concurred with Jo Lawrence's statement that The Eye was designed around the presence of Sorabji's two pianos, which did feature prominently in the proportionately large living room of the home.<sup>120</sup>

Admittedly, as a homeowner, Sorabji required plenty of assistance for the maintenance of The Eye. It is commonly acknowledged by the villagers in Corfe Castle that Sorabji did not often admit visitors to his home and it is therefore very interesting to learn from the interviews of Vic Bennett and Ken Miller, both of whom have vivid recollections of their time working for Sorabji and the treatment they received while at The Eye. For both individuals there was initial apprehension in working for Sorabji, due to his reputation for being an intense recluse and the general perception of his being from a higher social class. But the actual relationships that evolved were mutually respectful. Sorabji was said to have been extremely courteous in his mannerisms and generous in his gratitude for services rendered; cigarettes and grape juice were the sort of tips that seem to have been commonly distributed.

Mr. Bennett's interview gives rise to an intriguing contrast. Along with Sorabji's perceived elevated social standing, he was also deemed both by the villagers and those that have subsequently written about him, as being financially independent, even wealthy.

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<sup>119</sup> Jo Lawrence, Corfe Castle, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 14 March 2002, letter in the hand of Jo Lawrence, Private Collection. In a subsequent telephone conversation Mrs. Lawrence offered a few more impressions about Sorabji, saying that she was always slightly afraid of him and that he was the kind of individual that you did not casually approach. She also remembered him strolling about the village in a black flowing coat or cape.

<sup>120</sup> The initial letter from Barbara Goodwin was very brief. It simply read, 'My father was the architect who designed Mr. Sorabji's house here at Corfe Castle.' Barbara Goodwin, Corfe Castle, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 16 March 2002, letter in the hand of Barbara Goodwin, Private Collection. Although Ms. Goodwin was not interviewed in person, she did share much useful information with me in a subsequent telephone conversation. Bernard Malcolm Goodwin was Barbara's father, who worked in Corfe Castle as a freelance architect with John Lawrence, and it was the two of them together that designed The Eye. Apparently Bernard worked in London for many years and after partially retiring in Corfe Castle, he desired to continue working, so he set up an office above the Post Office for the purpose of offering his skills to the local community. He enjoyed very much working on The Eye and thought highly of Sorabji. Barbara remembers seeing Sorabji and Mr. Best strolling around the commons, although she never met them personally. She lived abroad in France for a while and it was when she returned to Corfe Castle that her father was working on Sorabji's home.

It is true that he did not have a paid profession and yet was able to afford both the construction of The Eye and its lavish contents, but Mr. Bennett was under the impression that Sorabji was perhaps having financial difficulties, since he paid for Mr. Bennett's labour in instalments. Sorabji's father did set aside a trust for his benefit, which enabled the relatively privileged existence of a composer without practical worries, yet by the end of his life when he required the expensive care of a retirement home, it seems, as I learned in conversation with Sorabji's heir, Alistair Hinton, that the trust had essentially been exhausted. It is plausible that when Mr. Bennett was working for Sorabji the decision to pay in instalments had more to do with a frugal character dictated by a finite amount of financial assets and a relatively fixed personal income, rather than any true economic destitution. Nevertheless, it is clear that Sorabji, although comfortable, was certainly not rich.

Upon Sorabji's death Mr. Bennett purchased The Eye and after making some alterations to the zoning of the property, creating two lots out of Sorabji's original and rather large single lot, and cutting down a good majority of the tree grove that shrouded the home, he in turn put the property on the market. The final interview of this chapter is with Andrew Wilson, who purchased The Eye from Mr. Bennett. Although Mr. Wilson did not know Sorabji personally, his interview, which is essentially a walking tour of The Eye, provides a glimpse into Sorabji's home, as it is today and as it was when the contents of the home were two grand pianos.

*VIC BENNETT, Sorabji's private grounds keeper and the first individual to purchase The Eye after Sorabji passed away, was interviewed in his Swanage apartment on February 28, 2003.*

SO: What kind of things did you do for Mr. Sorabji?

VB: Practically everything, general decorating, carpentry. That house had a massive garden and when he got there – he liked seclusion, as much as possible – they put a sort of hedge up through there, some kind of bushes, but they didn't last very long, which is a shame because they cost him a lot of money.

SO: Do you mean the trees that have now been cut down?

VB: There weren't so many trees then, but he did have a lot of trees in the end. When he died, I bought the house and cut down many of the trees without planning permission. They had a good look at it and said, 'Well obviously you had to do something about it.' It is a lovely house really and in a lovely position. He had a big lounge, a terrific lounge, with two grand pianos.

SO: How did you first meet Sorabji?

VB: I think he gave me a phone call. I lived quite close to him actually, where he lived then. Yes, he just gave me a phone call one day, surprise, surprise, because he never mixed with the local people very much. He didn't associate with anything very much. He gave me a phone call and asked if I would do some small job, I said, 'Certainly, why not.' After that I was there every week of the year, doing something or other. We got along very well actually.

SO: How long did you work for him?

VB: About 30 years. I went to his funeral. That was a rather strange affair for me. It was all of this highbrow music and it went on and on and on...

SO: Before you met Sorabji you must have known of him beforehand?

VB: I used to see him walking around with his helper,<sup>121</sup> but that is all I knew about him. He had another place before The Eye, not very far away, close to Albert Dodd.

SO: Do you have any recollections about Mr. Sorabji that really stand out?

VB: All I really know is that he asked me to do a job for him, small jobs all the time. He couldn't have been well off in those days, because I would always send him a bill at the end of the month, which I normally did with all of my customers, and he would write out cheques for three separate months, £10 in June, £10 in July, and £10 in August. It kind of suited me when I got used to the idea.

SO: He paid in instalments did he?

VB: Yes.

SO: When you first bought the house, did you actually live there for a time?

VB: No. I didn't even know that it was for sale at the time. The woman that was doing a bit of cleaning for him said, 'Did you know that Mr. Sorabji was selling the place?' I said, 'No, I might have been interested in it had I known that.' She said, 'Well, I think it is sold.' But I went to the agents that were selling it and it hadn't been sold. I got the idea that it was on the market for £100,000, I think, and these other people offered £96,000 and I said that I would give the full £100,000. So it was bought through the agent and that was that.

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<sup>121</sup> Mr. Bennett is alluding to Reggie.

I do appreciate and value the number of years that I helped him. Mr. Best used to carry on about him sometimes, when he was in a funny sort of mood. They must have got on very well, because they spent a lot of time together.

SO: What was Mr. Best like as a man?

VB: Very strange, there must be a better word for it. He used to say to me sometimes that Mr. Sorabji had done this wrong and done that wrong and let him down. I never took much notice, because I didn't think that it was my business. I got the impression that Mr. Best was a very lonely man. I never knew if he was an orphan or what.

SO: A sad man?

VB: Oh yeah. I never knew Mr. Best to laugh. He was very serious and always had a problem on his mind of some sort, I imagine. But in fairness, Mr. Sorabji wasn't very much different. He never relaxed, had his own way of living, and favoured his seclusion and what not. But he was a very, very nice man.

SO: Did you find him to be a generous man?

VB: Fairly. We all used to be smokers back then. He used to give me 50 cigarettes for Christmas and to a few other people as well. That is about all, but he was very kind hearted.

SO: Did Mr. Best smoke?

VB: No, I don't think so. I don't think Mr. Sorabji really smoked either. But as I said, he always had 50 Players to give to me or somebody else that helped him.

SO: Did you know that when Sorabji died, he left behind a huge legacy of music, 16,000 pages worth?

VB: He would do. He never stopped playing the piano and writing. He gave me records at some point and said that there were only a few printed but he wanted me to have some. It wasn't my cup of tea.<sup>122</sup>

He asked me to decorate that big lounge one time, because it was getting in a terrible mess. It was full of furniture, books, and everything that you could imagine. I said to the man that I was working with, 'I don't know how I am going to manage with the ceiling,' because the ceiling was very high, just in the lounge. But we managed somehow.

SO: Was Sorabji particular about how he wanted you to decorate?

VB: No, I don't think so. He had great trust in me, I must say. As far as I know, I never, ever let him down. He wanted things different from the average person, but I endeavoured to do what he wanted all the time, if I could. It was a fairly happy relationship. We never crossed words.

I know that there were certain people that got a hold on some of his music eventually. I was told that they just couldn't play it.<sup>123</sup> Because he knew all about it, he knew every detail. I always realised that he was a very clever man; that was fact. Whether he was ever appreciated fully, I don't know.

I made very little on The Eye when I sold it, I didn't want to. I wanted to get another building plot on the property, because it was a massive garden, which I got and that was worth quite a lot of money. There is a little bungalow there now. I wanted to build there myself, but finances wouldn't allow it.

SO: Sorabji would have still been quite elderly when you first met him.

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<sup>122</sup> This is indicative of another complicated aspect to Sorabji's personality. On the one hand he sought seclusion and desperately guarded his privacy, yet he was also a natural promoter, at least locally, of his talent, constantly giving signed copies of printed scores and Michael Habermann's records of his music to acquaintances and helpers in the village.

<sup>123</sup> This is likely a reference to the now infamous performance by Tobin, since Sorabji's approval of Habermann was expressed in his action of distributing signed copies of his record and there are several verbal accounts of his admiration for Yonty Solomon's playing.

VB: No one ever knew really. The villagers often spoke about how old was Sorabji, but no one ever knew really and I sure didn't.

I did go to see him once in hospital, just before he died. But he was very ill and didn't really want visitors at all.

SO: What kind of things did the villagers say about Sorabji? I am sure they must have had their own ideas as to what he was like.

VB: Well, they thought he was a bit of a recluse. He wasn't a complete recluse, but he was very isolated from most people. I am afraid that a lot of them used to make fun of him at times, because they were ignorant. They didn't know what a good man he really was. When he first asked me to do a job for him, I was a bit surprised, to say the least. But we did enjoy a very happy relationship for a long, long time.

SO: How would he let you know if he wanted a job to be done at The Eye?

VB: I think he wrote me a little note, 'Would you please come up to The Eye, perhaps there is a little job that you can help me with;' words of that kind. Sometimes he would write bloody miles and miles of it. I was always of the opinion, it was mostly guesswork I suppose, that he was quite a brilliant pianist and composer and that he would go down in history.

SO: Were you around when the television people wanted to interview him?

VB: Yes, I was. 'That is enough, go, go, go.'

SO: Is that how he was?

VB: That is exactly how he was. He said, 'I will help you a little if I can.' A couple of them, I think, went to his house. He let them in and answered a few question. What I am saying now is second hand, but I think it is true; after he answered a few questions he

said, 'That is enough, out you go, out you go.' He was very strong-minded, that is for certain.

Yes, I am afraid that there were a lot of people that used to make fun of him, but he didn't care about that.

SO: How would they tease him?

VB: They treated him like something very odd and I suppose in a way he was odd, because he used to go out walking with his friend and never mixed with anybody very much. As I said, I was surprised when he asked me to do a job for him.

SO: Were you scared?

VB: Scared? No, but a lot of people were. A lot of people wouldn't have walked in that house if they had to, that is quite right. I was a bit, not nervous, but dubious about it all. Anyhow, when I got to know him he turned out to be a wonderful gentleman, as far as I was concerned.

SO: How did Reggie and Sorabji interact with one another?

VB: When I was working there, quite a lot, most of the time they hardly spoke to one another at all. I don't know what duties Reggie was supposed to do, but most of the time they lived almost separately. But as I said before, they would go walking together. The local villagers used to say all sorts about the relationship that they thought was going on, but I wouldn't have thought that there was anything in it. I don't really know. What is your opinion of it?

SO: I have heard so many things. I have heard that he was the manservant, but I don't think it was just that.

VB: No.

SO: Sorabji had said that Reggie was his mother's godson.

VB: Yes, that is what I heard.

SO: And of course some people thought they had a more intimate relationship.

VB: Well they did, definitely. Especially the more ignorant people could be very nasty about it. It is silly really.

I think that the school children were quite scared of him in a way, they thought he was something really odd and different. They didn't know what to make of it all. He wasn't high and mighty. He was just reserved and almost a recluse. People didn't understand him. I didn't understand him really. But he was very open, very honest, and very generous, if you like. I treated him as he treated me, with friendship.

He used to get me to fit all sorts of locks on his doors, locks that are rather common now, but were very complicated at the time. He liked to shut himself away completely and didn't want anyone around that wasn't his acquaintance. These special locks came onto the market at the time and he sent away for one and gave it to me, 'Can you fit this lock onto the big front door?' 'Yes,' I said, 'I suppose so.' I looked at it for a long, long time and couldn't figure it out, but I got there in the end.

Did he have The Eye built himself?

SO: Yes.

VB: I didn't realise he had that sort of money. As I said before, he gave me the impression that he had a small income and that he couldn't throw it away.

SO: Perhaps he was just frugal.

VB: Yes, I suppose that is the word for it. The lady that used to do his washing for him,<sup>124</sup> his underclothes and that, well she is dead now anyways, told me that his underpants was all holes everywhere and he used to ask her to patch it up all the time. He wouldn't spend money on that kind of thing. But I suppose there are a lot of elderly people like that. But still that is getting rather personal.

All I can say, as far as I am concerned, he was a very good man and a very good client of mine and when I got to know him he was a very nice man to work for.

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<sup>124</sup> i.e. Violet Stockley.

*KEN MILLER worked with a local home furnishing firm the services of which were employed by Sorabji for an extended period of time. Mr. Miller had many opportunities to work around The Eye and his recollections of the unique interior of the home are particularly interesting. Mr. Miller was interviewed at his home in Corfe Castle on April 5, 2002.*

SO: When did you first meet Sorabji?

KM: Well it must have been in 1952, when I was an apprentice for a firm called C. Wilson and Son, who were house furnishers and removal type. My first memory - I suppose you have heard about the notice on the gate - well there were very strict appointments. The governor himself took me; I was just an apprentice boy, and a carpet layer to the house. He drove us there in his own car, because you couldn't show up there unexpected. You didn't actually have much contact with Mr. Sorabji himself. Mr. Wilson went to the front door and we went around to the back door, where Mr. Best, who was I suppose the housekeeper or butler. He was the man who gave you instructions. Mr. Sorabji came in and said, 'Good morning gentlemen.' Which was the first time I had ever been called a gentleman as far as I can recall, I was only seventeen at the time.

The only thing that I can really tell you is about the house itself. There was the large lounge, I suppose it would be, the walls of which were completely covered in hanging carpets, huge Persian-like carpets. Which I think had partly to do with acoustics, because in there was a huge piano, which I later learned was a concert grand and one smaller one. There were various antique furniture, two large long cased clocks, if I recall, and bonsai trees, which I had never seen before. There were some very good specimens I would imagine. I remember in particular was a little grove of trees, he had six in a line, which had tiny red leaves. I don't know what they were but they always stuck in my mind. On the mantle piece was this box, which was 8 x 6 inches I suppose and about 4 inches deep, which he said to me, 'Pick that up.' I went to pick it up with one hand, but it was incredibly heavy. He told me that it was made of solid gold; quite an amazing weight considering the size it was. I think at that time we called because a bit of carpet had become loose in the door way and we fixed it. But from time to time you had

to call because the staircase carpets in those days were on rods and you went and changed the tread every three months. In the summer you changed all of the curtains to the summer curtains, then in the winter you changed them back to the winter curtains. The heavy curtains in the winter were some kind of damask and the summer ones were some kind of bamboo floral pattern if I remember.

SO: For how long did you work for Sorabji?

KM: We did it off and on during my apprenticeship, which was from 1951 to 1955. Then I went into the army. When I got out of the army I was contacted by the apprentice that had been with the company before me and we formed our own business, because at that time Mr. Wilson had shut down the upholstery and carpet side of the business. I was with him for four years, until he had a brain haemorrhage at 39 and died. Ever since then I have been in partnership with two other blokes and we formed the Purbeck Furnishing Company in Swanage.

One peculiar job I remember we had to do twice a year. The kitchen had a completely fitted carpet, which was unusual in those days, and on top of it there was what they called a dandy chord, I don't know if you would have heard of it, which was like a coconut matting but it was woven in plastic. There was a strip of this that ran across the sink and everything, one that ran out to the back door, and another one that ran across to the door to the hall. This had to be sewn onto the woven carpet so it didn't move about. Twice a year we went to do that. It was quite a laborious job sewing it by hand. Then Mr. Best would take it outside, hang it on the line, and beat it. Being a coconut mat, the dust used to collect in it. From 1958 until I retired in 1985 we regularly went to do that. If Mr. Best was preparing food it would keep a certain amount of dirt from getting on the main carpet. But it was pretty unusual. I had never seen anyone else with it.

SO: It sounds as if there was a considerable amount of work to do at The Eye.

KM: Yeah, we went fairly regularly. I don't know if you know the big ball shepherd casters, they must have come out in the late 60s or early 70s and these were big 3-inch

ball casters. I remember then we went over there and put them on everything that moved, except the grand pianos of course, they had their own great big casters. But every other bit of furniture in the house was fitted with these big shepherds and they rolled about quickly. For several days we were over there changing all the little casters with these big ones. It made it easier to move the furniture.

SO: So you weren't afraid your first time going over there?

KM: It was a bit ominous, because everyone told you to mind your P's and Q's. It was quite something to go there I think, because not very many people were allowed. You were told not to talk unless you were spoken to. That was fair enough for most of the grander places and when I was an apprentice boy you minded your P's and Q's and made sure that your apron was clean.

SO: He must have been an interesting client.

KM: Yes, quite unusual.

SO: Yet it sounds as if he was decent enough.

KM: Oh yes, he always said, 'Good morning gentlemen,' when you arrived and when you finished Mr. Best would give you a bottle of non-alcoholic grape juice. I can't remember the actual trade name of it right now, but you always got a bottle each when you left. Mr. Best would give you a cup of tea if you were there for a time. He was what we termed in those days a gentleman. He never appeared arrogant, but he did respect his privacy.

*ANDREW WILSON, the current inhabitant of The Eye, was interviewed at his home on April 5, 2002. The interview took the form of a walking tour around the home and its grounds. Although Mr. Wilson never met Sorabji personally, he was born locally and as he is living in the home of such an infamous individual, he possesses many superb second-hand stories of Sorabji, in particular as they relate to The Eye.*

AW: I have been clearing out the back here. When we first came here, the grass was about six feet high and that entire boundary with the Common was heavily overgrown. It was coming into the garden. There were roots sticking out of the ground about twenty feet into what is now reasonable lawn. Clearly he was a recluse and liked his privacy and apparently even liked the wildlife in the garden as well. He didn't mind if foxes ran around apparently. This obelisk or monolith, whatever you want to call it, was lying in the hedge. This is stuff we just cleared in the last couple of weeks. This is the commons.

SO: Gorgeous view! It is strange that he would want to conceal it.

AW: Well he liked the privacy.

The monolith was lying in here and was rather heavy. But we manhandled it Egyptian style with rollers and ropes and got it up there.

SO: It is a beautiful stone.

AW: It is the local Purbeck stone. It is fairly soft, but there is a bit of carving here on the side. It could be anything. I mean it could be something from an early building on a settlement here. Obviously there has been a settlement around the castle for well over 1000 years. They are odd kind of shapes.

SO: They are equidistant as well.

AW: They are very mathematically spaced. But what they are I don't know. Whether it is a lintel for a hearthstone or a lintel for a door?

SO: I wonder if it is a scrap left over from building The Eye?

AW: I doubt that, because all of the mouldings that were used here are basically concrete mouldings.<sup>125</sup> But this is a stone lintel here; I put that one in when we installed the French windows. But if you look over the windows, all of those lintels there are made of concrete. Apparently one of the reasons that he had some of this detail the way that he had it was because he spent a lot of time in the Bankes Arms Hotel in Corfe before he moved here and I think that he liked some of those details. Some of these details are rather similar, the way that the rafters poke out from underneath the roof is a detail that you will see in the village at the pub and the shape of the lintels is almost the same as well. It is a funny house.

SO: And that small window was there?

AW: Yes, that was there.

SO: You just gave it a fresh white painting?

AW: Well the windows were pink. The frames were this kind of yucky, dirty pink. It didn't take me long to change them.

SO: And that was Sorabji's doing?

AW: Yes.

SO: The man that had The Eye before you didn't do it?

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<sup>125</sup> Our attention here is drawn from the yard to the exterior of The Eye itself, specifically the side of the home where the front entrance is located.

AW: Bennett, he didn't do anything, he did nothing. All he did was fence that off there and that is about all he did really.

SO: I am just curious, why did you keep the house name the same?

AW: Well why not? It is a nice name. I wasn't sure about it at first, but after about a week I decided that I liked it.

SO: Do you know why it is called The Eye?

AW: No, do you?

SO: I know a couple of theories.

AW: Go on then.

SO: Well he had the sign posts in the front of the house warning people to leave him be. One was in English and the other was in French. On the top of that board was the Eye of Horus.

AW: I think there is an Eye of Horus here.<sup>126</sup>

SO: Yes, that is it.

AW: That has been there since the beginning.

SO: That must be it then, the significance of the house's name must be related to the Eye of Horus.

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<sup>126</sup> At this points Mr. Wilson shows me a brass inlay of the symbol, the Eye of Horus, set into the stone of the house, just to the left of the main entrance.

AW: I didn't know which leads to which, was it the name, did he like the name and therefore there is the eye? What is it about the eye? Is it a mystical or religious thing, obviously from Egyptian times, but what is the significance today? I don't know. It is funny the number of people who think that it is a buzzer. In fact it is funny, I have been here for fourteen years, but I almost don't notice it, I have almost forgotten that it is there. Strange really isn't it.<sup>127</sup>

A lot of the details in the house are really nice. For example the front door at the main entrance are oak, solid oak and beautifully made.

SO: So those are the original doors?

AW: Those are the original doors but these aren't unfortunately. I had them made again in oak, but nothing near as good in quality. You see you just can't get good oak these days it just swells. But this - again to the original door - is beautiful stuff.

SO: Original doorknob as well?

AW: Yes, yes, original as far as I know. Original locks even. He built in good quality, apart from this rubbish.<sup>128</sup> It is a shame really, because it is very solidly built for the most part, but these internal doors are crap, if you would excuse my expression.

SO: So here you just took down the wallpaper and made a proper fireplace?<sup>129</sup>

AW: A proper fireplace with a wood-burning stove. I redid the floors, the whole place needed rewiring, and it had no central heating.

SO: What about this back patio, was it here as well?

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<sup>127</sup> Like the symbol in Sorabji's intaglio amethyst ring, which is still an utter mystery, it is not clear what the significance of the Eye of Horus was for Sorabji and why he used this symbol for the name of his home and as an adornment at the entrance to his driveway and the entrance to his home.

<sup>128</sup> We have now entered the front door of The Eye.

<sup>129</sup> As you enter the front door, Sorabji's infamous living room/music salon is immediately to the left and it is this room that we are now examining.

AW: No, I built that. You came straight out to the grass here. These doors weren't even here, there was no way out. Which is a shame because this is south and west. This is what the house is all about for me.

SO: This is where the big bookshelves were.<sup>130</sup>

AW: That's right.

SO: This was Sorabji's room?<sup>131</sup>

AW: Yes, that is where he slept.

SO: Now it is your bedroom?

AW: Yes, we use it as a master bedroom. The fireplace was there and there was a basin there. Quite nice, sort of parquet floor, which is reasonably solid, it is quite nice thick wood. There is a bit of damp here in the corner, it comes up from the foundation. It is only minor.

It was a funny thing really, because I had actually made an offer on another house in the village at 146 East Street, which is one of the little houses on the road there. That offer had been accepted. Then I was in Wareham to do something and I was passing Cornwall's, the estate agents, which is just on the crossroads there at the traffic lights and the advertisement for The Eye just jumped out at me from the window. They had only put it up in the window that morning. I came up on the Thursday, either a Wednesday or Thursday, straight away. I went in and told them that I wanted to see it right away. So I came up here, it was all over grown and required a lot of work. But I could see the potential to open it up and make it a very nice family home. So within 24 hours I put the asking price on the table and by the same Saturday there were five offers on the property.

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<sup>130</sup> I am here referring to the area of the wall where there are now French doors that lead out to the patio.

<sup>131</sup> We have now entered Sorabji's old bedroom.

The only reason that I got it was because I had nothing to sell. I had cash and was ready to go. Luckily they accepted my offer.

SO: Was that skylight in the hall original as well?

AW: Yes, that is original.<sup>132</sup> It is a really odd bit of creation. This was just a fairly open roof structure.

SO: It makes a really beautiful space.

AW: It is weird<sup>133</sup>, because it is really a nicely made house, there hasn't been a single tile off in 14 years, the stone work is good, the lead flashing is well made, it even has lightning conductors; I mean no one puts lightning conductors on their houses.

SO: That is interesting!

AW: Yes, it is really expensive; it is copper all the way.

It is nice and well built, but it is a really stupid design. For just one or two people it is great, but for a family! We are just about to extend here on the side of the house facing the castle, so we will end up with another 500 square feet here and another roof pitch.

SO: And the garage is new?

AW: Yes, we built that.

SO: So that is what the whole upstairs originally looked like?<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Now we have walked upstairs, which was originally just a large open attic space, but has now been converted into a few very comfortable and uniquely shaped finished rooms.

<sup>133</sup> Now we are outside on a portion of the roof.

<sup>134</sup> We have now entered a portion of the attic that has remained in its original, unconverted state.

AW: Yes, that is what it was all like up here.

SO: Did they have anything left over up here or was it all removed?

AW: There were some odd things. There was an odd wrought iron chandelier. It looked vaguely Indian.<sup>135</sup>

This fence, which must have been there for forty years, is oak. God knows what that cost or what it would cost today! It is beautiful stuff and solid as a rock.

SO: No decay at all?

AW: No, none at all. You can't find a bit of rot on it, which is fantastic. The boundary to the property is not actually here, it is another four feet further out and behind the line of trees and somebody told me that it is this way because Sorabji was so much of a recluse that he didn't want to see the electricians when they were looking after the supply. But on the other hand I think that it has more to do with the fact that the electricity and gas companies have what is called an easement, a right of access.

SO: Oh, this whole strip is yours as well?<sup>136</sup>

AW: Yes, it just sits there and needs to be cut now and again.

SO: It is very beautiful aesthetically with all of those flowers poking through.

AW: He was very fond of these evergreen trees. I must have taken out 50 or 60 of these things. It was lined up all the way along the drive and a big thicket of them, about a dozen of them here. They went right around the back, around the house and around the

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<sup>135</sup> A short interval passed while we made our way outside to inspect the perimeter of the property.

<sup>136</sup> Through a small fence we find ourselves gazing at a very straight and narrow stretch of lawn that extends the length of the property but is completely concealed by the trees that Sorabji planted on one side and the neighbours' property walls on the other.

rest of the property. I don't know how many are left, but not many. We took down 20 to 25 just a year ago. They were everywhere.

SO: So once again you have another path?<sup>137</sup>

AW: These are very old. He must have planted these pretty much at the beginning of his time here. 1953 the house was built. It was built by Harry Parsons, who was a local builder in Swanage. There are some interesting bits of pottery, like some of the sanitary ware at the bottom of the down pipes.

SO: How much did the house end up costing?

AW: It was about £96,000 then, but the price is just about tripled now. Places in Corfe come up for sale so seldom.

SO: Such a desirable village to live in!

AW: In some respects.

SO: Certain people would be attracted to it.

AW: It is a little quiet for a lot of people and it is quite a close community, which some people would find perhaps a little oppressive. But I am probably a bit like Sorabji; I am a little bit on the outside of it.

SO: As you are living within his home you must have spoken with a lot of people about Sorabji. Are there any stories that struck you as interesting?

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<sup>137</sup> A similar stretch of lawn behind the border of trees was to be found on the opposite side of the property as well.

AW: Of course a lot of them are anecdotal. It is difficult to know if they are genuine or not. There used to be a little village shop about halfway down East Street, which is now a bed and breakfast, and apparently he was pretty fussy about what he bought there; his orange juice had to be from Florida and so on and so forth. Ken, who was the guy who owned the shop, told me joking a couple of times that he had to buy things in especially for him. But again the neighbours on that side, the old man died and the wife has moved away, when we first moved here, were very nice and friendly to us when we first moved in. They once said half jokingly that they saw him once every five years. But I know he wasn't as reclusive as that, because he used to go out and about in the town. He used to go into Swanage and could be seen there.

## Chapter Five – Neighbours

As much as Sorabji sought a private life at The Eye, with his fortress of trees both insulating his solitude and deterring the visual satisfaction of the curious who might peer into his property, even a recluse has neighbours. In many ways Sorabji was more approachable to his neighbours, although it was still expected that they submit a request for an audience if a visit was desired. Nevertheless Sorabji usually granted the request and seemed happy to share his inner sanctuary with these individuals. He was also very generous when it came to giving gifts to his neighbours; in particular the giving of books and musical scores was not an uncommon practice. Such openness in Sorabji's behaviour seems to contradict, or at least contrasts, his reputation for requiring a life of reclusion. He indeed guarded his privacy and required quietude for his intellectual and musical activities, but he also had a propensity for communicating and sharing aspects of his private life with the society around him, not just by giving books and musical scores, but also in a more exhibitionist manner, for example, as the Kings relate in their interview, by hanging a papal flag out of his window which those who strolled passed his abode could observe or by strolling into a church to spontaneously play the piano for the individuals decorating the interior. Even the admonishing signs posted on Sorabji's front gate seem to express this contradiction; the intense desire for wanting to be left alone, but in being left alone, it was important that he provided a sense of himself, the great individual, who refuted those who would seek to trespass into his world.

Sorabji was admired by his neighbours as a man of great talent, intelligence, and musical accomplishment, yet his reputation was not untarnished. Despite being recognised by his neighbours as a gentleman and having a generous nature, Sorabji was infamous in the village for less pleasant characteristics and the following interviews with his neighbours relate how Sorabji could be thorny, combative and forceful with his individuality. He was described by Mr. Dodd as disliking women, a frequent observation that will arise throughout the interviews contained within this work, but one that is perplexing when you weigh the importance of women like his mother, Denise Vicars, and Gola Martin-Smith upon his day to day life. Nevertheless, the notion that Sorabji was a

misogynist was prevalent in Corfe Castle chatter. Mr. and Mrs. King described how Sorabji could assume a strong dislike for specific people in the village, in particular with children. In her interview, Mrs. Chappell states that Sorabji was known to stick his tongue out at the youth in the village and would even poke his head into baby carriages and display his outstretched tongue for hapless infants; a behaviour that seems particularly impish and in alignment with Sorabji's sense of humour.

With his garden adjoined to The Eye, Mr. Dodd had the regular privilege of overhearing Sorabji busily playing the piano, yet this phenomenon of audible drift worked both ways, as Mr. Dodd, in his interview, told how Sorabji had once shared with him how he had heard him playing a piece by Chopin and, with tainted mockery, commented upon the originality of Mr. Dodd's interpretation. The creation of caustic witticisms was one of Sorabji's great talents, which can be gleaned from reading his books, articles, and letters, yet in becoming the live target for such verbal darts, the reader of Mr. Dodd's interview will perceive that amidst the polite expressions of admiration lingers a little more than a hint of resentment. Sorabji carried the sting of his opinions into his written correspondence with local villagers, as was the case with a seemingly harmless musical disagreement between him and Pauline Stock, as described by Mrs. Chappell. He also presented his subjective views, even those of an extremely banal nature, for the public to witness, by carrying his argumentative warfare into the local newspaper; an amusing instance over the renaming of his street is retold by Mr. King in his interview.

Sorabji had the personality of a great artist and he was not modest when it came to thrusting his personality upon others, despite his reputation for being immensely guarded. Perhaps it was due to his reclusive nature, which although it harboured great musical productivity and from which he found the time for individual growth, that ultimately caused him to lag in the development of his social graces. On the other hand, Sorabji did possess an air of elitism and it is possible that he was not concerned at all with building relationships or appeasing those around him whom he deemed insignificant. It is also possible that Sorabji resented some of the villagers for their reaction to him and his music. Ms. Marshallsay, in an old recording that Mr. and Mrs. King played for me, explained that when Sorabji first arrived in Corfe Castle, he lived for

a time at the Bankes Arms and would frequently play the piano with no objection to the locals gathering outside his window to listen. But Mr. Dodd, perhaps alluding to these same occasional musical events, says that the villagers were not partial to his performances and as a result he fell out of favour with the locals and eventually sought musical solace by building his home at the furthest extremity of the village. It is worth considering whether Sorabji's aloofness was a natural component of his personality or whether it developed circumstantially as Mr. Dodd suggests by instances of friction with the villagers. Sorabji's propensity for sharing aspects of his private world, in his piano playing, his articles to the newspaper, and his interactions with the locals, was bound to incur reactions in Corfe Castle and the latter potentiality of his behaviour deriving from circumstantial occurrences seems particularly compelling. In reality this suggestion is an extension of the argument, as it has been suggested by others,<sup>138</sup> that Sorabji was ill treated in his youth over issues of race and sexuality and that the psychological kernel of some of his more venomous personal attributes could possibly be traced to those early painful experiences, building defence mechanisms within his personality in reaction to the actual or perceived offences that he endured.

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<sup>138</sup> Paul Rapoport provides a general description of Sorabji's experience with prejudice during his youth in *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*, 68-69.

*ALBERT DODD, a retired local educator and amateur singer, was introduced to me by Andrew Wilson and was subsequently interviewed in his Corfe Castle home on April 5, 2002. Mr. Wilson attended the first portion of the interview. The close vicinity of Mr. Dodd's home to The Eye allowed him to hear Sorabji's piano playing on a regular basis and his recollections of these occasions are fascinating, especially considering that Mr. Dodd is a trained musician.*

AD: I can tell you what he was like. He is a rather difficult chap to estimate. When he was playing, there were passages that were quite good, that went zill, zill.<sup>139</sup> If it had been that he would have had some very charming little passages, but it had no sort of, or at least it didn't seem to me anyway, have any of this constant opposition. If you look at Beethoven or any of those people they go right through and there is continuity. But in his case it is nice at times – I don't say that it wasn't. It was nice, but a weird nice. I can hardly describe it but that.

SO: Was he always playing his own compositions then?

AD: Pretty well, always practising his own something and repetition was going on there.<sup>140</sup> I was playing one morning and the next time he saw me he said, oh what did he say? About Chopin...I know that it was not at all complimentary about my playing, a wonderful phrase, damning while giving praise.

It was unusual music; let's put it that way, it was really. It was quite pleasant sometimes. I don't really know enough really or have studied enough to give you a worthwhile criticism. Another thing, the trouble was his outlook on the town. I know he took exception to their opinion of him. That is true, he definitely did. I don't think they sort of filled his name with love. He used to practice quite a lot in that hotel. He fell out

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<sup>139</sup> At this point Mr. Dodd made gestures of quick passages over an imaginary piano.

<sup>140</sup> Perhaps suggesting either the practicing of passages within his own music or compositionally developing a phrase at the piano.

of favour with the people locally - they didn't really like his sort of performances.<sup>141</sup>

Then of course he built this house at the end and he was able to practice as he wanted to.

SO: What was the occasion whereby he gave you this copy of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*?

AD: Why did he give me that? I don't know why he gave it to me.

SO: Did you ask him for one of his scores?

AD: No, he just gave it to me.

SO: There is a nice written inscription here on the title page.

AD: What does he got there?

SO: It says, 'To my dear old, from Kaika.'

AD: What does he mean, elderly people or what? It was probably given to someone else and they didn't want it so they gave it back to him and then gave it to me.<sup>142</sup> I have never seen this before, this bit. But even then, I wouldn't want to play this.

SO: He was 90 when he parted with this score.<sup>143</sup>

AD: This is typical,<sup>144</sup> 'Public performance prohibited unless by express consent of the composer.' That is absolutely typical of him.

SO: So when did you first meet him?

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<sup>141</sup> There is no indication that Sorabji provided 'performances' in Corfe Castle. One can presume that Mr. Dodd was referring to the audibility of Sorabji's piano from his home and the reaction to the villagers that overheard his playing.

<sup>142</sup> This type of remark is typical of Mr. Dodd's sense of humour.

<sup>143</sup> Sorabji dated his inscription for Mr. Dodd, "20.3.82".

<sup>144</sup> Mr. Dodd is reading the admonishment printed on the score.

AD: When I came up here I suppose. I knew him by reputation.

SO: When did you move here?

AD: 1954 it was built, this place.

SO: You had mentioned that Sorabji would come over to look at your piano, but first your wife would have to leave. Would he not visit if a woman was present?

AD: That is true. There wasn't any nonsense about it. He felt nervous, although he was quite polite. My wife once came back from being on a bus ride, he sort of stepped down and sort of bowed, he was a very polite chap like that to women. If you lived here it was very difficult to know very much about him. He was a bit of a misogynist. I think he must have done, otherwise he would have been far more sociable.

SO: If he was playing piano at The Eye, how distinctly could you hear him?

AD: I would have said, 'Ah there is someone playing the piano.' I know that sounds a bit weird, but that is about all. It is difficult. It was not about the way he was playing, although it seemed artificial at the time. But I don't want to criticise him, because he was far more a musician than I am and I think it would be a bit impertinent if I were to do that.

SO: Did it ever sound as if he was practising technique?

AD: Yes, oh yes!

SO: Scales and arpeggios?

AD: Definitely, yes.

SO: So he wasn't just running through his compositions?

AD: Oh no, that is true. That did interest me.

SO: How did he sound as a pianist? Did he sound fairly good?

AD: Yes. There were a lot of flourishes about it. He did play quite a fair amount in the early days.<sup>145</sup> You expected it. He had the two instruments, both very good instruments. The Steinway, something about that one, almost brilliant at times, I would rather have that.

SO: Did you ever go up to The Eye when Sorabji was there to have a look around his music room?

AD: If I wanted to take care of some difficulties that had arisen, with the Gilbert and Sullivan stuff, I would go in and produce it and get his advice on things. It was quite good. But, I think it is very difficult to estimate him as a man. Some people hailed him as a genius and others didn't. It is a very difficult thing to know and I am not in the position to criticise him. There was a pleasant kind of sound when he was playing. He never did it as if banging down or anything like that.

SO: I am curious about the Gilbert and Sullivan.

AD: It is a queer thing really about the Gilbert and Sullivan. I couldn't do a grand thing at all, but I could get enough volume to do roles in Gilbert and Sullivan productions. I

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<sup>145</sup> If we assume by the early days, Mr. Dodd is referring to the mid 1950s when his own house was built and his relationship to Sorabji began, then this remark seems to describe a period of incredible artistic profusion in Sorabji's life that bore into existence his massive *Symphonic Variations for Piano and Orchestra* (1935-37, 1953-56), *Opus clavisymphonicum – Concerto for Piano and Large Orchestra* (1957-59) and the solo piano works *Un nido di scatole* (1954), *Second Symphony for Piano* (1954), *Passaggiata veneziana* (1955-56), and *Rosario d'arabeschi* (1956).

quite liked doing that. But unfortunately the producer decided to leave here and went to London.

If you go to one of these professionals, each professional sings particular songs, he has a range and it is beautiful...now if you are like Albert Dodd!

SO: How did Sorabji help you with the Gilbert and Sullivan?

AD: Well, if I didn't know something about some principal or a scene, which also tempted me to go over there and see what it was like inside. I don't know whether I learned a great amount from him. I don't think Sorabji was much of a Gilbert and Sullivan man. Gilbert was a genius. I could respect him as an artist; his language was jolly good. But the music in that was alright, humpty dumpty, it is suitable for that. But I think the words are far better and are the important part.

I remember he told me about Yonty Solomon once when I was up there. He had a great deal of confidence in this chap and thought that he could play his music.

*BRENDA CHAPPELL, who lived just down the road from The Eye, was interviewed in her home on April 7, 2002.*

BC: I was born in the cottage next door and I have lived in Corfe my whole life. When I was a child, the lady that lived here, actually there were two ladies, Pauline and Gertrude Stock, were both clever musicians. But Pauline was an exceptionally good musician. She played with the Sir Dan Godfrey Orchestra in Bournemouth. She did not see eye to eye with Mr. Sorabji on a lot of his music. A lot of people find his music extremely strange. When we came in here and cleared everything out there were a couple of letters that he had written to her.<sup>146</sup> To be perfectly honest, I don't think that I understood them, but it was obviously an argument about the rights and wrongs of a certain piece of music; whether it was one of his pieces or not, I don't know. It was some argument about a piece of music that obviously Pauline didn't agree with his views or he didn't agree with Pauline's views, I am not sure which way around it was. I think they respected each other quite a bit actually, because they were both quite good musicians.

SO: What instrument did Pauline play?

BC: She was lead viola in Sir Dan Godfrey's orchestra. Her sister Gertrude was a pianist, but not quite up to the standard that Pauline was. They were living in Germany when the First World War broke out and trained there. Then, of course, they had to come out of there and I think they lost quite a bit of money and then settled back here.

You see, my husband used to go up and see Mr. Sorabji quite regularly. I truthfully can't tell you anything about any of the conversations that they had, but my husband was a drummer, he had a small dance band, a small village dance band, so they were only very much amateurs. They were quite good and he played all his life. He knew a lot of musicians that were of a far higher standard than he was and several of them asked if they could come over and if there was any chance that they could have an audience with Mr. Sorabji. He was always very pleased for Ron [Mrs. Chappell's late husband] to go up, 'Oh yes I should be very pleased to see you and your friend.' I am not

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<sup>146</sup> Unfortunately, after a long search through her papers, Mrs. Chappell was unable to find these letters.

quite sure what they talked about, because all of Ron's friends were interested in the same kind of music, none of them were classical musicians. One of them that I remember he took up there was a sales manager at one of the music shops over in Bournemouth.

SO: Do you remember the man's name?

BC: Yes, his name was Dave Judas. I truthfully don't know what happened to him for we have lost touch. But I think that he was younger than what we were, so there is the possibility that he is still around. But I have no idea what they talked about when they went up there, so I am not much help where that is concerned. But he was always more than willing for a person, with an interest in music of any kind, to come up and see him.

My most vivid recollection of him was – you know where he lived, it faces out onto our Common and in those days before the hedges were all grown up it was quite open. I was always out there with dogs, two or three times a day. When I walked I could look down across and nearly always he was sitting at his front porch and I couldn't figure out what he was doing, but it was exercises for his wrists. He would sit there for ages and ages doing this<sup>147</sup> with his hands. I used to think, what is he doing, pretending to conduct something? But he wasn't he was just keeping his wrists supple. Especially on a day like this with the sun coming into his porch he would be sitting there.<sup>148</sup>

I never heard him play.

SO: Did you ever go into The Eye?

BC: No I never did. I suppose I could have done. I used to meet him regularly. In those days everybody walked. I don't think that they had a car. You know he had his manservant that lived with him all the time. It was quite common to see him with his stick walking up the road and he always spoke. When I was married first of all and when

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<sup>147</sup> Mrs. Chappell here makes a gesticulation that resembled a constant knocking gesture from the wrist. Sorabji was a great believer and practitioner of various alternative or obscure physical exercises, including exercises for the eyes, which is expounded upon in the interview with Anthony Burton-Page, and the hands, the latter likely being that which Mrs. Chappell witnessed.

<sup>148</sup> Again she made the wrist movement.

I had the baby in the pram, he would always speak and asked how the baby was. He didn't have much time for some of the children in the village. They didn't understand, because he was different and he didn't have much patience with some of their behaviour. But he was always charming, very much the gentleman.<sup>149</sup>

SO: Were there instances where he yelled at the children or chastised them?

BC: There were instances when he poked his tongue out at them. My friend said that they were sitting on the bus, either on an adjacent seat or the seat behind, and she had her small son with her at the time who was fascinated and just kept staring at him and the tongue poked out at her son. But he was very, very much the gentleman. It is a pity really that you didn't come around when my husband was alive, because he would have remembered a lot about Mr. Sorabji.

He was always very immaculate in his appearance. He always had a stick and walked quite quickly.<sup>150</sup> I always got the impression that while he was walking around that in his brain he was writing the next piece of music. He always seemed to be wrapped up in his own little world when he walked along, but he always spoke to me when we passed on the road.

I wonder if he was lonely. He was obviously highly intellectual and in the village during those days it was a backwards place, we were only very ordinary, commoners really and I would have thought that there would have been very few people, besides perhaps Miss. Stock, that he could have conversed with on his own level. I wonder if he was lonely, if he would have preferred more company perhaps. He and Mr. Best were perhaps quite happy with their own company; but I don't know. What I am trying to say is that perhaps he would have wanted to talk to the ordinary village people more. But when I was young, in this village, we were still at the stage when there were the gentry and the nobility and then there was us commoners. My father would have raised his cap

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<sup>149</sup> It is interesting to note that in contrast to Mr. Dodd's portrayal of Sorabji's attitude towards women, Mrs. Chappell does not allude to Sorabji's behaviour towards her as being at all misogynistic.

<sup>150</sup> In later years Sorabji walked very slowly, so this must be a very early recollection that Mrs. Chappell has provided.

to them and spoken to them, but you didn't get in to any kind of conversation with them. You kept your place in those days.

SO: So how was Sorabji viewed?

BC: Well if he would have mixed with anyone, I would have thought that he would have mixed with the gentry. But I never heard that he did.

*DAVID and JEAN KING, direct neighbours with Sorabji for approximately 25 years, were interviewed in their home on April 8, 2002. I was especially fascinated by an old audio recording that the King's shared with me of an interview that Mr. King conducted with Joan Marshallsay, a now deceased resident of Corfe Castle who offered very early memories of Sorabji's presence in the village. The content of that recording has been incorporated into the following interview.*

DK: We have lived here for 42 years, which is an awfully long time. We built this house 42 years ago and of course Sorabji lived here [at The Eye] anyway. All of this land belonged to the Bond estate and we bought a plot and built on it. Sorabji had, I guess in the middle of the 1950s, bought two plots and built a house in the middle, which explains the odd positioning of his house. He was a recluse and we knew him as well as you could possibly get to know anybody. If you wanted to talk to Sorabji you dropped him a note asking him if we could come and talk to him. He had been in the village before the war.<sup>151</sup>

JK: Didn't he have a bungalow in Mr. Dodd's road, prior to having The Eye built?

SO: Is that the one just to the left of Dodd's home?

JK: It is next door but one, yes, it has been extended recently.

DK: He was a strange little chap. He used to wander around with this beret on.

JK: He had a red velvet hat and a red velvet suit. He went into Wareham on most Thursdays, which was market day. Originally he went by bus, prior to that he possibly went by train. He certainly went by bus and latterly he had a taxi driver from Swanage who always took him in on Thursday to do his shopping.

DK: Have you been in the house?

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<sup>151</sup> Only as a visitor, Sorabji did not move to Corfe Castle until after the Second World War.

SO: Yes.

DK: It has been remodelled slightly by Andy Wilson, but it was basically a music room and there were two pianos in there. It was decorated very much in the style of Art Deco-Edwardian; lots of Tiffany-type electric light stands, very dark, bookcases, and the smell of incenses if I remember rightly.

JK: Yes, yes!

DK: It was the music room, there was a kitchen stuck on and a cloakroom, but they were appendages to this place. I can remember going and seeing him quite a few times, but you had to drop a note before hand, didn't you? He was an incredibly intelligent man.

He used to wander down the village and look in children's prams and put his tongue out, didn't he?

JK: Or so the story goes.

DK: And you were going to say something about the papal flag.

JK: Yes, I was going to say that when the Pope was chosen, he always used to hang the papal flag out of his high window...

DK: Out of his window and draped over the roof.<sup>152</sup>

JK: Because one of his ancestors was supposedly a Pope or a Cardinal. There were many stories that went around. It was Sicily wasn't it that the Cardinal came from? He could at times, though remote, be very friendly. We were decorating the church one year and he came in and played the piano.

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<sup>152</sup> This seems a very exhibitionistic behaviour on the part of Sorabji, who was known as a recluse, demonstrating the great contradiction that existed within his personality; the man who so wanted to be left alone and yet was incapable of ceasing his extreme communications to the observing world.

SO: Which church?

JK: St. Edward in Corfe. He just came in and played happily.

DK: I went to his funeral, which was in St. Edward's. They brought down a lot of Hi-fi equipment and there were some very serious looking people in black overcoats, they were clearly musicians. They played a great chunk of his organ concerto.

SO: Yes, it was part of his first Organ Symphony.

DK: It was a very long service.

JK: He liked his garden just wild, with...

DK: It was wild and boggy.

JK: ...evergreens, absolutely nothing else.

DK: No, just enormous Lawsons.

JK: A double row of Lawsons and grass.

DK: He had a man called Mr. Best who lived with him. They used to go off together and Best would walk about ten paces behind him.

JK: But Sorabji could be pleasant, very pleasant, but he could also be remote.

DK: We got on as well with him as one possibly could. He used to lend occasionally his manuscripts to any exhibitions that we might have in the village.<sup>153</sup> Of course quite a bit of his music exists on LP, because somebody gave the town trust some LPs of his and they have got them down in the town hall.

He was a prolific writer of letters to the local newspaper, The Swanage Times.

JK: You almost expected one every week!

DK: I was on the council 40 years ago and when we were asked to name the roads up here, they looked at me and said, ‘You name them.’ We found that this big field, which has now been built on, had two names, one was Townsend Mead and the other was Higher Fieldbanks, plural. Since we had two roads and I liked Higher Fieldbanks, I chose Higher Fieldbanks and we gave Albert Dodd Townsend Mead. The County then lost the S and we became Higher Fieldbank, singular. But Sorabji didn’t like it and there was a lot of correspondence about Higher Mudlock, because the road has always been in a bit of a mess and he objected to this place being called Higher Fieldbank and felt that it should really be called Higher Mudlock.<sup>154</sup> But he would write these very assertive letters to the press.

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<sup>153</sup> This is another example of Sorabji’s willingness to break his solitude for the recognition of his talent, in this instance by submitting his music for local viewing.

<sup>154</sup> Mr. King’s memory, although capturing the essence of the debate, misquoted Sorabji’s mock name for their street. Sorabji did not refer to the street as ‘Higher Mudlock,’ but rather as ‘Higher Mudbank.’ Incidentally the current name of the street is no longer ‘Higher Fieldbank,’ it is now the oddly truncated ‘Higher Fildbank.’ The article in which Mr. King’s recollection is referring to reads as follows: ‘Under a system wherein 10 times as much is spent upon “education” as it is called, as on putting sound roofs, indeed ANY roofs over people’s heads, it is natural that there should not be overmuch concern over the state of the roads and lanes whereby people have access to their homes. Of course no one disputes the importance of that process of “*bourrage de cran*” that produces meek and unquestioning moppers-up of the spiritual, mental and moral dope dished up to them via press and radio, that must, naturally be the first priority. Assuming, however, that people HAVE some sort of a house to go to, it does seem reasonable (or doesn’t it?) to expect that they be able to get to it with reasonable ease in all weathers. Here we live up a lane that in wet weather is rapidly becoming an impassable morass, and a grave danger to vehicles some of which have already been bogged down. What do our local bigwigs, wiseacres and whatnots do? Send along a load of stones to fill up the worst holes? Not on your life! They stick pretty labels on us. TWO if you please...Higher Fildbank! One is reminded of the White Knight in ‘Alice’ when Alice asked him what was the name of the song. The name is CALLED he said, this, the name IS this, but the song itself is THIS. WE are now Higher Mudbank, and, at our present rate of progress or deliquescence will soon be Deeper Quagmire.’ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “A cry from Higher Mudbank,” *Swanage Times* (27 April 1966): 16.

He also, and I cannot find it, was a great supporter of a man named Eddie Shaw. There was a newspaper proprietor called Eddie Shah, who broke, before Murdoch came along, the print unions. Sorabji was a great supporter of his, whether he knew him, I don't know. Shaw eventually wrote a book on this. Somewhere I have a copy of this book, given to me by Sorabji.

But we didn't see much of him.

JK: He just lived a happy life.

DK: A happy life up there! But of course he wouldn't see people. Presumably you have seen the classic bit when Russell Harty tried to film him and it is on film. But I can remember that he put his head around the door and told them to go to hell.

Before he died, somebody broke into the place and I think that they only took money, although there was a priceless amount of gold objects and things there, none of which as far as I know were touched. Whoever it was didn't appreciate that this Art deco stuff was valuable.

JK: Didn't we think that at the time they broke in from the Common.

DK: They were some of our local lads, I am sure.

SO: I don't think Sorabji was ever told about the break in.

JK: That is just as well, because I think that he would have been very upset.

Like most elderly people, he didn't want to go into a nursing home, but it came to that stage when there was no alternative. To me he was a pleasant neighbour who just liked to keep to himself. But he was very striking in his red velvet or purple.

DK: He was breathtakingly bright, without any doubt, sharp! He was just a quiet neighbour who was a recluse.

JK: We had an old English sheep dog who thought that it was extremely funny to escape and go into his garden. He used to rush around and Sorabji would bounce about and catch the dog and bring him back.

DK: The whole of this mound is full of springs and it was a really boggy garden. I can remember the cattle used to get out and the village policemen had to chase them about in Sorabji's garden one morning.

JK: There were one or two people, now dead, who he used to invite around. I thought that they were all Catholics.

DK: The local squire, who is long since dead, Jack Ryder, related to the Queen Mother who has just died, was a great rugby player, not a musician or anything like that, owned all the land over the hill to the harbour. Sorabji rang up Jack one day and asked him to provide him with a log, upon which he could sit and use to meditate. I think the remains of it are still up there. When it was delivered, Jack used to be invited up to sit on the log and talk to Sorabji.

I guess we were all at work and busy, but he certainly wasn't in the social lot in the village.

JK: That wasn't his scene. But he did his shopping, he pottered around, and used to walk down to the village in his red velvet and he had a round hat. The thing he mainly wore was this red velvet suit. He looked very dignified, I think. Would he be about 5' 8" or 5' 7"?

DK: No not so tall, he was just a little fellow.

The builders who built his house are all dead. Ron Chappell built the house.<sup>155</sup> We had the last plot and bought it in 1959.

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<sup>155</sup> Ron Chappell's widow does not mention this little fact in her interview and Mr. Wilson thought that a Mr. Parsons built The Eye, but of course it is possible that Mr. Chappell was involved in the construction of Sorabji's home as well.

JK: I can picture him when he came down while we were decorating the church and playing the piano.

SO: Do you remember what he played? Did it seem like his music?

JK: It wasn't his own music.

DK: I can remember you coming back and someone else saying that it was Chopin.

JK: It could easily have been.

DK: Apparently he used to come down with his mother and stay at the Bankes in the 30s. The piano used to come down in a crate on the goods train and was then reassembled. When you look at the Bankes Arms, the bar on the right used to be the lounge. There was a lady called Joan Marshallsay, there were two Joan Marshallsays in the village, little Joan and big Joan. Big Joan died the year before last and she was a spinster who worked in the tearooms and used to look after him in the Bankes Arms. He would let her play the piano. In fact I interviewed Joan some years ago and if you would like to hear the bit about the Bankes Arms I could play it for you. She was a terrible person to interview, she just wouldn't talk and you had to probe her along.

SO: Could you hear him play his piano here from your home?

DK: No.

SO: It must have sounded the other way, as it could be heard from Mr. Dodd's home.

DK: Could Doddy hear it?

JK: I don't think he ever opened the windows.

DK: Well, we weren't on that side of the house. You see all of the utility rooms were on this side.

Did you see Barbara Canning?

SO: Yes.

JK: Well she should remember him playing the piano in the church.

SO: She didn't mention that.

JK: Well, it could have been her mother. I know we were all busy arranging flowers and making the church look nice and he just walked in. I suspect he asked Roger if he could play the piano. Roger Welchman was the Rector there. He just sat down and played, which was a joy for us all because we didn't think that he would do it, it didn't seem in his nature.

SO: And his playing was fine?

JK: Oh lovely!

SO: How old was he at that time?

DK: Twenty years or so before he died.

JK: Yes, about twenty.

SO: So he was already quite elderly and moving about just fine on the piano?

JK: Yes.

DK: It is dreadful having been his neighbour for all these years and not knowing him very well, while we know all of the other neighbours, with whom we have street parties.

JK: He wouldn't have enjoyed that. He loved Corfe and he liked walking down to the village and say good morning to you. He was very polite.

DK: In those days there wasn't very much pavement. There were only three street lamps.

JK: It seems almost unbelievable; the traffic must have increased incredibly. There wasn't pavement at the end of this road on the main road. It was put in about thirty years ago. We must have walked along just in the road. Sorabji would have done that.

DK: There is very little left of the old village. It was very interesting though, because clearly it was a closed society. I talked to some of the old villagers and the annual treat was going to Swanage and back. They seldom ever went to Bournemouth.

JK: I think that in the forty years that we have lived here it has changed enormously.

DK: And you took some of them to London once and they had never been to London before.

JK: Yes. In fact when we first lived here - Sorabji would have known this - the vast proportion of the village was related. There were very few incomers like Sorabji and us who came to live here.

SO: Stockley, Orchard, Moss...<sup>156</sup>

JK: They would have all been cousins. There were very few outsiders.

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<sup>156</sup> Within Corfe Castle, these three family names, along with a few others, are absolutely omnipresent, with a continuous legacy in the same area that extends back to a time before the siege of the castle.

DK: The other thing that was interesting was that in this closed society they were very talented carpenters and musicians. There was Fred Stockley, who died recently, who was in the town band and he was a very talented cornet player. Joan Marshallsay was a talented violinist and pianist. Would you like to try and hear Joan Marshallsay?<sup>157</sup>

DK: What about the Bankes Arms. I remember it with Hatfield, but there must have been people long before that. Sorabji used to come there.

JM: I was about to say that Mr. Sorabji used to stay there.

DK: Did you have much dealing with him?

JM: Yes, quite a lot.

DK: He was a strange man.

JM: Oh he was, very strange.

DK: What are your memories of Mr. Sorabji? He came down I think with his mother.

JM: Yes, with his mother, that is right.

DK: And the piano came down by train?

JM: Down by train, that is right. Marvellous piano it was. In those days I used to go over there.

DK: Did he let you play it?

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<sup>157</sup> At this point in our conversation Mr. King pressed the play button on his tape recorder and we listened to a selection from an old recorded interview that he conducted with Joan Marshallsay.

JM: Yes, yes occasionally. But I had to be careful.

DK: Where was the piano, upstairs?

JM: No, downstairs, in the little private room on the right hand side as you went through the front door.

DK: Sorabji used to stay in the Bankes with his mother?

JM: Yes, that is right and he would stay for the summer.

DK: So you could hear him play?

JM: Yes, people used to stand outside to listen to him.

DK: Did he have any visitors to see him from the musical world?

JM: Yes, he did, but I can't remember whom. Then when he was living up East Street he used to come down to ask for tea, but he used to bring his own tea. He had to make his own tea. He wouldn't drink the tea that we had.

DK: What tea was that?

JM: I can't remember, but it was something very special.<sup>158</sup>

JK: You now know that he only liked his own tea.

DK: The village is quite capable of being nasty to people.

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<sup>158</sup> Although Sorabji had a few different teas that he regularly drank, his preference was for Chinese teas, in particular Lapsang Souchong. At this point Mr. King stopped his taped interview with Joan Marshallsay, since the remainder of the recorded material turned to subjects un-related to Sorabji.

JK: They used to get upset by him, because, as I understand it for I never experienced it, he could be very unpleasant if he took a dislike to either a child or something, probably due to living the kind of reclusive life that he did with Mr. Best.

SO: Did you ever have any contact with Mr. Best? I know that he must have been even more reclusive.

DK: He was quite impossible to get any recognition from him if you spoke to him.

JK: He was a very tall and thin man; well he seemed tall compared to Mr. Sorabji. He always gave the impression of being very hard done by, but this could be wrong.

## Chapter Six – Villagers, Local Acquaintances & Helpers

When Sorabji first moved to Corfe Castle after the Second World War the village was fairly insulated from the urban influences of London, let alone the influences from beyond England's shores, and I was concerned that there would have been bouts of racial discrimination or animosity towards Sorabji's eccentricities. Indeed the villagers of Corfe Castle were keenly aware of Sorabji's uniqueness, beyond the mere visual distinction of race, but in general it appears that they did not estrange him or shun him for his perceived differences. With that said, Sorabji did seek to estrange the villagers, and very quickly developed a reputation for being a recluse.<sup>159</sup> His privacy was respected, and although there was whispering as to the contents of The Eye and Sorabji's relationship to Mr. Best, the villagers seemed to have perceived a social gap between themselves and the mysterious Sorabji, or Sir Abji as he was known by some of the villagers.<sup>160</sup> The notion of class, especially in post-war Dorset, was a very real social concept and as such it would have been inappropriate for many of the villagers, as they saw it, to intrude upon Sorabji's affairs. There are examples of how Sorabji fuelled this characterisation of his elevated status. He shared stories about his intaglio ring with many people and told Mrs. Williams, as learned from her interview, that upon Sorabji's death, the ring was to be given to the Pope. Of course in England there are manor houses inhabited by nobles and the social elite, so it is rather in keeping with this elevated image that from Mr. Stockley's interview it is learned that Sorabji related stories about a massive family estate somewhere in the Middle East; Mr. Stockley felt fairly certain that this supposed family estate was not in India, which is an important distinction, since his family in India was immensely successful in business and it is plausible that they could

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<sup>159</sup> The villagers predominantly viewed Sorabji as a recluse, but it is possible that this behaviour intensified with age and that he was far more approachable when he first moved to Corfe Castle. This idea is supported by an extraordinary assertion in the following letter by Barbara Canning, who is a well respected and generous Corfe Castle native, 'I was born in Corfe Castle in 1935. I remember my mother telling me that Mr. Sorabji came to Corfe first and stayed at the Bankes Arms Hotel and often played the piano there, this must have been just after the war. I remember him well. He was a kind gentleman who used to walk down to the village most days with his friend, Mr. Best. He always passed the time of the day with the villagers.' Barbara Canning, Corfe Castle, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 19 March 2002, letter in the hand of Barbara Canning, Private Collection.

<sup>160</sup> This amusing anecdote was drawn from the interview with Bernard and Kathy Williams.

have afforded a rather luxurious life. Yet, if Mr. Stockley's memory is correct, then an estate in the Middle East, perhaps suggestive of the ancient Persia of the Parsis, is more than likely a fabrication on Sorabji's part as was the story about his ring as an ultimate gift to the Pope, conceived perhaps to bolster this notion of his elite social standing.

With Sorabji's privacy being honoured, time passed with a cordial handshake and a quick polite chat being the extent of the villagers' interaction with the composer that lived in their midst. Of course the children of Corfe Castle could not restrain themselves from teasing Sorabji and creating imaginative notions about this strange man, but their youthful curiosity and mild cruelty was playfully received and Sorabji replied to this abuse in a humorous manner by sticking out his tongue at the youth of the village. Based upon the content of the following interviews it seems that Sorabji's need for a private life intensified over time and that he was more approachable upon first arriving in Corfe Castle, at which point he was already in his 50s, but as he became frailer he steadily withdrew into The Eye. The villagers who did have contact with Sorabji in his later years, some to a greater extent than others, typically provided a form of service; for example, the Stockleys cleaned his clothing,<sup>161</sup> Mr. Williams and Mr. Johnson were postal workers, and Mrs. Nice, Ms Green,<sup>162</sup> and Mrs. Kirkwood<sup>163</sup> all delivered food to his home.

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<sup>161</sup> The Stockley's, who cleaned Sorabji's clothing, remarked upon his elaborate and expensive wardrobe, purple velvet and flowing robes, which is perhaps indicative of the composer's earlier days in Corfe Castle, since Peter Western wrote a letter, relating to Sorabji when he was a bit older, that contrasts the image of Sorabji the velveteen dandy. 'My only recollection for many years (living in East Street, Corfe Castle, from 1965 onward) was this small dishevelled old man with white unkempt hair, wearing a cream/brown coat. I would be very interested in knowing more about him. He seemed a very clever person, but reclusive. But these are my impressions only.' Peter Western, Corfe Castle, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 13 March 2002, letter in the hand of Peter Western, Private Collection.

<sup>162</sup> Doreen Green wrote a very short letter in response to my enquiry for information on Sorabji, 'Regret – my only contact was through "Meals on Wheels" and even then I did not meet or see him as his butler always attended.' Doreen Green, Corfe Castle, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 13 March 2002, letter in the hand of Doreen Green, Private Collection. Mr. Best is here succinctly summed up as the butler.

<sup>163</sup> Mrs. Kirkwood was not interviewed, but she did provide the following letter of interest. 'We do not have much knowledge of Mr. Sorabji's history but were told when he came here that he was a Syrian composer, whose works were not to be published for 100 years. He lived with his manservant near us – the house was surrounded by Macrocarpa trees, the grass left wild, and on the gate a notice to say that the only women allowed on the premises were the nuns from some order abroad? Consequently there was very little chat. When he was failing he agreed to have "meals on wheels" and I took the lunches in once. A huge drawing room, two grand pianos (I think), gold ornaments on the mantelpiece, large windows with dark curtains nearly shut so it was very sombre and a strong smell of incense. In this room Mr. Sorabji seemed a very small, bowed figure, wearing a pill-box embroidered hat. He did not speak and I was looking for somewhere to put their lunches – found a little dark kitchen with the manservant waiting and departed.

*Three generations of the Stockley family were privately employed by Sorabji for general help, in particular for doing his laundry. Sorabji was very generous with this family, bestowing upon them a variety of gifts and a steady friendship. CECIL STOCKLEY and his son, JOHN STOCKLEY, were interviewed at Mr. Cecil Stockley's home in Corfe Castle on April 6, 2002.*

CS: One Christmas when the wife and me were up there, he said to her, 'Mrs. Cecil,' he always called her Mrs. Cecil not Mrs. Stockley, 'I've got you in my will.'<sup>164</sup> But he didn't like women, he didn't.<sup>165</sup>

JS: Lovely old boy he was.

CS: There were not very many people in the village like Mr. Sorabji.

JS: You know it is funny, he used to have these long flowing robes and he used to walk down through the village. And unless you knew him he was very scary. But he was a gentleman. You always had to shake his hand; he was very polite.

CS: He was a very clever man.

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Shortly after I think they both went into a nursing home, as there were no more 'meals on wheels' deliveries.' Mrs. Kirkwood, Corfe Castle, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 11 March 2002, letter in the hand of Mrs. Kirkwood, Private Collection. Of course Sorabji was not Syrian, as far as I know he never banned the publication of a his compositions for a specified time of 100 years, nor were the signs on his driveway so specific as to say that the only women allowed on the premises were nuns, yet the enigma of Sorabji was such that fantastic stories were rife in the village.

<sup>164</sup> Mr. Stockley's wife, Violet Stockley, was not actually mentioned in Sorabji's will at all; only Reginald Norman Best, who passed away before Sorabji, Alistair Hinton, Frank Holliday, and Denise Vicars appear as beneficiaries. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Probate registry, 1988, Principal Registry of the Family Division, Probate Department, London. Unfortunately and unrecorded in this interview, Violet Stockley trusted Sorabji when he made this jest and when nothing materialised after his death she assumed that she had been swindled by those overseeing the administration of the Will, which was not the case. The whole issue was a terrible misunderstanding engendered by Sorabji's casual but ultimately insincere generosity with Mrs. Stockley.

<sup>165</sup> While Mr. Stockley was talking, his son John presented for my viewing various items that Sorabji had given to Mr. Stockley and his late wife Violet. Most of the items had some kind of written commentary by Sorabji. The items were: A transcript of Donald Garvelmann's WNCN radio broadcast about the composer, a photograph of Sorabji, one of Michael Habermann's recital programmes, and "Sorabji Symposium" by Hugh MacDiarmid, John Ogdon, and Ronald Stevenson.

JS: Then there is that wooden thing in there, let's get that in here to show. He was always giving us presents.

CS: My wife was Irish and a Catholic and he was Catholic,<sup>166</sup> so he gave her all of these little pieces.<sup>167</sup> He was always bringing her something. He used to say to her, 'I have been to Wareham, Mrs. Cecil, and those cats have been getting on my nerves.' And she would say, 'What do you mean cats?' And he said, 'The women in Wareham.' He called the women cats.

JS: These were the kind of things that he gave us for gifts.<sup>168</sup> I think it was done by hand. It is oak. That is the sort of thing he would give us, presents like that. I thought you would have liked to see it.

SO: What were the occasions that he would give you something like this?

JS: Oh any occasion. I used to go up there every Saturday and get anything from half a crown, which was a lot of money in those days in the 1950s, to seven and six pence, for just going from here up to The Eye and back again. I used to put me stuff on the go-kart, it didn't matter how heavy it was since I put it on the go-kart, and if it was heavy, I used to like a heavy one, because I would get more money for it. He would often call me in and say, 'Here you are John, a little present.'

In the shops in Swanage, if he walked in there, they used to look after him. A friend of mine had a shop down there and he used to get him incenses and stuff like that and if he walked into a different shop, he would call his mate and say, 'Mr. Sorabji is coming, look after him.' He was so sort of popular that is how he was. Unless you got to

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<sup>166</sup> Sorabji's religious views cannot be summed up so succinctly and it is incorrect to say that he was Catholic, yet this is the impression that he gave to many individuals, with his wonderful stories of his supposed Sicilian heritage of prestigious Catholic pedigree. Sorabji was not a Catholic, but he was intrigued by and sympathetic towards Catholicism.

<sup>167</sup> The Catholic comment I assume was gendered by John's mentioning of the 'wooden thing,' which he had gone to fetch from another room and would soon produce. But at this moment Mr. Stockley pointed out the various wooden gifts from Sorabji that were within the room: a carved lion, a smoothly polished drinking cup, a small round box, and a framed print of the Virgin Mary.

<sup>168</sup> It was a very large wooden relief carving of Christ, specifically an image of Jesus as he appears in Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper*.

know him you would think, what a funny bloke. But he was very kind underneath, very, very kind.

SO: And why did you go up to see him every week?

JS: Well mum used to do his laundry. Well gran started it, but she got too old to do it, so mum took it over. I used to go up and get the laundry, mum used to do it, and then every Saturday we would swap it over, I would take the clean laundry up and bring back the dirty laundry. He wouldn't take it to the laundry; it had to be done either by my gran or my mum.

CS: Special!

JS: It had to be done special. He wouldn't let anybody else touch his laundry.

CS: He had purple velvet.

JS: Oh yes his silks and everything, beautiful clothing he had. It wasn't just ordinary clothing.

CS: His buttons were gold.

JS: It was all first class stuff.

SO: Was it specially tailored for him?

JS: I think so. He went to London and places like that. He didn't get his clothes from around here. But like I said, if he bought anything locally, he was always looked after, especially in the little shops in Swanage. Yes, he was a lovely old boy.

CS: He had a piano in his house and I used to ask him, 'Play that for me Mr. Sorabji,' and he would say in jest, 'No, I am not good enough.'

JS: When I used to take the things up to him you could hear him playing piano and the rooms were so dark. The curtains were velvety and were always drawn. It was always dark. I suppose it was so he could get his mood for composing.

CS: One Christmas he invited the wife and me up and he said, 'Mrs. Cecil, I want you to see something.' And she said, 'What is that Mr. Sorabji?' 'Family heirloom.' It was the only time I had known him to get bad tempered. He brought her this ring; you have never seen anything like it. Of course, being a woman, she put it on and he said, 'You're going to bring my family bad luck.'

SO: Which ring was it, the one with the amethyst?

CS: Yes. You see what happened, my wife had a brain haemorrhage, otherwise he would have never gone into that nursing home.<sup>169</sup> He hated that nursing home. It cost him and Reggie £1,000 a week.

JS: That was a lot of money back in the 80s. Me gran, she met him when he came to stay in the Bankes Arms Hotel. That is where he stayed at first. Apparently his mother used to live in Swanage.

CS: Next door to Auntie Fan. My sister used to look after his mother. His mother was white.

JS: His manservant was a case. I don't know if you have ever seen *The Munsters*, Hermann, he is a bit like that. He was a sort of dark sort of bloke. But he was alright, he was harmless enough. He used to go for walks on his own on The Common. He never

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<sup>169</sup> Marley House.

seemed to have any friends, Mr. Best. He never socialised like most people. He remained his manservant and that was it.

CS: Mr. Sorabji came in and said to mother, ‘Will you look after Reggie? I am going to London.’ So mother got in the car and went up there and she had to get through the garden and found him on his back. She had to stay with him until Mr. Sorabji returned.<sup>170</sup>

When I had that heart attack he came in and said to my wife, ‘Mrs. Cecil, I am going in to London to see my doctor. Would it be alright if I picked up some tablets for Mr. Cecil?’ And she said, ‘Yes.’ He came back from London and he brought these tablets. Ten a day I took. Whether they helped I don’t know.

JS: My dad wasn’t even born when Mr. Sorabji arrived.<sup>171</sup> For 80 years or so Mr. Sorabji had known our family.

CS: His room, when you went up the hallway and turned to the left...

JS: It was full of stuff.

CS: Along one wall there were 1,000 books. What they were about I don’t know.

JS: Even in those days there must have been thousands of pounds worth of stuff in that house.

CS: Someone broke into there one time.

SO: You mean somebody broke into The Eye?

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<sup>170</sup> The details of this incident are unknown, but it is likely connected to one of Mr. Best’s psychotic episodes.

<sup>171</sup> This is a bit of an exaggeration, since Cecil Stockley was in his early nineties at the time of the interview and Sorabji did not move to Corfe Castle until after the Second World War.

CS: Yeah. He always told us, ‘Whatever you see; don’t tell anyone.’

SO: What year did this happen?

CS: That was about 12 years ago when it got broken into.

SO: Did they take a lot?

JS: I suppose whatever was pinched must have been worth something, because there wasn’t any cheap stuff there. I don’t suppose there was anyone there to see what was missing, since he wasn’t there and Reggie wasn’t there.<sup>172</sup>

CS: I used to go up every Thursday and take out the dustbins. ‘Have a drink, Mr. Cecil,’ he would say.

JS: He was always good to me though. But he never let my sister into the house. He would say, ‘Come on John,’ and he would show me around. But if my sister was with me she would have to wait outside.<sup>173</sup>

SO: Would he actually tell her that she had to wait outside?

JS: Yeah, more or less. I used to take the stuff inside for him and he would show me around and she would be outside waiting for me. It would be a nice day; it wouldn’t hurt her. He never allowed women in. The only two women to go in were my gran and my mum. Strange!<sup>174</sup>

SO: The police never caught the burglars?

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<sup>172</sup> Sorabji and Mr. Best were already in the nursing home at the time of the burglary.

<sup>173</sup> It is not clear why his sister had to wait outside, whether Sorabji preferred to minimize the number of little hands in The Eye or if she had a reputation for getting in to things, but stories like this propagate the notion that Sorabji was a misogynist who did not often permit the presence of women or girls into The Eye.

<sup>174</sup> Of course other women were allowed into The Eye and in particular his female friends, like Denise Vicars and Gola Martin-Smith, visited the interior world of The Eye on a fairly regular basis.

CS: No. I don't know how they could have broken in. One room was all windows and from there right around to that cabinet were all books and those two pianos and he had those beautiful carpets.

JS: Oh yes, he used to have me come in to see those carpets. I remember one year, I thought it was fantastic and it was very advanced, remember those space programmes? He gave me a torch one year that was supposed to be everlasting. It wasn't supposed to need batteries. You just turned it on and turned it off. But like everything else it did eventually wear down in the end. We used to get some funny gifts off him. And shortbread, he always brought us back shortbread from London. It wasn't the cheap stuff.

CS: He always gave us presents for Christmas.

JS: Always loads of gifts for Christmas.

CS: We used to worry about getting him presents. We used to ask, 'Mr. Best, What should we get Mr. Sorabji?' 'God knows.'

If I was ever working in Corfe, he always found me out. He would come to the house where I was working and somebody would say, 'Your old mate is outside.' I would go out there and it would be Mr. Sorabji wanting a look around. He was very nosey. 'Can I come have a look around Mr. Cecil?' 'Certainly Mr. Sorabji.' He was just curious.

JS: He just wanted to see how the other half lived I suppose. But it was a beautiful bungalow that he had. It was all built to his specifications. Parsons built it and Vic Marsh worked on it.

CS: They sold it for next to nothing. Vic Bennett bought it, but he never had any money. He bought it for the land and was going to put bungalows in there, but it didn't work. The planning people didn't want any more built in there.

Vic used to do the decorations for Mr. Sorabji.

SO: What kind of decorating?

JS: He used to paint the walls and ceilings.

I don't think that you will find many people that knew Mr. Sorabji like our family. He was a recluse.

SO: Did you attend his funeral?

JS: No, my mother did.

CS: Mother went and I asked her what it was like and she said, 'It nearly drove me crazy. They played his music for two hours and you couldn't understand a bit of it.'

SO: Did you hear much about Sorabji's mother?

CS: She was a very nice lady.

SO: Did you ever meet her?

CS: No. I think mother did. My sister died at 90 odd and she took care of Mrs. Sorabji. All I knew is that mother used to say that she was white. But he never told anybody. Because mother used to ask him, 'What are you Mr. Sorabji?' And he would say, 'I am Persian and my mother is hottentot.'

JS: He never spoke much about his mother. I don't recollect him speaking about his mother.

CS: Auntie Fan lived in 126 High Street and she lived next door in 128. He brought her down from London down to Swanage. She was too old to come about. Reggie Crabb used to chauffer him over to see her.

JS: I am trying to think of someone else...you see there weren't very many people that knew him.

CS: He was a recluse. You could walk past him on the street and say, 'Hello Mr. Sorabji,' and he wouldn't answer you. Unless he knew you, he would stop you then.

JS: If I saw him in the street we always shook hands. That was polite to him. You would say, 'Hello Mr. Sorabji,' and then shake his hand. If he knew you, you had to know how to speak to him.

CS: If you went up there he would show you his bedroom and his big sitting room, but he never showed you where Reggie was. 'Don't let Reggie know that you are here,' he would say.

SO: It seems that you remember Sorabji's humour rather well.

JS: Yes, he was quite a character.

CS: He went into Wareham on the bus and I think that he did most of his shopping there. And he would stop by to see my mother before going home and he would come in, puffing and panting, and he would say, 'Those bloomin' cats.' She said, 'Cats, Mr. Sorabji?' 'Them women in Wareham, they push and shove.'

JS: Yes, he certainly hated women.

CS: As kids we used to sit in the Square and listen to him playing the piano in the Bankes Arms. That was in the bottom one, the last room there. He lived in the room facing the station road. We used to sit down there and hold on to the bars and listen to this whoomp whoomp whoomp!

JS: I should think that up there at The Eye he had plenty of peace and quiet. Because you weren't allowed in, 'No Hawkers, No Peddlers,' was on the gate. Just nuns, 'Sisters of Mercy,' were allowed. It used to tickle me every time I went up there, I would read the notice because it was on the gate before you went into the gate.

CS: He was a very fast speaker. You had to listen very carefully, because he talked softly and very fast. He also shuffled.

JS: He didn't walk about really. He shuffled along in those big robes.

CS: You would go into his front door and by the time he got to where he wanted you to get to it was nearly a half hour!

JS: His room was very unusual.

CS: It always smelled like burning incense.

JS: There were always incense burning. Every Saturday, by the time I got outside of his door I could smell the incense.

CS: He gave us some, packets and packets he gave to my wife. I used to say to her, 'For God's sake don't put any of that stuff on!'

JS: He used to buy it in Swanage, the shop called the Beach Combers used to get it in for him. I knew the chap had to order them especially for him.<sup>175</sup>

SO: So there is this consistency that all of the gifts are made out of wood.

CS: Yes, mostly wood. He would never give you rubbish.<sup>176</sup>

SO: He must have really liked your family.

CS: He was like one of the family. We were all brought up with him about.<sup>177</sup>

CS: He was a lovely man. People didn't like him. Everybody knew of him, but they didn't know anything about him.

SO: Why didn't they like him?

CS: Well, he didn't want to bother with no one.

People used to say to me, 'How is it that you come to get invited into his house and no one else can get in?' I said, 'Well, it is just one of those things.' You always got a lovely drink when you went in there.

SO: What did he drink?

CS: I can't remember, but it was a lovely drink. It was a liqueur of some sort.

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<sup>175</sup> At this point I was allowed to gather all of the wooden items that Sorabji had given to the family on the table and took a few photographs of them. Then John went into the storage room and retrieved a wooden jewellery box that Sorabji had given to Violet, which I also photographed.

<sup>176</sup> Mr. Stockley showed me a drawing that he had made of The Eye, illustrating where Sorabji and Reggie's respective rooms were located and a basic outline of the music room, showing the two pianos and a case that was placed above the hearth, which contained ornamental items on the first shelf, silver on the second, and gold on the third.

<sup>177</sup> Our conversation recessed for an hour while John drove me to Swanage so that I could photocopy the various papers that Sorabji had given to Mr. Stockley and as well see the house where Sorabji's mother lived. After the quick excursion to Swanage I returned to Corfe Castle and spoke more with Mr. Stockley.

He was very meticulous with his clothes. It had to be done just right. The wife would spend all afternoon ironing his few things. His coat would be purple. His shirt would be purple. His coat was velvety. He never went about looking frumpy. He was always meticulous. He always looked well dressed, especially with his gold buttons down his coat.

Him and my wife used to think the world of each other. One Christmas we went up there and he said, 'Mrs. Cecil, I have put you in my will. I can't leave you the house, because that will be Reggie's and it will be up to Reggie what will be done with it.' So anyway, when we went to this nursing home to see him in Winfrith, he was sitting on his bed and he said, 'Mrs. Cecil, you are in my will, but you [Cecil Stockley] are not.' If my wife had been well, he would have never gone into a nursing home. When she came out of the hospital, I said to her one night, 'Would you like to go up and see Mr. Sorabji?' And she said, 'Yes.' So I got the car and we drove up there. We said, 'You made it.' I think he was open to her looking after him, because she would have done.

SO: When Sorabji was at The Eye, could you just go up and visit him at any time?

CS: Oh no. You always had to ring up. I can't remember what his number was now.

SO: Did he lock the gate?

CS: No, he never locked the gate, because I had to go up and bring his dustbin down to the main road. He came in one day and said, 'It is getting too much for me, Mr. Cecil.' I said that I would come up every Thursday and bring them down through the gate.

SO: Would he talk to you for long periods of time?

CS: Yes, sometimes we would stay there for two or three hours. He would show me this and show me that. He had some beautiful Persian carpets. He would move the furniture about so that we could see the carpets. There was so much stuff. That whole wall along the back of the room was just a mass of books. He said to me one day that

there were a thousand books there. I never had the sense to ask if I could look at one. He used to visit a lot of antique shops. He could always tell you what was in the various antique shops. He spent most of his time in antique shops. He had a chauffeur, Reggie Crabb. You would see Reggie sitting in his car in Wareham while Mr. Sorabji was shopping. He usually shopped in Wareham, because Wareham was a better shopping place in those days than Swanage. Sometimes he would go in on the bus, but usually Reggie would take him in.

SO: How often would Sorabji go to London?

CS: He went up to London a lot. He would go up on the train, take it from here to Wareham, then up to London. He had a doctor in London. He wouldn't have the local doctors until the end, when it was getting too much for him. He suffered a lot and as I said he couldn't walk, he used to shuffle like myself now.

SO: So it was a specialist doctor in London?

CS: Yes. Because when I had me heart attack I was only 39 then. So he said to the wife, 'Is it alright if I mention Mr. Cecil to my doctor?' She said, 'Yes.' Then he came in with this box. He said, 'I have some tablets for you.' Ten a day I used to take, tiny little things. I always said to the wife, 'I think they have done me some good.'

SO: For how long did you take them?

CS: Oh, weeks.

SO: And they made you feel better?

CS: Yes. They were about as big as a pinhead.

As I was saying to John the other week, I don't know where his mother is buried. He used to come in and say, 'Can I put some candles on for your mother in the church,

because I am going to take some for my mother?' We would say, 'Don't bother Mr. Sorabji.'

SO: It is hard to imagine what Sorabji's house looked like, since it is so different now. Most of the trees have been cut down.

CS: You couldn't see the place because of the trees. Of course he didn't have the grass cut then. If you went out into the back of his garden you would go into the Common. When Bennett bought it they wanted to build some buildings up there, but they wouldn't allow it. As I said, he used to do Mr. Sorabji's decorating. And one day we were up there and he said, 'Mr. Cecil, you have been in building for your whole life?' I said, 'Yeah.' 'What can we do about this damp stain coming through?' 'Not much,' I said, 'Mr. Bennett should know.' Whether he ever did it, I don't know. That was in the doorway going into the sitting room; it was up there in the corner.

Haven't they got bedrooms up in the top now?

SO: An office and one very long room.

CS: Mr. Sorabji used to use it, I don't know what for, but we never went up there.

SO: I believe he just stored things up there.

CS: I remember one day he pulled this big ladder down. It was when you came through the hallway; it was the ladder that came straight down. He told us there was more up there, but we didn't go up. He never took us into Reggie's part.

SO: Into Reggie's room?

CS: Nope. Of course I suppose it was Reggie's privacy and he never invited us up. As I said, we never saw Reggie when we went up there. On days like this (a very warm one) Reggie would have a bloody great overcoat on, gloves, scarf all around his neck and

head; a bit queer. He said to my daughter, 'You are a lovely girl, but I am gay.' I started laughing when she said, 'Do you know Reggie Best?' 'Yes,' I said. She said, 'He is gay.' I said, 'Who bloody told you that?' She said, 'He did.'

SO: Do you think that Reggie and Sorabji were a couple?

CS: My wife always reckoned that they were. We always called him Sorabs, never Sorabji, it was always Sorabs. One day when he went away, he asked her to look after Reggie, she said that he used to play hell, Reggie did, because Sorabji was gone off to London for a week. Then she used to say to him, 'Where is he then, Mr. Best?' And he would give her the information and she would call him up and say, 'You better come on back, Reggie's pining.'

SO: Do you think that they were a couple?

CS: He used to tell us that Reggie was his critic. Of course he used to always call him Mr. Reggie. Reggie was from London.

SO: Did he have a London accent?

CS: No, neither of them had London accents, neither Sorabs or Reggie.

SO: Were they unique accents? Did they give away any clues to their regional origin?

CS: They were more Oxford English I think. It is like my daughter, she is ashamed of me when I am there with her friends around, because of the way I talk.

SO: I like the Dorset accent; it is very natural.

CS: That is what I tell her.

I love that piece of music of his, *The Perfumed Garden*. So he said, 'I am going to bring you a lot of tapes of my music.' But he never did, because my wife had that brain haemorrhage and she had to go to Southampton. I stayed up there, so we never got them.

In the end his hands were all shrivelled up. She would come in and ask him to play and he would say, 'No, Mrs. Cecil, look at my fingers.'

SO: So he played the piano for your wife?

CS: No, every time she asked him it was always that his fingers were bad.

SO: What about when he was a bit younger?

CS: No, she didn't know him then. My mother knew him and that is how I knew him so well. When I was a kid he used to come to my mother's. My mother got a little old to do the washing and ironing, so she said to the wife, this must have been about forty years ago I suppose, 'Would you do it?' So she asked him, 'Oh yes, Mrs. Stockley, Mrs. Cecil can do my washing.' Then mother had to tell her that it had to be so and so. Very meticulous he was. He was somebody that you wouldn't have been ashamed to have in your home.

As I said when I was working on a house and he would come there and the other blokes would say, 'Your mate is out here. What does the nosey bugger want now?' 'Could I have a look around Mr. Cecil?' 'Certainly, come on in and look around.' I think he just wanted to see what the old houses looked like.

SO: Did he comment on what he saw or did he just quietly look around?

CS: He just looked around, then turned about and out he would go. Of course they were coarse blokes then they would say, 'What did the old bugger want?' 'Nothing, he didn't want nothing.' We always thought of him as being one of the family.

He did tell us where the family home was. I think it was somewhere in the Middle East, a big estate home.

SO: It wasn't in India?

CS: No, he knew that I had been in India for four years; we used to talk about it. When the wife said that his mother was white I said, 'Yeah, he could be a Parsi, because they are white.'<sup>178</sup> I said, 'A Parsi when he dies - you see - there is this big iron grate and they are laid down on this grate. The buzzards would come down and eat the flesh and the bones would fall down between the irons. That was a Parsi. The Hindus used to have fire. I saw it. They were always going down the river, the Ganges, with a body on top and a fire going. That is the Hindu way.'

SO: Did Sorabji ever talk about his childhood?

CS: He would only talk about everyday things. Say now, if he had been alive, he would fuss about local things and write up to the paper, especially the local papers.

SO: Yet it sounds as if Sorabji was very generous with your family. He gave you so many nice gifts and large tips for your services.

CS: During Christmas we used to get chocolates. He never came into the house empty handed; he always had some kind of thing. If I could walk into my big storeroom I could find lots of little things, silver things.

SO: You have mentioned that you went to Sorabji's house quite often for Christmas, but did he ever have any kind of Christmas decorations?

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<sup>178</sup> Mr. Stockley was not familiar with the specifics of Sorabji's background, therefore it should be clarified that Sorabji's mother could have been deemed 'white,' but she was not a Parsi.

CS: No decorations, no. We used to sit and say, 'Should we go up to see Mr. Sorabji?' I would get a nice drink up there so off we would go - but nothing ever Christmasy. You could never see in there, the curtains were always drawn, big velvety curtains. It was pitch dark in there. He was like a little kid in there, 'Have I shown you this yet Mr. Cecil?' and he would start shifting furniture. He had a baby grand on that side and a grand piano in the corner and in the middle there he had a table and on there he had his big cassette player. There wasn't much in there that we hadn't seen. The wife could have told you more, because she took more of an interest than me. But you never heard any music when you were in there. I would sit down with my wife sitting beside me and Sorabs would be shuffling around somewhere saying, 'Have I shown you this? Have I shown you that?' That cupboard above the fireplace used to go all the way up to the ceiling. On the top was all gold and the next one was all silver. He used to say to us, 'Don't you dare tell anyone what you have seen in here.' 'We won't Mr. Sorabji because no one will ever ask.' We wouldn't any case. So when he got burgled - as I said the wife and me were in the hospital at the time - I said to the wife, 'Someone has burgled Mr. Sorabji's and one thing they can't blame us, because we never told anybody.' No windows were broken. We know that he had some clothes stolen at one time, he told us that.

SO: Was there more than one burglary?

CS: Just one at The Eye. When you go to the Wareham Hospital they take a lot of your clothes. When I came out I had a quarter of what I took in with me.

SO: They just take it?

CS: They just take it. A lot of people don't have a lot of clothes, so they take the clothes for them. Just before I came out my niece bought me a nice new cardigan, I never saw it anymore. When I came home she asked me, 'Where is the new cardigan that I bought for you?' I said, 'Never seen it.' She said, 'Where are the pairs of pyjamas, I bought you six pairs of pyjamas?' I said, 'I don't have any of them.'

SO: So that is what happened to Sorabji's clothing?

CS: Yes. A lot of people went there and lost their clothes. They would change your clothes every day and if you didn't have enough clothing they would take it from someone else.

SO: So someone got Sorabji's nice clothing!

CS: Yes. Someone could have been dressed in Sorabji's clothing.

SO: What did Sorabji do when he found out about the burglary?

CS: He was in the nursing home.

SO: Oh I see! He was in the nursing home while all of his belongings were just sitting in his house.

CS: Someone came in and told us that it had been broken into. 'Do they know who it was?' 'Nope,' I said to the wife, 'Nobody could break in there, because you wouldn't know how to get in there anyway.'

SO: Did Sorabji ever find out?<sup>179</sup>

CS: No, he never found out, no.

SO: Were the police called?

CS: I reckon that they were.

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<sup>179</sup> Based upon discussions I had with both Denise Vicars and Alistair Hinton, it appears that Sorabji was aware of the burglary in *The Eye*.

I was trying to think of the name of the place, the nursing home - Marley House in Winfrith. He died out there. He was up there for a few years. You walk through Winfrith, go to the church and then turn to the right in those houses. It was just past the Winfrith church. But they both died up there, Reggie and Sorabs. It is a hard place to get to. You can't get there by bus or train. When we would go visit Mr. Sorabji we would knock on the door and a nurse would come and we would ask, 'Can we see Mr. Sorabji please?' She said, 'I better go and find out. Who are you?' 'Mr. and Mrs. Stockley.' Then she would come back, 'Yes.' So she took us up to his compartment and the old fellow was pleased to see us, someone he knew to talk to.

SO: What would you talk about?

CS: He wanted to know what was going on in the village. And he said, 'You are in my will Mrs. Cecil.' And he said to me, 'But you are not.' 'That is alright Mr. Sorabji, I don't want anything.'

*DOROTHY FOOKS, who had occasion to travel on the bus with Sorabji now and again, was interviewed in her Corfe Castle cottage on April 6, 2002. She was greatly impressed by Sorabji and surprised that he interacted with her at all, considering his reputation as a misogynist.*

DF: They said he hated women. I don't know whether he did, but he wouldn't have women in his house, would he? The boy Arnold, who writes in there<sup>180</sup> - well he isn't a boy now, but he was a boy then - his mother lived next door and apparently she was always welcomed in there. He didn't like women in his house anyway. I never knew why he started talking to me, but he did. I travelled on the bus with him, you see. Of course my husband was an invalid at that time, and we both worked for the same firm in Wareham, but when he couldn't work any longer I said that I would have to give up my work. The boss said to me, if you both leave we will have to shut the place down, we can't do without you. So what I used to do was keep the books at home and go in every morning and see to the mail, go to the bank and order what was needed to be ordered. Then I would come home on the bus at one o'clock and I used to travel on the bus with Sorabji very often. But how he started getting talking to me I can't remember.

I always remembered the last time that I saw him. It got to the point that he couldn't walk down to the village and he used to have a taxi. He was going into the post office one day and I was walking along on the other side of the road and he came right

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<sup>180</sup> Mrs. Fooks is referring to an article that appeared in a local magazine by a man who used to live in Corfe Castle, who wrote about his recollections and impressions of Sorabji. Due to the highly relevant nature of the article to this dissertation, it seems appropriate to quote it in full here:

'I read with great interest Michael Dawney's article on the composer Sorabji at Corfe Castle (PURBECK 8). I grew up in Corfe and Sorabji was teased unmercifully by the small children, including myself, on his rare excursions down the village street. We called him Rabjab. He was teased not only because he looked different but dressed flamboyantly in corduroy suits and brightly coloured shirts. Despite our treatment he was respected as a character in the village. I can still see him bustling down East Street, umbrella in hand, with Mr. West [Best] in his mackintosh beside him.

'My parents had Brackendale built, in 1951, which would be a garden and cypress hedge away from Sorabji's Eye. Sometimes on fine days you could hear him playing his atonal music. My mother found him charming and was one of the few Corfe people invited into The Eye. They both greatly liked the work of Thomas Hardy and Sorabji gave my father an indigestion cure he called his "Elixir." It was in small bottles in a turned-wood case and he was told to take only a teaspoon at a time. It did help Dad and Mum also swore by it. Sorabji said he got it from Spanish gypsies.

'In later years Sorabji must have forgiven my childhood teasing as he would always stop in the street to speak. Unless I was with a girl in which case he would promptly cross the road as soon as he saw me!' J. P. Arnold, *Purbeck and Poole Magazine* 9 (Winter 2001): 7.

across and said, 'Mrs. Fooks, I haven't seen you for such a long time. How are you getting along? I thought that I must come over and shake your hand.' We had a little chat and then went on. That was the last time that I saw him.

I think that he was a very nice gentleman, very nice indeed. Of course many people were half afraid of him, because he was weird, you know. But a lot of these kind of people are, aren't they? I don't know anything about his work at all. I am a non-musician. I love music, but I am not a musician. Apparently he was wonderful. Certainly a striking man!

He was always going on about fasting. But I never did that. I asked him how long he could go and he said for about a week.

SO: What year was it that you first met Sorabji?

DF: Well, it would have been when my husband was still alive, so it must have been over 25 years ago. But he was an elderly man at the time. Like I said, he dressed very weirdly. That little article in there says that they used to chase after him and call him names, because he was dressed queer. Very fond of his mother, he always spoke very highly of his mother. Apparently before they came here to live, they used to come here on holiday always. But it surprised me when he said that he didn't like women very much, because he had a very high regard for his mother.

He had this fellow who lived with him. Well, he was a bit weird because he always wore a long Mack and didn't look as if he ever spoke to anybody. I had reason to say to him something about him one day. I wasn't enquiring or nosing, I never ask people anything, if they choose to tell me, well, fair enough. And I asked him about his colleague and he said, 'Oh that is my godson.' But he died before Mr. Sorabji did, Mr. Best. I didn't realise he was a godson; as a matter of fact I thought that he was a manservant. But he was a queer man, Mr. Best, with his great long Mack. He used to walk around in the Common a lot. Never looked or spoke to anybody. Most people will at least say good morning, but not him...very queer!

SO: You mentioned that Sorabji used to give you chocolates.

DF: I don't know where he got them from, but about three he used to give me in my hand. My husband used to be tickled to death when I came home, as though I was a little child.

SO: It seems that Sorabji's presence would have greatly stood out here. This is after all a very 'white' neighbourhood, if you know what I mean.

DF: I don't think there was ever any racial hatred towards him or anything like that. He mingled with us.

SO: Did the villagers feel that he was at all arrogant?

DF: No, I don't think so. He was just accepted as part of the community. I've never heard anybody saying anything against him, never. I mean they might say 'funny little man' or something like that, but nothing nasty.

He had some notices in front of his house, 'Roman Catholic nuns welcome,' or something like that. When you get people who are geniuses they are often strange.

SO: Do you think that Sorabji was a genius?

DF: I should think so by what people say. I have never heard his work.<sup>181</sup> It has got to be a gift when you have something like that. Of course you have to work at it as well.

He spoke very quickly and softly.

SO: Did you know of him before you met him?

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<sup>181</sup> This is a perfect example of Sorabji's prevailing reputation in the village and the effect of his mystique, for even though Mrs. Fooks had never heard Sorabji's music, she still recognized him as a person of great talent, even a genius.

DF: Oh yes, of course. With his strange clothes he really stood out. But, as I said, he was always a perfect gentleman to me. I felt quite honoured that he wanted to talk to me, because I was just an ordinary housewife going to work.

*GRAHAM WHITE and ANNETTE BROWN, two Isle of Purbeck locals, were interviewed simultaneously in the historic Corfe Castle pub the Fox Inn on April 6, 2002.*

*This conversation took place late at night with a dozen or so individuals seated about a table. Although the conversation about Sorabji was primarily with Mr. White and Mrs. Brown, the other individuals, for whom I don't have names, occasionally offered their own impressions of Sorabji as well.*

AB: He drank his elixir of life, this little green bottle, with a few little drops on a sugar knob.<sup>182</sup>

GW: He only usually had one meal a day, but he had two of whatever he was having. If it was steak, he would order two steaks, if it was pudding, he would have two puddings. He also used to come into the restaurant and put all of these little tablets all around his plate, there might have been as many as two dozen.<sup>183</sup> This was at the Ship Hotel in Swanage. He sometimes came with his manservant, who I always thought was his nephew. We thought he was some kind of relation, but we weren't ever sure.

AB: He [referring to Mr. Best] looked a bit like a monkey.

GW: He looked like something out of the *Adam's Family*.

Sorabji used to wear a big hat...

AB: And his ring, of course, which was fantastic and a walking stick with a silver top.

GW: And a skull cap thing, embroidered, Indian-like. He shuffled along.

AB: He always shuffled.

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<sup>182</sup> The famous elixir to which Ms. Brown is referring and of which comments arise through out the interviews is the *Élixir Végétal de la Grande-Chartreuse*, an herbal *digestif*, with a 71% alcohol content, that has been made by the Chartreuse Monks of France since 1737. Sorabji was a great advocate of this elixir and often recommended the use of it to others.

<sup>183</sup> The description of these pills sounds conspicuously similar to the heart pills that Sorabji had obtained for Mr. Stockley.

GW: He talked quite fast.

He once told me that the dearest thing that he ever bought to go into the house was his grand piano. He was a great collector of things. He used to buy in bulk.

Anonymous: He used to frighten me. I used to deliver the paper to him. And occasionally he would stare out at me. He had these big gates and all of these trees. But I never used to go in. I don't think that I ever wanted to go in to the house. It was very eerie with those signs on the gate.

GW: He used to have a finger manipulator that he would put on the table, so all the time he would be eating with one hand and his fingers would just be going on this thing, just keeping them supple. Then he would swap hands and use the other hand.

One day the relief manager came in and he had three phone calls, people booking tables. When they would phone up you would obviously say what name it was to be put under. The first one was Balls, and the manager said, 'Balls to you! I want your name.' And he said, 'Balls.' This was Captain Balls that used to live in Swanage. The second one was Allcock, which he couldn't believe. And after the third reservation he came in and said, 'I don't know who the hell that was, some Sir somebody or another.' And of course it was Sorabji.

*MOLLY MOSS, a Corfe Castle local, was interviewed in her cottage on April 4, 2002. Her interview amusingly illustrates the manner in which Sorabji dealt with the more youthful trespassers at The Eye.*

MM: It was wartime and the village was quiet then. He used to be sat under the Bankes Arms' porch, just, well I presume, he was probably writing. That seems to have been a pet spot during those times. We used to hear little bits when he moved up to The Eye. Pat Roger, who helps me in the garden, was telling me, I asked him because he lives up in that direction if he remembered anything about it and he said, 'Yes, when I was eight years old.' And I said, 'Well what do you remember?' And he said, 'Well we used to be able to get into the garden through Sorabji's hedge. He used to have a big netted place and the most superb strawberries in it.' And these boys use to get in there and just have a jolly good feed apparently. One day they were caught by Sorabji and Roger was the unlucky one. I think he was the youngest of the little crowd. He got a hold of him by the collar and took him indoors and still held onto him while he telephoned the police. Then the police came over and gave him a jolly good talking to I think. So I said, 'Did you ever go in again?' And he said, 'No, I was too frightened to go in.' So I said, 'No more strawberries?' He said, 'Yes, plenty, they use to go in and get them and give them to me.' I can just imagine. I would like to have seen him marching Roger around. Roger would have been tough I am sure.

SO: And how old is Roger now?

MM: 45 or 46. Sorabji had his friend with him, Mr. Best, a tall thin man. He always looked miserable, as if he had no life in him.

*BERNARD WILLIAMS was the post master in Corfe Castle between the years 1964 and 1984 and had many opportunities to strike up conversation with Sorabji. He and his wife, KATHY WILLIAMS, were interviewed in the beer garden of the historic Corfe Castle inn, the Bankes Arms Hotel, on April 5, 2002. Incidentally, it was at the Bankes Arms where Sorabji first lived upon moving to Dorset.*

BW: I don't know what happened to all of his possessions, but sometime after he died somebody contacted Father Simon, a priest in Swanage, and told him that they were disposing of things at The Eye and asked would he like to come along and take anything of use.

KW: So Father Simon rang us and asked Bernard if he would go up to The Eye with him and look through. I actually think that it was meant for the poor people of the Parish, but there wasn't anything of interest there.

BW: In fact I was wondering what the few things there were doing there.

KW: What sort of stuff was it?

BW: Just junk. You know odd bits and old kitchen utensils, things like that. Has anybody spoken with you about his godson, who lived with him?

SO: Reginald Best.

BW: Well Sorabji outlived him. He wasn't a very healthy specimen was he?

KW: No, and he always looked subservient when they were together. I suppose he relied on Sorabji for everything, food and everything. At first I was told they were lovers you see. That was the generally accepted thought in the village. If you were in a group and his name came up and someone said, 'Of course he is his godson,' there would be

laughter and they would say, 'Well that is what he would like you to think.' I think the majority of people thought that he was his partner.<sup>184</sup>

BW: We were surprised to hear that his ring didn't go to the Catholic Church, to the Pope, because he told us that on two or three occasions.

KW: I remember being on the customer's side of the counter at the Post Office when he came in with Mr. Best. I think it was about the time when our son was baptised at West Lulworth and I must have mentioned it, because he then lifted his hand up and said, 'this ring,' it was a huge stone, amethyst coloured, 'when I die, this goes to the Pope.' He was quite emphatic about it. What do you remember about him? I only lived at the Post Office for three years, but you were there for nineteen.

BW: He was the sort of fellow that you need never be surprised with what he came out with; the most unlikely expressions he had and opinions. Well I take it that this reflects his opinion that it would be in his possession and that he handed it over to me.<sup>185</sup> I don't know if he intended to influence me or whether he thought I was the sort of person that would fall in line with the edict there.

I'll tell you what, our postman, if he was here, would tell you that he was a very generous fellow. You know with the ordinary common people, like the postmen, they always did very well in this area for Christmas boxes and Sorabji was always out and above anybody else. They knew that they were going to have a good Christmas with what he would donate.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Many of the villagers took Sorabji word at face value that Mr. Best was his god-son, but it is important to note that like Mr. and Mrs. Williams, there were those individuals who suspected the true nature of their relationship and they imbued their suspicion with amusement, not bigotry.

<sup>185</sup> Mr. Williams is referring to an article that Sorabji gave to him entitled, "Alert the nation: a short version of the evidence concerning the conspiracy to establish a one-world police state." The conspirators are named as 'International bankers in alliance with the Communists and leading politicians of all parties.' Sorabji annotated this article with the words, 'You will see how this demonstrates and underlines what I am always insisting, that Communism and High Finance are the obvious end of one and the same world.'

<sup>186</sup> This is a fine example of Sorabji's incredible generosity and his reputation in the village for being generous. For all of Sorabji's more thorny attributes and his eccentricities that kept him removed from ever being truly integrated into Corfe Castle society, his apt for giving, especially as a gratuity for services rendered, was a likely counterbalance for maintaining good stead with those whose services he did rely upon.

SO: What would he usually donate? Cash?

KW: Yes. In fact when Bernard was retiring, Eileen Crowe slipped printed leaflets in the paper, asking for donations to buy him a present. Mr. Sorabji sent it to the house with the pamphlet. It said in the pamphlet to give everything to Eileen Crowe, when anybody wanted to donate. But Mr. Sorabji sent it to the house with the paper and a cheque for a donation.

BW: And that was generous too.

KW: So I had to say to Bernard that you haven't seen this and took it straight down to Eileen.

SO: He ruined the surprise!

KW: Yeah he did actually, didn't he?

BW: Well yes he did; that element of the surprise, because from the village, business wise, we moved to the model village and took that over. That was in April and the presentation took place in June. We ran for the festivities committee, the Corfe Castle Festivities Committee, and their purpose in life is to illuminate the village at Christmas time, which they do wonderfully, because the village lends itself and the square to illumination. They also give children's parties and old folks parties. Anyways, we decided, Kathy and I, that we would have a cheese and wine party after the model village was closed and lo and behold I was called out of the kitchen, where she had me washing up, and this presentation was made.

KW: That was the surprise that Sorabji spoiled.

BW: But he did support everything financially very well, without seeking publicity. Not a mean man, humorous too, a wicked sense of humour. I can't remember anything in particular. Did I tell you about the removal men that were given a job at The Eye?

KW: It was a removal firm from Swanage.

BW: Wilson's of Swanage. Anyway, the van turned up with these removal men. They knocked on the door and were ushered in by Mr. Best and told to wait. Mr. Best disappeared and then came out and told them to go into the main room there, which was the music room and they went in, it was all in dark. Eventually a voice came from inside the room. He was covered by a blanket and he was meditating. He spoke with them and eventually he came from under his blanket. All they were there to do was to move one of his pianos. And he told them if they made a bloody mess of it they wouldn't get anything. But as it turned out they moved it correctly, only a matter of feet, and he gave them a very good tip. Good Day! End of business! I think Tommy Arnold was one of them. That was who I heard it from, because he was working for Dick Wilson at the time.

SO: What year was this then?

BW: Late seventies, early eighties perhaps.

KW: The plate on the gate was interesting. He seemed to have an affinity with the Catholic Church.

You know a lot of the people in the village, bless them, thought that he was Sir Abji, title then Abji.

BW: True.

SO: That is very funny.

KW: Have people told you about the hats?

BW: A beautiful purple velvet hat.

KW: It was a pill-box style. But he did bob, he didn't stride, he bobbed.

BW: He was very discreet. I think he was one of the most private persons I have ever known.

KW: I think that the majority of the villagers were in awe with him. There were never any racist comments. Never!

BW: Never anything offensive said against him, there was a lot of respect.

KW: I can see him now in that house and his overcoat, this short little man. But you know, you said that he had a wonderful sense of humour, well I am sorry Bernard, but I don't think that he was ever very funny towards Mr. Best, because Mr. Best was as dour and as glum looking as anyone that I have ever seen. Mr. Best looked very miserable.

BW: When he came in on his own, he came in and spoke ever so quietly. You were too embarrassed by his silence more or less, I was anyways. He might have spoke with Sorabji.

KW: Sorabji opened the conversation. If he wanted to say something he would open the conversation.

SO: What kind of things would he talk about, just day to day issues?

BW: The sort of thing that I think he would have said would have been a slight at the politicians of the moment. But he wouldn't engage in a political argument. He would make his comment and that would be that.

KW: And though he was only a little man, his presence seemed to fill the Post Office.  
Does that sound ridiculous?

SO: Have you heard his music?

KW: They did play some on that programme.

BW: When he was interviewed there were some excerpts.

KW: I think we prefer Mahler and Rodrigo even to Mr. Sorabji.

BW: If you had to ask me to describe his music in one word I would say discordant.

*BERT JOHNSON, who was introduced to me by Bernard and Kathy Williams, was a postman in Corfe Castle who delivered much of Sorabji's post to The Eye. He and his wife, ANN JOHNSON, were interviewed in their Corfe Castle cottage on April 7, 2002.*

BJ: I was his postman, one of three – there were three village postmen – from 1966 to 1989, just after he died. Then I went on to another route. The people around here in the village knew him as a little bit of a recluse. He kept to himself; very, very private. And in the early days when I got to know him, after 1966, a lot of people, television people wanted to interview him and he didn't want to know, he really didn't want to know these people. I think that he was badgered by them for quite some time over a number of years. I think the postmen were the only ones that got to know him and the taxi driver, if he wanted to go into town, Mr. Blake.

SO: Is Mr. Blake still alive?

BJ: No, he died some years ago. If he wanted to go out it was through the taxi. He used to come down occasionally through the village with Reggie, who was his companion, housekeeper, whatever. They used to trot down, taking little steps. He was just a little man. Because all of his banking came through the post I had to knock him up quite regular for packages and that. Very nice, well spoken, very, very English gentleman-type voice, posh, well educated!

On his gate he had a notice, 'No Hawkers, No Peddlers,' and I think that it was in two or three languages.

SO: But of course nuns were welcome.

BJ: Nuns, that is right. In fact I come from the north of Ireland and he kept badgering me as to my religion, because he was staunch Roman Catholic.<sup>187</sup> He tried to get it out of

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<sup>187</sup> Mr. Johnson, like Mr. Stockley, refers, with definitiveness, to Sorabji as being a Catholic and causes one to ponder whether Sorabji actually told them that he was Catholic or if they merely inferred this conclusion from his ring and miscellaneous conversations.

me if I was a Roman Catholic or what, coming from Ireland. But I think he favoured the Catholic.

You know he lived in Swanage before coming to Corfe Castle. I was just wondering if you could get anything out of the Roman Catholic Church in Swanage, because he definitely lived in Swanage before my time.

SO: Did he get a lot of mail?

BJ: He got a lot of mail, every morning through the gate. Sometimes he was watching from the window, he was always alert. For an elderly gentleman, like he was, he was always alert. He didn't want anyone in, if you know what I mean. He was suspicious, always suspicious of everyone. Most of the time he was at the window watching about.

SO: Did he get any unusual mail?

BJ: He got a lot of his tablets. Health wise, I think that he lived on a lot of vitamins.

SO: Did he get international mail as well?

BJ: He got a lot of international mail, definitely.

SO: From where?

BJ: Italy, India, America, an awful lot of mail from America. During my time, the late 60s up until he died, he got a lot of mail.

SO: That is interesting that he got mail from India.

BJ: Yes he did, he definitely got mail from India, because I can remember the stamps and the coloured envelopes. He got them quite regularly. But most of his mail was American. But I remember the Italian stamps, the green and blue envelopes. I used to

see the different stamps coming over and in those days everybody collected stamps. But I am sure that there were letters from India.

SO: Did they seem like business letters or private letters?

BJ: I would say more private. The envelopes were written by hand.

SO: Did Mr. Best get mail at all?

BJ: None that I can remember. It was always for Sorabji.

He had a big ring. Occasionally he would shake hands with me if I hadn't seen him for a little while or if I had been on holiday and I felt like shaking hands and slipping this ring off of his finger. It was a great feature when you saw him, the ring stood out. But a lovely man, he was a very lovely man. And very generous, he used to give me sweets, chocolates, the Belgian white chocolate in the early days and then it went on to cigarettes. He used to see me coming in with a cigarette through the gates and then he started giving me cigarettes at Christmas time for a gift. Then he came over one day and said, 'Mr. Johnson, I am not going to give you any more cigarettes, because I had a friend that just recently died of cancer, so I am not giving you any more cigarettes.' He would have been in his 90s then. He definitely had all of his faculties.

SO: Have you heard his music?

BJ: When I joined the post office in 1966, both of my colleagues here in the village were older than me and they knew him prior to me coming along. Rupert, who passed away about three years ago, would have been ideal for you. He knew him much better than I did. According to my colleague Rupert, when he had some music recorded, he gave some to people in the village. BBC Radio 4 used to play his music. I remember it vaguely.

SO: Did you ever have occasions for more lengthy conversations with Sorabji or did he ever invite you inside?

BJ: No, I used to stand in the hall if he needed to get some paper or a pen. He did his business and that was it. He was private, unbelievably private. In the early days I can remember the television people trying to record him. He was trying to get around the trees to film him. Before I arrived there must have been some banter between them. I got the message that he got sent off from the door. When I met him he was at the gate in a bit of a fluster and I think that they must have been having a go at each other. But if he didn't want to speak to you, he wouldn't speak to you, definitely. Very private!

SO: How often did he come down into the village?

BJ: Usually about once a week, mostly with Reggie tripping a step behind him. He was the type of chap that you would want to talk to. He had so much knowledge. I think that he was so intelligent. I think back, if only he had been more outgoing, but you couldn't get to him. But certainly an amazing man, just to listen to him! I just spoke to him about the weather.

I'll just shout my wife up, because she is a local girl.

AJ: I only knew him as one of the villagers. When we were kids if we used to look at him or stare at him he would poke his tongue out at us.

BJ: That came over when I used to speak to him. He certainly had a great sense of humour.<sup>188</sup> That was the first thing that hit you, as soon as you began talking to him, his sense of humour.

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<sup>188</sup> Indeed, such actions were indicative of Sorabji's playful nature, not of any particular dislike for children.

AJ: I remember mum went up there once. I think she ordered some curtains for him. I remember the incense. It made me feel sick, so I had to go outside and let mum finish. I was still in school then. He used to go down and see Mrs. Stockley.

BJ: That would have been Cecil's mother.

AJ: Me and mum used to live next door to Mrs. Stockley so now and again when he would come down I would get a bit of a smile. We just knew him as Sorabji.

SO: What would people say about him?

AJ: When we were kids it went around that he was an Indian prince. I don't know if that was just kids' talk, 'Watch out there is the Indian prince!' because he always had a stick with him.

BJ: Silver topped walking stick.

AJ: And he used to wear purple.

BJ: Immaculately dressed.

AJ: Yes, but always purple.

BJ: I used to go up there very early in the morning and he was already immaculately dressed in all of those dark colours, greys and pinstriped suits.

AJ: Even as children we noticed how well he dressed. But apart from that, with the exception of coming down to see Mrs. Stockley, he didn't come down to the village very much. He used to wear a great big ring as well. It is the little things like that that I remember, the ring and the stick.

BJ: You couldn't get close to him. Even the television people were obviously interested in his music, but he pushed them away. Why would he push them away?

AJ: He just wanted to be left alone.

BJ: He got everything through the post: his business, food, and his pills. Everything rattled.

*JILL NICE, who was hired privately by Sorabji to deliver homemade meals, was interviewed in her Swanage home on April 3, 2002.*

JN: He built his own mystique. I got to know him because I had a market store in Wareham and he came in one day and bought some food from us. Then we closed down and he got in touch with me and asked if I would make things for him. Going up there the first time was quite extraordinary. It was like going into a fortress. It had great big gates at the front and great pine trees all the way around. It had a much bigger garden than it does now. The door had to be unlocked for you. They had to know exactly when you were coming. They would have the door unlocked for you so you could drive in. You mustn't ever be early or late. His house was like a fortress. I was never quite sure if he was just a man that protected his persona or whether he was really scared of being attacked or something like that, because it was very quiet in the back of Corfe there. But it was an amazing room, full of all sorts of strange Indian and Asian artefacts. Very, very stifling, very heavy covers, things on the walls and rugs on the floors. He used to just sit and talk and he was a gnomish figure, very sort of small with this massive hair. We used to just chat. He didn't talk about himself. I often tried to get him to talk about what he did, with his music and that. He didn't talk about himself at all. His manservant was always in attendance. I always got a cup of tea, with milk and sugar. He had a preference for English food.

Every week I had to make him a great collection of things that I had to very carefully put together, like Eccles cakes, Bakewell tarts, Cornish pasties, and all regional food. It was as though he wanted to know what proper regional food was like, that he probably hadn't had. It was sort of a little adventure to go off and buy all of these different things that he could find out from you and he would phone up and ask me if I had any ideas what he might like to try. He was very strange. I don't know whether he ate it all or if he liked it or not, he never said. He did come back for some things, but not everything.

SO: How long were you doing this?

JN: About a year, year and a half I suppose.

SO: Do you remember when this was?

JN: It has got to be about twenty years ago. Well, over twenty years ago. My daughter is 23 and it was before she was born. He was very elderly by then. I was just trying to think of why I stopped doing it. Maybe it was because he was leaving. Did his manservant die before he left?

SO: They both ended up going to a home together. But, he actually wasn't a manservant.

JN: I never quite got a hang of what the relationship was, but that is how he liked it to be seen, because the guy always wore a dark coat when he came to answer the door. He always wore a dark coat, dark trousers, as though he was somebody that was looking after him. He never gave the impression ever of being anything else than someone who worked for him. As I said, the house was like a fortress inside and I always felt that he was perhaps somebody there to look after him or keep him company, because it was so lonely up there for him.

SO: So you went to his house more than once then?

JN: Oh gosh, I went a lot of times. I had to go once a week.

SO: For a year?

JN: Yes.

SO: And Reginald Best always answered the door?

JN: On most occasions yes. Memory is a very dodgy thing anyhow, but as far as I can recall, the only times he didn't was when he had gone off to Wareham to pick some food up or do some shopping or something like that. But in the beginning I didn't go and see him unless Reginald Best was there. There was always definitely going to be someone else there, to start with anyhow. I think that sometimes Mr. Sorabji came to the door himself, dressed in his big shapeless grey cardigan and his carpet slippers. I would be certain that he almost always gave the impression as though he was on duty. Isn't it strange how your mind automatically falls into a way of thinking of somebody, because that is how I saw it!

I have to say that Sorabji was a very touchy man. You had to be very careful of what you were saying. I didn't know him terribly well and obviously not as well as some people did and therefore I only knew him on a superficial level. But he talked quite a lot and I always found myself being very careful about what I said. I never wanted to display my ignorance. I told him that I wasn't a musician to start off with. I told him that everybody has got their strengths, but mine happens to be in cooking. If you said anything in the least bit that he didn't agree with, he would tell you very firmly or allow you to know very firmly that he didn't believe. Then he would fuss around with things and the conversation would be at an end and you would go. I knew when my presence was no longer welcomed. Actually, I liked him very much, but I suspect he wasn't a very easy man, not at all. Musically he wasn't I take it either. Do you think that is why a lot of his music didn't get the recognition that it should have done or he's not been recognised as much as he should? Because the music is difficult and like a lot of people who do difficult things, they get extremely put out when everybody doesn't recognise them.

He was very hung up about his religion and his faith. I can't remember, but I think that was one of the scruffily conversations that I had to leave rather hastily.<sup>189</sup> From what I can remember I think that the Zoroastrians felt that they didn't have a place in the modern world. In fact I think that was the gist of it. I remember he used to get rather heated up about that.

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<sup>189</sup> Although the conversation did not penetrate deeper into this particular instance, the implication, which is not surprising, is that Sorabji became rather firm on the issue of his father's religious heritage, which characteristically could have led to a transgression of Sorabji's otherwise impeccable etiquette.

I always felt that it was a shame, in a way, obviously I knew he wasn't English because he certainly didn't look English, I mean he had a very sallow complexion, but I always felt that it was a shame really that instead of wearing his floppy cardigan and baggy old trousers and slippers, that he didn't actually wear something far more ornate and exotic. It would have suited him much better. Do you know what I think he reminded me of, more than anything else, was a spider, a spider sitting behind – I mean we never sat in armchairs – this big desk or table it might have been. It was covered in cloth, very ornate cloth. He would always sit on one side and I would always sit on the other side. I would unpack my basket of goodies for him, which would be carefully relayed onto a tray and taken outside. His head sort of came to about this level of the table.<sup>190</sup> A tiny little man he was, really he was or so he seemed to be. And he would peer over the table at me and I always felt like little Miss Muffet. But he did seem very small. Actually, I have to be perfectly honest, when I first went there I was scared, really frightened of him. There were quite a few people that I made food for and he just happened to be one of them and happened to be one of the more liberal ones. People that have a great interest in food and aren't prepared to make it themselves are often quite strange people. I can understand why he didn't, because he was a man by himself. Well, obviously not [referring to Mr. Best]. I was never allowed to go in another room. No way did I go out of that one room. Even on the hottest summer days you weren't allowed outside into the garden. You would go in and it was the first door on the left. It was quite a sizeable room, but it was filled to the ceiling with bits and bobs.

I use to talk to him about languages, because he was quite interested that my sister lived in France. I am not a very great linguist, I can get by alright if I have to buy things. This is the thing with him, I tried very hard not to tell him too much about myself, because I always found myself feeling as though I was lacking, wanting in something, because he was quite critical. So you really didn't offer too much of yourself and your abilities if you could possibly help it.

SO: He might test you?

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<sup>190</sup> Mrs. Nice positioned herself in a hunched posture, just above the table top level.

JN: Yes and you would be found wanting and he would be disappointed in you and would make no secret of it at all. I think actually, more than anything, we used to just talk about food and the different things that he wanted to try out.

SO: I heard that he had very unusual diets and that he liked to fast.

JN: I never got that impression. Unless, because the things that I make never used additives or preservatives, maybe that fell into his idea of things. He was very determined that I did only use the very best ingredients. But he wasn't a vegetarian; he wanted his Cornish pasties. He must have got a hold of a good old English cookery book somewhere. We didn't fall out, but I think it is probably why, as much as anything, I stopped going to see him, I think he wanted me to prepare hot food for him and that is not something I did. That is something tremendous to do, catering properly like that. I would also have the Food and Safety down on my neck. There are some things you can and some things you can't do in this country if you cook and that is one of them. I probably said that I couldn't do that for him and he probably got a bit cross. But he wasn't a vegetarian and he did have quite an array of things. He used to really test me.

I felt quite protective of him. I used to think of his sitting there in his house and I felt very sorry for him actually. I think that he used to remind me of my grandmother. It really isn't nice getting very old and not having any friends. Well, obviously he did have some friends, but the way he locked himself away was very macabre. I could never imagine anybody going there and just dropping in. There were notices all over the gate saying don't come in here – not quite that, but words to that effect. When I knew him he was totally paranoid about his safety and privacy.

*ROBIN LONGMAN, who as a conductor for a local Isle of Purbeck performance organisation benefited from Sorabji's generous financial support, wrote the following letter on April 11, 2002.*

I am the current Chairman of the Isle of Purbeck Arts Club and for over 35 years was conductor of the Arts Club Choir. I visited Sorabji at The Eye in Corfe Castle in early 1966 and he agreed to make a donation towards our performance of Bach's St. John Passion with Wilfred Brown as Evangelist. You will find Sorabji's name amongst the patrons on the enclosed programme. This was one of the most memorable performances I ever conducted.

My wife also remembers Sorabji coming to see her grandmother, Susan Tatchell, on many occasions for long chats and brought her an elixir from the East,<sup>191</sup> which was supposed to maintain health and prolong life.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> I would assume that this elixir of the East refers to Sorabji's much adored *Élixir Végétal de la Grande-Chartreuse*.

<sup>192</sup> Robin Longman, Swanage, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 11 April 2002, letter in the hand of Robin Longman, Private Collection. The programme that was included with Mr. Longman's letter indeed mentions as a patron, "K. S. Sorabji, Esq." The performance was held in the Swanage Parish Church on Tuesday, 8 March 1966. There is no evidence that has been found thus far which confirms whether or not Sorabji actually attended this concert.

*DANIEL MACRAE, who delivered milk to The Eye, wrote this letter on March 15, 2002.*

I was a milkman who delivered milk to Mr. Sorabji at his big house (The Eye). This house was fenced all round with two large gateposts and an iron gate leading to his drive. On the left hand post was a large printed notice 'strictly private,' 'no hawkers' 'peddlers' or 'political touting' and on the right hand post, Roman Catholic, i.e. genuine R.C. sisters of mercy welcome. I was shown a box near his front door for the milk bottles and told at no time was I to knock on his door or ring the bell and he had a special box for his mail fixed to his gatepost. On not seeing him – during milk deliveries – I was a bit surprised at X-mas time to see in my milk float a small gift placed on my seat in the milk van. This was a packet of 50 cigarettes.<sup>193</sup> No note saying whom it was from. He lived very quietly and walking in the village with his manservant, Mr. Best. One little incident, a local man opened a fish and chip shop opposite to where he was living and he had this closed complaining of smells and noise.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> The provision of giving gratuities was a common action that Sorabji graciously extended to the villagers who provided some form of service. Another local milkman, Ken Williams, wrote about his experience in receiving cigarettes as a tip from Sorabji, 'I do not know very much about Sorabji, nor do very many people in the village, as him and Mr. Best, his housekeeper, lived a very private life. Years ago I used to deliver milk at The Eye and after putting the milk on the step and walking back down the garden path he would often come to the door and clap his hands, when I looked around he would be holding up a packet of cigarettes for me. I understand he used to do this to other callers.' Ken Williams, Corfe Castle, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 12 March 2002, letter in the hand of Ken Williams, Private Collection.

<sup>194</sup> Daniel Macrae, Corfe Castle, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 15 March 2002, Letter in the hand of Daniel Macrae, Private Collection.

*LIZ AGNEW, a Corfe Castle local whose parents owned a convenience store that Sorabji frequented, wrote the following letter on March 11, 2002.*

I have lived in Corfe Castle all my life (I am 54) and remember when I was a child what a strange, incongruous figure Mr. Sorabji cut in austere post-war Dorset. I am afraid I have almost no information that would be of help to you, although I do remember my last sightings of him were when I used to deliver ‘meals on wheels’ to him and his companion towards the end of his life. You will know that he lived in a strange house called ‘The Eye’ and was very reclusive.

My mother, who with my father ran the newsagents in the village when Mr. Sorabji first came to Corfe, was on good terms with him, which I gather was unusual as he had the reputation of disliking women intensely. She told me that she was one of the few women who had ever been invited into his house.<sup>195</sup> She was always telling me that he was a great composer, but that he would allow none of his music to be published until after his death. My mother would have been able to tell you a good deal about Mr. Sorabji, but as she died three years ago this is not of any help to you.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Again, the notion of Sorabji’s misogyny is brought into question by yet another individual who believed that she was one of the very few women allowed into The Eye.

<sup>196</sup> Liz Agnew, Corfe Castle, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 11 March 2002, e-mail written by Liz Agnew.

*PETE FROST, who delivered Sorabji's local newspaper to The Eye, wrote the following letter on March 11, 2002.*

Just a quick note I had occasion to visit him only as the local paper boy to deliver his Bournemouth Evening Echo, which invariably was taken from me at the door of The Eye, his house, by Mr. Best, the butler/companion (?), in the 1970s. Later in the early 80's, an older work colleague talked about Sorabji, recounting times during previous employment with British Railway in the 50s, when Sorabji, without his own transport I presume, used the local branch line, the work mate was a porter at Swanage in the Goods shed/parcels office, when regular orders of fish were delivered by hand to The Eye. On several occasions the order mysteriously got mislaid and how Sorabji would write letters of complaint to the area office. His passion for the railway was very evident when in later years, mid 80s, I had occasion to be involved in a local pressure group fighting to reinstate the railway which is now operated by the Swanage Railway Trust, to prevent the council from building a by-pass on the railway so to that end I went to him for support for a petition which he signed willingly saying, 'We can not let a road be built on the railway.' I got the impression that like many Indian people, railways were important to them for employment and transport in India, this was a cultural influence.<sup>197</sup>

I recall on the occasions I visited there was music being played, a piano if I recall correctly, it sounded quite wild and without rhythm I believe, not my cup of tea. I preferred Rock Music. There was always a strange smell of incense or spices. Mr. Best was a strange one, extremely quiet and very reserved.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Many of the villagers had very little knowledge as to Sorabji's history and family background; therefore it is not surprising that Mr. Frost would mistakenly assume that Sorabji was Indian. Sorabji was a great promoter of public transportation and he depended upon it heavily, both while living in London and also, after moving to Dorset, as a means for returning periodically to London.

<sup>198</sup> Peter Frost, Corfe Castle, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 11 March 2002, e-mail written by Peter Frost.

*Although I do not know her full name, this amusing little letter by MRS. V. M. FORD was written on March 12, 2002.*

As a local, I remember when Mr. Sorabji came to live in Corfe Castle. He stayed at the Bankes Arms Hotel for a very long time, till he bought The Eye, name of the bungalow in East Street. I remember when he used to come into tea at the Old Tea House in the Square and I used to serve him; he always brought his own tea for the pot. He used to have a gentleman living with him but don't remember his name,<sup>199</sup> he died, a very reserved gentleman. He used to write a lot of music. I don't know what happened to all his belongings. I can't help you any further.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Reginald Norman Best.

<sup>200</sup> V. M. Ford, Corfe Castle, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 12 March 2002, letter in the hand of Mrs. V. M. Ford, Private Collection.

*WILLIAM BROWN, a local church organist, wrote the following letter on March 15, 2002.*

Although I have lived in this area for almost 30 years, I never had any direct contact with Kaikhosru Sorabji, except once in the late 1970s when he responded to an appeal for used newspapers and magazines for recycling and I was asked to collect them. He was known to be very reclusive.

My predecessor as organist at Swanage had a copy of Sorabji's Organ Symphony, which I borrowed for a time (again in the late 1970s), but neither of us found it possible to play more than a few notes of it – printed on four staves throughout, we both found it quite impracticable as parish organists to devote the time and effort needed to study it, even if we had the technical competence (which as an A.R.C.O. I certainly did not have!).<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> William Brown, Corfe Castle, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 15 March 2002, letter in the hand of William Brown, Private Collection.

## Chapter Seven – John Dean

Sorabji considered his friend, John Dean (1932-2000), ‘one of the few intelligent people in Purbeck.’<sup>202</sup> Although he was not a musician, Mr. Dean was born into a musical family and possessed a sizeable music library of books and recordings.<sup>203</sup> He was a man of many interests, who was a highly proficient auto mechanic, a skilled French polisher, and a scholar of Purbeck history and its stone industry. He was also an active contributor to the *Swanage Times* and penned many a polemic attacking the injustices of local politics. Sorabji must have admired his bold individuality and based upon the complimentary letters that they submitted to the *Swanage Times*, supporting each other’s ideas, it is clear that their local concerns were in harmony with one another. The following two articles are a fine example of their polemical cooperation. Mr. Dean wrote the first scathing letter, which was printed in the *Swanage Times*, regarding the decision of the British government, during World War II, to force the abandonment of the Dorset village of Tyneham for the use of military training and target practice. Mr. Dean saw this decision on the part of the government as an unnecessary outrage and a conspiracy for the purpose of redevelopment.

The recent re-opening of the question of Tyneham and its use as a military playground marks the pouring of yet more salt into a local wound. But is it entirely a wound? I feel that there are certain points about it which bear closer scrutiny. Naturally it goes without saying that in the age of fencing and barring the public away from every conceivable open space, it is to be deplored that such vast tracts of land are still held by Government departments. The destruction of the village of Tyneham was in my opinion a shocking comment on not only the powers, but the ways of officialdom. There is no possible excuse for it, and I hold no brief for the ‘it was wartime and necessary’ point of view. If one considers that Swanage lies at the eastern end of the valley and Tyneham at the western end, one does not have to look very far to see precisely what Tilly Whim<sup>204</sup> fails to see when he says, ‘I do not know what the developers would have done to mar it.’

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<sup>202</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to John Dean, Swanage, 15 January 1968, Letter in the hand of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private collection.

<sup>203</sup> Refer to George Willey’s interview for a brief but informative discussion about John Dean and his family.

<sup>204</sup> Tilly Whim is the pen name that George Willey used in one of his *Swanage Times* columns.

Great balls of fire and death by a thousand cuts, Tilly Whim! Which end of the valley do YOU consider is really ‘despoiled?’

The last ten years have seen a frightening example of the acceleration of what the developers can do. They’ve raped Durlston, they’ve savaged what was left of the old town, and now they’re moving north, west, and southwest. The process goes on and will no doubt continue to do so; the future of the eastern end of the valley is signed, sealed, and positively doomed. In fairness to the more modern developers I do not suppose that when Durlston ‘Castle’ or Purbeck House were erected, the shock upon the local horizon was much less than today’s mess; but at least they had a certain character – perhaps whimsical if not beautiful.

Perhaps the deathblow for this end of the valley was when they built over the stream. What we hide and regard with apparent shame, Bournemouth displays, develops and presents with pride – with a rich financial bonus. Perhaps as a mere accident, Tyneham and Worbarrow – the destruction of the village aside – stand as a painful lesson in just exactly what the developers and planners can do for themselves, for us today, and posterity. Would that the public had more access of Worbarrow and Flower’s Barrow. These to my mind, are the most superb areas that I know.<sup>205</sup>

It was completely in keeping with the nature of their friendship that within two weeks after the appearance of Mr. Dean’s letter, one suddenly appeared written by Sorabji, continuing the strain of John’s argument.

In an age of universal bad taste, as ours has been called with good reason, how heart warming it is to see those of the junior generation who still have some regard for what Aldous Huxley so well calls ‘the immemorial decencies,’ insofar as these apply to the preservation and fostering of local beauty and ‘amenity,’ as it is called – a nasty word implying something that ‘planners’ may approve of but probably no-one else. I allude, of course, to my friend Mr. Dean’s admirable letter in your newspaper.

Lying, duplicity, deception, evasion, and double-talk, as all adult minded persons know, are the small change of party-political and ‘Establishment’ claptrap. But rarely has there been such a prize specimen as the breach of the most solemn undertakings and pledges by authority as in the case of Tyneham. Military necessity, we were told, was the reason for this – exactly, in fact, as the Germans said was the violations of Belgium in 1914. And looking at the events of the past few years, months even, apart from innumerable earlier instances, no realistically minded person has any excuse now for not being warned that when a Government declares that something or other is ‘unthinkable,’ that is actually the thing it is meditating. Additionally horribly instructive evidence as to how governments regard their pledges was provided between the wars in a large

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<sup>205</sup> John Dean, “The village that was murdered,” *The Swanage Times* (3 January 1968), 14.

volume of hundreds of pages called India's Scraps of Paper, a long catalogue *raisonne* of the breaches of treaty obligations by the government of the time with the Indian princes.

The rape of Tyneham, damnable and atrocious as it was, has been equalled, if not surpassed, by what those who – as they would call it – ‘love’ the delicious Purbeck countryside, have done to it, underlining La Rochefoucauld’s bitter saying that if one were to judge ‘love’ by some of its effects it is much more like hatred than love. And deeply shocking as were the misdeeds of Victorian and Edwardian jerry-building against natural beauty, they are as nothing compared with what ‘contemporary’ taste has done. One small consolation is that much ‘contemporary’ building is of such fabulous shoddiness that in no very distant future it will have dropped to pieces from sheer inanition and lack of staying power.<sup>206</sup>

They enjoyed igniting heated polemics in the local ‘rag,’ as Sorabji always referred to the *Swanage Times*. Sorabji, in particular, penned his arguments with anticipation of dispute from other readers who might write into the paper with an opposing position and as a matter of strategy, seemed to have left in reserves a strong counter-attack in the form of some sweeping fact or authoritative reference. These chess like manoeuvres were shared and rallied between the two friends almost as a matter of sport.

Was tickled to death to see my rude effort in the Rag...wonder if anyone will challenge it? Hope they do THEN I can confront them with the evidence of the Indian Minister of PEST CONTROL from whom the figures come.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Broken faith at Tyneham,” *The Swanage Times* (17 January 1968), 14

<sup>207</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to John Dean, Swanage, 17 January 1969, letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection. The rude effort to which Sorabji refers reads as follows: ‘The muddle-headed, the woolly-minded, those who, as it is said, “mean well” – “such a dreadful thing to say of anybody” a witty friend of mine once said – who are constantly demanding that the churches should sell the ancient and historic treasures of which they are custodians and give the proceeds to supposed famine relief, should consider the following fact: (1) In a temple in Bikaner one hundred and ten pounds of food grains are daily offered to rats as part of the “religious” worship of these creatures who are authoritatively stated to devour two and a half million tons of food yearly, the populace objecting to their destruction, again for “religious” reasons. This is what is called – but not by me, I hasten to add – “Indian spirituality.” (2) The Common Market Agricultural Fund expects to pay out in 1968-69 over a thousand million pounds sterling for the destruction of so called surplus food. Not a whimper from the professional do-gooders – all other people’s expense, *bien entendu* – about THIS monstrosity. This suggests, doesn’t it, Sir that some charitable appeal should be scrutinised, if not with a very cold eye, at any rate with a very, very clear and wide-open one.’ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Treasure – or Rats?” *Swanage Times* (16 January 1969): 40.

Sorabji found in Mr. Dean a companion with whom he could congenially converse about national and local politics; the latter topic was often tinged with a wicked proclivity for jest.

I was tickled to death by your descriptions of the two baboons who may try and fill Mr. Bishop's place on the Council. But you ARE rude you know...TO THE BABOONS!<sup>208</sup>

And they freely shared their musical opinions as well; with Sorabji's condemnation of those musicians he disfavoured being, as usual, extreme and sweeping.

Thank you very much indeed for the September Opera that I'm delighted to have. I agree with Heyworth, but all this adulation of Schoenberg makes me tired...an abysmal and insufferable BORE. As for Master Billy Boulez he's a goddamn bloody fool. Glad you share my views of Dotty Donato.<sup>209</sup>

In the interviews with the villagers of Corfe Castle, it was widely acknowledged that Sorabji was a recluse and that he detested the opposite sex. It is most interesting and highly relevant to the examination of the villagers' common accusations, that Sorabji freely discussed these matters in his correspondence with Mr. Dean. Apparently responding to a previous letter by Mr. Dean, which must have expressed a certain reticence towards public places, Sorabji provided the following confessional and explanation for his own removal from the masses:

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<sup>208</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to John Dean, Swanage, 24 May 1968, letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection. Sorabji is here referring to the replacement of the recently deceased George Bishop, who was a local politician. On the day after Sorabji wrote the above letter to Mr. Dean the following tribute was printed in the *Swanage Times*: 'As one who has been hanging about Purbeck for 40 years and living therein for 20, may I heartily endorse Tilly Whim's [George Willey] tribute to the now, alas! late Coun. George Bishop? A man of vigorous independent and thoroughly adult mind, he was not taken in by the current cliché and claptrap of this stupid and sentimental (the two things go together) age. The certain yes-men, toadies and lickspittles of the various establishments, did not take any too kindly to him was, of course, a great tribute to him. He was often right in his warnings, and they never forgive that. How I enjoyed going into that Aladdin's Cave his boutique, and how well I did there too over the years, animadverting with him on "*l'éternel sophisme, l'universel déraison*" of our days! A man of striking appearance, he bore a startling resemblance to one of the Roman Emperors whose bust is in the Hall of Emperors in the Vatican, Rome. I often used to tease him about it. He is indeed a loss! *Requiescat in Pace.*' Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Tribute to George Bishop," *Swanage Times* (25 May 1968): 17.

<sup>209</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to John Dean, Swanage, 17 January 1969, letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

I can well understand your reaction against public places. After some 55 or more years of concert going and writing about the blasted things, the inside of a concert hall never sees me in these days, because, principally my detestation of human beings in the mass is so great that their physical proximity in concentrated numbers, as in a concert hall or theatre is repulsive to me. I always say, as an excuse for this that my own failings are such a burden to me that I find those of other people ON TOP of them an INTOLERABLE one!<sup>210</sup>

The issues of Sorabji's dislike for women is a confusing matter, for on the one hand his reputation as a misogynist was very well established in the village, but on the other hand, he was known to keep the company of women as a close friends, was always very polite to the female villagers, and had an exceptionally close relationship with his mother. The following comment seems to stir the pot even more, corroborating his reputation and suggesting that, whether there is any actual credence in Sorabji's strong words as it related to his action, the attitude itself was one that he shared with and perhaps obtained as an influence from his mother:

When I think of the number of very dear friends of mine whose lives have been spoilt or warped by females I go down on my knees and thank all my Gods that they made me a natural-born celibate. My beloved mother who was the only woman I could ever stand about me took the dimmest view of her own sex and her comments upon them were as withering as they were witty and diverting. I adored her...and when seeing the average (especially contemporary female specimen) I always think how I would love to hear my mother's barbed comments on her!<sup>211</sup>

Ironically, the closing line of the above letter retracts immediately from the harsh position on women, 'My regards and best wishes to your lady mother.'<sup>212</sup> Within their correspondence, many of Sorabji's letters end with this manner of warm wishing to Mr. Dean's elderly mother, which must have awoken feeling of nostalgia within Sorabji whose own mother had passed away less than a decade prior to when these letters were written.

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<sup>210</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to John Dean, Swanage, 29 December 1965, letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

Now look and listen...when...if ever...the better and warmer weather comes you absolutely MUST bring your dear Mother and your self to tea one fine day...like Butterfly...I'm DYING to show off the cottage to her! And she can run her fingers over my two marvellous pianos. Do you think she can resist THAT inducement? I hope NOT!<sup>213</sup>

Here again Sorabji makes an exception to his supposed misogynistic attitude and warmly presents an invitation for a woman to enter *The Eye*, which was reputedly barred from the vast majority of the female sex. There appears to be an important distinction to be made between women, in the general sense and defined as a distinct grouping, and a woman, who has a name, a purpose, and a clear individuality. Sorabji abhorred the masses, but he could adore an individual, whatever their gender might have been.

The limited extant correspondence between John and Sorabji suggests that their friendship was most active between the years of 1964-1969. As far as I know, the two of them never had a falling out and John maintained throughout his life a great admiration for Sorabji and his music.

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<sup>213</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to John Dean, Swanage, 7 January 1969, letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

*VALERIE LLOYD, a very dear friend of Mr. Dean's through the vast majority of his life, was interviewed in Mr. Dean's stately old Swanage home on April 3, 2002.*

SO: How long did John Dean know Sorabji?

VL: He knew K, as he always called him, I think for very many years. But as I say, he either talked to him on the telephone or K would just phone up and say, 'Come over.' You wouldn't see him for two or three months and then it was a command. But they always got on very well.

SO: Do you know how they first met?

VL: That I don't know. How he knew him I don't know. They were both very keen on music, so I am sure that they could have talked for hours on that subject.

SO: But John wasn't a musician?

VL: His mother was, she was a pianist and his father did a lot of singing. There were a lot of soirées and things going on, which happened with my grandparents and his parents, because his mom died at 103. So whether K got to know them there, I don't know. But I never knew much about Reggie.

SO: When was John born?

VL: 1932, so he would have been 70 this year. If Sorabji would walk up from Corfe, he would have his head down; he was miles away. John used to do a lot of talking to people one on one, because he was very keen on that sort of thing, but I don't think that Sorabji would allow it. I don't think that you would be able to have an interview with him. To me he looked a lot like Mahler, with his shock of hair.

I was always with John when he met K, but the main conversations were with John and K. But because I was with John I would be listening, but I don't think that I

was putting anything into the conversation. It was only when they asked me if I would look after K. Poor soul! It was dreadful to see them both in Wareham, a great man like that.

SO: What were the conditions like?

VL: Terrible. It was quite smelly. They weren't looking after the clients very well. It was a large, large room. There were people in all sort of undress; I suppose it was easy for the staff, but when people went to see them it just looked so bad. Was Reggie in bed for a long time or did he just die? Because I went into a side ward there and I don't remember if it was Reggie in there or if it was somebody else.

SO: He passed on just before Sorabji. Even though Sorabji was 17 years older I think that he was in much better health than Reginald.

VL: But Reggie did everything in the house and did all the cooking and did everything, didn't he?

SO: I know that a lot of locals think that he was a manservant.

VL: That is what I am saying, you see, but he wasn't.

SO: Do you know what their relationship was?

VL: I was always told that they were cousins, but I don't think that they were. Reggie was not an upstanding man, not good looking, just a rather bent, old-ish man. Just an ordinary sort of person, he wasn't good looking, he didn't have a shock of hair. There was nothing to him. You could see that Sorabji was a musician; there was something about him. You would rarely see Reggie.

SO: Had you only been to The Eye once?

VL: I think that I went a couple of times, especially since I was going to have to look after him, I didn't know what the situation was. And I had been with John, because they showed me quite a bit of things, his treasures. He had some bonsai trees that were terribly old. They showed me those. And all of his little treasured boxes, which I know that John has got one, but I don't know which one it is.

I was terrified to meet K to begin with, because I had heard all of these stories and how he was an introvert and didn't want to see people and you could only see him on command.

SO: So you met him late in his life?

VL: Very early in my life and very late in his. I suppose I was about seven or eight when I first knew him and that was remembering him at the Bankes Arms. We use to hear him playing.

SO: Did John ever talk about his playing?

VL: Yes, but I think he enjoyed talking to him. I don't know whether it was so much his music, but I think that they just really enjoyed each other's company.

SO: You said that John was a historian?

VL: A historian of the Isle of Purbeck. He loved music as well, you only have to go upstairs and see his equipment and books. It is all there. John was an odd-bob too, so between them, I think that is why they hit it off so well.

SO: Was John introverted like Sorabji?

VL: No. He had a lot of acquaintances. I mean everybody knew him in the town. But he didn't have many solid friends and that might have been because his mother was alive.

SO: And John passed away 18 months ago?

VL: Last November. He was an engineer and also, I will tell you what I think he did, John was a French polisher and I think he did some work for K. Of course he had some nice furniture didn't he? Now what was it? Maybe a table.

SO: Sounds like John had a lot of skills.

VL: Yes, he was taught to be a car engineer. He had his own Bentley, beautiful old Bentley he had in the garage. But, K didn't drive did he?

SO: I have never heard of him driving.

VL: No, I haven't either, never seen him out.

SO: I don't think he liked cars, I think he preferred trains. I don't know the whole story, but it fits in with the Swanage Rail. There was the possibility that the tracks were going to be removed and a road was going to be put in.

VL: That is quite true.

SO: Then some people in Corfe set up a petition and Sorabji signed it to preserve the rail.

VL: I think they wanted to put a road in as early as 1939, but they didn't know what side of the Common to put it on. Some people were saying that it ought to run along side the railway and the other people said it ought to be on the other side, which would have been his side of the Common. I should think that he would have fought very hard about that. But nothing was ever done, so it is still a bottleneck.

SO: So they won their petition!

## Chapter Eight – The Swanage Times

*GEORGE WILLEY is a veritable institution on the Isle of Purbeck. He practically wrote the entirety of The Swanage Times for many decades, a newspaper that provided a platform for many of Sorabji's later published letters. His knowledge of Swanage and its surrounding area is encyclopaedic. Equally impressive is his enormous enthusiasm for life, his great sensitivity to the arts, his wide range of learning, and his unique admiration for Sorabji. A great majority of Mr. Willey's interview, which took place in his Swanage home on February 25, 2003, centred on our perusal of Sorabji's published writings in The Swanage Times, which I had collected, and Mr. Willey's colourful accounts of the circumstances and content of those letters.*

GW: I mustn't pose as being a friend in any close way to him. I kept clear of him from the earliest. In my ignorance I knew nothing about him when I arrived here and secondly when I did learn about him, it was only because he was the man that composed these letters; what a fool not to have saved what would have been appreciated in the future, especially some of the more strongly worded stuff that he had. So I tended to regard him very circumspectly and did not have much to do with him. When we did meet however, although we crossed swords, particularly over *Carmen Jones*,<sup>214</sup> there very rapidly came a point where he was such an affable man. Oddly, for all of his irascibility, it was a pretended form of prickly attitude and partly a defence mechanism. But inside him he was really a very warm hearted man, who eventually, his face all in smiles, would prick one with some warmth. Eddie Holland, who was the chairman of the parish council and a local tradesmen in Corfe Castle, enjoyed his great friendship and he always called him, "Brother Holland, what have we done today, what is the parish council unfolding for the improvement of this town?" Or whatever, but some jocular attitude he would always strike.

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<sup>214</sup> *Carmen Jones* (1954) is an Oscar Hammerstein film adaptation of Bizet's opera, directed by Otto Preminger, which became the subject for debate in the pages of the *Swanage Times* between Sorabji and Tilly Whim (a pseudonym used by George Willey in a weekly column of the same name).

He was very good, in the sense that he would speak in short sentences and one only wishes one could have perhaps recorded him or wrote down in short hand what he was saying more often. But because my only relationship with him was that from time to time he would write to the paper, dropping this missive, as if from on high; like Moses dropping a tablet down from the mountain top, he would drop a missive for us ordinary people, to put us right, correct us in some misunderstanding as he saw it. So that is why I as a young reporter didn't really embrace him or ever feel on the same plane and frankly, of course, no one really was on the same plane as him. He was an amazing man to find here in a Dorset village. You will know so much about his physical characteristics already, but I have to say, that even his physical appearance was richly comical; he was short, rotund, and, although he had greying curly hair, he wore sometimes a kind of hat that concealed it and sometimes long cloak-like clothes. He was aware that his appearance was strange. He had huge pebble lens glasses, tortoise shell glasses, of opaque capacity it seemed to me, but behind them his eyes would twinkle. But knowing that I think he was slightly guarded, because he thought that people would be smiling about him, would take him not seriously and so he was slightly defensive with people. And because he had the unfailing acolyte walking a few steps behind him all the time, in his long black overcoat in winter and a long mackintosh in summer, very silent and lugubrious, the two of them did make rather a comical, strange spectacle in the village.

SO: Reggie was always walking behind Sorabji?

GW: Always a few paces behind him, rather like a Parsi or Saudi man would have his wife, a man who was greatly in his affection, it was not a sign of degradation, but in their proper place. He also had this extraordinary sensitivity about what race he actually was. He is described by Scholes in his encyclopaedia as a Parsi, but there seems no doubt that there was the Parsi father, it was a paternal influence on him, India, and an Italian born mother.

SO: Supposedly Sicilian-Spanish mother, but this is dubious and the genealogical research that I have conducted would suggest that she was purely English. Her maiden name was Worthy and her mother's maiden name was Wood.

GW: Really! He was I think at heart absurdly romantic. He was a romantic and so his music seemed to me, an unlearned mere appreciator. Of course, the biggest laugh, I thought, was when finally we were vouchsafed the experience of hearing *Opus Clavicembalisticum* and it reminded me of the romantic 'In a Persian Garden' and such other essays in musical romance as that. It was lovely and had a near east romance about it. I am not clever, but I could not perceive any tremendous subtleties about it and as good as it was, I wondered what all the fuss was about and I speak for a lot of other people, 'What on earth was all the fuss about?' You couldn't improve upon the language of the encyclopaedist and I always said it was as if Sorabji had written his own entry; you couldn't improve on that thundering majesty of the judgement in that thing, 'to reduce its number of competent practitioners and willing auditors,' that is what I like, it is lovely. Early on I managed to get that, before my wife bought me a copy of the encyclopaedia back in the 1960s, from a library, so I could use that phrase tellingly against him when we would have these debates in print.

SO: It appears that he really enjoyed his debates as expressed in the letters that he wrote to John Dean.

GW: You know that John descended from a man called Reg Dean, his father was Captain Dean, who was wounded in the first World War and this great man, Reg Dean, who was the proprietor of the garage business here in the town from which the family wealth derives, was a singer in light opera. He was a tremendous entertainer and last week – you will be bored to tears with all of this gossip – we had the dinner to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of our operatic society, which is called Swanage Choral and Operatic Society, very unoriginally. Featuring Reg Dean, I mounted a small exhibition of memorabilia, books, papers, programmes and things, not of our society,

because fifty years isn't very old, but of the much earlier Swanage Music Society and its precursor which was Swanage Lyric Society.

John himself wrote a good letter. He was a very competent fellow indeed, a very clever man and had he not been a shy and modest fellow, John, he would have been a leading citizen. He had an enormous memory. He was an authority, not just interested, but quite authoritative, about the Purbeck stone industry, the rock, literally, on which the Isle of Purbeck is founded. A lovely bloke and a very nice man indeed!

Did you have any luck at all with your pursuit with the Swanage Times?<sup>215</sup>

SO: I can show you what I have. I thought perhaps these would prick your recollections and conjure forth some interesting comments. Of course some of your articles are in here as well, complementing and thus completing any relevant debate, but you will see that between 1952 and 1956 there is a gap and unfortunately I suspect that your *Carmen Jones* debate would have fallen within those years as I did not encounter it in my research; which would make sense since the film was released in 1954.

GW: That is right.

SO: Tilly Whim!

GW: Oh yes, Tilly Whim and 'Purbeck Notebook,' that is from 1956.<sup>216</sup> I only started the notebook in 1955 or 54 perhaps. I entertain a belief that I came here in October or November of 1953, so my first full year here was 1954.

SO: It is interesting to take notice of the topics that he would write about in the Swanage Times. In flipping through the papers I definitely thought that certain musical or even political issues that people intimated would seem interesting to him and he would pen a hot response, but he didn't always.

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<sup>215</sup> This reference alludes to my collecting Sorabji's 'Letters to the Editor,' specifically those published in the Swanage Times, the efforts of which were known to Mr. Willey.

<sup>216</sup> Mr. Willey is merely glancing at the table of contents from my Swanage Times accumulation and taking notice of one of his articles, the earliest within the collection. Tilly Whim, "Purbeck Notebook," *Swanage Times* (5 Dec 1956): 12.

GW: I think that early on he probably decided that he was making his home in a very small enclave, that he was splashing in a small puddle, and that it wouldn't pay him to get too strong on issues and make enemies in the area. He could have a thundering go on things like the write up on *Carmen Jones* or things like that and this kind of letter here 'Left or Right?'

'The planners are at it again. When they talk about taking over land to the west of Northbrook-road, do they mean that they intend to touch good agricultural land?'<sup>217</sup> That is very good. How funny! I was writing this in 1956. Do you know the planners are at it again today and that Northbrook road is, well not under siege exactly, but the threat of development in the north of Swanage has reopened sharply? Because of the closure of the grammar school in Swanage there in now 5.6 acres or 5.8 acres of land, which was sold to the county council at a peppercorn amount for educational purposes and the building of what was to become the grammar school, which was built in 1929. And now, the county council, if you like, because the grammar school has closed down and we have a new educational structure, the poor old grammar school being long gone, they want to sell this to the highest bidder, thus being unfaithful to the spirit of the original gift. And oh were he alive with us in this hour, Sorabji would have something to say about this! This was made for educational purposes and sport and ideally it should remain open land. But even more hideous than the fact that they have reclaimed the educational thing, that almost certainly the kind of money they are after would only be yielded by development, building development and housing. So they are betraying us now and I am delighted to read with some relief, 'Tilly Whim's admirable observations on the nefarious activities of "planners" and such shows him the sham-fights and the shadow boxing of the political parties, by which it has well been called, masked behind the sham-fights and the shadow boxing of the political parties, by which it is difficult to see how any mentally adult person can any longer be taken in, exposed as it has been again and again by events, and by the deadly and searching analysis of such men as the late Lord Hewart in his *The New Despotism*, Belloc in *The Servile State*, Belloc and Chesterton in *The Party System*, and

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<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

more recently by Professor Hayek in *The Road to Serfdom*, Dr. Erik von Kühnelt-Leddihn in *Liberty or Equality*, and Sir David Kelly in the *Hungry Sheep*.<sup>218</sup>

His reading was absolutely encyclopaedic, he quoted from the most extraordinary sources, but also, what amazed me was that he would write to the *Catholic Herald*, with which he would have very little in common, with his mixed background. He must have been sponge like in his picking up of any written material. I don't suppose for a moment he subscribed to the *Catholic Herald*, except perhaps for a brief period.<sup>219</sup> But whenever he came across a paper he would have something to say about it.

'The Town Map,' oh how wonderful! 'Among the soloists were such top-ranking singers as Isobel Baillie...' <sup>220</sup> Isobel Baillie came here at the behest of a man called Edward Armstrong, a first violin in the BBC's concert orchestra, who retired and then came to live here and he got some of these people down here. 'Norman Lumsden' <sup>221</sup> was a bass. 'Recently a letter, sent to the Swanage Times by Mr. Alexander Beattie...' This is Alex Beattie who was a Scots-born man who ran a shop here and was a member of the operatic society in his day. 'The Messiah was the largest scale production of its kind within memory to be seen locally. Among the soloists...' This is referring to a concert that I am writing about. 'It was produced early in March, after months of hard work and planning by Mr. Armstrong and members of a small committee who organised performances at Lady St. Mary's Church, Wareham, Swanage Methodist Church, and Poole Methodist Church. Mr. Armstrong conducted his string orchestra, augmented with players from Poole, Bournemouth, and Weymouth. Recently a letter, sent to the Swanage Times by Mr. Alexander Beattie, secretary of the Swanage Singers, announced that the sum of £20 16s. 10d. had been handed over...' That was the total they received for their playing, 'and thanked the choirs playing and other helpers and supporters.' So I think I wrote this as a news item.

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<sup>218</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "That town map," *Swanage Times* (12 December 1956): 13.

<sup>219</sup> Sorabji was actually a long term contributor to the *Catholic Herald*, publishing dozens of 'Letters to the Editor' from 1943-1962.

<sup>220</sup> George Willey, "Months of work," *Swanage Times* (29 May 1957): 1. The 'Tilly Whim' column was not Mr. Willey's sole responsibility for the *Swanage Times*; he more or less wrote everything within the paper that did not acknowledge specific authorship, including this article.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.* Mr. Willey began scanning through the article, reading certain passages, engaging the specific recollection engendered and elucidating the background to the subject matter expressed within a particular passage.

SO: Sorabji definitely had a response to this article and it was but one word that caused him to react.<sup>222</sup>

GW: That is terrific. I wonder which headline he means? ‘A production,’ how funny!

A lot of these, by the way, are the kind of things that retired Colonels in Tunbridge Wells write, extreme right wing views and predictable views about modernity in its form, but now and again, only he, ONLY HE, Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji could pen this: ‘A distinguished French writer Frédéric Loilée once wrote a richly diverting study of *Le Paradoxe: L’Eternel Sophisme, l’universel Déraison*.’<sup>223</sup> Then he goes on with this fantastic opening paragraph, ‘Had he foreseen the lengths to which indoctrinated infatuation with party-political dope can go he would have trebled the length of his book.’ Thundering opening! And then the next line, ‘Thus, we read, according to Tilly Whim that Lord Hinchingsbrooke is not regarded as a “good” Conservative by certain people...’ This famously refers to an occasion in 1956. Britain was stupid as to launch a madcap folly of an attack on Suez, in an effort to claim some seniority in administering Suez Canal. We landed paratroops in this ridiculous thing, which resulted in total failure, embarrassment, and the resignation of the Prime Minister. But, Lord Hinchingsbrooke resigned from the Conservative Party in protest and said, ‘I am no longer going to sit in these benches’ and went to the cross benches in the House. As a result, the conservative faction in this town, the idiots of the Conservative Party, took his picture from the wall and turned it around or they took it down, which I quickly learned about. So I phoned the Nationals – many years of my life I was the stringer for National Press – and got a few paragraphs in the national papers. So dear old Kaikhosru must have spotted this and picked it up. I would have written my own story as well, so ‘Lord Hinchingsbrooke is not regarded as a “good” Conservative by certain people because he is not a slavish and

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<sup>222</sup> I am here making reference to the following article within the collection of *Swanage Times* articles that we were perusing. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Really, really!” *Swanage Times* (5 June 1957). The short letter, which Mr. Willey and I silently read to ourselves runs as follows: ‘Really, really! Are there not enough mass-circulation rags to supply readers with as little breeding and taste as themselves with the shocking sort of headline that flaunts itself on the front page of your May 29 issue? And one does NOT, sir, if one knows how to choose one’s words speak of the performance of one of the great masterpieces of oratorio as a production!’

<sup>223</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Party slaves,” *Swanage Times* (19 Feb 1958): 10.

abject yes-man.<sup>224</sup> The other thing is, I have to say sadly, the reason why Hinchingbrooke resigned, was not because of the folly of going into Suez, but because we didn't go in hard enough and stay in there until we fought and killed people and won the bloody battle, he was pursuing the hardest line possible, whereas there were other people, like Nigel Nicholson who resigned out of indignation that we should commit such a folly and go to war. I don't think either of those things worried Shapurji, either point of view, he is annoyed about this Democracy thing and his offence was to be 'utterly right in his opposition to certain deplorable policies of his party, which have, as he foresaw and warned, proved shamefully humiliating and disastrous to his country.'<sup>225</sup> It was an excuse for him to thunder, but to start off with Loilée, this obscure author!

By the way, how timely, in 1958, November the 12<sup>th</sup>, what do we see here, another letter correcting something he sees wrong in the paper,<sup>226</sup> Benno Moiseiwitsch, the great concert pianist of my time, who had a friendly connection with Swanage; played the piano here once. I was obviously innocent to write 'a square piano, the first grand piano in use after the harpsichord.' Then he launches off to correct us and he tells us what a square piano was and what the derivation was, 'made by Bartolomeo Cristofori of Padua' and all of this stuff. Marvellous! And I don't question his learning, he would know far more than me. What is so thrilling is that only two days ago in the *Daily Telegraph* was the obituary for Tanya Moiseiwitsch. She was a dancer and choreographer and the daughter of Benno Moiseiwitsch. Both Tanya, her father and his own wife came to Swanage. I bought this house from a man named Charles Alexander and he had been a failed actor in his lifetime, but he knew a few people in the art world. He was a friend of Benno Moiseiwitsch, who visited Swanage and stayed in this house.

'Visual Drivel!' Ah, this is the sad day in 1959 when our cinema was closed here. How funny, since he had been a critic. 'Now that people can have an unlimited supply of visual as well as auditory drivel laid on with the gas, the water and the electricity, there is less incentive than ever for them to exert themselves even to the extent of going out for it.'<sup>227</sup> At his best he was witty.

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<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Square piano," *Swanage Times* (12 Nov 1958): 12.

<sup>227</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Visual drivel," *Swanage Times* (23 Sept 1959): 12.

I mustn't get trapped into reading through these, because I am absolutely enraptured. And then he puts Stendhal, of course he would quote Stendhal, *De L'Amour*;<sup>228</sup> was there anything he didn't know?

Oh here we are, when Ida Woodward wrote *In and Around the Isle of Purbeck*.<sup>229</sup> Oh, he had purchased a first edition of Ida Woodward's rather celebrated book, but very little possessed because it was printed in 1908. Although I have got an enormous collection of books here, I don't think that I possess that particular one, although I know it well.

And again, 'Your admirable contributor Tilly Whim does invaluable service in drawing attention to the shameless, flagrant, and unscrupulous disregard of pledges and undertakings with regard to radioactive effluent at Winfrith.'<sup>230</sup> I get enormous pleasure from this. I was always slightly wary of him, because as a young man I was conscious of how abysmally ignorant I was against him. He was certainly not anyone I would have dreamed of taking on and even in that tiny exchange we had, when I said in my column, 'Mr. Sorabji, the adaptation was careful not to alter one note of Bizet's music,'<sup>231</sup> that didn't even satisfy him, oh no, in fact 'you're excusing him by saying this,' and he continued this things about 'the atrocious Negroid perversion.' But he obviously forgave me or sided with me on many other things.

Oh, this is a letter from George Willey here. How funny, I have no memory of it. I think I know – I became the chairman of the United Nations Association branch here in Swanage and found myself writing to him.<sup>232</sup>

SO: That received a couple of responses.

GW: 'Every line of Mr. Sorabji's curious letter can be contested...' Oh, I had more courage than I remember having. '...But I will content myself only with a closing reference to his commendation of the "admirable and humane" nature of the Belgian administration of the Congo.' This is the administration that used to cut the hands off of

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<sup>228</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Look and pass on," *Swanage Times* (27 Apr 1960): 14.

<sup>229</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Comical ignorance," *Swanage Times* (10 Aug 1960): 10.

<sup>230</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Radio-active waste," *Swanage Times* (26 Oct 1960): 2.

<sup>231</sup> Mr. Willey is, of course, making reference again to the *Carmen Jones* debate that was mentioned earlier.

<sup>232</sup> George Willey, "United Nations," *Swanage Times* (20 Dec 1961): 12.

the coal miners who produced less than their permitted outcome. It was a most inhumane and horrifying white colonial occupation of the Congo. I can't tell you the pleasure this gives me to look back at these. I am only surprised at how good some of these exchanges are.

SO: The only time the debates seemed to get personal was with Mr. Varney, who did make some rather strong, personal jabs at Sorabji.<sup>233</sup> But, other than that, it did remain fairly professional.

GW: Les Varney is still going strong. He himself is a colourful person, a stocky, Dorset man, with the high cheekbones of the Celtic origin of the people around here, and a faint accent. He was the village chimney sweep, in fact he extended far more, he would around the Isle of Purbeck go if you needed your chimney cleaned, in the days when that was a flourishing line of work. He was a great sports supporter, the football team he helped to run, and was generally a good egg in the village and became a parish councillor. Then suddenly the parish council did something that not for the first or only time did Sorabji object to and he wrote one of his marvellous missives about it. And dear old Varney did no more than to write a polite rejoinder. Then Sorabji wrote something stronger and Les Varney then wrote something that was a bit amusing, because he is a very witty and amusing character, and he must have had a dig, which wasn't so subtle that Sorabji didn't quickly apprehend it – he got it alright! His fury knew no bounds, now he found himself getting the mickey taken out of him by a prominent villager. I think actually they finished up as good friends, because I think everything was just a passing storm with Sorabji and the sun came out again eventually.

So one day we have a joke that is unfortunately not able to reproduce very easily. Sorabji, as I told you, peppered his letters with quotations from a number of languages. I think he had a good knowledge of Persian, I don't know why or how, but he made some references to Aramaic and something else in Persian, which would have been difficult to translate. He came to me once with a letter that had Greek quotations and I told him,

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<sup>233</sup> The debate being referred to between Sorabji and Mr. Varney spanned five letters: Sorabji, "A cry from Higher Mudbank," (27 Apr 1966); Varney, "Life up a muddy lane," (11 May 1966); Sorabji, "Untitled," (18 May 1966); Varney, "Council castles," (25 May 1966); Sorabji, "Homes reply," (8 June 1966).

‘there is no way we are going to print that, we don’t have a Greek font.’ But one way you could assure to get a letter in *The Times* newspaper in London was to send it with a Greek quote in it, because they were so proud of having a Greek font, they would print it. It is an old joke in journalism that that is a way to get a work published in *The Times*. So you have Sorabji writing in saying so and so, then Varney writing back that the village didn’t decide that at all, in fact so and so is the truth of it. Upon which, Sorabji sends another short, but very sharp pointed missile; he wrote quoting Hugo, ‘*Tant pis pour les faits!*’ Now this expression means roughly ‘To hell with the facts.’ Les reads this, being a dry witty fellow, and writes back saying, ‘I have shown your letter to my friends and they said, “take piss poor Les, ‘tis pretty good.”’ Unfortunately I don’t think we dared to print it. But he took these words, which he didn’t understand anyway; he had no idea or cared what they meant. But they do happen to read in his version of it, ‘take piss poor,’ and ‘piss poor’ is something very poor and inadequate; so his pun is just as good if not better. I thought it was marvellous and I retyped the letter, hoping that it would be unnoticed, that my editors, the people that print the paper would print it without question. I think however they did pick it up and realised that the phrase ‘piss poor’ was a bit too demotic to be used. But I always thought that was one of the best things that happened and I know that the first man who would have roared with laughter would have been Sorabji. I think that I once told him about this and wrote it down for him. I thought it such a good joke, ‘take piss poor Les, ‘tis pretty good;’ it is four words out of the French phrase that he turned to his advantage.

I can’t remember when Sorabji died?

SO: 1988.

GW: In his last years I don’t know that he was still writing to the paper.

SO: The last one seems to have been in 1977.

GW: So for ten years he didn’t seem to write locally.

SO: Well, he was very old at that time and quite frail.

GW: He was in his 80s when he died?

SO: 96.

GW: 96!

SO: He was born in 1892, so he was in his 60s, 70s, and 80s when he wrote these articles.

GW: When I first met him his hair was still raven black, back when he was in his 60s. But he then became rounder and shorter - one had the impression - accentuated by the sometime voluminous coat that he used to wear. So he looked a slightly comic figure when he went around, with these great pebble lens glasses of his that he would peer owlishly from behind and then break into that grin of his. Of course he never seemed to have transport of his own, he was always waiting for a bus or train between here and Corfe Castle.

SO: Sometimes he used a driver, but he was a staunch supporter of public transportation.

GW: Absolutely, yes! He was right about so many things, but when he was wrong, it did not stop him from being a wildly brilliant advocate for the cause, whatever, for or against. He was a bewitching fellow. I cannot stop repeating the fact that I should kick myself, realising the gold that was there, to have not learned more about him. He was prickly and wasn't the kind of man that you could just go knock on his door; you particularly couldn't knock at his door, his card said that, 'chance callers strictly barred'<sup>234</sup> and this things about the Sisters of Mercy being the one exception.<sup>235</sup> I imagine he must have had

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<sup>234</sup> Sorabji's private 'business' card was headed with this particular statement.

<sup>235</sup> The specific order of nuns to be found in Swanage were the Sisters of Mercy, hence the assumed relationship made by Mr. Willey between this particular order and Sorabji's famous gate sign: 'NO FLAG

some kindness here in Swanage. The Sisters of Mercy were the ladies that ran the convent here.

SO: Is that still about?

GW: No, three of the nuns are still living in Swanage, but the convent itself closed down in the 1980's and now it is a very nice hotel. The building, of course, is the beautiful Purbeck house, which was the home of a man called George Burt, a man of immense wealth who made his fortune in London. Along with John Maulum, the town is really founded on the fortunes of those two men, modern Swanage.

But old Sorabji didn't really betray ever any particular interest in the historic aspect of the place, he put up with Swanage only long enough to stay here as a temporary stop gap at 128 High Street.

When I first came to live here there were formidable literary people connected with the area. Giles Dugdell, who was a writer for the BBC, lived in Corfe Castle. He was a great man, a very nice and friendly man. One of our great historians lived in Kimmeridge at that time.<sup>236</sup> There were a handful of people - there still are formidable people of whom I treat with the greatest of respect, but with more diffidence in those days, of course, when I was very young. But with Sorabji, he was on such an Olympian plane, that I was always very careful what I wrote about and so I am relieved now to find that he let me off lightly in so many ways. He was honest enough to agree, he didn't hold grudges. If you said something he was prepared to pat you on the head for it.

SO: But in regard to his own opinions he was a rock.

GW: Absolutely! Of course he would strike like a cobra and instantly say something and the marvellously funny thing is that even if a second later, a split second later, he realised how deeply wrong he was, that wouldn't enter the discussion, there would be no question of qualification or of withdraw; having been wrong he would then plough on with even

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DAY OR CHARITY TOUTING, NO HAWKERS, PEDLARS OR CANVASSERS, POLITICAL OR OTHER. GENUINE CATHOLIC i.e. ROMAN SISTERS WELCOME.'

<sup>236</sup> The historian being referred to is the prolific Arthur Bryant.

more eloquence, at least that is the impression I have of it, not susceptible to correction. What a man! But as to his encyclopaedic reading, he must have had some fluency in more than one language: German he knew and French and Latin he certainly used constantly. His education itself must have been formidable and wide ranging. Were you able to dig up anything regarding that?

SO: He was privately educated.

GW: Oh, I see!

SO: He never attended any schools, as far as I am aware, in fact he very much frowned upon any form of mass tuition.

GW: How did he imagine the unwashed, the great unwashed, would manage without the board schools?

SO: I believe he felt that it produced a level of conformity, which was actually a rabid debate when mass education was first introduced.

GW: Yes, of course, and with some truth. Our history masters shaped a lot of us.

I can remember when Sorabji wrote these letters, it was the colour and flow and massive scholarship of his erudition and scholarship and no one, with the faintest ability to see lights on the shore of literacy, would fail to see that. It is great stuff!

SO: Sorabji's writing style is instantly recognisable. There is a certain melodic flow to his language. It is a creative form of communication. He was not merely eloquent; he was artistic with his exploration of language.

GW: Yes! What a fool that I was, not to sit at his feet and listen to him talk and perhaps take notes and transcribe them later. It was one of the opportunities that I missed in my life. In his case, of course, he must have found very few people to whom he could talk

with at any real level; so life must have been rather frustrating for him living in a small village like Corfe, unless he was the kind of man that telephoned friends or was content with his own loneliness.

SO: He had his correspondences and he loved his solitude.

GW: Indeed! Did you manage to acquire copies, in some case frail copies of his letters? He wrote on the thinnest of notepaper and the typewriter that he used; this old battered portable with its one or two keys slightly unaligned. How familiar they were to me, I knew it was from him the moment I saw the envelope. Occasionally there would be words crossed out, with alteration in the text. But his scholarship always shone through. It must have been shortly after he moved into The Eye, noting his new address, that he would religiously paperclip a 'business' card to each letter; far more substantial the card than the paper, he didn't waste too much money on buying good note paper that was made to last. He himself intended these to be the most ephemeral materials. He would be delighted with your careful harvesting.

On one occasion we had an article written by a wonderful old gentleman called Leonard Tatchell. Leonard Tatchell was an entomologist, a fellow of the Royal Society. This man was a member of a distinguished family of Swanage people, but he himself had an academic bent that went rather away from the family, who were respectable trades people in the town. He qualified himself in a very closed world of academia. As a distinguished entomologist he came back to live here and wrote a column in the weekly paper about his observations in the countryside. Unusual to have a writer in a local paper like ours whose work was illumined with real profound knowledge about things like that. So this learned man, Leonard Tatchell, one day happened to write, 'This of course is observed in the religion of the Zoroastrians, there are references to it in a book about the sacred cock of Zoroaster.' He left it at that, this rather gnomonic reference in his column in the Swanage Times. Judge of my horror, when a day after the publication, a letter arrived in a familiar format with his well known handwriting and well known typewriter. Sorabji thundered, 'Who is this that writes about Zoroaster? Zoroastrians do not believe this and do not agree with these ideas.' He came down with all the might of his thunder against

this poor innocent man. Poor Leonard Tatchell, the most mild mannered of man, was horrified at this purple reaction from on high. ‘I don’t think that I know Mr. Sorabji,’ he said to me anxiously, ‘and I wouldn’t want to upset anyone on a religious matter.’ He was full of apologies and said, ‘If he writes any more, tell him that I perfectly accept what he says about this.’ What I said afterwards and I have said for years afterwards was would you believe that it is possible for some dear old gentleman, writing harmlessly about the woods in Rempstone, about the flowers of Purbeck and to throw in a chance remark about Zoroaster, only to be fallen upon heavily by a man that was a Zoroastrian. How unlucky can you get!

SO: What year would that have been?

GW: It would have been in the late 60’s or perhaps a bit later. But I am not sure. I have got a copy of the book written by dear old Tatchell. He wrote a lovely book about natural life in this area, but I think that he wrote it before this latest reference, this letter by Sorabji. It was something about the golden cock, adopted by the worshipers of Zoroaster; that is how it went. A crumb of knowledge, or would-be knowledge, picked up by dear old Leonard Tatchell, which he used to enliven his column, only to draw the wrath from on high from Sorabji.

SO: He is commending you on something here.<sup>237</sup>

GW: ‘Progressive taxation!’ I don’t have the faintest memory of writing on such a thing. ‘This has recently been utterly riddled upon both economic and equitable grounds by Professor Hayek in an immensely important and weighty book recently published called *The Constitution of Liberty*. I commend it to Tilly Whim. As professor Hayek convincingly shows, the real actuating motive of progressive taxation is envy, spite and malice.’ It is marvellous, he doesn’t ever say an unkind thing in that sense; he could have so easily said, ‘If I thought that Tilly Whim had the brains or scholarship to appreciate

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<sup>237</sup> I am referencing a Swanage Times article that mentions Tilly Whim, i.e. George Willey. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Malice in taxation,” *Swanage Times* (6 June 1962): 2.

this I would recommend it to him,' not likely, he sincerely means, 'I commend Tilly Whim,' paying me the compliment of imagining that I could read equally with him and understand on his par. Isn't that amazing! I am amazed and flattered how many times he commented on things I wrote, he must have been a regular reader of my column. I thought that he quickly put me down, with some justification, as just the village hack, penny-a-liner, and not worthy of serious debate, but no on the contrary.

He now writes about John Butler, the sub-editor of the newspaper in Bournemouth, where the paper was published. John must have written some review of a book. 'Father d'Arcy, Jacques Maritain, René Guénon, Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy, Martin Lings and Lord Northbourne.'<sup>238</sup> He throws in this handful from the top of his head.

SO: Each one rather eclectic in their own right.

GW: I don't doubt for one moment that he had read and to some extent digested their works. 'The genocidal extermination of the Ruanda in Zanzibar by their fellow Africans who don't like them.'<sup>239</sup> He had a violent dislike of black people, but he did have a great respect for the kingdoms of Ethiopia. Here we are, 'Three Zulu kings, Tshaka, Dingaan and Ketcheweago decimated and massacred neighbouring tribes in pursuit of their sort of colonialism until stopped by white "colonisation."' Hmm! 'Sauce for the goose but poison for the gander?'<sup>240</sup> He had very witty epigrams.

Here is another letter, praise of 'Mr. John Dean's admirable letter about the rape of trees in Swanage and thereabouts.'<sup>241</sup> That is marvellous and can still be as timely today. 'The historical case of North Africa and the interior of Sicily, all well and richly wooded in classical times, which were reduced to near and/or total desert by the latifundia system...' Latifundia system was it?

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<sup>238</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "A time for silence," *Swanage Times* (5 May 1965): 14. At this point Mr. Willey had resumed scanning through the collected articles, adding commentary when inspired.

<sup>239</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Colonialism of another kind," *Swanage Times* (21 July 1965): 14.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Malice against natural beauty," *Swanage Times* (16 Feb 1966): 14.

That was another thing, he called Higher Filbank, Higher Mudbank; ‘at our present rate of progress or deliquescence will soon be Deeper Quagmire.’<sup>242</sup> And here is Les Varney, here it is in all of its richness, Les Varney writing: ‘As a member of Corfe Castle parish council I have joined with others in getting the houses numbered and the streets named. It makes life so much easier for tradesmen who come in from other towns.’<sup>243</sup> Very reasonable, you would think that was, wouldn’t you? ‘I would like to see all of these private roads made up for the good of all.’ It is true that Filbank had only names. ‘People do not hesitate to put “private” notices up all over their boundaries. Instead, one has often to read on to see if one has any right to enter at all. It would seem to me that these puddles at least keep the public away from Higher Fildbank. However, we must avoid at all costs having a perfect town or village, otherwise wouldn’t it be dreadful to have nothing to write letters to the Press about. Lastly, the author should feel very highly honoured because to the Englishman his home is his castle; yet only a very few can boast the additional luxury of being surrounded by a moat.’<sup>244</sup> That is typical Les, marvellous!

SO: Of course Sorabji hated that line and took it to task.

GW: ‘Relevance doesn’t seem to be Mr. Varney’s strong point. The fact is that Higher Fildbank wasn’t anything like the deeper morass it now is in wet weather when I and most of my neighbours came here 10 years ago. But maybe Mr. Varney feels about facts like Victor Hugo, who when reprovved for writing what didn’t accord with them, replied, “*Tant pis pour les faits!*”’<sup>245</sup> ‘And in some “castles” – council-house sort – I am credibly informed that the inmates are not even allowed to keep a car or a bird or even grow the

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<sup>242</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “A cry from Higher Mudbank,” *Swanage Times* (27 Apr 1966): 16.

<sup>243</sup> Leslie R. Varney, “Life up a muddy lane,” *Swanage Times* (11 May 1966): 14.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>245</sup> At this point Mr. Willey continues reading the article in silence, which says: ‘And even Mr. Varney might realise that there is a via media, literally as well as figuratively, between a made-up-road horror like those which are making Corfe Castle look rather worse than Golder’s Green, and a quagmire. And really, Mr. Varney, that stale, battered, discredited old cliché about homes being castles. That ceased to have any validity years ago, what with compulsory purchase powers – polite euphemism for robbery – and the statutory right of some six bodies, I believe, listed by the admirable Council for Civil and Political Liberties, to demand entry into the “castle” whenever they see fit.’ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Untitled,” *Swanage Times* (18 May 1966): 28.

sort of hedge they like.’ That is marvellous and also very timely of those days, when there were rapid explosions of building council houses and council estates, they created rules to go with them, like not allowing certain pets.

So Les Varney comes back on it,<sup>246</sup> ‘...they didn’t seem to like being referred to as “inmates.”’ A very witty reply, but of course it would not acquiesce, ‘Mr. Varney proceeds from irrelevance to *suggestio falsi*. There is NOT ONE WORD in my letter that applies either implicitly or explicitly to council houses in Corfe Castle – I repeat in Corfe Castle. Mr. Varney of course, knows this as well as I, but it suits him to assume that there is.’<sup>247</sup> No, he has changed the terms of the argument there for the reply, because Les Varney was entitled to cite the example. They are both scoring off of each other as quickly as they can.

Look here, just writing about the pianos, ‘That the best pianos are made in this country. Now this is quite true that the famous old house of Broadwood played an important part in the development of the piano, but apart from them the really great names in piano making are American, Jonas Chickering who originated the first complete metal frame in one casting, Steinway; German, Bechstein, Bluthner, Ibach, Bösendorfer, and French, Erard and Pleyel. The great days of piano making came to an end with the First World War. Nothing made since even approaches, let alone surpasses the instruments made before that time. In one famous case their peak was reached a good fifty or more years ago. I am myself the proud possessor of one of these marvellous vintage instruments...’<sup>248</sup> He had a superb Steinway grand, didn’t he? I had an experience with that instrument when I went to The Eye with Clive Boone. I ought to mention this because it is priceless funny. Clive had met him at the bank, because I think that

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<sup>246</sup> Leslie L. Varney, “Council castles,” *Swanage Times* (25 May 1966): 18. This George Willey reads in silence: ‘It now seems that to prevent certain roads from becoming Golders Greens, we do not after all want our roads made up. Wonderful! Then why all the fuss in the first place? Mr. Sorabji’s letter on council house castles is, as usual, all at sea, as of course we would expect. We have 67 such houses, all very attractive with neat gardens and hedges, all the hedges being of the tenants’ own choice. Pets – I challenge anyone to find the odd seven houses without one, or for that matter three or four. And may I add that the powers that be are not making any plans for any mass destruction of these pets in the foreseeable future. I spoke to a few people on this subject and they didn’t seem to like being referred to as “inmates” – they seem to think this title should be reserved for people who surround their houses with pseudolarix, taxodium and six feet high wire fences, in keeping with a prison. But never mind. May the lovers of harmony never be in want of a note, and their enemies be hanged by a common chord.’

<sup>247</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Homes reply,” *Swanage Times* (8 June 1966): 28.

<sup>248</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Some pointers of pianos,” *Swanage Times* (19 Oct 1966): 14.

Sorabji might have banked at the National Provincial Bank at which dear old Clive Boone worked and where he was the deputy manager. I can only vaguely remember, but I think we had a drink at lunchtime and then went on to Corfe Castle. He was frightened to go and see Sorabji without some aid, myself, and Dutch Courage, so we had a drink first. We went to the door by arrangement, telephoning in advance, and we were let in. Knowing of Clive's interest in the piano and his music, he showed him some of his music and said, 'Would you like to play this?' And Boone said, 'No, I thought you would play sir.' 'Not at all,' Sorabji said, 'do come and avail yourself at this poor piano of mine.' He sat Boone down and very nervously Boone put the music on the note stand of the piano, opened the piano lid, glanced again at the music, then looked closer at it, and then sharply at Sorabji to see that it wasn't some joke and then said, 'I can't see the key of the music.'

And Sorabji said, 'There is none.'

He said, 'What sir, I beg your pardon?'

'There is none,' Sorabji replied, 'look at the music, YOU must decide on that, you play what you think that it should be.'

And the nonplussed fellow, completely lost, sat down and after a minute or two broke into the chord of middle C, or something like that in order to play this piece of music, some safe thing. They had longer conversations than that, but I was more interested in Sorabji's library. I remember standing there looking at some of the books he had, a great collection of books, which is also a passion of mine. And then we left and that is the nearest I ever came to his hospitality.

SO: Was that the only time you went to The Eye?

GW: I may have gone for another purpose. I think that I went with Eddie Holland and that was to do with something that was coming up over a planning application in the village. But I was certainly not a guest or friend. I don't know what friends he had in the sense of people that would go around and have tea with him. I think that he was very private indeed. They would have been very few and very fortunate people that enjoyed any intimacy with him.

SO: I am just curious, when you visited The Eye with Mr. Boone, did Sorabji know that you were Tilly Whim?

GW: I think so.

SO: He didn't mention anything about that?

GW: No, he was only interested in Clive. Clive had asked if I could come and so I did, but he showed no interest in me particularly and we were confined only to this experience of Clive. I think that he let Clive depart with a borrowed piece of music to work on. But there was some reason why we couldn't stay very long, there was something else happening, so that before it could develop even, after this strange incident with Clive, we had to leave.

SO: What year would this have been?

GW: I can tell you more exactly when that was. It was in the early 1970s. Clive and I did concerts. He was often kind enough to come. We were on our way to play in Poole, I was singing and he was going to play with me and we called in and because Sorabji was simply told, 'I am taking this chap over to play at this concert and I can call in on my way.' I am actually not sure whether Sorabji knew at the time that I was Tilly Whim. But he certainly did eventually know quite well who I was and always gave me a broad smile in the street and was quite civil to me. I had always in the very early times been frightened that he would round on me, because he expressed himself so strongly, which was unusually powerful in those days in a little local paper. The very language that he used was violent and then I realised that it was part of this man's terrific character; his facade was to have this thunderous style and Rococo variety of expressions to use. Then he clearly settled down to read Tilly Whim and found himself agreeing and like a very good natural debater, instantly began to appreciate if he agreed with you; he wouldn't take against you on a permanent basis at all. So I found favour. I am delighted to find

that these articles bear out this impression of him. But certainly I was always very full of respect and apprehension in those early years; I knew that I had a very formidable man here writing to the paper.

SO: You thought that Sorabji had lent Mr. Boone a score? Was it one of Sorabji's own scores?

GW: It was one of his own works that he had him play at the piano and I think that Clive did take away this piece of music. But I believe he returned it.

Here we are: he refers to Mr. Bartlett and I am sure that must be this man F. R. Bartlett; this woman Miss Beamish who used to write letters all the time to the paper; Stokes was the MP for Poole; Lord Henry Cavendish Bentinck, all names that I knew then.<sup>249</sup>

You see he was very interested in the Catholic faith and I think that one member of his family had been a Catholic. Here he talks about Pius III, 'The guide says that they were designed for Pius III by Giulio Romano. Both statements are impossible. At the time of the pontificate of Pius III (he reigned for 25 days only and was dying when he was raised to the Holy See) Romano was a child four years old.'<sup>250</sup> It is the breadth of his knowledge that is so wonderful.

He quotes Tilly Whim an awful lot; I am really amazed and frankly flattered. 'May I heartily endorse Tilly Whim's tribute to the now, alas! late Coun. George Bishop?'<sup>251</sup> George Bishop was a great character and was a former chairman of our local council. After his death I wrote a tribute to him and Sorabji took it up too. 'A man of striking appearance,' he was a huge man, an ex-police Sergeant with a fine nose and I now understand this last paragraph, Sorabji says of George Bishop, 'he bore a startling resemblance to one of the Roman Emperors whose bust is in the Hall of Emperors in the

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<sup>249</sup> George Willey is quietly reading the names mentioned in another article. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Money," *Swanage Times* (21 Oct 1964): 28.

<sup>250</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "The wrong pope," *Swanage Times* (10 Mar 1965): 16.

<sup>251</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Tribute to George Bishop," *Swanage Times* (25 May 1968): 17.

Vatican, in Rome. I often used to tease him about it. He is indeed a loss! *Requiescat in Pace.*<sup>252</sup>

He comes from such a lofty height and then writes, ‘It is announced in your paper that all booking and portorage facilities are about to be removed from Corfe Castle Station and that those using the station and whose journeys involve a change of trains will either have to book where they change or at their destination.’<sup>253</sup> He goes on about this because he travelled by rail quite a lot.

I remember this one line I believe, ‘The muddle-headed, the woolly-minded, those who, as it is said, “mean well” – “such a dreadful thing to say of anybody” a witty friend of mine once said.’<sup>254</sup> That’s good! ‘In a temple in Bikaner one hundred and ten pounds of food grains are daily offered to rats as part of the “religious” worship.’<sup>255</sup> Yes, he would know that. Then he goes on about The Common Market Agricultural Fund. ‘This is what is called – but not by me, I hasten to add – “Indian spirituality.”’ But he never made anything about his own Indian connection.

‘Gobbledygook on the Line,’ ‘Pop Around the Clock Menace,’<sup>256</sup> the sub-editors wrote the heads for the letters and they tried to make a dull letter sound bright by adding a popular headline. ‘I read with great interest your letter headed “Pop around the clock,” though I feel that this headline could not possibly have emanated from the actual writer.’<sup>257</sup> Sorabji writes the letter that is headed, ‘Pop Around the Clock Menace,’ and a response is written by Tony Holister, that is the father of David Holister; ‘I can only suggest that those who abhor this type of music take the same action as myself – a rapid leap for the “off” switch.’ Then there is ‘Knocking the Pop,’ with a letter by Jeremy Davis, ‘But perhaps Mr. Sorabji hasn’t dwelt on the simple beauty of, say, some of the compositions by the Beatles. Songs such as *Yesterday* and *She’s Leaving Home* contain melodies which I am sure will stand the test of time as well as works by the great masters.’<sup>258</sup> Then he quotes Eric Blom’s book, although I don’t know that I have read

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<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Plot against branch line,” *Swanage Times* (26 Sept 1968): 37.

<sup>254</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Treasure or rats?” *Swanage Times* (16 Jan 1969): 40.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> These are headlines for two of Sorabji’s letters: “Gobbledygook on the line” *Swanage Times* (6 Mar 1969): 8; and “Pop around the clock menace,” *Swanage Times* (15 May 1969): 33.

<sup>257</sup> A. Hollister, “Pop around clock – is it so bad?” *Swanage Times* (19 June 1969): 33.

<sup>258</sup> Jeremy Davis, “Knocking the pop,” *Swanage Times* (26 June 1969): 48.

Blom on this subject, but Eric Blom used to be the music critic for *The New Statesmen* when I was young, “elaborately decorative compositions on an enormous scale, which by turn become even more polyphonic.” The trouble is, adds Mr. Blom, that nobody knows where to put them when they are done. Very clever, Mr. S., but I prefer tunes I can whistle in the bath.’ Oh dear, that would have brought, without doubt, a reply. Oh yes, first he deals with Mr. Holister, with one swipe of his paw, he writes, ‘Counting heads without regard to what is, or is not, inside them leads naturally not to the highest common measure but the lowest common denominator of taste and intelligence, hence the vast prevalence of the obscene trash called “pop.” And that some persons normally intelligent can become almost completely imbecile when it comes to talking about music, or what they call music, any musician knows to his cost. The pernicious effects of prolonged exposure to this trash have been studied in America and the evidence is now immense. It is plain that Mr. Hollister is unaware of it.’<sup>259</sup>

And then Norman Dutton; a very nice chap called Norman Dutton, who had a great sense of humour, was a hotelier here in Swanage and he writes a letter which carries the headline, ‘Mr. Sorabji’s Long Words:’ ‘During the last few years I have found myself becoming more and more interested in the correspondence of your reader Mr. Sorabji. The range of subjects on which he seems to speak with authority is amazing, and indicates a knowledge and education far beyond my own humble boundaries. One thing, however, is beginning to show up in his letters, which leads me to believe that he is pulling our legs in a most gracious but impish manner. His command of the English language is such that he is able to apply the subtle shadings to his compositions with words that are seldom used in this modern age of brief communication, with the result that I am frequently flying to the dictionary to assure myself that I am reading his exact meaning, and it is here that the subtle joke becomes evident.’<sup>260</sup> It is true. It is not a subtle joke, Sorabji uses irony like Charles Dickens uses irony, because things are much funnier when you say a serious thing that you actually intend to have a comical undertone, that is classical irony. When I was young, I got on the wavelength of Charles Dickens’ work and would sit under the table with Dickens, for my father luckily,

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<sup>259</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Knocking the pop,” *Swanage Times* (26 June 1969): 48.

<sup>260</sup> N. A. Dutton, “Mr. Sorabji’s long words,” *Swanage Times* (3 July 1969): 37.

although not a well educated man, strove after education and we had books in the house – the best thing you can confer on any child, to have books in the house – and I read those books with a tremendous appetite. I used to roar with laughter reading Dickens, because it was funny, written with mock seriousness, but hilariously funny. Then Norman Dutton says, ‘Never use a long word where a short word will do.’ Quite a good letter! ‘Mr. Sorabji’s Final Word:’ ‘When addressing remarks to an audience that one hopes will include persons as mentally adult and discriminating as Mr. Dutton surely is, one doesn’t insult them by using words of one syllable of “the cat is on the mat” order. However, the final word on the source of this correspondence, the debased, degenerate, perverted stuff called “pop,” has been said by one of the purveyors thereof in an interview. This egregious personage said he had never learned music – as if there were any need to tell us so!’<sup>261</sup> Lovely stuff!

SO: It is curious when reading his hand written or typed letters that he would rarely use commas, it was as if he never had time to pause, one great breath.

GW: They came out in a stream. You could almost imagine the faint moisture coming off of his lips when going through all of this and failing to express a comma, as you said, he couldn’t be bothered. He certainly hardly bothered to read through them afterwards. Occasionally he would make an alteration or a correction in a splash of ink. And his own writing, I seem to remember his P’s having a rather long leg and some letters would have a long leg. I can mentally see his writing even now when we talk, though it is thirty years since I have seen one.

‘That wittiest of Frenchmen, Chamfort, once said that if you saw politics, the law and your dinner in the making you would risk being VERY sick.’<sup>262</sup> That is marvellous, but his memory would tell him that. And here he is writing about the origin of the swastika, I seem to remember that letter, ‘Central European Jews are not of Jewish race at all, but Khazars by origin, descendants of the Tartar people of Southern Russia who were

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<sup>261</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Mr. Sorabji’s final word,” *Swanage Times* (17 July 1969): 40.

<sup>262</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Humanitarian humbug,” *Swanage Times* (11 Dec 1969): 11.

converted to the Jewish faith in the early centuries of the present era.<sup>263</sup> Is there no limit to his erudition?

SO: Are we to declare these comments as being racist necessarily or is it just his indignation of a particular political climate? For example, I don't think that he was anti-Semitic, but he would make these remarks because they were relevant to very real and heated issues.

GW: Or the awful truth, that he could see a little further than some people. After all, it is one thing to welcome our black brothers and recognise them as our brothers, but another thing all together to then turn a blind eye to the horrors of Robert Mugabe or anyone like that, because you will be accused as a racist if you accuse a black person. Sorabji saw through that very quickly indeed. Although there is no doubt that he, whether it is just his over-jovial sense of humour, is just as hard on his own antecedents and his own possible race, certainly with religion he strikes out at all with equal zest.

SO: Sorabji did come from a multi-racial background, lived in London during what was a very different age, and had racial remarks directed towards him as a child, which he related later in life to his friends. It seems to me very odd that a person with those types of personal experiences would then turn around and support Apartheid or make these, what could be interpreted as, anti-Semitic comments. There is an inconsistency here. Although he was a great believer in the concept of race, I feel that race was but a pawn in his dissension and it could very much have been the politics which surrounds race that intrigued him.

GW: Indeed! First of all, Sorabji attaches importance to race. It would be very easy to say, let them all come, but he doesn't at all, he questions everyone. He takes us right back to the Khazars – by Jove that is an obscure thought – in order to trace central European Jews. That itself is a wild overstatement, of course. But he does take race enough to identify it. He refuses to make judgements on general grounds and although he

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<sup>263</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Swastika origin," *Swanage Times* (10 Dec 1970): 3.

says about ‘atrocious Negroid perversions,’ because once I quote that people immediately condemn him for saying it, but you can be sure that one shouldn’t, for what he means, although it would sound different to an American because it was all in their past, is that they would then be applying Negro conventions to the music, perhaps jazzing it up, perhaps altering the tempo of the tunes to bring it out. This in fact happens, some awful things, where American Jazz pianists will take a classical line and then syncopate it; this might be fair enough for a musician to do, but Sorabji would have the right to hate them for doing it.

SO: I don’t see why he should, he wrote his own transcriptions, even one on *Carmen*, which is incredibly wild.

GW: All the way through his writing there are these flashes where you know that he is being consciously outrageous.

SO: There are letters he wrote to John Dean, which included a draft for a letter to the *Swanage Times*, accompanied with comments relating how if anyone responded to his letter with a certain predictable retort, he could then follow up with a secondary statement, which he had already prepared.<sup>264</sup> He purposely left holes in his arguments so as to incur debate.

GW: He was keeping his powder dry. John must have had a most amazing time with Sorabji, because John had a tremendous and very impish sense of humour himself, which was not always easy to keep up with. It is a shame that he wasn’t more outgoing. I enjoyed his company and when I first came to live here, John was a young man about town who had tremendous advantages that none of us had as young men - he had a car. He had a sports car because his old man had a garage. He then built himself a larger

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<sup>264</sup> The specific letter to which this comment refers was written the day after ‘Treasure or rats?’ mentioned above and was printed in the *Swanage Times*: ‘Mr. Bishop was always at them about the four legged rubbish-tip ones...Was tickled to death to see my rude effort in the Rag...Wonder if anyone will challenge it? Hope they do THEN I can confront them with the evidence of the Indian Minister of PEST CONTROL from whom the figures come.’ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to John Dean, Swanage, 27 January 1969, letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

version of a car, which he had all his life, which the mechanics and everybody called the beast, because it was an amalgamation of cars. John was trained, by the way, as a motor mechanic in Bournemouth, although he did not make his living in it. It was more of a hobby than a living, because he wasn't financially dependent on any outside income. His family had means and owned a lot of property; although it wasn't always realisable means, John lived frugally anyway. But he and I got around a bit together and in years later John would send me copies of his writings, particularly I wish he had kept all of his stuff about the stone industry, because he had a lot to say about that. He made recordings too. He would get two old stone hands together, get them talking and record their conversation, trying to encourage them to tell anecdotes.

Anyway, here is an example, from one who signs himself Christian In Spirit, who writes, 'As an agnostic, may I protest at the current use of Good Friday as an excuse for an orgy of shopping. Surely this must be the most sacred day in the Christian calendar, yet thousands of so-called Christians flock to the shops...'<sup>265</sup> And once again the eagle swoops, 'The crass insensibility to the significance of Good Friday shown by the stock product of the modern educational system ("drawing fools from their obscurity" the poet Gray called it), many of whom when applying for their first jobs as teenagers can't even spell their own Christian names (see Black Paper on Education, No. 2),' and finally, after having gotten three or four dependent clauses in one sentence, he ties it up at the end, 'By the way, does he, I wonder, know that wonderful phrase of the Catholic Church aptly describing such as himself, *Anima naturaliter Cristiana*?'<sup>266</sup> I use my Latin occasionally. I was brought up Roman Catholic and Latin, when I began to learn it in my grammar school, came more easily to me since the sound of Latin, the plainchant of Latin was very familiar to me. To this day, people don't ask me to do grace, because I jump up and go on in Latin and they will say, 'Oh bloody hell, it is George off again.' But Sorabji would lapse into this and it would not be self-conscious; he really would say this kind of thing. 'Now it is not a crime not to be a Christian, but to be insensible to the unique atmosphere of Good Friday, *Kar-Freitag, Vendredi Saint, Venerdi Santo*, is to write myself off as an

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<sup>265</sup> Christian in Spirit, "Bad Friday," *Swanage Times* (8 April 1972): 9.

<sup>266</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "The crime of not caring," *Swanage Times* (22 April 1972): 9.

impercipient clot.<sup>267</sup> Having aired his knowledge in three languages. He was marvellous.

This man goes on like, ‘under a ruler of genius like King Roger II of Sicily,’ bloody hell, ‘King Roger II of Sicily in the 12<sup>th</sup>-century there came about a marvellous fusion of Norman-Arabic-Byzantine elements in which none of the constituent elements were obliterated but blended in such miracles as the Capella Palatina in Palermo,’ this beautiful building in Palermo, it is quite true, ‘in Monreale Cathedral and the Church of the Martorana. But in this case the constituents were all Mediterranean cultures. And the English Archbishop of Palermo at the time, Walter-of-the-Mill, used to sign himself with the dual titles of Archbishop and Emir (The Arabian title).’<sup>268</sup> How would you know things like that? What an amazing depth of knowledge! He reminds me of people like Francis Bacon. If you have read his essays, what a breadth of knowledge that man had. He was a contemporary of the Earl of Rochester who in one of his famous dicta said, ‘An illiterate person is one who cannot read and write Latin or Greek.’ This harsh standard was clearly the standard for the educated class then and they didn’t bother about the poor getting educated, they thought that it was the refinement and privilege of nobility, but they didn’t neglect it themselves, they got hard educated. The monks were the only other literate people in the land, who had their regiment of the day divided into three eight hours period: eight hours in sleep, eight hours in study, and eight hours in prayer. That was the regime of the day. Sorabji was a bit like that and it was certainly the principle of the people that he quotes here, ‘All the most profound and acute minds from Machiavelli, through de Touqueville, Belloc, Spengler, de Jouvenel, Hayek, the late Lord Hewart (*The New Despotism*) and the late Lord Lymington foresaw the final deliquescence of the “democratic” confidence trick into totalitarianism or “fascism” – Kremlin red, Berchtesgaden brown, Roman black, or Bloomsbury pink – each brand calls the other that “fascist,”’<sup>269</sup> He is brilliant, it is a brilliant mind.

There is another thing that was tremendous in its day, a letter here from a man that was writing about the fact after the closure of the branch line,<sup>270</sup> which we in this

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<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>268</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Much more than colour,” *Swanage Times* (27 Jan 1973): 9.

<sup>269</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Democratic confidence tricks,” *Swanage Times* (1 Sept 1973): 8.

<sup>270</sup> M. E. Barnsdale, “Secret enemy poser,” *Swanage Times* (28 Sept 1974): 8.

town fought tooth and nail to oppose, and followed the famous Beeching Axe, where a man called Beeching had to design a scheme to relocate railways and alter the system of public transport. We knew eventually the bad news that there was a threatened closure of our rail line and I led the way with articles in the paper, fighting to save the railway. But they finally won in the end; it was a national policy and they weren't going to make any exceptions or very few. Then a year or two later, perhaps five years later, the people that worked to get a new railway put here, which is this amateur railway that you might be using the next few days going to and from Corfe Castle, the price for which required tremendous fund raising and work and when it looked like succeeding a counter wave began to oppose it and you actually had the mayor and councillors opposing the reopening of the branch line, because by then they owned the railway station land and they had other ideas for it. They also didn't think that it was a feasible thing to have the railway once again opening, because it would cut down on other developments that might be possible, using the land of the former railway. We wanted to drive a road through at one time as well. All of these factors occurred. So this man writes in asking what secret motive they have and appealing for a referendum in favour of getting the railway back, which we eventual got with resounding success. 'Has Swanage a secret enemy?' this man, called Barnsdale, asks, so Sorabji wades in, 'How utterly admirable is Mr. Barnsdale's letter! Precisely! "*Quis beneficet?*"' who will benefit, 'That we have been in the presence of a sustained plot to destroy our little branch line then to make its restoration as difficult as possible, and maybe impossible, leaps to the eye.'<sup>271</sup> All establishments, religious, political, municipal, medical, social, educational, commercial, are at the core corrupt,<sup>272</sup> nothing if not sweeping. 'Instances teem during the past few years as rarely if ever before, and are known to everyone.'<sup>273</sup>

Here is my article about Sorabji, when I did phone him and talk to him. I wrote this piece, 'Noteworthy date.'<sup>274</sup> 'The Isle of Purbeck's quiet genius of music, Mr. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, who lives almost in seclusion at his home, The Eye, Corfe

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<sup>271</sup> Mr. Willey emphatically accentuated his reading of the words 'leaps to the eye,' intimating at once, beyond the more obvious meaning of this line, the notion that the happenings being described in the letter are being viewed from Sorabji's home, The Eye.

<sup>272</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Well plotted," *Swanage Times* (5 Oct 1974): 8.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>274</sup> George Willey, "Noteworthy date," *Swanage Times* (2 Dec 1976): 1.

Castle, has found himself at the centre of national publicity with the news that he is at last going to allow public performances of his works...after 44 years.’

SO: I didn’t realise that you wrote this article, since it was un-named in the paper.

GW: Well, there is no reason that you would have known the author. Everything that isn’t attributed to someone else, I wrote. When it came to reporting, I wrote everything from the front page lead story, which might have been a council story, or a crime story, or whatever, at the beginning of the paper to the gossip column and the sports pages at the end, to the reviews of concerts and musicals. Every word of it I wrote.

SO: You must have been extremely busy.

GW: Oh yes, I was a very zealous little chap. I would phone the eight national newspapers whenever a story broke that was anything like that which would be appropriate for the national papers. I covered the council meetings of the Purbeck Council in Wareham and the Wareham Town Council, along with my own meetings here in Swanage. Years later, by 1986, I became the district governor of Rotary for the southern region and in order to do that and to visit all the clubs that I had to visit, to go to lunch in one club in Hampshire and then another club in the evening in Wiltshire, I had to be up at 6 o’clock in the morning to send copies off.

But back to the Sorabji article, it was rather lengthy. I lifted part of this from the nationals, perhaps from *The Telegraph*; then I go to the *Oxford Companion to Music* and so on; then a bit about *Opus Clavicembalisticum*. ‘Mr. Sorabji is known to his friends in Purbeck as a man of great charm and kindness, and also of formidable scholarship.’<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter Nine – Marley House

*Marley House is the retirement home in Winfrith where Sorabji and Best resided for the last few years of their lives. JUDITH SQUAREY, a physiotherapist who worked at Marley House with Sorabji, and her husband, REV. GERALD SQUAREY, who was the Parish priest of Corfe Castle from 1972-1990 and who oversaw Sorabji's funeral service in the Church of St. Edward the Martyr, were interviewed on July 10, 2002 in their Salisbury home.*

JS: I am a physiotherapist and I was asked to go and treat him at his home. So I was one of the few people who ever went there.

SO: When did you go to his home?

GS: Well we left Corfe Castle in 1990.

JS: It was well before that. When did he die?

SO: 1988, but he went into the retirement home in 1986.

JS: Well I knew him there too, because I used to work at Marley House in Winfrith. I should think that two or three years before that I went to his home, which was quite an alarming experience, because by reputation I knew that no one was allowed in. There was a notice to the effect that unless you were a sister of mercy, you weren't allowed.

GS: You had to be Roman Catholic.

JS: Although he did agree to see the Rector's wife, which was very good of him. There were two doors side by side - extraordinary really – two front doors. It was a very gloomy house; all of these awful furnishings and it was very dark. I arrived - I have no

idea at which door. It is like a fairy story really. So I knocked at the right hand door and this man answered, who he would describe as his godson. Mr. Best, who was really sweet in the end and when he was in the home I got very fond of him and got to know him very well, but at that time he was very uncommunicative. He didn't say anything; he just looked at me and signalled for me to follow. So I went in. There was a strong smell of incense and mustiness. It seemed rather neglected, a slight dampness to it, mould perhaps. I was taken into this darkened room where this little old man was sitting and all Mr. Best said to Sorabji was, 'She came in by the wrong door,' this he said in sepulchral tones, which really sent shivers down my spine. So I said that I was so sorry and that I didn't know which door to come in by.

Actually Mr. Sorabji was terribly nice and very friendly and very relaxed. He told me a lot of things. The only thing that I remember is that he had this ring that had belonged to a Pope, which was one of his early ancestors. He was quite a fussy little man. He spoke quite quickly and was quite impatient, he would say, 'Yes, yes, yes, we have done that, let's get on with the next thing.' He told me all about his music and that he wouldn't allow anyone to perform it. He was incredibly polite and very courteous. But I think that is all I can remember about him at his home.

I treated him for a bit and then I met him again when he went into Marley House. I really in a way got to know Mr. Best slightly better, because I really started to feel sorry for him. They each had separate rooms in this home and I said to Mr. Best, 'Why don't you have a television,' because he was just sitting there, not able to read. He said, 'Oh, I am not allowed to have a television.' I suppose he was a bit of a bully.

They used to spend the days together and dear old Sorabji used to scandalise the nurses, because when Mr. Best was wheeled in he would say, 'Hello darling, you are looking wonderful today,' and things like that. The nurses were frightfully shocked. Mr. Best was embarrassed, but Mr. Sorabji couldn't give two hoots. Actually it was absolutely sweet, the two of them muffled up in their shawls.

He was always very polite, very nice to everybody. His reputation suggested that he was terrifying, but he wasn't at all. I thought he was absolutely sweet and he was very much liked at the nursing home. He never communicated with any of the other people in the home, but most of them wouldn't have been able to communicate anyway.

SO: Do you know what he was doing day by day, because in his life he was always very productive?

JS: I don't think that he was able to be productive. He had a room that was a replica of his home. It was amazing in a nursing home, because you were allowed to take all of your own things. It was overcrowded and dark and of course there were the incense. I am not aware that he was actually producing anything at that point. I can just sort of see him sitting in his room and I think that he was really quite unwell.

Gola Martin-Smith definitely went to see him. She was a very interesting person and a tremendous musician. She had two grand pianos and they had this remarkable house up this little alley way which you wouldn't have thought there was anything there. But her husband was an architect and he designed their house quite brilliantly. In this very tiny place there were two grand pianos.

GS: There was a central fireplace so you sat and talked to people with the smoke coming up making you go quite crossed eyed. But she was a friend of Sorabji's.

SO: Yes, he went to see her quite often in Wareham. So she came to visit him, which would make her his junior. I wasn't sure about her age.

JS: She was and she was absolutely minute. How tall would she have been? Four foot something, a tiny little thing, but absolutely dynamic and terrifying. Our daughter Alice learned piano with her, but started to have nightmares so we had to withdraw her. I am sure that Gola meant to be nice to her, but Gola was very enthusiastic.

GS: But she was an artist not a composer.

JS: She wasn't a composer. She was on examination boards, but she was also a violinist. She led a campaign against - what is this way in which children learn violins - the something or other method.

SO: Suzuki?

JS: Exactly. She absolutely thought that it was the end and she led a campaign against it. I don't know whether it was good or not.

GS: People like Gola Martin-Smith and Vera Ryder came from a social level in Corfe Castle, which the Isle of Purbeck has always had, a lot of artists, because, I suppose, of the actual situation where it is and it is very attractive. It seems to draw artists from various fields, people who paint, write, make music, and write plays. There has been a fairly high social level of the artists in the outer Purbeck, including Corfe Castle, and Sorabji presumably, quite naturally, became a part of it. He was accepted by them and this was his social milieu.

I only have three memories of him. One was when we first arrived there in 1972.

JS: You called on him.

GS: Did I, despite the notice?

JS: Yes and I think that he was very polite. You took his funeral didn't you?

GS: Yes, there is that memory.

I think I must have gone inside, because I can remember this house with sort of shades over the lamps.

JS: Yes there were shawls, fringed shawls over the lamps.

GS: One of my duties as a Parish priest was spending my time going to meet people, ideally at their own home. So despite that notice, I would have gone up and knocked on the door, just in case. Whether it was the left one or the right one I don't know.

Obviously I was allowed in.

The other occasion was fairly early on in the time when we were living there in the early 1970s. I was in the village post office and I had heard about Sorabji. He was described as being a recluse and all the rest of it. But I had suddenly realised that he was also there in the post office queue, just behaving like all the rest of us, but because of whom he was, quite distinctively. So my memory of him there was yet another resident of Corfe Castle who joined a queue at the post office. Normal, natural, not really humble, it was just how all of us behaved.

The only other thing was when he died. Whoever it was asked if his funeral could be in the Parish Church. It wasn't a funeral, as of the Church of England, naturally. But they simply wanted to have some kind of occasion for his friends to mark that he had died. There was, I think, permission given or somebody was going to play something of his on the organ. Clearly it was all right, because previously there had been this ban that he had imposed. I for one, who am not a distinct musician, but I like music, was there with others sitting in the nave. I can't remember officiating in any way. But I remember sitting there in the nave being absolutely mesmerised by this music. Yes I was the rector of the church, but I was absolutely delighted that his music was being played in that particular setting and thrilled that at last the community of Corfe Castle and his friends had an opportunity to hear this. And I remember thinking at the time that I hope to goodness that there will be other occasions, wherever they are, for people increasingly to be able to hear his music.

But I remember the way in which that particular occasion was done, with a great deal of respect for everybody concerned: respect for Sorabji, respect by the people who were asking for this to be done, they were very respectful towards the fact that this was actually in a Church of England parish church, and the demands were not of anything that wasn't perfectly acceptable. So the whole thing was done very satisfactorily, I felt and I sense that even Sorabji would have been agreeable to it.

JS: It was on the organ was it, not on a recording?

SO: The piece was the First Organ Symphony and I believe that they just played the second movement from it. My recollection was that it was a recording.

JS: I think that it was a recording as well.

There were some wonderful characters in Corfe Castle. We never had that in any parish since. Sorabji was very nice. I do have a picture of him, the two of them sitting muffled up to the ears in that conservatory at Marley House nursing home. They used to put them in long chairs. He must have felt the cold because he was always swathed in shawls and things like that.

SO: What do you remember about Mr. Best, because he is almost more of a mystery than Sorabji?

JS: I think that he lost his identity. I felt that. When he came to the nursing home he really did what Sorabji wanted him to do. Although he was obviously protective of Sorabji, because of the way he said that I came in by the wrong door. He used to do all the cooking and that kind of thing. I think that he just complemented Sorabji.

SO: But they were partners weren't they?

JS: Oh yes. They must have been.

GS: I would hope that they were.

SO: I would think so as well, as they were both known to be homosexuals by their own accounts.

JS: I hoped that they were just a happy couple, with Sorabji being the dominant one.

SO: Is it true that Mr. Best always walked a few paces behind Sorabji?

JS: Yes, I think it was true. He was very much kept in his place. But, having said that, Sorabji was very loving towards him, embarrassingly so.

GS: There he was, described as Sorabji's godson.

JS: He always used to talk about his godson, which always made me smile. The word partner really wasn't in fashion in those days. But I think that they must have been. We will never know for sure, will we?

GS: The description in the nursing home, 'hello darling,' there must have been a relationship of affection, to put it mildly. It is not really in keeping with partnerships or relationships in these days. I mean in their situation, there was Sorabji and then partner, servant, godson?

JS: Reggie, it always sounded kind of humdrum, Reggie Best, such an ordinary name for someone in such an extraordinary relationship.

GS: If that was part of the relationship, that Reggie was there to do the cooking and walked two paces behind, what does that say about the more intimate relationship? At that point I feel, Oh dear, I hope he didn't have to walk two paces behind in that. If he did, that is making enormous demands on him. What kind of person was he, who was presumably there rather than being somewhere where he didn't want to be? I feel there is an element of sadness, if not tragedy, in the story.

JS: The impression I had of Mr. Best was that he was an incomplete person and therefore couldn't survive on his own. He desperately needed the support of Sorabji. I remember Reggie saying that the money was Sorabji's and that is probably why he couldn't have a television.

SO: Well, Sorabji himself was running out of money at that point.

GS: So it wasn't a question of being mean about Sorabji and the television.

JS: Oh a television wouldn't have entered Sorabji's world, it would have been one of these ghastly things. He never would have looked at it.

GS: It is not impossible, is it, that their relationship was platonic or not consummated. I think that there can still be a lot of love between two people. I simply can't come to terms in my own mind with Reggie having to live the somewhat servile life that he did, if he was also someone who was going to give and receive love as equals. I think in my own mind I would like to go down the fanciful avenue that they looked after each other and were good companions, but not in any marital way. They would have been not the only two people living in Corfe Castle, who were also by nature homosexuals, but in their particular relationship there was no sexual activity. They lived together and they had sexual activity outside of the relationship, but not within it. There was a love between them, which one can respect very deeply.

JS: I suppose it is possible if it was a physical relationship, then Reggie could have been a more complete person. But this is pure surmise.

GS: I think that Sorabji would have been absolutely furious with this conversation.

SO: I would think so.

*FRANCES HARDMAN, a nurse who administered medication to the patients at Marley House, including Sorabji, and her husband, REV. PETER HARDMAN, who was the Parish priest of Wareham from 1979-2000, were interviewed in their Bradford-on-Avon home on December 5, 2002.*

FH: I did go to his home one evening. He was so reserved and didn't like interruptions and reluctantly he accepted that he would need medical help and people going to his home. I went in dread of this man, but he was actually very affable and friendly, and helpful really. I suppose he was aware that you were going into a strange house and that you wouldn't have a clue where everything was, like a drink. Maybe, looking back, such a great person would feel, 'Oh dear, how sad, is this what I have come to that I am now relying upon people to do everything?' He was so apologetic about asking people to go out of their way to look after him. When I went to see him, I think that he was alone and Reggie Best had already gone to the home. Obviously Sorabji couldn't stay at home any longer and there was a room vacant for him at Marley House. They had a joining room, so he could spend time with his friend. Sadly, when you are the one SRN on duty, with a lot of auxiliaries, you don't have a lot of time. In fact I used to go earlier so I could socialise for a little while, before I had to remind people to take their tablets. He did know then that Peter liked playing the piano and was musical and that is why he gave me this signed copy,<sup>276</sup> which was very nice. I don't remember him saying anything about his family, but he was always so affable to his friend and always said good night to him or sat and had tea, a good drink together and this friend would go off to bed with a fond goodnight. He was sincerely polite, almost excusing himself for being so grateful.

He was always interested in the headlines, what was going on in the world.

SO: He was very politically minded.

FH: Yes, very politically minded, that is right. I have forgotten, but I think that he was a *Telegraph* reader. I don't remember what books he had in the nursing home, but his

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<sup>276</sup> Mrs. Hardman is referring to an autographed copy of Ronald Stevenson's published performance edition of *Fantasettina sul nome illustre dell'egregio poeta Hugh MacDiarmid ossia Christopher Grieve*.

home was quite dark and full of large, dark bookcases, which you certainly wouldn't have felt as if you could get a torch to go and see what he had been reading and what was in his collection.

Have you been to his house?

SO: Yes, but it is completely different now. All the trees are gone.

FH: You couldn't see into it and had to wonder how you were going to find your way in. So all of those trees are gone! And that somehow added to this great myth of seclusion, it was like going into a forest in the middle of nowhere.

Sorabji never talked about his worries, but Mr. Best often worried about his faith and forgiveness, which often people do in later years. I can remember having long conversations about what he thought about forgiveness without saying for what he needed to be forgiven for.

PH: Was Sorabji a churchgoer in his earlier years?

FH: No, no.

I have just had a thought, because I don't remember his funeral. I certainly must not have been free to attend it for I would have, because I always had a soft spot for him and he was so dignified to the last.

SO: For how long were you in Wareham?

PH: Nearly twenty-one years, 1979 to 2000. I retired in 2000.

SO: When would it have been when you went to Sorabji's home?

FH: Just before he went into Marley House and then of course I looked after him in Marley House.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> At this point they shared with me their signed copy of the *Fantasiettina*.

PH: 'To dear Frances'

FH: Do you know this piece?

SO: Yes I do. You can see how difficult it is?

PH: Absolutely impossible.

SO: Have you tried to play it?

PH: Yes, I have tried, but I have no idea what it is suppose to sound like.<sup>278</sup>

I have a nice story to tell you about John Ogdon. I grew up in Manchester, just north of Manchester. After I did my degree I had to do national service, but I had a couple of months to spare, so I thought I would get a job. I got a marvellous job as a bread rounds man. The chap was going on holiday and for a fortnight I had to take his round and drive around the streets in this little area north of Manchester called Whitefield, delivering cakes and breads to people on the street. One street where I used to deliver, this one close, was very much like around here. I drove in and I could hear a piano playing in one of the houses quite clearly. Several women were standing outside to buy their bread and I just said to this woman, 'How nice to hear that piano.' She said, 'We don't think so, the bloody thing plays all day long. We're sick and tired of the damn thing. That lad just plays all day long.' This was John Ogdon and that was where he lived. He must have been about fifteen at the time.

SO: Did you ever meet Sorabji?

PH: I don't think I ever did sadly, but I heard all about him.

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<sup>278</sup> Our discussion, which thus far had been carried out over lunch, turned temporarily to other matters, but then John Ogdon was mentioned.

SO: Did you spend a lot of time with Sorabji while he was at Marley House?

FH: I don't remember a conversation as such, just impressions. But when there are twenty-five patients you have quite a lot of responsibilities. I went in the evening during the time when people took their medication, from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., and then they would have their tea. But it was quite a tight schedule. I worked one evening a week, so I would arrange my mind mentally, because there were a lot of people there from Wareham since it was only up the road. I would go in to see someone and tell them, 'It is nice to see you' and 'it is time to take their medicine.' Then they would start chatting and ask, 'How is my friend and how is your neighbour?' When I discovered that people knew Wareham well, I had to go early to socialise, otherwise I would be spending the time backing out of rooms backwards and seeming quite unfriendly. And because of Peter's position in Wareham we knew so many people and they wanted to catch up, which I enjoyed.

SO: Peter was the Parish priest?<sup>279</sup>

FH: Yes that is right, that would have been his position. He was also Rural Dean, but that is just being in charge of a large area.

SO: So he had the equivalent of Rev. Squarey's job?

FH: Yes that is right.

But Marley House was a very happy home. I don't think that Sorabji could have ended his days in a more beautiful setting, not that he would have ever come down to the garden.

SO: So there was a public garden and the opportunity to be sociable?

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<sup>279</sup> Rev. Hardman had stepped out of the room temporarily so the question was not put to him directly.

FH: Oh yes, there was the opportunity to be sociable. In fact the matron Rosemary was very keen on people socialising. She would make arrangements like, 'Wouldn't you like to have the lady you met yesterday at lunch and have her for some sherry before lunch or join her for tea?' It was one of her great assets that she liked people, otherwise you would have felt like the new girl at school there. But dear old Sorabji never involved himself with socialising. I think mainly he was quite immobile then and he wouldn't have easily got down to the garden.

SO: What about Reggie?

FH: No, neither did Reggie. They were quite happy to sit together and chat and reminisce.

SO: Were you ever there on a Sunday?

FH: Yes. People who were able would have gone across to the service and then once a month there was a communion service.

SO: Sorabji probably didn't go.

FH: Oh no, he wouldn't have dreamed of joining, I am quite sure.

He liked his routine. He wouldn't give you the impression that you would like to put him on the list for those who didn't mind being late. He gave you the impression that quite a regimented life is what he liked. I also found that he dismissed you after he had his chat and medicine.

## SECTION THREE

### Chapter Ten – Gola Martin-Smith

Gola Martin-Smith (1899-1989) was one of Sorabji's dearest friends at the end of his life. She too lived on the Isle of Purbeck in the nearby historic village of Wareham. Her pedigree was rather impressive, being a direct descendant of the Banks family who, among other things, is most well known in the area for Lady Banks' defence of her family seat, Corfe Castle, against the siege army of the Parliamentarians. Sorabji would have been attracted to Gola's prestigious genealogy, but by all accounts, he would have also found congeniality in her fiery personality and musical sensitivity, all of which was contained in a minute physical stature. Although Gola was considered an accomplished pianist and was well established in the area, having tutored generations of local piano students, there is no record of her having ever performed any of Sorabji's music, nor does it seem that he ever dedicated a composition to her. Gola was enthusiastically supportive of Sorabji's musical gifts and regarded him as a neglected genius, but she respected his need for solitude. She did however harbour secret desires that one day his music would be more actively performed and from this motive she encouraged the introduction to Sorabji of two young pianists, Lord Patrick Douglas-Hamilton and James Kirby. Yet she never pushed the issue and was content with the special friendship that she possessed with Sorabji, one that had a depth beyond their shared musical interests and that inspired her own eventual admittance into Marley House, where Sorabji was already admitted, so that she could maintain a close proximity to the composer in his final years. After Sorabji passed away, it was not long, a little over a year, before she followed her friend once again.

*MARGARET HUBICKI, a retired music professor at the Royal Academy of Music, a composer of brilliant music, and a cherished friend of Gola Martin-Smith's, was interviewed at the University Women's Club in Mayfair, London, on February 5, 2003.*

SO: Did Gola ever talk about Sorabji's wealth or his family?

MH: Not directly. She didn't actually say in terms of that, but I simply think that I thought that he was very wealthy indeed and lived on a very meagre way of living, because that is the way he chose. That is the impression that I had.

SO: I imagine that Gola must have painted many pictures of Sorabji for you, figuratively speaking.

MH: Yes, many pictures. A most remote character, because that is how he liked to be. I know he valued Corfe very greatly indeed. He was more than grateful for Gola's friendship. I can't throw any light on what he would have been like as a personality, apart from her enormous appreciation of his musical abilities.

SO: I imagine Sorabji must have played the piano for her at some time?

MH: He must have done. I have an impression of him being incredible as a pianist, because that is the impression that I gained from her. Partly he didn't want anyone messing about with the playing of his music, because he could achieve what he wanted in the way he did it himself. So much of my conversation to you is conjectural.

SO: That is fine. Impressions have a certain kind of reality and you have impressions of this man that other people don't know at all. And then you have very real, concrete knowledge about someone he held very dear. So in a sense you were in a very privileged relationship with Sorabji, once removed.

MH: You are absolutely right, completely. It is all second hand, but it is first hand in the sense that my second hand impressions came from the original source.

SO: Although it has less to do with factual events and more to do with your own opinions and subjective views, as a retired harmony teacher, what did you make of Sorabji's soundworld, his musical language? Did it seem arbitrary or amateurish?

MH: Oh no, my goodness gracious! He completely knew what he was doing. I only heard his music on very rare occasions on which I have long learned to be terribly reserved on making any comments, for anything as new as that must be listened to many times, which I didn't have the chance to do at all. So I have got no proper place to give a real assessment of what I thought. It was fairly incomprehensible in the sense of being able to follow where we were trying to get to. The nature of it was monumental, because his conception, being able to create music sounding as it did, with clear authority, was to me enormously complex. I knew if one had time to study his music there must be something amazing within it. It is wrapped in a kind of veil. I remember looking in a score of amazing complexity and length of time, because when I listened to it I remember thinking of it lasting for hours. That is the impression that I had. It was monumental.

SO: Did you see a performance of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*?

MH: Yes. I knew at the time that I was to be amazed by it.

SO: I think that it is very difficult to communicate his music, for that one reason, it is difficult to get a grasp of its entirety.

MH: Yes. It is difficult to figure out where his music fits into the general repertoire.

SO: How did you first meet Gola?

MH: On one occasion, my friend Elizabeth Hunt and her husband invited me to dinner. At that moment I had been living for a time in Benjamin Dale's widow's flat, which terribly and sadly I had come to know her when he was alive and she was a great friend and going in and living in her flat, the whole situation changed and she also became rather different and things were not quite the right way to continue living with her. At the time I went to dinner with the Hunts I was saying that I was in desperate need of changing where I was. Elizabeth Hunt's daughter was a dance student and Gola's Mary was also at the dancing class, so Elizabeth and Gola had been talking a considerable amount. Gola had come out to say that her and her husband had the top floor of their house and they were looking for someone to come and live there. I don't expect you need me to go into further details. But that was one of those extraordinary things that quite out of the blue and which has happened to me so often, where occurrences come together. That is ultimately and literally how I came to know Gola. So I got in touch with her and she told me to come see her. An amazing connection! I came to know Gola through the daughter of an old school friend and Mary going to the same dance class. From there onwards, whatever is relevant is what matters.

SO: She knew Sorabji at that time?

MH: I didn't hear about Sorabji for quite a time. I certainly didn't hear about him at the time when I came to live with the Martin-Smiths. They became very much involved with Wareham, linking with Corfe. Of course Gola was linked with Corfe in her family.

SO: The Bankes family no less!

MH: They came to be much involved with Wareham, first of all through friends of theirs having a caravan, which Gola, Don, and Mary used to borrow for holidays. Don was a superb architect and they liked Wareham so much that they thought that they should build something there, which is what they did. This would have been around 1956. I would have thought that she would have known Sorabji from around 1956 onwards, but actually I am not completely sure of that.

SO: I have heard much about Gola's extraordinary gift as a piano teacher, but I don't know her musical background. Did she study in London?

MH: Yes. I will start with what I know about her. She learnt the piano with a dear soul named Mabel Floyd, who was a very well known piano teacher in north London. She also had lessons with a professor at Trinity College, whose name I don't know. She then taught at a school. The only thing is that at that school and other places too, Gola was marvellous with small bands of pupils. Particularly, she concentrated on small groups playing bamboo pipes, which she made. Mary would be quite amusing on that one because she had to go through the stages of learning about the bamboo pipes. Gola was marvellous with that, I do know, and she used to hold classes of music and movement. She was a great reader of somebody called Anne Driver, who wrote books about music, movement, and eurhythmics. Gola was a tremendous advocate of this. Obviously Gola was tremendously caught up with it and it extended into her teaching, which she did privately when I came to know her. The school where she taught was somewhere called Crowstone House School, where she was highly successful. When I came to know her, she had already become a Roman Catholic. She then became the secretary for the Catholic Musicians' Guild, for which she did a great many things. All of that was on the side of her teaching.

These are the bare boned details about her. But there are many things that I can tell you about her; her sympathy, understanding, and how she made it so delightful to live in her house.

SO: You already mentioned that you only met Sorabji once in passing, but I imagine you must have had many conversations with Gola about him. I was curious if you could just talk about the nature of their relationship.

MH: We talked about him enormously.

SO: I know she was very protective, especially in later years.

MH: Yes, very protective indeed. These are pure impressions; I have to make that awfully clear. My impression of Sorabji was that he was a very withdrawn person in the ordinary way of things. He was very outgoing in certain aspects. If you got into his domain he would have been very warm in that sort of way. Gola had great recognition of his stature as a composer. She was utterly sympathetic to what Sorabji really was, if that makes sense as a statement. He was clearly a person of remarkable abilities, which were enigmatic within themselves. Gola was very warm hearted indeed, and she was capable of great effusion. This is what to me is fascinating, knowing how reserved he was and knowing Gola's extraordinary outgoing capacities.

Shall I tell you a little bit more about Gola? She was very small to begin with, but I know from the start that she was greatly handicapped in her early eight years by some spinal problem, which affected her walking. Although, she had a remarkable facility for making up splendid things to wear and she was apt to wear rather large hats. I remember one occasion there happened to be one of the concerts given by the Yehudi Menuhin School at the Wigmore Hall, to which she went with me and Yehudi was there as well. She was wearing one of those hats and at the interval he came up to introduce himself to her and said, 'I am so glad to meet the wearer of this enormous hat, I was wondering all afternoon who was sitting underneath this large hat.' It was a splendid hat too. She was capable of an outward appearance of some sort, very remarkable. It was pure personality, because as I said, she was handicapped and very small, but a very outgoing person altogether; so all of these contradictions added an area of intrigue for Sorabji. She was a very unusual character, which I hope I have been able to convey.

She was very interested in sculpture and made a lovely head of Mary. Mary incidentally studied painting and Don was a highly gifted architect, but he was also highly gifted as a painter too. The family background, again, adds up to an interest for Sorabji. Don didn't get caught up with Sorabji at all, not that Don wasn't interested, he just didn't have an appropriate outlet.

Gola, as you know, eventually went to Marley House, which she went to through Sorabji having been there and recommending it to her.

SO: Did Gola introduce you to Sorabji's music or did you know about it before hand?

MH: The answer is absolutely simple. Yes she did, because I didn't know anything about him at all. And how she introduced me was by talking about him at a long length of time, covering many occasions in which she referred to him in all sorts of ways. With Gola's particular and amazing capacity for enthusiasm, we were simply on a similar wavelength so much. You can't explain a relationship of how you get on with somebody, just because you do; there is no way at all. There are so many points of reference and our musical ones were one of them.

SO: Do you remember anything she said about his music?

MH: Gola told me that he was utterly remarkable and that he didn't get the recognition that he deserved.

Sorabji is fascinating in every kind of way, an enormous subject. It is like when you have a little crystal, you can look at it and when there is no light shining on it and there is merely a shape, but the moment a light goes on, the most amazing thing happens and that little crystal lights up in heaven knows what colours. So much of our conversation that we are having is like that exact thing; you can't define it, you can't name all the colours, but my goodness gracious me, what colours there are there.

*The following interview is an amalgamation of a list of questions that I posted to MARY JAKOBSON, the daughter of Gola Martin-Smith who now lives in France, and her answers to those questions which were written on June 13, 2003.*

MJ: I will answer your questions in order of asking, but I feel dreadfully perplexed by my uselessness and forgetfulness and wish I had paid more attention when I was a girl to details.

SO: Do you know when, where, and under what circumstances your mother met Sorabji? I know that we discussed the possibility that either they were introduced through Clinton Gray-Fisk in London or they met on the Isle of Purbeck, but perhaps you can recall some information that may tip the scale in favour of one of these or perhaps another possibility.

MJ: The Clinton Gray-Fisk scenario is the one that clicks the most, but I can't say why.

SO: Just regarding your mother's family background, what is her connection with the famous Bankes family that defended Corfe Castle and does she have any other connections with the Isle of Purbeck?

MJ: Brave Dame Mary was the defender of Corfe Castle against Oliver Cromwell. She was a Bankes and my mother's ancestor. Gola went constantly to the Isle of Purbeck as a child. Her brother Sydney Angold lived in Elm House in North Street, Wareham and as he was so much older than her (as were her sisters) she must have gone and stayed with him and his wife Riva a lot.

SO: Although Peggy shed some light upon this next question, I was curious for the sake of confirmation and possible informational addition if you could briefly outline your mother's musical education and activities?

MJ: I can't shed any light on Gola's musical education other than what Peggy had told you. As a young child she was surrounded by music (a very musical father) and as she

had a curvature of the spine and was strapped to a board for a long part of her childhood, she must have absorbed a great deal from her father, especially as her next sibling was fifteen/twenty years older than her. Don't forget that she, Gola, was born in 1899 (and her mother in 1855) and there were two sisters and a brother born a long time before her – her elder sister was married in 1903 (I have a photo of that with Gola sitting on the grass with a basket of flowers, aged 4). She had to earn her living very early on, as her father who was a wealthy gentleman lost all his money during some sort of political crisis, and so she taught music and did private teaching as well – very keen on eurhythmics, teaching children music and movement.

SO: What are your impressions about the nature of your mother's relationship with Sorabji? What was your father's attitude towards Sorabji and Sorabji's relationship with his wife?

MJ: This one made me laugh. Gola was fascinated by Sorabji; I think it was mutual. She was supposed to be the only woman allowed in his house for example. My father was deep water – he was indulgent towards Gola and I don't remember any friction about the relationship, but then my father was too astute for that.

SO: Can you describe the memories you have of actually meeting Sorabji?

MJ: In Wareham, only twice I think. He always spoke to me in French, possibly because I had just spent a year in Paris after I left school (I'm talking around 1959/60). I was compellingly attracted to his elegant suits, the colour of them, the colour of him, the silk handkerchiefs. I found him a 'personage,' some one to be reckoned with and immensely charming, witty, intelligent, a huge personality, the good and the bad if you know what I mean. I'm not surprised Gola was fascinated; it must have relieved the boredom of Wareham to no end!

SO: Do you recall your mother's thoughts regarding her role in introducing James Kirby and Patrick Douglas-Hamilton to Sorabji? Did she harbour secret hopes that these young pianists would be drawn to perform his music?

MJ: Yes probably, to the second part of the question.

SO: Is it true that your mother wanted to live in Marley House because Sorabji was there?

MJ: Yes.

SO: How did she react to his passing away?

MJ: Surprisingly rather non-committal, but she was 90, though completely 'all there.'

SO: Did your mother ever receive letters, gifts, books or perhaps musical scores from Sorabji (the latter could include either the works of other composers or perhaps Sorabji's own music)? If so, do you still possess or can you locate any of these items?

MJ: He gave her his mother's crucifix. I still have it somewhere. As to anything else, I don't know.

SO: As a biographical detail what incidentally were your mother's dates of birth and passing? Please forgive the openness with which I pose what might potentially be a delicate question.

MJ: She was born on March 16, 1899 and died in November 1989.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Mary Jakobson, Berdoues, to Sean Owen, Greenwich, 13 June 2003, letter in the hand of Mary Jakobson, Private Collection.

LORD PATRICK DOUGLAS-HAMILTON, while still a young pupil at the Royal Academy of Music and with the assistance of Gola Martin-Smith and Peggy Hubicki, was given the opportunity to meet Sorabji at *The Eye*. Lord Douglas-Hamilton was interviewed in his Chelsea, London, flat on January 8, 2003.

SO: You met Sorabji in 1973, correct? But you knew his music before then.

PDH: I knew his music through knowing Ronald Stevenson and a Canadian piano professor that I had, Neil van Allen, who suggested that I had a look at the scores. I bought some of the scores. I don't recall exactly what I bought first, but I remember having *Le Jardin Parfumé* and *Opus Clavicembalisticum*. You could buy them from OUP<sup>281</sup> for not an awfully lot of money. I was very intrigued by them. I also read *Mi Contra Fa* and I very much liked where Sorabji came from, I liked the sort of music that he liked. There is a description of Szymanowski's Third Symphony in *Mi Contra Fa*, which I actually read first and then went to listen to the piece. I have an enormous crush on that music. His description was so vivid, he described it as a magic carpet of sound, which actually made me want to go and hear it. I wasn't disappointed either by the music or his description of it.<sup>282</sup> I suppose I was just very intrigued and I communicated this to

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<sup>281</sup> Oxford University Press.

<sup>282</sup> Kaikhosru Sorabji. *Mi Contra Fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician*. London: The Porcupine Press, 1986. First Printed by Da Capo Press, 1947. The referenced description is located in the chapter, "Karol Szymanovsky," pages 183-184. 'The *Third Symphony*, subtitled *Le Chant de la Nuit*, is a great choral-orchestral work with an elaborate choral part and an extended tenor solo. The poem is from the *Divân* of Jallâl-üddin Rûmi, one of the greatest of Irân's mystical poets...Around this poem, Szymanovsky has written music of a radiant purity of spirit, of an elevated ecstasy of expression, music so permeated with the very essence of the choicest and rarest specimens of Irânian art – the whole score glows with gorgeous colour, rich, yet never garish nor crude, like a Persian painting or silk rug – that such a feat is unparalleled in Western music. Here is no European in Eastern fancy-dress, but one who, by a penetrating clairvoyant insight and sympathy, an astonishing kinship of spirit, succeeds in giving us in musical terms what we instinctively know and recognise as the essence of Persian art. And what wonderful blend of ecstasy and languor of which only the great Irânian poets have the secret, to find it expressed with this degree of intensity, this authentic accent, by a Western musician is something the like of which we are not likely soon to see again. The score of the *Third Symphony* is a marvel – firm in structure and essential cohesion, yet disembodied and transparent as gossamer; glowing with the utmost of scintillant luminosity, yet rich in deep dark velvety shadows, elevated and lofty in expression, yet without a hint of magniloquence, pomposity, or the striking of attitudes, rising to a climax of enormous power by the most sovereign mastery of musical means and the ineluctable inner urge, the irresistible interior logic of the very stuff of the music, yet with no superfluity, overstress or point-labouring. *The Song of the Night* combines in perfect accord the most discrepant, disparate, and antithetical of qualities. In a word, it remains, as it begins – from its deep murmured unforgettable opening through its sublime heart-stirring climax to its

Peggy Hubicki, who was teaching me harmony at the time. She knew Gola Martin-Smith who knew Sorabji. She told Gola that she had a student that was interested and Gola then told Sorabji. At this point I do remember seeing a note that said that he was interested in my interest and would I like to meet him. He liked Scots – he knew that I was Scottish – he preferred Scots to anybody else apparently. He wrote also in that note if I had read the *Gambit* “Symposium,” when John Ogdon, Ronald Stevenson, and C. M. Grieve all talked about Sorabji, making the point that the only one to talk any sense at all was C. M. Grieve.<sup>283</sup> That also tied in with the Scots. That is how it came about.

I remember spending either one or two nights with Gola Martin-Smith in Wareham and then she drove to Corfe Castle the next day. I played two piano pieces for him that I had prepared. Both were by Godowsky, one was *The Gardens of Buitenzorg* from the *Java Suite* and the other was a *Wienerisch*, which is a sort of Viennese Waltz pastiche. I think that I thought rightly that, while they were more or less within my capabilities as a pianist, I felt that he would like hearing them; which I think he did, especially *The Gardens of Buitenzorg*. After I played I showed him a portfolio of my compositions, which he looked at. I don’t remember him saying very much about that. I didn’t play him any of them, but he liked the fact that they were traditional, they weren’t serial or aleatoric, bubble and squeak or anything, they were just notes on paper. Then he played a fragment from *Gulistan*. There were two pianos and I remember one being

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unforgettable close, fading out in the deep blue luminousness of the Eastern night, in passages for whose beauty one scarcely dares to breathe – a perfect and incomparable masterpiece.’

<sup>283</sup> This statement is consistent with an annotated copy of that particular article, which Sorabji gave to the Stockley family. In response to more than one of Ogdon and Stevenson’s comments, Sorabji wrote poignant and somewhat severe rejoinders. For example in response to this by Stevenson, ‘Considering Sorabji’s multiple racial background in Iran, Spain and Sicily, it may at first be found surprising – disconcerting, even – that he upholds nationalism so strongly,’ Sorabji underlined the word ‘nationalism’ and then wrote the following as a footnote, ‘I don’t at all. Nationalism is nothing. It is political. I uphold race, birth, breeding; something quite different.’ Other amusing rebuttals included a casual response to Ogdon’s statement, ‘much as he hates Boulez, he hates Shostakovich even more,’ where Sorabji writes, ‘I don’t hate Boulez; he makes me laugh. Shosty bores me! I don’t like that;’ and two criticisms for the following sentences by Stevenson, ‘His musical speech does not know the vernacular. Yet I recall that some of the profoundest statements have been uttered in the vernacular: even Christ spoke a dialect,’ firstly and to the first sentence, ‘Don’t be silly! What vernacular? And whose?’ followed by a response to the statement concerning Christ, ‘Christ did not. He spoke Aramaic. This was not a dialect!’ Ogdon’s final statement, ‘And there’s also, of course, the *Fantasia Hespanica*, which might indeed have had a certain popularity with more frequent performances,’ was quickly dispatched, ‘He is talking rubbish. He has never seen the Fantasia.’ Lord Douglas-Hamilton’s intimation seems correct for the only contributor to the article not to be disputed was C. M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid). Hugh MacDiarmid, John Ogdon, and Ronald Stevenson. “Sorabji Symposium,” *Gambit: Edinburgh University Review* (Summer 1965): 4-12. The copy of this article with Sorabji’s personal annotations is in a private collection.

rather more difficult to play than the other. I think the Steinway was the more difficult one. I first played on that and then got on very much better on the Mason and Hamelin, and he played on the Mason and Hamelin. We then had tea and talked, then we left and that was really it.

In the talk afterwards I remember asking him whether he liked Messiaen and he said literally, 'I can't do with it, the textures are too thick,' which quite tickled me. I loved everything that was exotic, Scriabin, Szymanowski, and Messiaen seemed a continuation of that. I think Sorabji fit into that too; his soundworld is not totally far removed, the musical texture is completely different from Messiaen, but there are somehow parallels, the timelessness of it and the exotic sounds he makes on the instrument.

I remember talking with Ronald Stevenson and he said at that time that he felt that his music promised rather more than it delivered.<sup>284</sup> I don't know if this was really what he felt and subsequently it isn't what he felt, but it may have been what he felt at that time. He compared it to William Walton as having the same kind of defects.

SO: So Sorabji knew that you had met Ronald Stevenson?

PDH: He did, yes. I mentioned it, but I was careful, because at the time there was a coolness between them.

SO: You knew that from Ronald Stevenson?

PDH: Yes. I think that Ronald felt critical of him. Ronald was very much with the Manchester group, although I think that he slightly predated them. They all got together, not that they slagged off each other's compositions, but they subjected each other to constructive criticism. I don't think their relationship exactly accommodated that terribly happily.

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<sup>284</sup> In a telephone conversation with Ronald Stevenson I (Sean Owen) discovered that he was indeed critical of Sorabji's compositions, referring to his fugal writing, in particular his choice of fugue subjects, and his orchestration, as flawed. He did however express great admiration for Sorabji's capacity as a composer of piano fantasias, stating that in the realm of organic form Sorabji is unrivalled.

SO: Everything that I have read by Ronald Stevenson about Sorabji comes from the standpoint that this is a composer that I would like to support and who should have a larger listening audience, but I am going to introduce him with a critical air. Even in that little symposium with Ogdon and Grieve he starts out in that way, he didn't want to place Sorabji on a pedestal, he wanted to be critical and perceive virtue where virtue is deserved and not to be misguided or make an apotheosis out of this man. I wonder how Sorabji would have reacted to that.

PDH: I think that he would have liked the attention, but I don't think that criticism would have been something that he took particularly very well. Certainly I wouldn't have dared, nor would it have occurred to me. I was a student who was subsequently not to spend his life in music. I was only 23 and far from confident, I was very curious, but not confident.

I studied piano with Louis Kentner and he had a story about Sorabji actually. Louis came to this country and started playing. Sorabji at that time was a music critic. Apparently he obtained rave reviews from Sorabji. Louis wrote to Sorabji thanking him for these reviews and the next thing there arrived in the post a large quantity of scores, which didn't appeal to Louis. Apparently the reviews tailed off after that; at least that was his story. I met Louis Kentner through Ronald Stevenson as well. I was really interested in Liszt and he felt that he was a good man for me to study with, which he was. This would have been around 1976.

SO: When you first arrived at The Eye was it one of those situations where there was not a lot of time spent with formalities and small talk, but rather you found yourself quickly to the piano?

PDH: I think so. I remember being quite captivated with his appearance, he was rather complex and it is difficult to describe. He spoke very amiably to Gola in a very gossipy kind of way. I remember playing the piano for him and being very pleased when it was over, for I was very nervous. I felt that I was somewhat on the line and in some ways I

think that it is more difficult to play for a single person, especially someone like that. He was very charming and by no way forbidding, although he had a slightly forbidding appearance and the things that I had read were very forbidding sometimes, like *Mi Contra Fa* which is highly vitriolic in places. But he wasn't like that and he put me at my ease. I did think that I should have followed up the meeting with something, which I didn't do, and I think that he may have been in some way disappointed. I think that he expected something more from the visit, which didn't happen. It may have been that I wasn't really the person to promote his music, for I wasn't a concert pianist. That is only my feeling about that.

SO: Did he make any comments after you finished playing?

PDH: Nothing derogatory, I certainly would have remembered that. He didn't go in any great detail about it. He reacted rather like someone that was glad to hear the music. It was music that he liked. He asked me, 'Which one is that?' about *The Gardens of Buitenzorg*, which is a rather perfumy type of piece. It was as if he had heard it before and it was a pleasant memory and I was resurrecting it. He didn't go into great detail about interpretation or how I played the piano. His comments were neither revelatory nor shattering, if you know what I mean?

I remember talking to Ronald afterwards and I told him that he played. Ronald said that was really a honour for him to play for me. It was as if we were sharing music, in a rather unequal way, for obviously he had much more to offer than I did. But it was a pleasant experience for me. I thought of him as an oddity, but I didn't foretell the comparatively great interest that there would be for him.

I remember telling him that John Ogdon wanted to play his music and he said, 'Well he won't.'

SO: He didn't explain why he didn't want Ogdon to play his music?

PDH: I had heard that he didn't like John Ogdon's playing at one point. I say 'one point' because it may have been a view expressed at one time that was not relevant at another.

He didn't say anything specifically derogatory about Ogdon's playing, but I had heard that because John Ogdon was very determined to play the music, Sorabji was in turn very determined that he wouldn't.

SO: Did Ronald Stevenson talk to you a lot about Sorabji or did the subject not come up very often?

PDH: It didn't initially come up too often, because I think that at the time when I first got to know him he had been slightly hurt by Sorabji's reaction to his analysis of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, which he had spent an enormous amount of time working on.<sup>285</sup> I was treading on thin ice, I felt, talking about Ronald to Sorabji and the other way too. I felt that Ronald was slightly – irritated is too strong a word – but slightly annoyed that I was going to see Sorabji. At that point his relationship with him wasn't the warmest. But later things seem to have improved, especially when Alistair Hinton arrived. Alistair seems to have been able to draw everyone together.

SO: What did you think about Sorabji's own playing?

PDH: He was very fast and fluttery, playing very much on the surface of the keys, but a lovely sound. I didn't hear him making huge sounds that would have been demanded by *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, but he obviously did have the ability to play, a kind of technique that could encompass his music, which is not an inconsiderable statement in itself. But how he would have projected to a large audience is impossible to say. He did have a very beautiful sound, but light and quiet.

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<sup>285</sup> This analysis was published in a booklet that accompanied John Ogdon's Altarus recording of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, 1988. The 22-page essay was entitled "*Opus Clavicembalisticum* – a critical analysis."

*JAMES KIRBY, like Patrick Douglas-Hamilton before him, was a pupil at the Royal Academy of Music who with the assistance of Gola Martin-Smith and Peggy Hubicki had the rare opportunity of meeting Sorabji. Sorabji was already quite frail and living in Marley House at the time of the meeting. Mr. Kirby was interviewed in his Bow, London, home on February 19, 2003.*

JK: As a student at the Academy I think I went through a sort of purple patch and became interested in transcriptions. I played Godowsky and Michałowski's arrangement of the Minute Waltz, which seemed relatively thin compared to Sorabji's version, and I also played some Busoni. I can't remember who it was, it might have been my teacher, Hamish Milne, who is also very interested in a highly eclectic range of repertoire, or Patrick, who I was friendly with at the time, Lord Patrick Douglas-Hamilton, that first brought Sorabji up. I got out my ancient copy of the Guinness Book of World Records, which cited the longest piano piece.<sup>286</sup> So I got interested.

My harmony teacher, Margaret Hubicki, mentioned that she was very friendly with Gola Martin-Smith, who was a piano teacher in Wareham that was also quite close to Sorabji and that it might be possible for me to meet him, which was amazing, because I knew all of this business about him being very reclusive and not welcoming visitors.

So I think what happened then was that a group of students gathered together in this very room, my studio in east London, twenty years ago, with a copy of Geoffrey Douglas Madge's recording of *Opus Clavicembalisticum* and the score, which Patrick amazingly lent me saying that I could have it for as long as I like. So we all sat on the floor and clustered around the huge score and put on record number one. I think we only lost two passengers throughout the performance, which is quite good. We only had a five-minute interval between Part I and Part II, when we got the promise of a curry from Brick Lane, which is a famous Indian area just near here where they have very good food. We sat there and did our work and then went out and discussed it. It was quite an amazing result from quite a disparate group of people, as we were all quite spellbound in our own individual ways.

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<sup>286</sup> i.e. *Opus Clavicembalisticum*.

SO: So who all was there?

JK: There were quite a few people from my year. There was a cellist friend called Robert Max and a violinist named Peter Sheppard. Quite interestingly, she ended up being Head of composition at the Royal Academy of Music and at that point she was merely a professor of music history, but was and is a very special lady called Melanie Dakin. I don't know if you have come across her, but she is also a composer in a quite extravagant vein, but not as extravagant as Sorabji. She was very interested and became quite fascinated with this performance. I remember seeing her at John Ogdon's musical marathon, where we lost the cellist, Robert, on this occasion because he went to see Michael Jackson, which is quite a contrast, but they were both performing on one evening, which was quite interesting.

So after that - Peggy<sup>287</sup> wasn't there by the way – Peggy spoke to Gola. I think that I came into contact with Gola a little bit at Peggy's retirement concert at the Royal Academy of Music, which I organised. It all floated into place as it were, Peggy and I went down for the weekend to Wareham, stayed with Gola. We had a very nice roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, very English, wonderfully full lunch. After lunch I think that Peggy sat by the fire and Gola chauffeured me off to the nursing home, where I met Sorabji for quite a short time, maybe fifteen or twenty minutes. She gave him a Madeira cake. He was quite frail and I think that the most difficult thing was, as it is sometimes, you meet an elderly person for the first time and it takes a while to get used to their speech, to understand him. I didn't want to say pardon and get him to repeat things too much, but actually there were quite a few things he said which I couldn't quite grasp, which perhaps went unchecked. But we talked about horse racing, or at least he talked about horse racing, as I don't know much about it; I don't know quite how we got into that. I obviously told him that I admired his work, but I think Gola in the very gentlest of ways suggested to me not to be too ingratiating, as he wouldn't be keen on that, so it was alluded to in a sideways kind of way, if it can be described in that way. I told him about my botanical interests, because I am very interested in wild flowers and the

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<sup>287</sup> i.e. Margaret Hubicki.

photography of flowers, and he responded quite warmly to that. So I sent him some photographs.

SO: So that is why Denise Vicars wrote to you?<sup>288</sup>

JK: Yes, she responded and that was very nice. I can't remember exactly what I sent him, but I think it may have been of an orchid, which hopefully grows wild in Dorset.

Really, that was it. The impression was of quite a frail elderly man, but with a most extraordinary face, which drew you into him. I don't know if it was due to my reading so much about all of this fiery passion that he was purported to have, but you could sort of feel that - I am sure it was there - even if it was faded to some extent. There was a big personality sitting there in that chair, there is no doubt about that.

SO: Was it before or after then that the idea came about that you would learn the Minute Waltz transcription?

JK: I think that Gola gave me this book of transcriptions, which includes the extraordinary Sorabji transcription. I certainly looked at it a lot, but never really contemplated learning it. I respected it, but I kept my distance. Perhaps in my old age I have become more classically bent and I don't play as many transcriptions.

SO: It is curious how you and Patrick went through the same kind of process, meeting Sorabji through Peggy and Gola. I wonder if there were any other intentions, that the two of you, both being young pianists, would take an interest in playing Sorabji's music. I wonder what was going through Peggy and Gola's minds, for only the two of you were brought to Sorabji.

JK: It would have been interesting if say I had met Sorabji in 1973 and not 1986, for it was rather late in the day for him to be thinking about or organising performance of his

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<sup>288</sup> 'I am writing at the request of Mr. Sorabji to thank you for your letter and for the very attractive photographs of British Orchids. He regrets not being able to reply personally.' Denise Vicars, Swanage, to James Kirby, London, 6 February 1987, Letter in the hand of Denise Vicars, Private Collection.

work, maybe. Gola, being the utmost discreet person, the diplomat, would have never put anyone under pressure to do anything and Peggy is the least pressurising person in the universe. So I didn't feel any pressure and also I think that I was probably quite careful not to rush into saying that I would play this and that, for it is a horrible thing to promise to do something and then to not do it. Perhaps in a slight way, there is the faintest grain of guilt, that I met Sorabji and other people, who perhaps would have taken him up more, didn't; perhaps I feel a bit over privileged in that way.

SO: What do you remember about Gola?

JK: It is quite funny with Gola, for I only met her a handful of times. But she was very sweet and we actually kept up a correspondence even when I was studying abroad in Russia. She kept me posted on how Sorabji was and whether she had given him cake or not. She was really quite loyal and I was very touched by that. To be honest, I am not really sure why, it must have been a chemical or biological thing, but we really got along with one another and I really regret not having met her earlier. She died in 1989 and I was away for the last three or four years of her life. She seemed a very kind, very thoughtful, caring, considerate, but quite steely person. I am sure if I had been her student and not practised, my knuckles would have been rapped and I would have been made to feel very small. She was quite a small person, but like my first teacher, small people can be quite formidable.

## Chapter Eleven – The Vicars Family

Of all the friendships that Sorabji maintained while living on the Isle of Purbeck – admittedly those of a personal merit were extremely few – his friendship with Mervyn Vicars (1905-1991) was arguably the dearest and indisputably the longest lasting. Their initial encounter with one another occurred in 1933 on a London bus. Catching a glance over Mervyn's shoulder, Sorabji noted with curiosity that this young man (Mervyn would have been 28 years of age at the time and Sorabji 41) was perusing Forsyth's book on orchestration.<sup>289</sup> The opportunity to meet a fellow musician was not to be missed, so Sorabji politely introduced himself. This was the beginning of a unique friendship that was to last the remaining 51 years of Sorabji's life.

Although Mervyn's most profuse period of composition began in the early 1950s, he was by this time already an accomplished cellist. An early sensitivity to music was granted to him by his father, Harold Vicars, who was an important composer of popular songs. Mervyn furthered his musical education in Germany where he attended and graduated from the prestigious Leipzig Conservatory. However, Mervyn's ambition after returning to England was not to become a professional concert cellist, but rather a conductor and a composer.

A creative congeniality was at the heart of Sorabji and Mervyn's friendship, a mutual respect and enthusiastic support for one another's musical activities that was constant and unwavering. Mervyn was in attendance with Sorabji at the ill-fated John Tobin performance of the *pars prima* of *Opus Clavicembalisticum* in 1936 and although the concert was considered by both Sorabji and Mervyn as a supreme failure, this did not deter Mervyn's great enthusiasm for Sorabji's famous score. In later years he paid homage to it by writing his *Variations and Fugue on a Theme from Opus Clavicembalisticum* (1973) for piano and orchestra and, in anticipation of Geoffrey Douglas Madge's performance of the work in 1982, he wrote a short essay about the composition, which included a brief overview of the form and some very interesting insights into Sorabji's musical capacities and compositional methods. It is worthwhile

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<sup>289</sup> Cecil Forsyth, *Orchestration* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1914).

here to quote a portion of Mervyn's essay, both for the delineation it provides of Sorabji's musicianship and to demonstrate the spirited, almost zealous tone of admiration that Sorabji inspired in his friend.

Mr. Sorabji's knowledge of the technical requirements of composition is encyclopaedic. He is able to use every fugal and contrapuntal device known to musical theory with complete assurance, conviction and artistic skill, and not just produce a dry and academic use of technique for technique's sake. His practical knowledge of all schools of music from John of Dunstable to the present day, is such that one has only to mention a passage from, say, *Rosenkavalier*, *Tristan*, a Mahler Symphony or a Chopin Sonata and he can immediately go to the piano and play that particular passage, and, in the case of opera sing the words for good measure.

A further remarkable faculty possessed by Mr. Sorabji is that he writes his music, whether it be for piano solo or full orchestra, straight down on to the MS paper without sketching or preparation of any kind. It is already there, completely thought out in his mind and only waiting to be released. He generally uses a very large orchestra and his orchestration is absolutely sure and certain. No instrument is asked to do anything outside its own capabilities, and the character of each instrument, group or family is scrupulously studied and adhered to. Within this framework he achieves marvellously original orchestral colours of a subtlety and beauty that have never been equalled by any other composer. Rhythmically he has freed himself from the tyranny of bars and time signatures. This produces an unbroken – not unaccented – flow of sound free from any metrical restrictions imposed by formal time procedures.

An art that has almost disappeared is that of improvisation. Mr. Sorabji can not only improvise in all musical forms including intricate fugues, but also does some very original things with common chords and their inversions. He is also a brilliant transcriber, having written some highly entertaining and witty arrangements of music by Chopin, Johann Strauss and others.

Mr. Sorabji's major works are of vast dimensions, written for piano solo, piano and orchestra, and orchestra and chorus. There are no operatic works. His time scale is so enormous that no composer has ever approached it, with the possible exception of that colossal masterpiece of Richard Wagner, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. This tremendous time scale as some might think and indeed have said is not just meaningless improvisation, but a highly organised, strict and logically controlled architectonic structure, stemming from musical seeds of infinite possibilities, which are duly realised, expanded and welded together to produce a marvellously proportioned whole. The musical idiom is not atonal, romantic, avant-garde, neo-classic or any other of the absurd 'isms' that are bandied about these days by so called musicians. No, it is a highly individual and personal musical language based on tonality! The basic themes are clear, beautifully shaped and cover a broad span. To all this is added superb technical

equipment capable of convincingly solving all the problems that arise during the act of composition.<sup>290</sup>

The Second World War interrupted Sorabji's friendship with Mervyn, as it severely interrupted all normality in British life. Sorabji remained in London, living at the time with his mother in an apartment off the southwest corner of Regent Park,<sup>291</sup> and continued his creative efforts, composing within the war years a few songs, over 550 pages of piano music, including what in later years he would consider one of his favourite works, the nocturne *Gulistān* (1940), all of his *Études transcendantes* (1940-44);<sup>292</sup> he also began work on his massive *Jāmī Symphony* (1942-1951). But the war did not spare the artistic energies of the younger composer: Mervyn entered military service, attended flight school, and flew bombing raids into Germany. He survived the war and was honoured with decorations for his service.

It was after the war in 1949 that Mervyn met and married Denise Vicars, née Allen (b. 1918). Denise was originally from Dorset, born in Poole and lived for a time in Corfe Castle. In her youth she was deemed too independent of mind by her parents and was thus packed off to Belgium where she obtained her schooling in a convent. She enjoyed her time in Belgium and acquired there a fluency in the French language – a linguistic love that was to be actively shared with Sorabji – but her unconquerable independence was not to be tamed. She often fled the confines of the convent for nocturnal visitations to the nearby country village, where she would socialise and be merry with the locals. This spirit lives on today and is plain to see in those eyes of hers that still brightly sparkle. Although Denise is not a musician, she always maintained a great admiration for the arts and all things beautiful in general. Mervyn and Denise had two children, Adrian (b. 1951) and Kevin (b. 1954) and they lived happily as a family in Swanage, Dorset.

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<sup>290</sup> Mervyn Vicars, Unpublished six-paged essay on *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, ca. 1982, private collection.

<sup>291</sup> 175 Clarence Gate Gardens on Glentworth Street.

<sup>292</sup> Other compositions from this prolific period include the completion of his *Tāntrik Symphony for Piano Alone* (1938-39), *Transcription in the Light of Harpsichord Technique for the Modern Piano of the Chromatic Fantasia of J. S. Bach, Followed by a Fugue* (1940), *Quære reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora* (1940), *St. Bertrand de Comminges: "He was laughing in the tower"* (1941), *Trois poèmes* (1941) for voice and piano, *Rapsodie espagnole de Maurice Ravel – Transcription de concert pour piano* (1945), and a transcription of J. S. Bach's Prelude from the *French Suite*, BWV 815a (1945).

In 1951, six years after the war and after an even longer period of silence between the two friends, Sorabji and Mervyn's friendship was rekindled, quite coincidentally, due to their suddenly living but five miles apart from one another, Mervyn in Swanage and Sorabji in nearby Corfe Castle.

How MADDENING to know that you were, so to speak, a few footsteps away last summer! That old toad at the Bankes Arms – who succeeded the admirable and unequalled Mrs. Parsons of happy yester years – was the world's OUTSIZE in stinks, and as I'd given up going there even for an occasional meal – such as it was – he WOULDN'T have told you where I was to be found.<sup>293</sup>

It was not long before Sorabji met Mervyn's family, with whom Sorabji was also to share from that point forward a very close and trusting friendship. In a state of happy and vivid reminiscence, Adrian Vicars told me that it was always a great delight to visit Sorabji. As a child the impression that was imbued into his imagination, with Sorabji's unique personage and The Eye, filled as it was with an abundance of treasures and curiosities, was one of magical wonder, as if he was ascending Sorabji's narrow lane to visit the house of the wizard. Sorabji, generous as always with his friends, was always immensely affectionate to the Vicars family, including young Adrian and Kevin.

And now, to say with what delight and pleasure I saw you and met your admirable wife, in whom, as you so rightly fore-indicated, I should find, as indeed I did, a powerful clear and penetrating mind, one with whom indeed, it was a privilege to converse. Pray convey to her my most respectful greetings and salutations and tell her from me that I who have known you a very long time think it wholly admirable that she has taken charge of you! And that enigmatic little person, the Bambino who looked at me from time to time with a concentrated gaze as who should say, 'Well HE at least hasn't said GAAA-GAAA or GOOO-GOOO to me. SOME grown-ups aren't QUITE the BEEFS they mostly look...I am surprised!' And didn't he LOOK it too!<sup>294</sup>

The early 1950s was a time of promise and potentiality coming to fruition as far as Mervyn's conducting career was concerned. Supporting this ambition and with the

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<sup>293</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Mervyn Vicars, Swanage, 14 December 1951, letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, private collection. The name of the hotelier to whom Sorabji is referring to is not known to me, but Sorabji's opinion of him is clear.

<sup>294</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Mervyn Vicars, Swanage, 28 August 1952, letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, private collection. The 'Bambino' being referred to is Mervyn's eldest son, Adrian, who would have been a newborn at the time.

specific aim of winning a professional conductorship, Mervyn obtained letters of recommendation from various well-known musicians from the English musical scene, including Henry Wood, Malcolm Sargent, Adrian Boult, Kenneth Essex, and of course, Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, all of whom exalted Mervyn's talents and capacities as a conductor and musician. The recognition and praise which Mervyn obtained from his more famous peers, is typified by Kenneth Essex's letter:

He is a fine all round musician, a composer and arranger, and a brilliant orchestral and choral conductor of outstanding merit. His knowledge of the repertoire is deep and comprehensive and his interpretation of the classics masterly. In addition he has a fine grasp of the problems of contemporary music and it was for this reason that, having a free choice of conductors, I chose him to conduct my complex and difficult Trumpet Concerto on the occasion of its performance by the London Philharmonic Orchestra at the Albert Hall.<sup>295</sup>

Mervyn's aspirations did finally materialise and in 1952 he formed the New Orpheus Concert Group, which sponsored three ensembles: the New Orpheus Orchestra, the New Orpheus Singers, and the Melos ensemble, which was the name by which members of the New Orpheus Orchestra would perform smaller chamber works. The mission, if you will, of these ensembles was three-fold: to perform compositions by un-established composers, to perform canonic works from the repertoire that were suitable for the forces of the ensemble, and to perform lesser-known published works. Therefore on a programme of the New Orpheus Orchestra, you were just as likely to encounter a piece by Tchaikovsky as you were to encounter a composition by, say, Lennox Berkeley or York Bowen<sup>296</sup> and the New Orpheus Singers, after a piece by Victoria, might present something by Racine Fricker or E. J. Moeran.<sup>297</sup> The technical standard of the ensemble was very high and typically, as a show case of virtuosity, Mervyn would include in his concerts an instrumental virtuoso, admittedly of a more unorthodox nature. For example, both the guitarist, Julian Bream, and the classical harmonica player, Larry Adler, found

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<sup>295</sup> Kenneth Essex, general letter of recommendation for Mervyn Vicars, 6 March 1950, private collection.

<sup>296</sup> The programme being alluded to was from a concert by the New Orpheus Orchestra at the Chelsea Town Hall, 4 June 1952, which included compositions by Lennox Berkley, Cimarosa, Benjamin, York Bowen, Ingvar Lidholm, Graham Whettam, and Tchaikovsky.

<sup>297</sup> This reference is also to an actual concert, this time at London's Cowdray Hall, 28 April 1952, the programme of which included works by Victoria, Robert Gill, Lassus, Racine Fricker, Graham Whettam, and E. J. Moeran.

early success under the auspices of Mervyn's concerts. Although not too frequent, Mervyn also found opportunities to present his own compositions to the public through these ensembles.

Besides Mervyn's personal ambitions as a professional conductor, there was another purpose behind the formation of the New Orpheus Concert Group and that was to educate the concert goers of his time as to the breadth and depth of the repertoire, supplementing the existing canon with the new and the obscure. To achieve this aim and also as a mode of self-promotion, Mervyn initiated a small monthly journal, *The New Orpheus Review*, which included the efforts of various contributors who wrote informative essays on the composers and music being presented in concerts by the New Orpheus Concert Group. Besides his own articles, Mervyn's journal was also a vehicle for the ideas of other interesting writers, including Nicholas Carroll, David Drew, Dr. Gordon Jacob, Graham Whettam, Sir Adrian Boult, and once again, always eager to assist his dear friend, Sorabji. Mervyn was especially appreciative and proud of Sorabji's inclusion in the journal and made this clear to his readers in the editorial of the June 1952 issue:

Three distinguished contributors to this magazine are especially welcome, K. S. Sorabji, Sir Adrian Boult, and Dr. Gordon Jacob. Support from such established musicians is of utmost value, and it is highly gratifying that Sorabji, who has withdrawn from concert-life himself, and who has given vent to his severely critical opinions of concerts and concert-goers, should nevertheless freely give his help.<sup>298</sup>

Mervyn's career as the conductor of the New Orpheus Concert Group culminated at the end of 1953, when after successfully auditioning for the B.B.C., he led the ensemble in a broadcast concert, which included works by Mozart, Prokofiev, Richard Strauss, and Weber.<sup>299</sup> Then, after less than two years of activity, the ensemble was

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<sup>298</sup> Mervyn Vicars, "Editorial," *New Orpheus Review* 1, no. 2 (June 1952): 1. Sorabji did indeed withdraw from concert-life and his opinions regarding the concert-goers, as Mervyn intimates, were both devastating and humorous: 'I rejoice exceedingly to be "out of it" down here [in Dorset as opposed to London]...I really found the reek of the unwashed heads of the "advanced" and "intellectual" ones getting more than my rather queasy stomach would stand...Do and or must plain-living and high smelling go so much together?' Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Mervyn Vicars, Swanage, 14 December 1951, letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, private collection.

<sup>299</sup> Specifically, the B.B.C. broadcast took place on 16 December 1953.

suddenly dissolved and Mervyn turned away from activities in London and the life of a professional conductor in general. He did however find occasional modes of expression on the Isle of Purbeck, where he was employed as the conductor for both the Swanage Choral and Operatic Society and the annual Purbeck Festival.<sup>300</sup> But besides these occasional amateur engagements, he did not promote his musical talents and did not bring attention to his ever growing corpus of original compositions.<sup>301</sup> Mervyn, like Sorabji, slipped into obscurity on the Isle of Purbeck, but in Mervyn's case the obscurity was even more extreme, for where Sorabji remained an infamous figure and was regarded locally as a reclusive musical genius, many of Mervyn's closest acquaintances were not even aware of the fact that Mervyn was a prolific composer. But Sorabji knew of Mervyn's abilities and remained a source of constant support and encouragement regarding his musical ventures:

I am ENORMOUSLY impressed with the completed Symphony. I devoted practically the whole of one day going through it as carefully as I could. It is a very powerful and masterly work, richly diversified, thoroughly individual without being idiotically 'modern,' and although I knew of Mervyn's real ability from much smaller and earlier works that he has shown me during the past few years, I confess that this splendid fruition surpassed anything I had expected.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Regarding the Purbeck Festival, George Willey, at my request, jotted down the following informative essay: 'The Purbeck Festival of Music flourished for about ten years in the late 1960's – early 1970's. It centred on the Kato Havas Summer School based at Knitson. Kato was a Hungarian-born British teacher of violin and was the author of several books on her bowing and other techniques. The festival brought classical concerts to Purbeck's "stately homes" and to village churches, with outstanding and well-established soloists and the orchestra formed from students at Kato's summer school. Kato's right-hand helper was Vera Ryder whose husband, Major D. C. D. "Jack" Ryder, was Lord of the Manor of Wareham and an extensive landowner in Corfe and mid-Purbeck. The format was a concert at the Ryders' home, Rempstone Hall, and one at Smedmore (Maj. John Mansel's seat), Encombe (the Scott family), Lulworth Castle (the Weld family), and in Swanage, Kingston, Langton, Worth, and Wareham parish churches. Money raised from the concerts, after expenses were deducted, was donated to Oxfam, which had opened a branch in Swanage. Mervyn Vicars became musical director in succession to Graham Rogers. Soloists included Lady Barbirolli (Evelyn Rothwell), who keenly supported the festival. The festival patron was composer, Sir Arthur Bliss, Master of the Queen's Musick, who attended several concerts including the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary one at Swanage St. Mary's Church. Conductor that evening was Vernon Handley, who had been a strong supporter of the festival. I served on the committee from its formation, not for any musical knowledge, but as the representative of Oxfam.' Letter in the hand of George Willey.

<sup>301</sup> As far as I am aware, with the exception of Sorabji's casual and friendly eye, Mervyn's compositions, or at least a few of them, were only once brought to the attention of another individual and that was to the famous conductor, Sir John Barbirolli, who was the juror at a composition competition in Italy. Mervyn's scores were submitted, but did not win a prize.

<sup>302</sup> The specific composition being referred to is Mervyn's Symphony No. 1 (1958-60), which was dedicated to Sorabji. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Denise Vicars, Swanage, 28 August 1960, letter in the hand of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, private collection.

From perusing the remnants of Sorabji's and Mervyn's correspondence,<sup>303</sup> it is clear that the two friends were eminently familiar with one another's oeuvre and that recently completed compositions were quickly delivered to the other for familiarity and study. Most of Mervyn's larger manuscripts<sup>304</sup> are even today littered with Sorabji's blue papered bookmarks, detailing specific locations within the composition to which Sorabji wrote critical or, more often, laudatory notes. Sorabji's comments are not analytical in the traditional sense, that is to say, they do not explore the scores with the implementation of specific analytical methods or terminology. This should not be surprising since Sorabji, in all of his writings, rarely and only with great reluctance ever used a form of codified analysis to describe a composition, preferring instead, as he does in the case of Mervyn's music, a more prosaic style of emotional description, focusing upon the desired aesthetical effect of the sound and not the structural or compositional essence that gives the composition its specific form.

Beyond mere congeniality, Sorabji and Mervyn sincerely appreciated one another as trusted friends and this mutual appreciation found expression in their compositions, specifically in the form of dedications. Sorabji began the tradition and in 1952 he magnanimously dedicated his massive and highly important *Jāmī Symphony* to Mervyn. Mervyn replied by dedicating two of his compositions to Sorabji, the *Purbeck Hills: Pastoral for String Quintet* (1953) and *Symphony No. 1* (1958-60). Sorabji repaid the compliment by honouring the entire Vicars family with the dedication of his *Concertino non grosso for String Septet with Piano obbligato quasi continuo* (1968) and in 1969 presented to Mervyn as a gift the manuscript of his *Quintet II for Piano and String Quartet* (1932-33).

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<sup>303</sup> Sorabji almost always disposed of the letters that he received, while those to whom Sorabji wrote had an uncanny consistency of saving their half of the correspondence, such seems appropriate when reading the brilliant gems that Sorabji wrote. Therefore, quite sadly, the greatest proportion of Sorabji's correspondence is one-sided, missing the thoughts and concepts of his friends and colleagues to which he would dedicatedly reply.

<sup>304</sup> Specifically, Sorabji wrote critical commentaries for the following of Mervyn Vicars' compositions: *A Lute of Jade*, *Lady Greensleeves*, *Ode to Spring*, and *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji*. Private collection.

Sorabji saw within Mervyn a great many things, which is appropriate when engaged by a complex and highly evolved personality like Mervyn's, and did not fail to see, when others were blind, that Mervyn was endowed with a great musical sensitivity. Mervyn was humbled and appreciative of this attention, especially considering that when Sorabji gazed upon Mervyn and saw talent, Mervyn graced his eyes respectfully upwards and beheld in Sorabji a great genius.

*Although I had the great privilege of talking with DENISE VICARS, the widow of Mervyn Vicars and one of Sorabji's truly great friends, on numerous occasions and now count her as a dear friend, only once did I conduct an 'official' interview with her and that was upon our first meeting. Mrs. Vicars was immensely generous and gracious in allowing me to study the plethora of Sorabji-related items in her collection, many of which have never been seen by anyone outside of her family, and from which a unique perspective, one that deserves more study, was glimpsed of the dedicated friendship that Sorabji shared with the Vicars family. The following interview took place in Mrs. Vicars' Swanage home on April 3, 2002.*

DV: Have you seen any of his works? Originals? I will show you one. Would you like to see one?

SO: Yes, very much so.

DV: If you would like to look at that. Could you just read it? Here you go.

SO: The second quintet.

DV: What do we have here? What does that say? I can't read it.<sup>305</sup>

SO: 'To dear brother Mervyn for keeps.'

DV: That's right. But look at this!<sup>306</sup>

SO: Yes, that is fantastic!<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> For the reading of the dedication Mrs. Vicars required the assistance of my sight due to the gradual failing of her own.

<sup>306</sup> At this point she gestured over the contents of the manuscript.

<sup>307</sup> A short period of time was spent peering at the last page of the score, where there are dates signifying the time and place of completion for the second quintet, '12 July 1933, 12:30pm Bombay.'

DV: Amazing! It is amazing because I think it is a bit like Mozart in a way, he didn't have to go through the usual agonies that most composers seem to go through, or quite a lot do. It just sort of did this<sup>308</sup> from somewhere up there, into the pen and onto the manuscript paper. He was for many years not going to write another note.

SO: Fortunately he did.

DV: I don't think he had an option really. It was awfully nice because I would get very spoiled and I would go over - I use to visit them a lot there at The Eye - and he would play. 'What would you like me to play?' '*Gulistan!*' Beautiful work! And he would play a little bit and that was a great treat.

I regret that I am not aware that anybody took a photograph of his big lounge with the two pianos in there, I don't think that it ever happened.<sup>309</sup> It really was an astonishing room.

SO: Could you tell me how your husband came to meet Sorabji?

DV: He met him on a London transport bus. Mervyn was reading and K noticed and thought to himself, 'Ah! At last somebody with something worth reading about music,' or something like that. This was 80 years ago. When we got married, I don't think that he had been much in touch with K until K came down here and of course we came down here on holiday because this was part of my personal territory. Then we met him quite frequently and we finally ended up living back here. Then we would have what K would call a soiree, he would say, 'come over, isn't it about time we had another soiree?' And that was to go over and have a nice little tippie of something delicious in a small glass. Generally speaking I sat back and listened to what they were saying, then when the boys got a bit older they were invited, my sons. Not that he liked children, he didn't. He wasn't keen on people anyway as a general rule.

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<sup>308</sup> Mrs. Vicars made a dramatic hand gesture as if something from above was passing directly into the mind, a sort of divine communication.

<sup>309</sup> Fortunately, in October 1977, with the company of the pianist, Yonty Solomon, Sir Jeremy Grayson did photograph Sorabji and his fantastic music room.

SO: Do you know why he moved to Corfe in the first place?

DV: Well, I think he had enough of the London scene. He moved down first to Bournemouth somewhere for a while I think, on his way to Corfe, as it were. Then he had the house built. He was in another house in the lane next to that one previously, then he had that one built. He loved it here. He loved the atmosphere.

SO: What were your initial impressions of him and did they change over time?

DV: Well you couldn't help to have an impression of him when you first met him. I was sitting in the car with my firstborn son, who was very small at the time, I mean very small, he was just a bundle at that stage. Mervyn went and I said that I would wait in the car. K came over and said his hellos. Then after that time we met, we would have tea or went to his place and so on. If you were meant to have tea out, he always arrived with a little packet of tea in his hand, to give to the waitress to make Lapsang Souchong for him, exactly as he told them to do it. Well he didn't like normal English teas - neither do I - he thought them boring teas. Anyway he did.

He was a very generous man in many ways. I think that someone has put in that book,<sup>310</sup> as far as I can remember that he was, which is how he struck me, a many faceted man; very, very interesting, every facet. Yes, lovely man.

SO: I have heard that the contents of his personal library contained very few books on music.

DV: I don't think that he felt he needed them actually, if you put it like that. I mean that is a quick reaction to what you are saying – awareness of his own self-knowledge of music, of his own view of music and what it meant. You must have read most of what he has had to say. That must have told you much about him. Intolerance, perhaps, wouldn't be an unjust word to use. And also very witty, very sharp, and very amusing, but of

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<sup>310</sup> Mrs. Vicars is referring to Rapoport's *Sorabji: a critical celebration*.

course, he could be very much to the point at times. He was, of course, anecdotal about many of the things that he said.

His music is absolutely incredible. Even for me, who am not a musician, all I ever did was learned how to play the piano a bit and I am not a musician at all, to hear him playing; it was amazing!

He was a very human being! I mean K's vitriolic statements about this, that and the other were absolutely priceless, his keen wit. Very amusing and a very generous man! I am not meaning so much gifts and generous in that way, but in other ways, especially with his friends. He was very good to Mervyn. I am looking over to the other side of the room because a whole wodge of folders containing Mervyn's compositions are in that box there, with little ribbon notes by Sorabji. When he finished them he would show it to Sorabji. He did variations on a theme of Sorabji.

SO: Which theme?

DV: Probably *Opus Clavicembalisticum*. Let's have a look shall we?<sup>311</sup> What is that one? That must be the opera.

SO: *Lady Greensleeves*.

DV: That's it. That is a charming work. What is that letter? Can you read it to me? There you are look! There are probably a few letters missing as we go along.

SO: 'My dear Denise.'

DV: Oh it is to me, what is he saying in that one?

SO: 'I was VASTLY IMPRESSED by what Brother Mervyn showed me recently of the Symphony; proof of that, I think, is how the look of certain passages have stuck in my

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<sup>311</sup> At this point we began to move items off the chest containing her husband's compositions so that we could have a closer look at the items that she had just described.

mind. He tells me too that the subtitle of the First Movement (*Tenebrae*) is your suggestion, an inspired one that shows - if you will allow me to say so - great discrimination and great perception.

‘I have to admit with great reluctance that Flash Harry’s performance of the Verdi *Requiem* was so good that I would much prefer it hadn’t been his! Spiteful old cat ain’t I? Did you hear it? Mervyn missed it he told me.’<sup>312</sup>

DV: Do you know who Flash Harry was?<sup>313</sup> We always called him Flash Harry and I can’t even remember his name – conductor - tall, slim, always with his legs wide apart. Do you know whom I mean? Oh, it is a long way back. I could ring my youngest son and ask him who Flash Harry was. This is terrible, but you must remember the fact that I am about ten years older than God and knocking on a bit. But K he used to run him down like anything.

This is what I was telling you about K and the little blue slips of paper. There will be a comment on one of those slips. He read the work and gave Mervyn his views on what he had done or not done.<sup>314</sup>

Oh the *Purbeck Hills*, that looks as if K has written something about this.

SO: So, Mr. Vicars dedicated the *Purbeck Hills* to Sorabji!<sup>315</sup>

DV: What a difference between Mervyn’s writing. This is looking so old now. Mervyn’s writing is so conventional compared to K’s writing - wildly written writing! What’s that one?

SO: That is Sorabji’s writing. Oh, this is an original manuscript, the *Concertino non grosso for String Septet with Piano obbligato quasi continuo*.

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<sup>312</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Denise Vicars, Swanage, (date unknown), Letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji. Private Collection.

<sup>313</sup> Flash Harry refers to the British conductor, Malcolm Sargent.

<sup>314</sup> Sorabji did indeed read through many if not all of Mervyn Vicars’ larger compositions and afterwards would pen his own personal comments about the pieces, littering the manuscripts with bright blue strips of paper to mark the specific pages to which his comments referred.

<sup>315</sup> The dedication for Mervyn Vicars’ *Purbeck Hills: Pastoral for String Quartet* (1953) reads: ‘For a very dear friend and an offering in respect and admiration to a very great musician, K. S. Sorabji.’

DV: Oh yes, that is right, that is for all of us. What does it say?

SO: 'For Mervyn, Denise, Adrian, and Kevin with love.'<sup>316</sup>

DV: Yes that is it.

SO: It is amazing that you have these things.

DV: Why is it amazing? I mean Mervyn was his friend from ever before.

SO: Would you say that Mervyn was in some ways inspired by Sorabji to compose?

DV: No, he was writing before. He played the cello and had a variety of amateur orchestras. He did play for the BBC and one or two more interesting places. I wish you could have been invited to K's house. It was such an Aladdin's cave. It was the best thing that ever happened when Alistair<sup>317</sup> came into K's life, to be able to step in when it was necessary. Is that really only one work?<sup>318</sup> I have forgotten how long it was. Which one is it?

SO: First Symphony.

DV: His first symphony. Very amusing! It was a lovely May day when he started to think about this one. We hadn't very long been married and I asked, 'Have you written a symphony yet?' He said, 'No.' And I said, 'Well, why not?' Then he called it May morning. Do you speak French?

SO: No. I studied German and Spanish, but never French.

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<sup>316</sup> This was the annotated dedication in Sorabji's manuscript to the *Concertino non grosso for String Septet with Piano obbligato quasi continuo*. Kevin and Adrian are Mervyn and Denise's two sons.

<sup>317</sup> Alistair Hinton.

<sup>318</sup> Referring to one of her husband's manuscripts.

DV: K was always spouting bits of Latin and bits of German.

SO: Was he fluent in these languages?

DV: I never got the impression that he was really fluent, but he had a nice lot of quips and things doled up.

SO: Of course he often used Italian as well.

DV: I never met his mother, but she was obviously a very attractive, very beautiful woman. They were very close. All one knew was that they were terribly close. Mervyn met her, but she had died before I met Sorabji. She is buried in Bournemouth cemetery, which is a vast place.

SO: Why wasn't Sorabji buried next to his mother?

DV: Who really wants to be in a cemetery that is in the middle of traffic and all the rest of it, not when you can be there in Corfe Castle?<sup>319</sup>

SO: I saw his stone, there next to Mr. Best.

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<sup>319</sup> In conversation Mrs. Vicars told me that it had been Sorabji's desire to be buried next to the Russian Prince and Princess in Corfe Castle. This is all that Mrs. Vicars could tell me and she was unaware if Sorabji actually had any acquaintance with these Russian nobles, but it was discovered later, thanks to Mr. George Willey's encyclopaedic knowledge of the inhabitants of the Isle of Purbeck, past and present, that Prince and Princess Troubetzkoy, two White Russians who escaped to England just prior to the bloody Russian Revolution, did indeed live on the Isle of Purbeck and are now buried in Corfe Castle, specifically in the new cemetery off West Street where Sorabji's tomb stone can now be seen. So it was not to be that Sorabji would find eternal rest next to the Troubetzkoy's, but at least he is in the same intimately sized cemetery. It is curious to note that the Troubetzkoy's stepson, Prince George Chavchavadze, was a piano virtuoso who studied with Egon Petri, Sorabji's dear friend and a musician who he greatly admired. A brief description of the Troubetzkoy's and Chavchavadze's time on the Isle of Purbeck can be found in Vera Ryder's book *The Little Victim's Play: An Edwardian Childhood*, (London: Rubert Hale, 1974), who, incidentally, was another high class citizen on the Isle of Purbeck with whom the Vicarses were close friends. Apparently Mervyn Vicars, a cellist, and Vera Ryder, who was a pianist of considerable ability, would now and again play duets in the fashion of private chamber entertainment, while Denise Vicars and Vera's husband would converse casually while strolling about the Ryders' country home, Rempstone Hall.

DV: Were there any flowers?

SO: No.

DV: There is no point in leaving flowers. Do you know what I take there every year? I take a handful of amethyst coloured stones and leave them there. But they always disappear, so I take another lot. He loved the colour of amethyst. Oh dear K!<sup>320</sup>

You just didn't go knock on his door and drop in at all. He made people welcome, but they were welcome by appointment more or less. I used to go over before they had to leave. I had a key, so I could let myself in and I used to take goodies over and little odds and ends and just see that they were alright. He couldn't bear intrusion. There was no question of it, nobody would. I think all his friends must have known that.

SO: Do you know why the home is called the Eye?

DV: I always associated it with the Eye of Horus. Oh dear K!

SO: He must have meant a lot to you.

DV: Oh yes, I feel him.

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<sup>320</sup> A few minutes passed of casual conversation, which led via the new ownership of Sorabji's home to the issue of Sorabji's privacy.

## Chapter Twelve – Anthony Burton-Page

*ANTHONY BURTON-PAGE was but a young man and Sorabji quite elderly when their friendship was first formed. The interview, which took place on April 22, 2003 in Mr. Burton-Page's Fontmell Magna, Shaftesbury, home, began over a casual perusal of Mr. Burton-Page's collection of Sorabji related artefacts, many of which were given to him by the composer.*

ABP: He gave me this in 1979, a copy of *Gulistan* with one or two interesting annotations. There is a theme, the male oriented ideas interested him: 'That straight tall cypress my eyes beheld.'<sup>321</sup> 'The typical Persian poetic description of masculine beauty.'<sup>322</sup>

You must have seen this, which I got him to sign.<sup>323</sup> He went straight to the picture and wrote, 'I didn't look as foul as this.'

SO: It is a terrible picture. Ah, you have an original copy of *Mi Contra Fa!*<sup>324</sup>

ABP: It cost me £17.50 in 1979 and I had never paid so much for a book in my life, but I was determined to get a copy. When he discovered how much I paid for it he said, 'Good God! You didn't pay that much for it did you?' He thought that it was dreadful that I paid so much for a book.

SO: How did you first meet Sorabji?

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<sup>321</sup> *The Gulistan or Rose Garden of Sa'di*, trans. Edward Rehatsek, ed. W. G. Archer (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1964). This line, which Sorabji had marked with a pen, is drawn from the twentieth story of chapter 5, "On Youth and Love."

<sup>322</sup> Sorabji's own annotation, written at the bottom of the page. It is curious to note, perhaps with implications as to Sorabji's inspiration behind his own nocturne of the same title, that he also marked, as if to draw Mr. Burton-Page's attention, stories 6, 8, and 14 from chapter 5, "On Youth and Love."

<sup>323</sup> Paul Rapoport, *Opus Est: six composers from northern Europe* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1979), 160.

<sup>324</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, *Mi contra fa: the immoralising of a Machiavellian musician* (London: Porcupine Press, 1947).

ABP: I knew about him once we moved down to Church Knowle in 1976. My parents moved from London. We had always known Dorset, because my father, when he was in the army, went to Bovington and Bovington Camp is just up by Wareham. It is still an Army camp and they still use it for tank training. He was always determined to move back down to Dorset. In fact, we spent holidays down here and would rent cottages, but it was costing so much to rent the cottages, it was becoming ridiculous because we would stay there at Easter and in summer time, so the family decided that, this is silly, we should just sell the place in London and move down here. So we did. In 1976 we found a house in a little village near Corfe Castle called Church Knowle. It was a haven from Manchester. I was getting fed up with Manchester at that time. I still stayed up there working, but I came down to Dorset as often as I possibly could.

It was my brother Piers who said, 'You know there is a composer living in Corfe Castle?' 'What composer?' I was fascinated by composers and wanted to meet as many composers as I could. My uncle Jim, Jim Aspinall, who lived in Worth Matravers, was a composer. He was sort of a recluse, very self-effacing and could only rarely be persuaded to get some of his compositions out, although he had quite a few played in the 50's, but the commercial way was not the way for him. None of it was published. It was enchanting stuff, very much like Delius. I think that Delius was his great god, but totally unlike Sorabji. Anyway, I wanted to try and get into the minds of composers, being an aspiring composer myself and when Piers said that there was a composer living in Corfe Castle I thought, 'Interesting! I wonder whereabouts?' I rambled around the countryside actually imagining where this composer might live and I came by this very grand house in between Corfe Castle and Church Knowle, thinking, 'Oh this is an ideal place for a composer, acres of land and a big palatial house.'

SO: Which house was this?

ABP: That was Buncknowle House. Of course I looked Sorabji up in the *Oxford Companion to Music*, and as you know, 'persons have been deliberately misled as to dates and places.' There was a lot of extraordinary information there. But, I thought,

‘How do I get to meet this guy? I can’t just drop in. I don’t even know where he lives.’ That part of Corfe Castle, where he did actually live, was just so inaccessible. I had passed the entrance of the road hundreds and hundreds of times, having no idea what was up there, it was just an un-made-up road. I was in a trio in those days and it just so happened that we were going to give a concert in Church Knowle, so I thought, ‘I know, I will see if he wants to come to the concert. It will give me an excuse to meet him.’ So I wrote a flattering letter, as flattering a letter as I could, to try and persuade him to come, saying, ‘I am afraid that the repertoire is not terribly interesting, because there isn’t anything for our ensemble’s combination by Reger, Szymanowski, Busoni, or, as far as I am aware, Sorabji, unless you would care to add to the canon one day.’ I knew that he was interested in these composers and I was getting interested in them during those days as well. He took the bait, as I hoped he would. So I got that letter which you have seen.<sup>325</sup>

SO: So he was referring to your invitation when he said, ‘I NEVER go out at night...’

ABP: Yes. I am not sure if I mentioned what we were playing, I didn’t dare. We always played a piece by Malcolm Arnold and Gustav Holst. There was a very good trio for flute, oboe, and clarinet by Malcolm Arnold, which lasted about seven minutes, so it is a mini-masterpiece. The Holst piece is the *Terzetto* for flute, oboe, and viola, with the viola part played by the clarinet. It is actually quite a fine piece of music and I reckon that it works better with the clarinet. It became one of the standards in our repertoire. The trio had been together for about three years by then and we lasted until 1982, when we gave our last concert. The clarinet player, who was a multi-talented fellow, Richard Turner, played the guitar up to superb concert levels, but he also had an art exhibition, he had poetry published, he had done sculpture, and the only thing he hadn’t done was written a novel. He wanted to spend five years writing a novel, so that is why we stopped. After that I took up the job at The Old Malt House, so as to make a potential income. Anyway, that was our trio.

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<sup>325</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Anthony Burton-Page, Stockport, 21 April 1979, letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

Sorabji didn't come to the concert. But we arranged to meet the next time I was down. I can't remember when exactly it was, I do have some diaries out and I have kept meaning to tabulate my various visits. It was just something that I put down in the diary as 'Sorabji, 8 o'clock,' it was nothing out of the ordinary. I went around and it was like going into a time warp. I had always lived in old houses, our house in Church Knowle was 200 years old, but it was sort of bright and airy and we had made it as habitable as possible. But his house, although 150 years younger, was like going into my grandparents' house, my mother's parents who lived up in Leicester who were born in the 1880's. I was intrigued with their house because they hadn't done anything to it since the 1950's or possibly the 1940's and they were in their late 80's when I was a little boy. I was always intrigued with their house because everything was old; there were stacks of magazines from the 1930's and it was one of those old person's houses where they hadn't been able to tidy up in the sitting room for about 20 years. But Sorabji's house wasn't like that, it was tidy and beautifully kept, but there were so many knickknacks, little ornaments, bigger ornaments, just things, lots of things, he loved things and there was a chiming clock and every quarter of an hour you would get this euphonious whirling, twittering, and tinkling.

Sorabji only played the piano for me a couple of times. I think he played the beginning of *Gulistan*, he was quite fond of that and he also liked the *Concerto per suonare* or rather *Concerto da suonare da me solo e senza orchestra*.<sup>326</sup> So I used to take my tape recorder to his house, because he didn't have one, and play various things to him. Somebody had given him a tape of *Il tessuto d'arabeschi* and since he didn't have anything to play it on he gave it to me. We sat there once listening to it and he said, 'Well, well, you know that they paid me a thousand pounds for that.'<sup>327</sup>

SO: His only commission.

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<sup>326</sup> Mr. Burton-Page has here corrected Sorabji's unidiomatic Italian in the title of his composition.

<sup>327</sup> *Il tessuto d'arabeschi* (1979) was commissioned by Sorabji's friend Norman P. Gentieu for the Delius Society in Philadelphia.

ABP: Yes, it was ironic that a man who hated chamber music, who wrote these beautiful piano pieces, was to be commissioned to write a work without a piano in it. I thought this was unbelievable.

I remember while still living in Manchester, to get to sleep at night, I would play a tape that had one side of Sorabji and the other side with Steve Reich, two opposite poles of the musical spectrum.

SO: How was it that Sorabji gave you one of his silver topped walking sticks?

ABP: I am not sure. As the years went by he started giving me presents. There is so much in this house that was from him. He loved wooden boxes. He used to say, 'Look at the work on the back.' I was so touched that he would part with so many beautiful things, but he would say, 'It isn't valuable, I got it from a junk shop.' I could just imagine him walking around London poking away into what to him were treasure houses, that people would get rid of things that they didn't think were worth anything.

These are the scores.<sup>328</sup> I went up to this music shop in York, I think in 1979, and they charged me the original prices for these manuscripts, for example 7 shillings and 6 pence worked out as something like 37½ pence. He did sign a few of them for me. And this is the actual manuscript.<sup>329</sup> I couldn't believe it when he just said, 'Here you are *per divertirsi*.'

Kaikhosru Catamontanus Corfiensis<sup>330</sup> - he loved the idea of himself being a catamontan, which is a mountain lynx, because it was an animal that lived by itself. He loved cats and was not a dog person. He was quite rude about dogs.

SO: Did you ever perform the *Fantasiettina*?

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<sup>328</sup> Mr. Burton-Page has a collection of Sorabji's original published works that is nearly complete and at this time in our conversation he had presented them for my viewing.

<sup>329</sup> At this moment I was shown the manuscript to Sorabji's *Fantasiettina Atematica* for oboe, flute, and clarinet (1981), which was dedicated to Mr. Burton-Page.

<sup>330</sup> It was fairly common practice for Sorabji to invent some form of comical name or title for himself when signing letters to close friends and variations upon Catamontanus Corfiensis was particularly typical in many of his letters to Mr. Burton-Page.

ABP: My trio played through it, just at the end of our career and it was shortly after that when Richard said that he was going to spend a few years writing a novel, so we never got around to playing it in public. He said that the oboe was supposed to float on top of the music and that is why it was written this way around, oboe, flute, clarinet, because the oboe was definitely the solo instrument, written for me.

SO: Did Sorabji ever talk you through the composition?

ABP: No.

SO: That wouldn't have been his way.

ABP: Definitely not.

SO: Did you always see Sorabji at The Eye or did you ever have occasion to meet him elsewhere?

ABP: I was always around at The Eye, but once, when my parents were away, I managed to persuade him to come to me for some tea. I drove him from The Eye to our house in Church Knowle. He loved it, because he knew that there wouldn't be anyone there and that is the only reason that he came. He knew that nobody would see him, so I made sure that I drove the car into a little driveway through an old gate and also I didn't want him to have to walk any distance. So he came into our sitting room and enjoyed looking around, seeing what an old farmhouse was like, not that there was anything farming about it, it was just a house. I think that I got some tea ready for him and my mother had made a cake. My mother and father were in France. But they did meet him once; we bumped into him in Wareham. We were shopping.

SO: Would you have been in your twenties?

ABP: Yes, I must have been 26 or 27 when we bumped into him in Wareham. So I was able to introduce him to my parents.

SO: He was courteous of course.

ABP: Of course, absolutely, but I knew that he didn't want to hang around. Having people forced upon him was not his way. I wouldn't force anybody on anyone, especially him, not even my parents. Mum was very easy going, but my father really wanted to meet him. So he met them once very briefly, but I knew he wouldn't come to my house unless I could assure him that we wouldn't be disturbed by anybody. It wasn't vanity, it was just privacy. He liked to keep various things in his life separated. It was afternoon time and he was very appreciative of my mother's cake; he did enjoy things like that. I took him around various little presents every so often, like things made by my mother, and at Christmas time it was a bottle of Marsala, and he liked petit fours, those little marzipan shapes, little fake fruit, he absolutely adored those. There was a shop either in Wareham or Swanage called Cullens and it was a delicatessen that shut in about 1980; it was one of these old fashioned firms, which just couldn't go on surviving. It was exactly his sort of shop because you could get Marsala and all your unusual things. You could get your petit fours from there if you wanted to. Fewer and fewer people wanted things like this so the store shut. He was immensely disappointed, because that was his way of living, he didn't like ordinary and commonplace things. He liked, without being luxurious, things to be a bit special and different. He was just different. So when I was able to get things like that I would bring them around. The Marsala had to come from this one shop, which he never discovered in Swanage, which sold it. I never told him that there was a shop in Swanage, because I didn't want him to go and get, I liked providing it for him. Anyways, that store stopped getting it in the early 80's. But I used to go up to London more often in those days and he had recommended a place in Leicester Square, so I would have to go there to pick up his Marsala all Uovo.

SO: How often did you see him?

ABP: Probably on a monthly basis. I would never invite myself around. It was usually a phone call from him and he would say, 'Are you free next Sunday evening at 7 o'clock?' And I would say, 'Yes, I am.' 'Oh good, would you like to come around?' Just occasionally if I rang him with some item of information or something that might have interested him, he would say, 'Oh good, would you like to come around and we can talk about it?' There was a record of Michael Habermann playing, which I transferred to tape, and I rang him up and said, 'I have it on tape now, would you like me to bring it around so we can listen to it?' 'Oh yes, yes.'

SO: How did he react to the Habermann recording?

ABP: He loved listening to music on the tape recorder.

SO: Did he enjoy listening to his own compositions?

ABP: Oh, yes!<sup>331</sup>

SO: Did he seem to remember them? You could see why I would ask such a question with there being no performance history and taking into consideration how prolific he was.

ABP: I don't think that he did. He said, 'I played O.C. up in Glasgow in 1930,' and I said to him, 'did you play it from memory?' 'Good God no! I couldn't memorise a page of that stuff.'

SO: How did it feel for you visiting Sorabji?

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<sup>331</sup> Upon listening to a tape recording of the radio broadcasted performance of his *Cinque sonetti di Michelagnolo Buonarroti* (1923) Sorabji did write a critical but kind comment about the performance and his own composition, 'I am vastly obliged to you for your kindness in bringing your tape recorder along and was very glad and pleased to hear the Sonnets, vastly better than I thought they would be, indeed was quite gratified. The singer had quite the right ideas but was vocally below the scale needed, poor lamb, but he phrased nicely and had proper feel for the incomparable words.' Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Anthony Burton-Page, Church Knowle, 10 May 1980, Letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

ABP: It was enormously fun. He was such an interesting man, just so incredibly interesting and so friendly, that really appealed. The music side of things was almost irrelevant, but not quite, because I was deadly keen on music and he was obviously, in fact whatever he might have said, he was a passionate musician and loved music very deeply. I think what I am saying is that we were both musicians. A musician has music going on in his head all the time, whether you like it or not it is always resonating in the background and there was this link between us. But it is just that he was such a nice chap. I am afraid that I borrowed that from him, because in one of the letters he wrote, 'To the NCh of ChKn,' it was meant to be the 'nice chap from Church Knowle,' which was his little name for me. He obviously thought that I was a nice chap as well, which is wonderful 1930's terminology. There was nothing remotely unpleasant, prurient, or sleazy. He was never a person that your mother would have said, 'Oh dear,' about. He was honest and so direct. He was aware that he knew a lot and not just about music. He was so interested in health and natural matters. Some of these letters are not in the remotest bit about music.

SO: That is quite a few letters that you have.<sup>332</sup>

ABP: 'Urgent Warning: Warn anybody you know who might be going that the performance by a certain pianist on June 30<sup>th</sup> of works of mine has been forbidden by me.'<sup>333</sup> So he did not approve of that at all.

SO: He couldn't do anything about it.

ABP: No. Well what could he do!

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<sup>332</sup> At this point in the conversation, Mr. Burton-Page began perusing the letters that Sorabji had sent to him.

<sup>333</sup> This comment by Sorabji was sent to Mr. Burton-Page on the reverse side of an advertisement for the mentioned concert, which was to take place in the Purcell Room on 30 June 1984. The pianist in question was Martin Offord who included, amongst two organ works by Michael Finnissy and Karlheinz Stockhausen, Brian Ferneyhough's piano work *Lemma-Icon-Epigram* and three works by Sorabji, *In the Hothouse*, *Le Jardin parfumé*, and *Prelude-Interlude-Fugue*.

‘Keep Carefully!’<sup>334</sup> Which I have, ‘An astonishingly persuasive Canadian economist named Charles Levinson popped up on the screen last night in “Vodka Cola” (ITV). Talking with great force and speed Levinson offered his thesis that the world is being run by a handful of titanic business affiliations, in which Russia and the West are equal conspirators and partners. Levinson’s well researched pitch is that, despite what we poor fools may be told, Western goods are increasingly being manufactured in strike-free, low-paid Eastern Europe in a kind of barter exchange for Western food and technology. Unemployment at home is directly linked, says Levinson, to this use of cheap labour in satellite Europe. The world, it is argued, is still in happy ignorance of this cynical, super capitalist collaboration of allegedly sworn enemies. Occasional crises, like Afghanistan, are privately deemed to be satisfactory and acceptable to the vast munitions interests of the world business complexes guiding our destiny. I must say Levinson had me totally sold.’<sup>335</sup>

SO: He was quite a believer in conspiracy theories, not all of which were completely unfounded.

ABP: I think that he made a lot of good sense and had a very deep distrust in capitalist ways.

‘Yes: but is it the “whole way of life?”’<sup>336</sup> He knew that I was very interested in this kind of thing and we both used to go to this shop called Nuts and May, or something like that, which was one of the first whole-food shops in Purbeck and you could actually get very high quality food there. He was very interested in good quality food and loathed anything processed.

‘Yes my dear *Frate epitalamica* is perfectly all right, so *Rapsodia epitalamica*.’<sup>337</sup> I had written a piece for oboe and string trio for my friend Gustav’s wedding. I took the piece around to Sorabji to look at and comment upon the title and I said that *Epithalamic*

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<sup>334</sup> Sorabji’s short annotation upon an article that he sent to Mr. Burton-Page: “I.T.V.’s ‘Vodka-Cola’ Programme,” *On Target (Supplement)* (9 and 23 August 1980).

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.* The last two sentences of this quotation were emphatically underlined by Sorabji’s pen.

<sup>336</sup> This annotated question was posed by Sorabji in response to the title of an article that he sent to Mr. Burton-Page: Sandra Grant, “The wholefood way of life,” *The Daily Telegraph* (11 September 1980): 17.

<sup>337</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Anthony Burton-Page, Church Knowle, 12 September 1980, letter in the hand of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

*rhapsody* doesn't sound very nice and would it sound better in Italian. He said, 'Oh yes,' and eventually wrote *Rapsodia epitalamica*, he must have looked it up in some book. But I thought that the Italian title sounded much better.

'Was so pleased to see you yesterday and a score of thanks for the cassettes and for the delicious dolci, very naughty of you and you really do make me feel guilty! And also so much concerned over your bad rest. I send you herewith a...purely herbal thing guaranteed utterly harmless for you to try. Two or three half an hour before bedtime with any hot drink they say. If you find they work I'll give you some more. See also that your bedroom is as dark as possible, unless like me you feel you must have a very dim light (red low wattage bulb...or so low down nowhere near your eyes). Apologise to your noble father for what he must have thought my rather abrupt approach when he answered the phone the other day. Have the James book...'<sup>338</sup> Oh yes, I got some ghost stories by M. R. James. He loved M. R. James, as you know. I got the whole lot and he was intrigued, he said, 'Yes, yes I will have a look.' 'Have the James book handy for you as soon as you want it. Another thing, do your feet get cold in bed? If so wear a thin-ish pair of socks and have something to draw up over your knees and feet in those cold early morning hours, when the vitality is at its lowest. Also remember the palming exercise if wakeful. And that's all for this nonce. Bless you and vast thanks for all your kind thoughtfulness, so unfashionable in this goddamn day and age and among any sort of age too!'<sup>339</sup>

SO: Do you remember the palming exercise?

ABP: Oh yes, you have to blot out light completely, to make sure no light escapes in. You open your eyes and it is just a way of relaxing the eyes.<sup>340</sup> I still do it very occasionally when I remember it.

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<sup>338</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Anthony Burton-Page, Church Knowle, 22 August 1981, letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>340</sup> Mr. Burton-Page demonstrated the exercise. Sorabji described the method and usefulness of this technique in an earlier letter to Mr. Burton Page, 'Cross your hands so the palms form a lattice work over the V shaped space to fit over your nose. Place the filled hands over your eyes. Don't press on the eyelids. Open your eyes behind the hands to make sure no light is seeping through the lattice work of your fingers, then sit with your elbows on a table but don't let your arms rub with each other. Think of various black

SO: Why did he feel that this technique was necessary and what was the trouble associated with light?

ABP: I think that I must have mentioned to him that I wasn't sleeping very well.

SO: I spoke with Sir Jeremy Grayson,<sup>341</sup> who photographed Sorabji in the late 1970s, and he said that all of the curtains had to be drawn shut in The Eye.

ABP: That would have been vanity, him not wanting to be seen.

SO: Sir Grayson insisted that he had to open some curtains so as to obtain the appropriate light, since he detested using flash photography. So Sorabji relented and allowed a few curtains to be opened, but as the light broke into the room Sorabji reeled as if in pain from being struck by the light.

ABP: He liked having his place dark. He preferred it like that I think.

SO: And he felt that the palming exercise would aid one's sleep?

ABP: It was just an exercise for the eyes. He was interested in health and said that the eye is just another part of the body and it ought to be exercised just as you exercise other parts of your body, but we don't give it enough exercise. He also said that what is said about reading in a bad light is rubbish, because if you read in a bad light you are actually making your eyes work, which I think makes sense. He said that another thing, which he

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things, surfaces or what not, and let your mind roam from one another in fantasy. Look about you for a few seconds then palm again and so on for a few minutes. But don't let yourself get worked and stop when you feel you have had enough. Most restful to the eyes! You can even do it in bed if you are wakeful and it will help you to drop off. Avoid staring with wide opened eyes at anything. Blink frequently.' Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Anthony Burton-Page, Church Knowle, 19 November 1979, Letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

<sup>341</sup> In October 1977 Sir Jeremy Grayson was commissioned by the Radio Times to conduct a photo session of Sorabji and Yonty Solomon at The Eye. Many fascinating images emerged from this photo shoot; in particular he captured from various angles the music room in The Eye, with its two pianos, abundance of bookshelves, and plethora of ornate antiques and decorative items.

tried to get me to do quite often, was to hold something close, focus on it, then hold it further away and focus upon on that, always changing the focal length, because you are actually making the eyes work. It is something that I try to do, but not often enough. And he was a very healthy man. He kept pretty good health until his 90s.

SO: Although we couldn't say that his eyesight was all that great.

ABP: His eyesight wasn't perfect. I think he realised that and that is why he wanted to exercise his eyes.

I used to call him Mr. Sorabji although he said, 'My friends all call me K, I hope you will call me K.' But I still thought that was a bit disrespectful and avoided the issue.

You know he loved good food and admired the good things in life, and yet he would send me *The Living World: Journal of Crusade against all Cruelty to Animals* and he loathed the idea of *foie gras*;<sup>342</sup> it was one of his big things, he detested and went on regularly that these geese are force fed huge amounts of grain that are actually crammed down their throats. There was a machine called the 'crammer' that forced the food down so as to make their liver as large as possible before they killed it, getting more profit out of the goose. He despised that sort of idea.

SO: He once wrote that it was a basic Parsi belief that the well-being of the animals had to be maintained, that it was almost crueler to kill an animal than a human being. He liked to say that Zoroastrianism was the one religion that declared cruelty to animals as being a sin. He didn't like dogs because in Zoroastrianism dogs are declared as dirty animals.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> "European spotlight on crusade report," *The Living World: Journal of Crusade against all Cruelty to Animals* 1, no. 22 (1980): 6-14.

<sup>343</sup> "The very interesting and perceptive correspondence in your columns about cruelty to animals prompts certain comments on the comparative attitudes thereunto in the great religious traditions. Generally speaking in those of the Judaeo-Christian tradition the attitude has usually been that animals were created for man's use in any way he chose. Occasionally this has led to some rather shocking incidents when, in the latter years of last century, Lord Odo Russell approached the Vatican authorities of the time for their endorsement and encouragement of his efforts to establish in Rome a society for prevention of cruelty to animals. This was refused; Lord Odo was told that the notion that men owed any duty to the animal kingdom was "based upon a theological error." This attitude, if not so frankly and less hypocritically

ABP: ‘The evidence that the world is governed by criminal lunatics grows apparent so that not even the most incurable rose-coloured spectacle wearers can [fail to] see it. And what on earth do you think of that special relation with Yankee-dom,<sup>344</sup> which tacitly fosters murderous and atrocious activities against its allies...by the I.R.A. murderers? Do you remember the wise lady, the widow done to death by the C.I.A., “Those who have America for an ally have no need of an enemy.”’<sup>345</sup>

SO: He was very sceptical of American politics and capitalism.

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expressed, is implicit in that of many people to factory farming, and the abominations associated with the preparation of things like *paté de foie gras*, not to mention the activities of the “sporting” Christian.

‘Buddhism with its central doctrine of universal compassion (Ahimsa) to every living thing is, on paper, wholly admirable, and, of course, involves vegetarianism. Unfortunately it comes up here against the epoch-making discoveries of Sir Jaghadis Bhowe, who has demonstrated that plants have a nervous system many times as sensitive as that of animals, feel pain and death, and have heart beats, which cease at death. This, of course, rather knocks the bottom out of the merely humanitarian arguments for vegetarianism. There are of course others, which don’t arise in this connection. In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition (the so-called greater vehicle) this attitude (Ahimsa) reaches sometimes to exaggerated lengths involving keeping alive noxious and noisome vermin.

‘Right outside all these traditions both by reason of its immense age – it antedates Christianity by a thousand years – and by the small number of its adherents in the modern world is Zarathustrianism, the ancient faith of Iran (Persia) and of the Persian settlers in Bombay, known today as the Parsis, who fled from their ancestral homeland more than a millennium ago to escape Moslem persecution. Zarathustrianism is unique in its specific and out-and-out condemnation as a cardinal sin of the infliction of cruelty and/or unnecessary suffering upon “animals of the good creation,” thus realistically recognising that some are emphatically not of the “good creation.” To go into the responsibility of both the good and evil principles in the universe for the creation of both would take too long, and is in any event unnecessary here. Thus Zarathustrianism here implies a similar attitude to that implied in the reference to Satan in the Christian tradition as “Lord of the flies.” It also condemns out-and-out the killing of animals for fun (“sport” as it is called). Thus it avoids both the exaggerated excesses of the Mahaya attitude and also the callous insensibility of the “healthy open-air” muscular Christian type who, with that fair play for which he is so notorious, tearing one helpless animal to pieces with his revolting dogs after having hunted it to death with his odious horses, over both of which creatures, by the way, he is ready to dissolve into deliquescent sentimentality at the slightest provocation.’ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Dim view of dogs,” *Swanage Times* (30 December 1965): 17.

<sup>344</sup> ‘Yankee-dom’ is my interpretation of a typical illegibility in Sorabji’s letter, which in its original form was as follows, ‘ysnkkoeedone.’

<sup>345</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Anthony Burton-Page, Langton Matravers, 1984, Letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

ABP: I offered to go shopping for him, ‘Many thanks for your kind note and you very kind suggestions. No need at all to impose upon you with regard to Swanage. We go, my godson and I, once weekly shopping thereunto likewise to Wareham.’<sup>346</sup>

This is when I first invited him around to our house in return for my visiting him, ‘Thank you for you charming invitation, but for various reasons I don’t visit anybody outside my own home these days, not even my oldest and most intimate friends, who if they want to see me must imitate Muhammad.’ And come to the mountain I suppose. ‘My reason? Oh too tiresome and unpleasant to go without embarrassment.’<sup>347</sup> Eventually he said to me that it was because he kept on having to pop off to the loo and that is why I think he only wanted to come to my house when mom and dad weren’t there. But I don’t remember him keeping on popping off to the loo. I only remember him going once, which for somebody that is 80-90 that is pretty good. ‘Let that be that. Feel very uneasy about keeping longer than absolutely necessary the valuable and beautiful book you left behind...’<sup>348</sup> Oh, I think I left my father’s book there.

‘Apropos the health shop, Sunny Meadows it is called, almost opposite the electricity place in the High St., you might try “Potters Passiflora” tablets for your insomnia, completely harmless and non druggy. She (Mrs. Collier) of Sunny Meadows has also others if she’s out of stock of that one. How is your bronchial trouble?’<sup>349</sup> He was just so concerned. You couldn’t not just be overwhelmed by somebody’s interest in you and concern for you.

This one is from 1983 and handwritten.

SO: Best of luck!<sup>350</sup>

ABP: ‘Very dear Anthony! Is it “TH” or just “T?” Silly of me always forgetting.’<sup>351</sup> Oh, I was having trouble with my leg in those days. I sound like a regular patient.

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<sup>346</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Anthony Burton-Page, Church Knowle, 9 July 1979, Letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>350</sup> Luck or at least persistence is required for deciphering the notorious scrawl of Sorabji’s handwriting.

<sup>351</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Anthony Burton-Page, Church Knowle, 21 June 1983, Letter in the hand of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection. Mr. Burton-Page continued to read, or

SO: Did he know that you had linguistic capacities?

ABP: Yes he did know.

SO: What was your impression of his language skills? Do you think that he was actually fluent in the various languages that he used in his letters?

ABP: I am not fluent in the languages, but I do have a working knowledge. I think a lot of people have an interest in language and words. He was a lot better in Italian than I am. He must have had one of those retentive memories.

I must have shown him my composition, 'I have been thinking a lot about your gracious and brave *Fête Champêtre*, its engaging quality is its complete lack of avant-garde quackery and progressive-ist cant. And its utter lack in the fast and allegro sections of any of that ghastly clod hopping, country bumpkin loutishness which the average British composer seems either unable or unwilling to avoid in his "jolly" passages. And that insufferable folk-stuff, Ugh! How it ruins the best of Szymanowski, I think of that dreadful *Sinfonia Concertante* for piano and orchestra. How on earth did he, the creator of the incomparable Song of the Night and King Roger, come to perpetrate that? Talk about whoring after false gods! Blessings and much love from Corfe Drop.'<sup>352</sup> I never called it *Fête Champêtre*. I wrote a woodwind trio, for flute, oboe and clarinet. I think that his came afterwards.

SO: How many of your scores did you take to him?

ABP: Just that. I didn't want to impose. It wasn't a kind of musical meeting, that wasn't the point of it. It was just company really.

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rather tried to read, the next couple sentences of the letter, but for the reason expressed in footnote 29 was only able to procure the gist of the letter's content.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*

SO: Did you sense immediately that the two of you would have this congenial friendship?

ABP: I think so. The first time I went around I thought, ‘What a delightful person. I would like to keep in touch with a person like this for as long as I can.’ He was just utterly charming in a way that a benevolent uncle would have been. I used to cycle around and had a garment with a hood on it, a woollen thing, which was still mildly unfashionable in the 1980s, so he called me Brother Anthony because he thought I looked like a monk, thus Frater Antonius.<sup>353</sup>

‘This is to confirm my permission to Monsieur Lutosławski that my songs may be performed where he wishes.’<sup>354</sup> I got to know somebody who knew Lutosławski and Lutosławski was interested in performing some of the songs, I believe the songs that Jane Manning sang.<sup>355</sup> Lutosławski apparently asked if he could perform the songs, but he didn’t write directly to Sorabji, he wrote to this friend of mine who then asked me, so I said that I would ask. I don’t know what happened with that. ‘My songs may be performed where he wishes. But I will not be called an English or British composer. Lovely to see your reassured self the other evening, but you forgot to take away your Saki.’<sup>356</sup> He loved Saki, the short story writer, H. H. Munro. I had always, even before I met Sorabji, adored them, little gems, every word is right, absolutely polished. We both admired him and used to compare notes on which story we had read most recently. He was very fond of *Gabriel Earnest*, as I was. There was a biography on Saki that I gave to him when it came out. I bought him a copy of the biography of H. H. Munro and I could never afford to buy myself a copy. I still don’t have a copy. The only copy I ever owned and I gave it to him.

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<sup>353</sup> The first letter in which Mr. Burton-Page is referred to as Frater Antonius seems to be from 19 November 1979, after which this became a common name of endearment that Sorabji used in his salutations.

<sup>354</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Anthony Burton-Page, Church Knowle, 23 March 1982, Letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

<sup>355</sup> In 1979, with Yonty Solomon playing piano accompaniment, Jane Manning sang for a BBC radio broadcast, the repertoire included *Trois fêtes galantes de Verlaine* (c. 1919) and *Trois poèmes pour chant et piano* (1918, 1919). If Mr. Burton-Page’s assertion is correct, then these must be the songs that Lutosławski wanted to perform.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*

SO: Did you feel that he was trying to shape you in some ways by sending you so many articles?

ABP: Passing his wisdom down to me? He wouldn't have been as patronising as that or as arrogant, but he was passing down his experience. He knew that he was older and here was this young person that was willing to learn and listen. I just loved being in his company and he could obviously see that. I don't think that it ever crossed his or my mind that there was any shaping going on, but influencing? Perhaps, but only from the best possible motives, because he was concerned that I was a terrible asthmatic and had been living in Manchester. My last winter in Manchester, Christmas of 1979, I had a terrible bronchitis that nearly finished me off. He was terribly concerned about that. He thought of me as the fragile one and he was nearing 90. He felt that it was his duty to make sure that his friends were ok. If he had any information to pass on health wise he would pass it on. He would say, 'If it doesn't work then pass it on. If it has side effects, then don't do it.' As for the political things, he thought he was doing me a favour by warning me about not trusting the capitalist society.

This one must have been around Christmas time, 'A short line to thank you vastly for the Marsala all Uovo. Very naughty of you but very nice of you, *quand même*. I have forborne to ring you to thank you as I felt sure you must be entangled in these ghastly "festive" capers. I loathe Christmas and detest turkey in any form. You are all I trust keeping well and warm? Later we'll arrange a coven. Till then all possible well wishings to you and yours in *saecula saeculorum*. *Bien à vous*.'<sup>357</sup> So we have French and Latin.

Here it says something about my car, because it had recently bitten the dust, 'Am deeply sorry to hear about your car, there is a museum specimen with built in obsolescence, which...*On Target* deals faithfully with.'<sup>358</sup> Oh yes, *On Target* was the famous magazine and he had this thing about built in obsolescence, which is a fact of life. 'Part of the swindle of "full employment" whether it is necessary or not plus all that

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<sup>357</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Anthony Burton-Page, Church Knowle, 27 December 1979, Letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

<sup>358</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Anthony Burton-Page, Langton Matravers, 17 September 1984, Letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

flows from it via the horrors of Studland Beach pollution, progressive destruction by big business and high financial brigands, and if anyone can't see that this set up is a high speed rush to complete perdition...well. Very many thanks for rerunning the records. But *caro mio* there seems to have been a small misunderstanding. I didn't want that big Habermann record but the cassette tape he sent with a later recording of *Le Jardin* and that silly interview! Never mind don't thrash your dear self about it, it will make a good excuse for your coming to see me again before not too long ahead. Was so thrilled to hear you had heard one of those old records of Caruso and how it made you realise as it must to all with any sense of hearing how the singing with which I grew up only began a few light years beyond that of where today's "greats" leave off. It used to be the fashion for mock superior persons to sneer and jeer at the masters and mistresses of *Bel Canto*, that is to say the power to express every shade of felling and emotion without recourse to barks, coughs, screeches, et al., after the fashion of the present day "interpreter," the noise of whose "interpretations" effectively prevents one hearing the music. And Melba at the height of her career was actually making records of Debussy, Chausson and Duparc and singing them incomparably and she too, again at the height of her fame, used to go once a year to her old teacher, the fabulous Matilde Marchesi to be checked and warned of any bad habits of misuse in her voice that she may have slipped into. You ought to have heard my dear mother's fraying remarks on the "great" vocalists, what a word for what a thing of today. But enough of this Hymn of hate, take good care of yourself and those to whom you are precious.<sup>359</sup>

Ah, this is when I knew Alistair was coming down and I told Sorabji that rather than staying in hotels he could stay with us, 'He has no car and he is coming with the B.B.C. crew and Ronald Stevenson and will have to leave when they do...I'm dreading Dec. 6<sup>th</sup> with all that gang descending on me. If it were only Alistair and Ronald, two very dear and good friends it would be all right, but the B.B.C. bunch, numbered at least four, including a female, for which I, born celibate, don't owe much relish. And why should one be expected to feel flattered when one is told that such and such a one is crazy to meet one. Christ Almighty doesn't it occur to them to ask you if you want to meet them? We will arrange a coven later. Thank your father for the loan of the Zarathustrian

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<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*

book; vastly interesting, telling multitudes of things I didn't know.'<sup>360</sup> One of my father's colleagues had written a book about Zoroastrianism and he read the whole damn thing.

SO: Did Sorabji ever explain to you his supposed aversion to female company?

ABP: No, he just said that he didn't want them around. He once said, 'This lady came in and she had long hair!'

Here he is going on again about Christmas, 'The "festive" (*sic* Costive) season approaches, when that revolting bird, the turkey, will be consumed along with Christmas stupid pudding. Once and only once have I had Xmas pud that didn't revolt me, at one Christmas in Rome, between the wars, when a delightful perverted version thereof was served on Xmas day as a compliment to the English guests, doubtless *pour encourager les autres*, it was really nice! Of course the true born ones snorted that it wasn't real Christmas pudding, much in the same way as the Germans are wont to say that Toscanini's Brahms wasn't real Brahms. No indeed, *maxime gratis et laudes*, that liver sausage composer.'<sup>361</sup> You can see that Brahms and he were not on the same wave length.

SO: You said that Sorabji only played the piano for you a few times?

ABP: I knew that his fingers were very rheumatic and I didn't want to pressure him into doing something that wasn't up to his best ability. Obviously his playing would have been better in days gone by, but his fingers just melted over the keys and he must have had an incredible fluidity and facility. His fingers must have thought about the notes in the same way that he thought about his notes when he was writing them down, covering the ground. Actually, I think he said that, 'I never played very well, but I used to cover the ground.' It was just a lovely noise, but how accurate it was I have no idea, because I

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<sup>360</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Anthony Burton-Page, Church Knowle, 3 December 1979, Letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

<sup>361</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to Anthony Burton-Page, Church Knowle, 198?, Letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private Collection.

didn't have the notes in front of me and neither did he. It was probably a semi-improvised version of *Gulistan*, but I dare say it was pretty accurate. Having said which, if you had written 16,000 pages of music the odd note is bound to go slightly awry in your memory. The other time he played was when we were talking about Florent Schmitt's piano quintet, which was one of his favourite pieces of music. I got a recording of it, because it happened to be broadcast on the B.B.C. one day. To my astonishment this piano quintet lasts an hour and ten minutes. It is only in three movements, but it is a majestic piece. We were talking about it and I told him that I had this recording and asked him if he would like me to bring it around and he said, 'Oh yes, I would love to hear it again. I remember the end of the second movement, where it ends in bare fifths and adds the thirds.' Then he went over to the piano and played the ending. It was a wonderful moment and that ending is very memorable. We sat there and listened to Florent Schmitt and had a glass of marsala afterward.

SO: When you were sitting there listening to the music would he be animated?

ABP: No, he just sat there and looked at the floor but usually closed his eyes and occasionally he would make a little noise when there was a good bit. No he wouldn't sing along or anything demonstrative. He just sat there and drank it in a purely aural experience.

SO: Would he comment afterwards?

ABP: Yes, but always in general terms, nothing like, 'How did you like the modulation in the second movement?' He was interested in it as an ongoing organic process. He didn't think in blocks, it was just one ongoing flow, so somebody like Stravinsky or Tippett, who thinks in blocks, would be a complete anathema to him. Or his idea of Sonata form would have been completely foreign to him.

SO: I like his attitude towards Sonata; take it to its roots, it is a piece that sounds.

ABP: Yes indeed!

SO: It makes sense that in regards to formalistic issues he was attracted to the Baroque forms, in particular the fugue and Passacaglia, which lend nicely to creative invention.

ABP: And to endless proliferation. What I find extraordinary is that he has this reputation for writing fearsomely long works and you look at the catalogue and ok there are quite a few large works, but the majority of them are of a perfectly natural dimension and some of them are too short.

SO: Like the *Sutras*.

ABP: They are Webern in length!

SO: Or even the work dedicated to you.

ABP: Yes, it isn't too long. I always wondered if the lengths of the pieces were determined by the amount of paper that he had left. I know that Rapoport makes a distinct point about the number of pages in his compositions.<sup>362</sup>

SO: Which is definitely more than just a coincidence.

ABP: I have a feeling that when he was approaching the end of a piece he would ask himself, 'What is a good number to end on?' And he would be sure to end on a number that wasn't antipathetic to him.

SO: Rapoport also sees the blot of ink at the end of *Le jardin parfumé* with the invocation,<sup>363</sup> 'here Satan is invoked to rend asunder all such as we hate,' as being significant. But considering that Sorabji's sense of humour was incessant...

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<sup>362</sup> Paul Rapoport, "Sorabji: a continuation," in *Sorabji: a critical celebration* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994), 63-65.

ABP: Oh yes!

SO: One could imagine that upon completing his composition and spilling ink on the manuscript he would inscribe a severe comment. But then this idea along with Rapoport's statement is speculative.

ABP: Especially at the end of a score, had he spilled the ink at the beginning of the score he would have probably just thrown the page away.

What I loved about the manuscripts, what intrigued me, as a person that has been teaching for twenty years who still has to write reports out in the rough first, I can never write a report directly onto the page, was that Sorabji's never or rarely had a crossing out. He didn't have the time to write out a neat version. He was certain about what he wanted to write and then wrote it as quickly as he could, there was no time to go back and make corrections, he was always thinking about the next few notes. Only a couple of times did I ever see him have to extend the page so as to obtain some extra space; it takes me a tremendous effort to get the bar lines right at the end of a page.

SO: You must have pored over the *Fantasiettina Atematica* quite a lot after it was given to you.

ABP: I did.

SO: And it must have been an honour to have the composition dedicated to you.

ABP: Yes, it was unexpected and I hadn't asked. The only reference I ever made to our trio was whether or not he had written any chamber work for our combination. I remember taking a tape of my wind piece, which is rather long, 25 minutes or so. He sat there and we listened and there were bits that he really did enjoy. I realise now that they were the best bits and the rest could do with a hell of a lot of pruning. I think that I

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<sup>363</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

brought the score, but he said, 'No, no, I would rather listen to it.' Again, he just sat there with his eyes shut and listened.<sup>364</sup>

Saturday, the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1982, 'Went to Corfe to visit Sorabji. Stayed for two delightful hours. Heard stories of his school days this time.'<sup>365</sup>

SO: What did he say of his school days?

ABP: He must have talked to me about when he was a young person. He did tell me that he had heard Scriabin play. Perhaps he was just talking about going to concerts in his young days. I suppose he would have said that these were his school days, even if he was about 22 when he was doing it.

'Sorabji rang and invited me around next Saturday,' so we go to next Saturday, 'Sorabji had rung to say that his godson was ill and cancelled my visit.' That was July 1981.<sup>366</sup> According to the dedication the composition was finished around the end of July and the beginning of August, so I am looking in the right year. 'Cycled to Sorabji in pm. He has written a tiny piece for wind trio, but we are forbidden to play it in public.'<sup>367</sup> But when did he give me the piece? It must have been finished by August 17<sup>th</sup>. I never for a moment thought that he would give me the manuscript. I was just flattered that he had written a trio. Ah, Wednesday the 16<sup>th</sup> of December, 'Tidied up for Sorabji,' so my parents must have gone, 'Went to pick him up at 3 o'clock. Gave him some marsala. Played records: Sorabji's *Opus Clavicembalisticum*,' which must have been the Michael Habermann recording of the *Introito, Preludio corale*, 'Chausson's *Concert* and Szymanowski's First Violin Concerto.'<sup>368</sup> He loved the beginning of that piece. It is a fantastic noise at the beginning of it, a magical sound. That is all I wrote there.

SO: What was the occasion when you met Reggie?

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<sup>364</sup> At this point in our conversation, Mr. Burton-Page began searching through his old diaries to see if he could identify the exact day the *Fantasiettina Atematica* was given to him. While searching for this date, he read out from his diary a few other interesting biographical moments.

<sup>365</sup> This quote is from an entry in one of Mr. Burton-Page's old diaries, 5 June 1982. Private Collection.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid*, July 1981.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid*, 17 August 1981.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid*, 16 December 1981.

ABP: I think that once I met him when he came to the door on one of my unscheduled visits, because I had just called to drop something off. Another time was when I went to tea one day and went to the back kitchen and saw Reggie very briefly before he shimmered away. Tea was brewed in a teapot, allowed to brew for four minutes, and then poured into a thermos, so that the tea leaves were removed, it couldn't go on brewing. Of course it was absolutely perfect tea. He had bought a treat for me that day. He had mentioned it to me before, 'Do you like peaches?' 'Yes,' I said. 'Right, when you come for tea I shall get some peaches soaked in brandy.' And that is exactly what it was, an entire peach with the stone inside it. The next time it was orange slices. So we sat down at the table and he was just watching me eat, he was just intrigued to see if I liked it, 'Have another one.' It was wonderful stuff but I was hoping that he would have some as well. I must have been 27 at the time.

SO: So Reggie didn't actually speak to you?

ABP: Only briefly, but he knew exactly who I was. I just passed the time of day with him and asked, 'How are you?' 'Oh my nerves aren't very good,' that is all that he said.

It is December 6<sup>th</sup>, 'To Sorabji 8 o'clock. He gave me the manuscript to the *Fantasiettina Atematica* and some yellow Chartreuse.'<sup>369</sup> Which I still adore! He introduced me to yellow Chartreuse actually. Saki said something like, 'You can say what you like about Christianity, but the religious system that invented green Chartreuse can never truly die.' Sorabji and I both preferred the yellow version. It is ridiculously expensive, but it is fabulous and it is so beneficial to the stomach. If you are feeling rotten, if you have had some inferior alcohol or bad food, a little glass of yellow Chartreuse just settles the system like absolute magic and it ought to do considering how much it costs. But it is fabulous. 'Dear man he becomes more and more loveable.'<sup>370</sup>

SO: Did he ever shock you; not shock as in horror, but perhaps just taken a back a bit?

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<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 December 1981.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*

ABP: I think that the most shocking thing was the music actually. I can remember going to hear Yonty Solomon playing *Rosario d'arabeschi* in 1979 at the Wigmore Hall. What startled me was how violent it was. It sounded like bad tempered piano bashing.

SO: Did the music seem incongruent with his personality?

ABP: I thought so at the time. I later realised that it was just a high and exuberant spirit. The most 'shocking' thing, very much in the inverted comma sense, was when he said that he loathed the sound of a string quartet, because I have never liked the sound of a string quartet. But I realised very quickly that this is an opinion that you keep to yourself in adult company, it is a kind of perversion, like dunking biscuits in tea, but worse than that. Maybe he told me that he couldn't stand the sound of the string quartet because he had been commissioned to write a composition for flute and string quartet. 'I don't like it unless it has the sound of the piano to tone down the scratching sound, then it is alright.' That is why he liked piano quintets.

Unfortunately in his later years I was very much in school and it being a boarding school, I would lose touch with him during the term time and try to catch up during the holidays. Less and less I saw in the last years, because he went to that wretched place in Wareham. The first time I went there to see him I walked through the ward and actually missed him, he didn't look like himself. It was much better for him at Marley House.

SO: How does it feel to know that you are tied to Sorabji's legacy?

ABP: It is a great privilege to have had a piece dedicated to me. I think that it was his way of thanking me for so many good times and we did have good times; many an evening sitting about, not setting the world to right, but discussing anything and everything, not just music. Of course we did speak about music as well. Every time I left his home I went away learning something, because of his wide range of interests. But how does it feel to have a composition dedicated to one? Immensely flattered! I would love to hear it performed properly.

SO: Would you then say that he was a great or pivotal influence in your life at that time?

ABP: Yes. He was a very good friend. He influenced the kind of music that I listened to at the time. I was determined to get to know it, but it wasn't particularly my kind of music. I listened to the music that he liked to listen to because he was a good friend and I respected him immensely, rather than some devotion to the music. I don't think that I have been influenced by Sorabji's music or those composers that he admired, except that he taught me not to be frightened by undue lengths and that size was not an issue. He taught me to respect my own instincts, which is what he said himself actually, 'It is not good just because I say it is.' Although you did know that if he thought that something was good that was then actually how things were, so I never argued with him. I just wanted to listen to what he had to say, because he was always interesting, always charming, and always entertaining.

## Chapter Thirteen – Alistair Hinton

*Although it is not necessary for an oral biography to be complete, embodying the full collection of individuals who interacted within the subject's life, an oral biography on Sorabji would be sadly lacking without the inclusion of ALISTAIR HINTON, Sorabji's most trusted friend at the end of his life and his heir. After the composer's death, Mr. Hinton, who is himself a composer of considerable talent, founded the Sorabji Archive. From this platform Mr. Hinton has been the single most important propagator of Sorabji's music and literature, assisting scholars and musicians alike with the provision of scores, Sorabji related documents, and an unfailing belief in Sorabji's genius. The following interview took place on June 18, 2003 at Mr. Hinton's home in Bath.*

SO: Because there is so much in your mind regarding Sorabji, perhaps it would be useful to channel our discussion in some way, at least to start off with. Since the nature of this oral biography is concerned with very human expressions about who Sorabji was as a man, not so much as a composer, although that is inevitable, but as a human being, his character, mannerisms, and personality, perhaps you could cite specific examples or occurrences regarding this issue.

AH: Sure. One of the most important things, which I think perhaps you are after at this point, is what kind of man is it that wrote essays like this and in particular wrote music like that, because obviously it is very unusual. One starts from the premise, without having met him, that he was a very unusual person. There were many myths and legends about him, all of which you already know and have been widely documented, but again, one needs to have met him for those untruths and misleading things to be dispatched properly, I suppose. Obviously one can counter them in words but one is in a stronger position to do that if they had actually met the composer concerned.

As you know, I chanced on his music, many years ago now, in a library, never having heard anything at all about him and the curiosity was got immediately, not only because I found this music quite extraordinary and unusual, but because it looked so

interesting and important. I thought, ‘Well, how come I have never heard of this composer, never seen the music, it is not being performed, there are no records of it around, why can’t I find anything out?’ The why I couldn’t find anything out came quite soon because I discovered that it was very difficult to get hold of these works and biographical information about him conflicted and this is all well known. What really revealed far more than anything else about him was first corresponding with him and then meeting him. I didn’t start corresponding with him immediately after I discovered his work; it took, I suppose, two and a half years before I did that. I was given his address through a friend of Oliver Knussen<sup>371</sup> actually and up until that time I still wasn’t actually sure if the composer was still alive, because he had been off the scene for so long, nobody really knew much about him, and anyone who could tell you anything about him would have been telling you things from a long, long time ago. Anyway, it turned out that not only was he alive, but he was very fit and well. I corresponded with him early in 1972, expecting never to get a response or to get a ‘keep off the grass’ kind of response, instead of which I got no response at all for about three weeks and then instead of getting a letter to begin with, I got a telephone call. He came across as being very low key, very modest in his speech, most charming, and he invited me to come down and visit him if I happened to be in the area.

Typical, ‘if ever I happened to be in the area,’ not, ‘do come and let us meet up.’ Not for any reason other than this privacy mania thing of his, he would assume that if he was going to warm to somebody than they must be similar in some way, so he wasn’t going to put up any obligations. It is a bit like with Yonty Solomon. When he finally relented to allow Yonty Solomon to perform his works, it was a great decision which he was very pleased that he made, he was very clear at the onset, right on the day that he made this decision, because a decision it was for him, that he conferred no obligation on Yonty Solomon to perform his works. He felt, ‘it is entirely up to him; I am not going to put any pressure on.’ It was the same thing, I didn’t have to go and see him, but if I would like to. He was very proper like that really and that kind of reticence of his, which was there, filtered through into that sort of thing.

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<sup>371</sup> Oliver Knussen (b. 1952), British composer.

Once I actually went to see him, which was a week after his eightieth birthday, it was not the opposite, but it was very much a larger side of him, the larger than life personality, that comes through in the two book of essays, in particular *Mi contra Fa*, was very much in evidence. What I found immediately when I crossed the threshold of The Eye, his house in Corfe Castle, was this constant spiritual generosity and warmth, enthusiasm and positiveness. This is one of the legends that he was some kind of misogynist curmudgeon, that wouldn't put up with anybody and was a constant complainer. He was the opposite of that. I can certainly vouch for that from much later in life when he had a most unfortunate enforced period in the hospital, between having to leave The Eye, when he was too unfit to remain there, and taking up his final place in his life in the nursing home at Marley House. Only on one occasion, I can remember, in January 1987, it got to him to the point that he said, 'I really don't think I can take much more of this.' All the years that I knew him, 16 years that I knew him personally, that was the only time that I ever heard him even suggest complaining about something.

He would always be very keen to find the good things in everything. Yes, he was very critical and barbed and all the rest of it and yes he could have a very waspish tongue from time to time as you will know from reading his books. But the attitude that I remember more often from him, really, is the kind of attitude that informed the way he wrote about Chausson, or York Bowen, or Szymanowski in particular. The sheer, unbridled enjoyment that he had in writing about people like that was again a very outgoing thing; he wanted to share this with people. He was very much interested in the music, but when he was writing about people's music that he was enthusing, he would want to write for people about that, he wanted to put Szymanowski's music in front of people, which he did very successfully in that article in *Mi contra Fa*.<sup>372</sup> The same thing happened in the way he wrote about Mahler, long before Mahler was widely performed, certainly in this country, twenty years before in fact. That kind of thing was very much what he was like; he would always find positive things to enthuse about.

On my first visit to him I took him a photocopy of *Around Music*, his first book, which he didn't even have a copy of at the time – so he told me in his letter – and I made

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<sup>372</sup> Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Karol Szymanovsky," in *Mi Contra Fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: Porcupine Press, 1947; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 178-187 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

this copy especially for him as a present. I gave him that one thing and I had so many books, pamphlets, records, and goodness knows what else to take back with me, that all cropped up one at a time in the midst of our conversation, there was a pile of things there, he would go get this and then go get that. The conversation would be patting around all over the place. His speech was always very fast. His diction wasn't brilliant. I always felt I had to wind myself up to catch up with him. He would talk about all kinds of things besides music, in fact mostly besides music, certainly besides talking about his own music. Trying to get him to talk about his own music was something that you weren't supposed to do, although I did do it. He didn't seem to want that and I think it wasn't because he was trying to cover up so much, as the fact that he didn't really feel that he had a lot to say about it. He was a man that did have a lot to say, but felt that the music was there and it was up to people to take from it what they can.

Certainly it is important to say that the way he came across personally was very different to the image that had been created around him, which in some ways he let happen and little bits of which he enjoyed and most bits of which he couldn't have given the stuff about really. I think he quite enjoyed being a myth and a legend, but he was obviously aware that he might have spun a few thoughts or ideas about himself that weren't exactly factual, but other people have done it far better since. All those kind of things have been debunked now of course. There is a lot more understanding about him because we can read his works and listen to far more of his works than we used to. But that still brings us back to your premise, which is a very important one I think, what kind of man wrote music like that so consistently and had the courage to do so no matter what other people thought? So he was always like that, a very strong personality. It wasn't that he didn't care what people thought, but he could defend himself against it, a lot of the time pretty well. Certainly he had his vulnerabilities, like the rest of us do, and some of them were quite big ones, but I suppose in a way he managed to defend himself against certain things by just being alone in this particular circumstance and not being invaded much by people, things, and thoughts that he didn't want to have around him. But again, the most useful part of that for him was just freeing himself up to being able to do what he wanted to do. If you think about how industrious he was, not only as a composer, but

also as a letter writer and a writer of articles, he needed time. He had his 96 years but that wasn't much for doing all the things that he did.

It is a curious thing in MacDiarmid's essay on him in *The Company I've Kept*,<sup>373</sup> which you might have noticed is shot through with misprints and inaccuracies, and is the largest essay in that book and one of only a few that is devoted to a single person, he ends by speaking about how he really doesn't have any interests in what K's hobbies were or the kinds of things that people normally want to know about; it was a very short paragraph, I think because he was trying to illustrate that it wasn't necessary to know what KSS<sup>374</sup> had for breakfast or what he did at half past four in the afternoon, it just wasn't important. He was doing his work and as long as we could have that, that was what really mattered.<sup>375</sup> Now, that is not to say that K didn't have a very vibrant personality – he did – but what he didn't want to do is go demonstrate it all over the place and make a big show of himself. One important illustration of that was when the concerts began in 1976 with Yonty Solomon. He would not attend any and this was not out of rudeness or curmudgeon, he just didn't feel fit to make lots of trips in those days, he was 84 when those started. But even then, it was a major event that first concert at Wigmore Hall and Yonty Solomon was prepared to go to lengths to arrange a car to pick him up and take him to London and he would make arrangements so that the balcony at Wigmore Hall was kept free and he could just sit there on his own and listen to this music on his own. He wouldn't do that. It wasn't that he was not interested; he just didn't want to make a show of himself. He just wasn't like that. So there is a very odd kind of contrast really between this very outgoing, vibrant personality who didn't want to be seen.

SO: There are so many things one could ask, but were these behaviours indicative of shyness, elitism, perhaps a defence mechanism?

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<sup>373</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Company I've Kept* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1966), 38-70.

<sup>374</sup> Commonly used initials of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji.

<sup>375</sup> *ibid.* The final paragraph of MacDiarmid's essay on Sorabji, to which Mr. Hinton is referring, reads as follows: 'A great composer, a great critic, and a prince among men, I know nothing about Sorabji (none of the particulars men usually know of each other, family affairs, education, hobbies, etc.) – nothing, but I think everything that matters, everything, as Jeeves would say, that is "of the essence."'

AH: I think it was all of those things and probably more, which we could perhaps think about in a minute. This was not something that came about due to old age; that is certainly true. It increased when he got older, but the seeds of it were already there in the early days and the covering up, for instance, when Philip Heseltine, his friend, was going to write an article for the *Weekly Westminster Gazette*,<sup>376</sup> I think it was, in 1923 about him and his work. He gave Heseltine some information that we now know to be incorrect, about the number of works that he destroyed from the First World War years and so on and so forth – he may have destroyed some works, we don't know, he may even have destroyed some works before the earliest of those that we are aware, which date from 1915 – but he did not destroy all of these piano concertos that he claimed to have destroyed, they still exist now. He was definitely willing for Heseltine, in those days, to publish an article about him, but that was second hand if you like. If there had been television in those days I am quite sure that he wouldn't have wanted to be interviewed. He also always disliked large gatherings of people. Well, not dislike them per se, he disliked being involved in large gatherings of people.

I think he was all of those things that you say. There was a shyness, definitely, which again seems to be at odds with the extroverted character. But it was all a part of his persona. A defence mechanism? Well, yes, up to a point I suppose, but a defence mechanism against what? I think in the early days it would have been a defence mechanism against the kind of reactions that he may have encountered in people, because he was not just a foreigner in England, but a mixed raced foreigner, at a time when foreigners were much more regarded as foreigners than in these days. The United Kingdom is a far more cosmopolitan group of countries than it was in those days and attitudes have changed a great deal. But on top of that, he was very conscious about the difference between race and nationality, from a political point of view, race being what you are and nationality being what is thrown at you, as he used to put it. But being a multi-racial foreigner, I think, in England during those days was much more of a situation to make people askance, than would be the case now. As a mixed race person you were considered even more outside the norm.

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<sup>376</sup> Philip Heseltine, "Music," *The Weekly Westminster Gazette*, 18 August 1923, 14-15.

The fact that he was a musician or intent on being a musician was another thing. The fact in particular that he was concerned with the latest trends in central European music and Russian music, most of which was not being performed in the UK, not even in London where he lived in the first decade of the twentieth century. The new music that you heard in those days was English music, well not entirely, that is an over simplification, but the music of Mahler was just not being played in this country in those days, at least more rarely, Busoni wasn't being played, Debussy wasn't often being played, even Rachmaninov wasn't. These are all of the composers that he was enthusing about to people. He wouldn't just find these scores and work at them over the piano, but he would find what was in them and then would go around telling people about these things. Perhaps in those days the shyness was less and he was less inhibited. Well, inhibited is the wrong word, perhaps he was more willing to share things about music, regardless of whose it was, with people in those days and I suppose this was enhanced by the fact that he found that this was music that most people didn't know. I don't think he was looking for music just because other people didn't know it; he was looking to find out what was going on. I don't know how he became conscious of the fact that there was an awful lot more going on than you could tell from concert programmes in the first decade of the last century, but he did find that out for himself and made it his business to get to know an awful lot of music.

SO: He must have kept up to date with the news scores as they were emerging in published form.

AH: Oh he did. In one of our early conversations he said, 'You grew up in the 1960s and I am thinking about the kind of music that was fashionable then.' He said, 'I feel sorry for you really, because I actually grew up in the first decade of the twentieth century and they were such exciting times.' Obviously they were, there was the emergence of Busoni, Debussy, Ravel, a new Mahler symphony every year or two, the music of Rachmaninov, Medtner, Schoenberg, all sorts of things happening, very exciting times and a real kind of tinder box, which he responded to with very great enthusiasm. That helped to absolutely cement beyond any doubt that this young fellow was a

complete outsider. I think he had to do what he was going to do, even as a critic, never mind as a composer. It was an inevitable thing, that was the way he was, but I think that he probably upset quite a few people by being like that. But he couldn't help that, it was no good pretending he didn't have these enthusiasms, he had them and that was it. He discovered for himself a lot of the works of Bartók and the sheer excitement was wondering what Bartók was going to write next, what Schoenberg was going to come up with next, what Mahler's next symphony would sound like. Unfortunately he couldn't go to hear most of these things, so he would get the scores. I am quite sure that was where he developed some of his facility at the piano; he would go through scores at the piano, whether or not they were piano music, to get to know pieces. What better way to do it really! That really made him, not exactly *persona non grata*, although it probably would have been that with some people, but certainly treated as though several stages outside – set him up for life in some ways, I think.

SO: The practice of reading scores, especially at such a young age, is a very obvious and good technique for strengthening one's ears and obtaining a strong sense of a composition.

AH: Sorabji, certainly in those days, when there weren't recordings, had to either go to a concert or read the score.

SO: Even the concert experience would only give you that singular moment of acquaintance and of course as you well know, with a difficult composition, repeated hearings are essential.

AH: That is right. If he wanted to get a buzz about *Pelleas und Melisande* of Arnold Schoenberg he would have had to go and get the score, because orchestras in this country weren't playing it. He had to do that with quite a lot of works really. I don't know when he first heard the Busoni Piano Concerto for example, which was a work that was very close to his heart ever since he did first hear it, but the first performance of it that took place in this country was in 1909 and I am pretty sure that he would have known it to

some extent before that. It came out five years before that and he would have certainly known about its existence. He didn't hear it at that first performance, so I don't know when he first heard it, but this was really an explorative thing and enhanced the excitement for him because there was the discovery process too. It is like trying to discover Sorabji's music all those years later, I had to read the scores or try to, because you couldn't go to a concert and you couldn't get a recording. It is the same kind of thing really.

The first work I saw, *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, I didn't exactly take that out of the library, go to a practice room, and plough through it, because it was obvious to any idiot that I couldn't possibly have done that, but because of some of the training I had I was at least able to get something off of the page and hear some of this stuff in my head. I was completely bowled over with it and it sounded so different from any other music that I had come across. So it didn't surprise me that his persona was equally unusual, a man that writes music that clearly doesn't fit into any kind of fashionable pattern like that. And when I say that I don't mean that the music was unfashionable or non-fashionable really, but like the music of Busoni which is much more widely recorded now and to some extent more widely performed, all four operas have been produced over the past fifteen years and recorded, there is still a built in non-fashionableness about most of the music of Busoni, even the Piano Concerto which Sorabji himself proudly said to me, long before I ever heard it, 'This is one of the most popular concertos in the piano repertoire.' Most people don't realise that, but it is, talking about the content, not how often it has been played. You can understand exactly what he was talking about. The fact that it is a big work of 65 odd minutes and is a difficult work, it still contains some material which a lot of people would and subsequently have warmed to quite easily, but it wasn't being done. The music of Busoni in those days was still not at all well known and when you look at a situation like that, say at the end of the 1940s after Sorabji had written his two books of essays, he is drawing people's attention to Mahler, Busoni, Szymanowski, who even then were not getting anything like the attention that they deserved, Alkan was another case, and Liszt too in the sense that it was always the same old pieces that people performed, but now today we have a far more comprehensive view of Liszt the composer, and Sorabji was instrumental in helping to make that happen and

enjoyed that. But again it was done from a distance. But he was perfectly happy to interact with the public at a distance, because when he was writing literary articles he was obviously very consciously doing it so that people would read them. He cared that people read them and was interested to read their comments. He wanted to do that and it fulfilled some of his enthusiasm to do that.

I think that the thing that came across was this very strong personality with immense courage. You would have to have immense courage to go on for that length of time writing music knowing that it isn't going to be performed, whether or not that is because you choose not to or you can't find the right people to or whatever the circumstance are. If it is not being performed and you are not making that communicative thread work, then the courage you need is by definition that much the greater.

SO: Do you think he remembered what he wrote? For example if you were to sit down with him, as it would have been possible, and listened to a recording of Michael Habermann playing some of his music, do you think that he would recognise aspects of his own compositions?

AH: To a large extent, yes.

SO: You would think that after writing 16,000 pages of music, the memory would become slightly blurred, especially with the absence of a performance history.

AH: Well, not really, even though everybody severs a certain level of connection with what they had done so many years ago, to a point. He didn't revisit works often, he very rarely revised anything, and he very rarely looked back on works. Although that said, on one of the occasions, I don't recall the exact date but it would have been in 1975 or 1976, before Yonty Solomon began to perform his works, I arrived early for one of my visits to him. It was a bright day and he actually had the windows open and I could hear him playing the *Fantaisie espagnole*, rather well too, considering he hadn't looked at it in years and hadn't practised it in God knows how long. He said afterwards that he was

quite surprised to find that he still liked it. He didn't revisit works in any form like that very often, so some things would have become somewhat undifferentiated, but on the other hand if you think of that extraordinary occasion when he ceased work on the Second Organ Symphony, just into the second of its three movements – and that's a really immense work of some, God knows what, maybe seven hours' duration – interrupted it to write *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, which isn't exactly a three minute song. Then he resumed the Second Organ Symphony and completed it. To keep all of that in the head at all shows a fantastic force of memory, so I think that he would have recognised quite a lot of his earlier music. Besides, his style consolidated fairly early on and whilst it continued to develop, he wasn't an innovatory kind of composer who changed horses in mid-stream every five minutes; there was a kind of consistency.

SO: Two questions really, the second only valid if the first gains approval. Do you see a specific evolution in Sorabji's works and if so do you relate it to any particular experiences that you are aware of within his life or perhaps changes in his temperament or world-view?

AH: The answers to that are largely yes and then no, in the sense that yes there is a constant evolution and in fact, even within a work for example. He was very keen on that and loved this idea of organic development that wasn't reigned in by particular disciplined structures, not that he worked in an undisciplined way, very far from it. But he loathed what he called the 'sonata form jelly mould.' That is not to say that he wasn't interested in the sonata structure, but he didn't like to feel that something was confining a piece of music. A structure was there to let the music do the opposite of that. If you look at the works that he wrote from 1973 onwards, certainly there is a thinning out texturally; there is less surface complexity, if you like. Although I have to say straight away having used that awful word 'complexity,' and he wrote an essay about simplicity which gives a very clear view of what he thought about it,<sup>377</sup> his attitude to all that kind of thing was

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<sup>377</sup> Sorabji did not, as Mr. Hinton expressed, engage complexity for complexity's sake; rather he engaged complexity for the richness and variety of its imaginative implications: 'The B minor Mass, the Hammerklavier Sonata, *The Ring*, all of them elaborate and complex in plan, immensely rich in complicated detail, of which only deep knowledge and prolonged study can make one both fully cognisant

that music, in terms of rhythm, melodic structures, virtuosity for the player, or whatever, has to be as simple or complex, as easy or difficult, as the thoughts require. Okay, most of his music we know is very difficult to play, even some of the shorter pieces, but he didn't really make things difficult for the sake of it. He wasn't interested in that. But what he was interested in was a real sense of organic development that something grows out of something else. He was very interested in the early days in the processes that he found in the Liszt symphonic poems, thematic transformation, in particular how that grew further to degrees and extents that Liszt would have never dreamed of in the early works of Schoenberg, like the First Chamber Symphony and the First String Quartet, for example. He moved away from all of that but it was very much a part of his early background. Then, oddly enough, in the 1920s, before he really found his feet, although he was already writing in a style, which was completely recognisably his own – I am talking about the days of the first three sonatas now or the second and the third in particular – he was talking along lines very similar, although quite coincidentally, to the way Shostakovich was talking perhaps six or seven years later about wouldn't it be a marvellous idea to write a symphony without themes; meaning, a symphony that would still hold up as a symphony, with its own organic development and logic, which would

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and appreciative. And this, indeed, is the endless fascination of the masterpieces, that out of their infinite richness some new detail is always being discovered, some aspect that has escaped notice before. "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 – the rhythm governing the Procession of the Equinoxes, the never-ending change that brings it about that no one movement is ever exactly repeated, that the veining of every leaf is different from that of every other, that no two days are ever the same in duration, that, in fact, nothing throughout the entire scheme of things is perfectly symmetrical, but of everlasting variety and difference. This is not to say that Art should hold the mirror up to Nature. That mischievous and pernicious theory has been the cause and justification of all the soulless mechanical photographic realism since the time it was written. But as man is to Nature, so art is to man – man the highest product of Nature, art the highest product of man – the end, the summing-up and culmination of all his activities. As in the Genesis story God said "Let there be light" where hitherto naught but darkness moved upon the face of the waters, so man is to be conceived saying "Let there be Art." Here it is that man becomes a god, and like a god creates what has never been before. So through man from Nature there flows into Art some of her boundless variety, infinite diversity and complex ever changing rhythms. But what of simplicity is there in all this? What *should* there be? Surely the greater the transmitting medium – the greater the artist, that is – more of this unending richness and complexity will pour through him to find expression in his work, not expect him to dam down the flood of his thought into a pitiful, piddling trickle because of our feebleness and weakness. If the Amazon at flood sweep you away who try to breast its volume of waters, that is your misfortune, not the Amazon's fault. But you have no right to expect the Amazon to flow through a bath tap with just the force and volume you happen to be able to bear. In any case you could have kept out of the Amazon's way!' Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Of Simplicity," in *Around Music* (London: Unicorn Press, 1932; reprint, Westport, Connecticut: Hyperion Press, 1979), 115-119 (page citations are to the reprint addition).

put itself across, but without having labels all the time. Now Sorabji moved away from all of that, in fact he moved away from it in his symphonic works very much in the opposite direction. In a work like the Second Organ Symphony or the First and Second Piano Symphonies and the Fourth Piano Symphony, which has recently been premiered, you find these vast opening movements, which grow out of a kind of sonata structure, but instead of presenting two, three, four themes and motives, with surrounding material as a kind of exposition, you have an expository passage which may contain ten, twenty, thirty, or more themes and motives, with almost no other material in between. Of course your memory can't take all of that in, but as the movement gradually unfolds all of those things gradually begin to make more sense and they are contextualised in different ways. So that is the way that he saw this organic growth thing.

I don't think that Sorabji ever really thought about how he was developing as a composer. These days people write so much about this kind of thing that a lot of composers probably become self-conscious. You hear composers talking about how they do things and why they are doing it, but Sorabji would never do that, he was too busy getting on with it anyway and wasn't very much interested in that kind of thing. I don't really think that he thought, even privately, 'How am I developing as a composer? What is happening to me now? Where have I come from? Where am I going next?' He was too busily immersed in his works to be concerned with thoughts like that.

There is a real consistency from about 1923, the time of the First Organ Symphony and *Le Jardin parfumé*. He regarded the First Organ Symphony as his first mature work and he might as just easily have regarded *Le Jardin parfumé* as his first mature piano work too, in spite of the fact that he wrote those three increasingly larger sized sonatas before. But the odd thing is that when you think of the number of large scale works that he wrote with fugues in them and the fugues are all so different from one another, he just doesn't repeat himself, and when you are a composer whose style develops to a certain point and becomes quite consistent and remains quite consistent and writes so much music for the same medium, the piano, there is a risk, a danger, that a composer of less greatness than Sorabji will repeat himself at some point. You try looking for repetition of himself, it doesn't happen. You only have to examine, for example, the fugue subjects in the First Toccata, of which Jonathan Powell's recording

has just come out – it is almost like a pilot piece for *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, in a way, then you look at the fugue subjects in the earlier Fugue and Variations on *Dies iræ* and then look at the fugue subjects in *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, they are all very obviously by the same composer and many of them seem very unlikely as fugue subjects for one keyboard player, but they are all very different and he just doesn't repeat himself. He does have that much to say.

And again his attitude towards the duration of pieces was just the same as simplicity and complexity, a piece should be as long as it should be. He said, 'I have heard plenty of five minute pieces that go on far too long.' He was conscious actually of duration. He didn't care how long his pieces were, really, in terms of minutes and seconds, as some statistic, but he said, 'I hope when someone plays *Opus Clavicembalisticum* that each of the movements feel and the overall composition feels to be the right length. Only the piece and its performance will justify or not justify that.' He wasn't trying to make claims that it was right, but he hoped it would be and worked from that premise. It is a very important premise because his attention to detail across these great long works is very concentrated. It is a very different kind of concentration than you would find in the music of, say, Elliott Carter. Carter's view, if he has a view on it, of complexity and musical expression is very different to Sorabji's and the music that he writes is very different from Sorabji, as indeed you would expect. Carter didn't write massive long pieces either. But he has an acute sense of where things should go and how long the passages should be, just as any composer should have. But it is harder to do when you are writing a great long thing that goes on for several hours. It is very easy to lead yourself into languor. It is a risk that you take and he was prepared to take that risk over and over again. Of course, as you know, many of his works were not of those great durations, many of which will fit perfectly well into a conventional-length concert programme.

SO: I think that often gets overlooked.

AH: You asked me that question if I thought there were any events within his life that may have influenced the course of the way he wrote things and apart from what I have

spoken about already about his background and make-up as a personality, I don't think it is the case really. He was very detached from the outside world when he was getting on with his work and he was also not thinking in terms of things for humanity. It sounds a very hard-nosed thing to say, but you would have to know him well enough to know what he meant by it. I remember him saying to me once, 'I detest humanity. I love humans.' He wasn't concerned with large audiences and yet he was writing for them, unwittingly if you like. It didn't matter whether he was concerned about how many people listened to his music, because that is going to follow anyway. As his friend the poet Harold Morland said to him, 'Look K, once you have done what you have done, a particular work, and it is out there, it is for whoever wants it and can get what they should get from it,' which is true. It is just as true for J. S. Bach, as it is for Stockhausen, as it is for Sorabji, it is a fact. I don't think Sorabji had given much thought to that sort of thing either. He didn't do a lot of thinking, as I said before, on the whys and wherefores. But by the same token I think that helped to establish or even enhance the detachment from the whys and wherefores of 'Why am I writing like this?' and 'What am I trying to do here?' He wasn't concerned with events and lives when he was writing music.

Of course he didn't write for the stage and he wrote very few songs. Whatever the background was with his mother, he certainly had a great interest in the human voice, which you can read from his reviews. There are more reviews about singers and singing than there is of anything else, even though his instrument was the piano. He took singing lessons, so he said, when he was a youngster and he said that he had a voice like a crow. He didn't know at the time that he wanted to be a composer, but looking back he felt that it was most important to have had some training in singing because he said, 'If a composer can't sing, a composer can't compose.' A very bald kind of view there really, but it meant a lot to him, that music began with singing and it will end in singing. He said, 'It isn't a question about being a singer, but I do feel that it is very important for composers to learn what it is to sing.' Of course you can't do that without taking singing lessons.

So no, it doesn't seem that any particular events in his life influenced the way he wrote his *Tāntrik Symphony* or *Passeggiata veneziana* or why he did them at any particular time. You might look at the mid-50s for example and ask why suddenly did he

start to write shorter pieces – still twenty minutes to a half hour – *Un nido di scatole*, *Passeggiata veneziana*, *Rosario d'arabeschi*, for his friends without any expectation on his part or indeed his friends' parts, for whom he wrote them, to hear them in their lifetimes? Why did he suddenly do that? Did he suddenly have a conscience about not having kept up with his friends? No, I don't think so. He always said of his friends, 'The great thing about one's real friends is that one doesn't have to have them in one's pocket and it is far better if you don't, both for you and for them.' He went years and years without ever clapping eyes on Sir Sacheverell Sitwell,<sup>378</sup> one of his oldest friends, whom he had known even longer than Norman Peterkin. That was a friendship that lasted 70 years and they bumped into one another on Wigmore Street apparently one day and they started a conversation, both of them, with the word 'and.' You resume where you left off, because the friendship was there the whole time. That meant a great deal to him. He was particularly generous to his friends and wasn't fussy about not having very many of them. He always had this interesting habit – call it a habit or not I will leave that up to you – a persuasion, a need or perceived need not to keep his friends from his other friends, but not to make an effort to introduce his friends to his other friends; very compartmentalised and that was enhanced of course by the fact that he would generally see only one person at a time. He didn't want to have too much company around. So with that kind of self-imposed isolation of a sort, although he was still very much in too much of a circle to be completely outside, I don't think that events either in his life or events that he witnessed or events in other people's lives or general current events had any effect upon what he was doing. Let's look for example at the Fifth Symphony of Vaughan Williams and the Seventh Symphony of Shostakovich, generally considered wartime symphonies in some sense, although they are very different works, there isn't a wartime work in KSS at all. You look at the kind of events, the whole complex of events, that prompted Elgar to write his Cello Concerto in the way he did shortly after the first war ended; nothing like that ever really crept into the way K was writing his music. I might be quite wrong about this, but it certainly isn't obvious. You can't pin down anything like that, which isn't to say

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<sup>378</sup> Sir Sacheverell Sitwell (1897-1988), English writer and long time friend of Sorabji's who authored over 70 books on a variety of subjects, including poetry, biography, architecture, art, music, travel, natural history, and to whom Sorabji dedicated his solo piano work, *Rosario d'arabeschi* (1956).

that K didn't care about world events or what was going on, but I don't think he saw a need or even the possibility of encapsulating this kind of thing in music.

He was a very great admirer of Alan Bush,<sup>379</sup> for example, and was a great champion of Bush's work ever since he first came across it in the late 1930s – he may well have been introduced to it by his friend John Ireland, because Bush studied with Ireland for a while. He was entirely at odds with Bush's politics and even more at odds with Bush's quite obvious avowed intent to make his music serve a purpose in some kind of humanitarian way that fit in with his political thinking, not just because Sorabji's politics and Bush's politics were so different to one another, which of course they were, but because Sorabji didn't see that music could do that kind of thing, let alone do you want it to. But despite this vast difference of approach between him and Alan Bush, he maintained his admiration for Bush's work, even to the point that in 1976, I think it was, I may have got that date slightly wrong, when there was a broadcast of Bush's last opera *Joe Hill*<sup>380</sup> – had Bush not had the political persuasion that he had he would have never written it – Sorabji actually rang me having listened to the broadcast of the work and said, 'I think this is the finest thing that Alan Bush has ever written and that is saying a lot. If you missed it I am sad for you, but it is bound to be repeated so don't miss it.' This gives you an idea of the width, the breadth, and generosity of spirit in the way that he could be. But he recognised Bush as a fine composer, in spite of the fact that not only was he against his politics, but he felt that Bush's whole idea of representing something or other like that was impossible. Sorabji said the same thing, was very deprecatory, about Richard Strauss and the tone poems; he said, 'Next he will try to represent a spoon or a fork in music.' He said, 'You can no more represent a spoon or a fork than you can represent a Communist ideal or a Fascist one.' He then went on to say that, 'Fascism was everyone else's Fascism except their own.'

In that sense he was more of an ascetic, I suppose you could say, or rather lived the creative life of one. I think that is one of the things that made many people think that his music was unapproachable, which it isn't and has been proven not to be unapproachable. He wasn't interested in contributing to society in his music or as a

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<sup>379</sup> Alan Bush (1900-1995), English composer and Marxist, who vehemently believed in the improvement of the human condition in society – political and ethical notions that were reflected in his music.

<sup>380</sup> *Joe Hill: the man that never died* (1967).

person really, except of course in his literary writings. He was contributing to society in his music too of course, but not in any conscious way where he wanted to make some comment. He just wasn't doing that. When Erik Chisholm<sup>381</sup> tried to persuade him to write a stage work, he just wasn't having any, because he didn't feel that kind of urge at all. He was moving in a direction that was a more spiritual one. Yet, there was no woolly-minded guru thing about him at all, he was just responding to the needs and aspiration which he had inside him. The detachment from a lot of things and people that he needed to have and did have was still very different from the communicative power that the music has on people.

SO: Did he talk about his spirituality with you?

AH: He didn't talk about himself at all. Well that is an exaggeration – he rarely talked about himself.

SO: I am thinking in particular his frequently expressed enthusiasm for Catholicism and Zoroastrianism.

AH: Yes, but more in writing than in speech. Anything he referred to, and he would talk a lot, he would never or very rarely often speak about things in relation to himself. He would express his views, but he wouldn't relate things to himself, particularly when it came to his music. There was an occasion when I tried to talk to him about the *Transcendental Studies*. I had heard the Frank Holliday recordings of some of those, which seemed to be slightly better performances than anything else he recorded. He wouldn't be drawn on these things as to why he wrote them or why there were 100 of them and not 96. He just really didn't want to have that kind of conversation going on around him or at least not to be made or persuaded to participate in one. There was one

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<sup>381</sup> Erik Chisholm (1904-1965), Scottish composer and long time friend of Sorabji's. In 1929 Chisholm established the Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music in Glasgow, for which Sorabji gave four piano recitals of his own compositions: 1 April 1930, Sonata No. 4; 1 December 1930, the famous premiere of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*; 29 April 1931, his nocturne *Jāmī*; and 16 December 1936, *Toccata* No. 2. In 1946 Chisholm moved to South Africa, where he became an important professor of music at the University of Cape Town, where he introduced the music of Sorabji to many of his pupils, most importantly, Yonty Solomon.

exception, when I was talking to him about the final pages of the Third Sonata – I wanted to discuss with him how he thought a pianist would set about a particular kind of technical problem – and we did actually have a discussion about that. He was quite adamant about how he saw this working and even went to the piano to demonstrate in slow motion the kind of thing that he was talking about. This was unheard of. Then he caught himself doing it and immediately decided that it was nearly 4 o'clock so it was time to go and make tea. I was never allowed to see him make tea, but I was always given something to do while he made tea and then I would be called into the kitchen to have tea with him.

SO: Perhaps it seemed banal to him.

AH: I don't know. I think he just wanted to get on with making the tea without interruption, just like he wanted to write a Piano Symphony without interruption.

He would not talk about himself. People thought that he was a very self-centred person and certainly if you had conversations with him the very opposite would come across. He was far more interested in talking about other people and other things, then talking about himself.

SO: I have heard that he was always very much concerned with what was going on within the person's life with whom he was conversing and if they had any ailment he would take that very seriously; that he was almost paternal.

AH: This even extended to people he didn't know directly. He was never a joiner of things, except for the Purbeck Society,<sup>382</sup> as you know. He would remain detached and be an onlooker looking in if he was interested, rather than joining something. He was concerned about the plight of certain composers and Erik Chisholm tried to co-opt him onto some kind of committee in the early 1930s. Before that there was an attempt to form a little group or society to try to get things to happen and in the 1920s he would go

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<sup>382</sup> Members of the local community who had a mutual interest in the archaeology and natural history of the Isle of Purbeck informally founded the Purbeck Society roughly 150 years ago. The society still exists today.

that far, but very much on the periphery of it. Thereafter he was detached, although he was still concerned about the plight of composers. I remember on one occasion he wrote to Michael Tippett, because he had heard that Michael Tippett had very bad eyesight and there was the risk that he would lose his eyesight altogether. Sorabji was interested in all kinds of alternative medicines and he had a person that he used to go visit at least once a year, in terms of keeping his own eyes in trim, which was very important, considering the amount of small-scale writing he was doing, I mean small-scale in terms of physical appearance of notes upon the page. He swore by this chap and was concerned about Tippett, for although he didn't care at all for Tippett's music – he could be quite rude about it on occasion – that was just brushed on one side and he wrote to Tippett and recommended this person to go to and consult. He got a rude letter back from his secretary apparently saying that Sir Michael's affairs are already being taken care of, thank you very much. He was quite offended by that.

But you see he would do that even for someone whose music he didn't care for at all, because this is another composer and he is in trouble; this bothered him. So it wouldn't have just been the people that he knew, if it was a composer that had some problem similar to his own, he would certainly consider getting off his bottom and writing a letter with a helpful suggestion. He never met Tippett. I don't know if Tippett ever knew about that letter. I have never seen it. But I have no reason to suggest that he was telling a story about that, even though he was quite good at embellishing stories. He would be concerned about that kind of thing. For example, although he was very much at odds with the kind of work that Britten was doing, he felt that Benjamin Britten was getting far too much attention as a composer from the days of *Peter Grimes* onwards, although he was quite generously spirited regarding *Peter Grimes* itself. But as I said, he felt that Britten was getting far too much attention, at the expense of other composers. Benjamin Britten was certainly not the kind of person that would seek attention for himself at the expense of other composers, far from it. Yet, when Britten died, prematurely, Sorabji was deeply upset. I saw him just a day or two afterwards and I remember this very well. He said, 'But he had so much left to do.' And he was speaking of him as a conductor and a pianist, as well as a composer. He never met Britten, but he

thought that this was an appalling thing to have happened, that Benjamin Britten had his life cut short when he had so much more to do.

Sometimes he could make very serious misjudgements through lack of proper knowledge. He didn't understand what was going on in John Ogdon's life, for example, in the 1970s. He didn't know anything about his condition. But I know perfectly well if he had, he would have been his usual warm and generous and helpful self to John Ogdon and it is a pity that he wasn't. Someone ought to have told him, I think, about what had happened to John Ogdon. He had just seen pictures and thought that he was overindulging - overindulging in giving too many concerts perhaps. He didn't know what was the matter with John. He would have been deeply sympathetic in a constructive way, because that is the way he was. But he didn't know what was wrong, got the wrong end of the stick completely, and made some quite unreasonable comments about John Ogdon.

SO: Was it Ogdon's playing that he didn't like or was he annoyed that Ogdon wanted to play his music so badly?

AH: It was the latter actually and it was the timing that was so unfortunate. He met John Ogdon once in 1960 – I think it was. Because as you will know John Ogdon went to give a reading – well to what extent it was a reading and to what extent it was a performance is hard to say - I wasn't there in December 1959, of the complete *Opus Clavicembalisticum* in front of its dedicatee<sup>383</sup> at Ronald Stevenson's house. A few other people were there, Helmut Petzsch included and he took the photographs.<sup>384</sup> Ronald, who hadn't met Sorabji at that time, did actually introduce John Ogdon to him through correspondence. On one of K's visits to London, when he was staying at 11 Welbeck Street, they met there, I think, and spent a very pleasant afternoon conversing. He knew that there had been this private performance and it wasn't until some time later that John Ogdon made it known that he wanted to play his music in public, but of course, things were simmering and getting worse and worse in those days where K was concerned, in

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<sup>383</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid.

<sup>384</sup> Some of Petzsch's photographs of this event can be seen in the liner notes that accompany John Ogdon's recording of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, Altarus AIR-CD-9075, 1989, compact disc.

terms of his attitude towards performances of his music. It started off with a perfectly reasonable wish to protect himself from misinterpretation, just as any self-respecting composer would have, and festered into something much less pleasant, which was unfortunate. It was also somewhat unnecessary, because the sheer difficulty in preparing an intelligent performance of even some of the shorter works, really, was such that put off most musicians anyway. Someone with the immense gifts and intrepidity of John Ogdon, who was not the average someone, would not be put off by that. Unbeknown to K and unbeknown to me at the time, since I didn't know John Ogdon in the 1960s, he apparently – John Ogdon told me this at the session for recording *Opus Clavicembalisticum* in the 1980s – in the 1960s talked to his producer at EMI about wanting to record *Opus Clavicembalisticum* and they laughed at him. He brought the subject up about a year later and got the same response, so he never brought it up again. Well, they were ill advised to do that really. John Ogdon, had he been a different personality, might just as well packed his bags at that point and found a different label to record for. They just didn't take him seriously and John Ogdon would be pushed about to do this, that and the other. He was so generous and so gifted that he would do it. That was a big part of what went wrong for him, because he had been so compliant and accepting of what people expected him to do. But he had always wanted to do this, it was something that came from him, he wanted to play this work. He told Ronald Stevenson once that there were only about seven works in the piano repertoire that he felt were absolutely essential for him to learn how to play; *Opus Clavicembalisticum* was one of those works. Hence the fact that it was over a quarter of a century between his first reading it in front of Ronald Stevenson and then actually recording it. It would have been interesting had he done it in the 1960s. Personality wise he was better equipped to have done it when he actually did do it. He was healthier and fitter, physically, in the 1960s than in the 1980s. Who knows what it would have been like, but it would have been interesting.

But to come back to Sorabji himself, at that point he was really getting himself entrenched more and more about not having his music performed. I found this when I first met him, that he didn't want to be drawn into it, he didn't want to talk about it. He felt that he was put here to write this music and as for the rest of it, well, whatever. And I

used to say to him, ‘But what are we going to do with the rest of it? Is it just going to sit there forever?’ It was difficult to say to someone like that, where you had just met him recently for the first time, ‘What is going to happen when you die?’ I was concerned about that; is this kind of inaccessibility going to go into perpetuity? What was going to happen to all of these manuscripts? The archive grew out of this concern. It was a concern I had right from day one with him. At the time when I first met him, although there was this great warmth, generosity, and positive nature, his attitude towards performances of his music really festered into one of, ‘I really couldn’t care less,’ which is very unhealthy, actually. It was a mistake. He had let it go too far. Fortunately it didn’t stop his creative work. It didn’t get to him so much that he thought of not writing any more. Well, he did at one point. In fact, Denise Vicars mentioned recently to me and perhaps mentioned this to you as well, that she recalled a time, just over thirty years ago now, when she went to see him and he said, ‘I am not going to write any more. It is finished. It is all over.’ She didn’t say, ‘Oh yes you will,’ she simply said, ‘K, you don’t have any choice.’ She was absolutely right; he didn’t have any choice. But he did make that one attempt at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s to give up composition. He wrote to me about it very early on, because I had seen this list that Erik Chisholm had compiled, not long before he died – he died in 1965 – of Sorabji’s works, which was full of mistakes, but went up to the Fourth Piano Symphony, which was completed in 1964. It was the second letter that I had written to Sorabji and I asked him if he had written anything since then, because this was 1972. He said, ‘Yes, one work, my Fourth Toccata, which I complete in 1967 – one of my best works, I think.’ Then he went on to say that he had stopped, which wasn’t true, he had written that *Concertino non grosso* for rather odd chamber ensemble in 1968.<sup>385</sup> He obviously tried to stop, he wrote that and there doesn’t seem to be anything between that and 1972, with the exception of those 104 *Aphoristic Fragments*, some of which might have been written before that – we don’t know exact dates – but they were finished sometime around 1972. But he did seem to make a conscious effort to stop and Denise seems to be correct about that, because he didn’t succeed. There was no way he ever could have done. He only stopped again in 1982 because he really couldn’t see properly or hold a pen reliably. It wasn’t because of

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<sup>385</sup> The ‘odd chamber ensemble’ consists of four violins, viola, two cellos, and piano.

any lack of ideas, not that there would have been any criticism if he had. Sibelius gave us very little after *Tapiola* in a life that wasn't much shorter than K's. I know for a fact that K stopped only because he just couldn't physically do it anymore; you just have to look at the last three or four manuscripts to see how spidery it was.

SO: In his last years did he ever express to you that he had ideas stirring in his mind that he would like to have jotted down upon a page?

AH: He wouldn't be drawn on it. He was very philosophical and I think that his practice of yoga helped him to come to terms, not only with having to stop writing, but also, towards the very end of his life, that he had to leave his home and he had to do certain things that he wasn't expecting – he was pretty much an invalid. He wouldn't talk about his music, so I wouldn't have expected him to start making comments about that sort of thing. But it was pretty obvious in his very last year that he had an idea of writing a piece somehow based on the Rachmaninov *Vocalise*. I suspect it might have been a piece based on the *Vocalise*, rather like the *Passeggiata veneziana* was based on the Barcarole from *The Tales of Hoffman*; not a transcription but a piece where someone else's work has sparked off a whole series of ideas. I have no idea what he would have done with this, but he was trying to hum it quite often and he was completely obsessed with it at this particular point. We were talking earlier on about what kind of music he was discovering in the first decade of the twentieth century and of course he bought that when it first came out, when that set of songs was first published. So he would have remembered that piece as new music.

SO: So *Vocalise* was a tune that he was enjoying in the last moments of his life. That is very interesting.

AH: You see, in the Rachmaninov centenary year, 1973, there were broadcasts in this country of a lot of Rachmaninov's works that were either very rarely heard over here or first British broadcasts. That was certainly, in my recollection, the year in which Rachmaninov's star as a composer was in the ascendant and we started to get a much

bigger perspective on the extent of the composer that Rachmaninov was, rather than the composer of preludes, the Paganini Variations, and the Second Piano Concerto. So we started to get to know his music a lot better and K was highly amused by all of this and very gratified as well. He was hearing things that were only then obtaining their first broadcast when he had known them ever since they had first come out. He had been enthusing about Rachmaninov's music since the first decade of the last century. He was ahead of the game quite often when it came to composers, very often ahead of the game in a lot of things like that. But he certainly had an idea of doing something with Rachmaninov's *Vocalise* right at the very end. Of course he couldn't speak very well either; he had a stroke in June of 1988 and his speech was difficult after that. You could see that the ideas were buzzing and the brain was still fine, but he found it very much more difficult to express himself verbally.

SO: How frustrating that must have been for someone who throughout his whole life was so incredibly expressive.

AH: Exactly. I don't want to make too much of this, but I am quite convinced that had he not had that time spent in the practice of yoga, which of course again he was physically unable to do at the end of his life, but had he not done that I don't think he would have been able to deal with things so easily. Well, it wasn't easy, but it would have been more difficult had he not done that.

SO: He did yoga quite regularly throughout his life?

AH: Oh yes. For years I wondered why it was that he mustn't be called between 6 and 7 in the evening, because he had something he had to do that mustn't be interrupted. It was his yoga exercises and he was very disciplined about that. He didn't talk about it a lot but I know that it helped him a great deal, not just for the physical aspects of it but what it did for him generally.

SO: Do you know what branch of yoga he practiced?

AH: No I don't, because he wouldn't talk about it. He was quite well read on the subject, but he wouldn't discuss his practice.

SO: Again, that is a strange thing to be private about. What harm is there to let your friend know that you do yoga every night and it is something that means a lot to you?

AH: None, quite obviously, but I think he quite liked this waggish thing about making people think, 'I wonder what on earth it is that he does at 6 o'clock every evening?'

SO: He couldn't really help but to become a mystery with that kind of mannerism.

AH: Yes that was part of it. He would do it to his friends as well, he told me that he was born in 1900 and I said well this dictionary says that and the other dictionary says the other and he said, 'Yes, aren't lexicons wonderful? Great expensive books full of fibs.'

I said, 'Well I don't know about that, I think if you looked up the entry on Chopin you would find an awful lot more truth than in yours.'

And he replied, 'That would be Chopin's problem, not mine.' He liked to mislead people like this, just out of sheer waggishness. He didn't like this kind of prurient nosing and prying, as he made it quite clear, he didn't like people poking their nose into his affairs. It wasn't obvious why he didn't. I think he just didn't like being invaded and he was very protective of his own work and his space where he did it.

SO: Do you think his need for privacy was related to paranoia? For example, his fortifying The Eye with so many trees planted around the perimeter.

AH: That he was very clear about, he liked having the trees with the odd little gap so that he could look out but other people couldn't look in. But that was very much a part of his general personality, where we were talking for instance of how he didn't like to join groups, clubs and societies, if he was interested in something he would feel that he was in more control of his interest by being on the periphery looking in rather than being in the

middle of it where he could be seen as well as everybody else. That is the way he operated and that is exactly what was behind his 256 trees around the house with strategically placed gaps. It was a bit of a gag really, because he spent very little time looking out of the window at what was going on. I don't know if it was healthy for him to be like that, having his curtains drawn closed for so much of the time. He could have had much more light within the house and still have his privacy, because of the trees around him and they were far enough away from the house not to feel claustrophobic, although it did slightly. Paranoia? No, I think that was really just a question of keeping control of what was going on.

As far as the rest of it goes, it is a question of the need for personal privacy in terms of the need for space to get on with his work, which I think was the most important rationality behind it. In the same way, if you look at this thing of wanting to have control over who performs his music, for whom and when, you could call that paranoia, but it started off from a premise that was perfectly reasonable rather than paranoid. It got to be something that was closer to paranoia, but it didn't need to be because it was just too difficult, technically, for most people. So if that ever did verge on paranoia, as such, it was an unnecessary expression or instance of paranoia, because performances were not going to happen anyway. Odd really and quite irrational, because if it was going to be Yonty Solomon or John Ogdon playing something or another, then what is the problem with that? He became too accustomed to the idea that his music wasn't for people, which was a stupid idea, because it is. It is not everyone's cup of tea, but neither is J. S. Bach.

SO: I recently heard the radio broadcast that you did with Sorabji and Ronald Stevenson about Medtner. You were a very young man at the time.

AH: That was a very long time ago and it didn't go very well.

SO: I thought that it was interesting though.

AH: Well, I was rather concerned, because he had agreed to do this and he had met Ronald Stevenson once before of course at the other occasion, not very long before this

actually, when the television crew was there about this thing regarding Francis George Scott,<sup>386</sup> which was brilliant actually. He was in great form then and exhibited an enormous amount of patience considering that technicians with lights and the rest of it had invaded The Eye. He agitated a bit, but once he forgot about that and sat down on one side of the piano with Ronald Stevenson on the other side, he was fine. But on the occasion of the Medtner thing, he was really out of sorts and was not feeling at all well, but he didn't want to let people down because he had agreed to do this and he didn't want to put somebody off at the last minute. I was quite concerned for him really, because he was not in good shape at all, so it was falling apart at the seams. It would have gone fine if he was in good form, but it got very stilted and didn't go anywhere because he just wasn't fully concentrating. How old was he then? I suppose he was 88. So yes, that was quite tough for him. It was a great shame, because the Francis George Scott thing never got broadcast and that has been destroyed now, so it will never be seen again, which is a pity, because he performed very well on that occasion. He really got involved in the three-way conversation around the piano, which was most unusual for him to do.

SO: I was curious what it must have been like for you as a young man being in the presence of these two, drawn into conversation upon a topic that especially Sorabji knew so well, citing musical examples off the top of his head. But I was also bowled over by his sense of humour, incredible, incessant even, poking in here and there, interrupting the conversation and often bringing it to an end with some flash of wit.

AH: He did have this. You only have to read his books to make out a perfectly reasonable and quite correct assumption that the sense of humour that is there in his prose was there in his speech as well. It never interfered with anything that was going on, but it was certainly there.

Now the background to that, in terms of the three of us there at once was interesting. He had known and corresponded with Ronald Stevenson since the 1950s, before Stevenson had written his Passacaglia. He never actually met Ronald Stevenson

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<sup>386</sup> Francis George Scott (1880-1958), Scottish composer, primarily of songs, and to whom Sorabji dedicated his Sonata IV for Piano (1928-29). Incidentally, Scott and Sorabji had many mutual friends, including Hugh MacDiarmid and Erik Chisholm.

face to face until 1980, when that Francis George Scott television thing was done. It wasn't a programme about Scott either, I believe it was going to be put in a programme about MacDiarmid, but it was included because of the Scott centenary, which was that year. I had known K for about eight years when this happened, but I met Ronald Stevenson for the first time in 1978 and corresponded with him very occasionally before that. I had spent some time up at Ronald's place in West Linton – marvellous occasions really, talking about so many things way into the night with a glass of national stuff. That was wonderful. When the technicians were setting up all of the television and recording equipment in K's music room, which you can see from the photographs were not very conducive to having all of that set up, Ronald sat down to try out the piano – he played the Mason and Hamlin rather than the Steinway – and I was trying to keep K's nerves as calm as possible. He would suddenly get a bit agitated, but he recognised that this had to be done. He wasn't used to it; he didn't have a television and never possessed one. So all of this stuff was being set up and Ronald Stevenson sat down and played the F-sharp Impromptu of Chopin. K was in mid-conversation with me and the technician was asking questions, then suddenly K interrupted the middle of these two conversations, grabbed my sleeve and said, 'My God! Isn't he a wonderful pianist!' He was very taken with Stevenson's playing. So it started off on that footing and Stevenson got into his ease very easily. It really is too bad that the material wasn't even archived somewhere, even if it wasn't actually going to be broadcast, but with the Medtner thing he just wasn't on form, as I said.

But it was interesting, even then, having the opportunity of talking about someone who – again, it was a centenary year, Medtner's centenary year – was a known name, but that was about it. His music in those days was being occasionally performed and broadcast, but it was pretty rare. We accept Medtner's music now far more than we used to, because there are so many opportunities now to hear most of it. There is a remarkable consistency of quality about it; he didn't seem to write good works and not good works. I have to say, and I am disagreeing entirely from K here, that his very last work, the big Piano Quintet, which preoccupied him from 1904 until 1949, on and off – most off I suppose – is a big disappointment. It is a big ambitious work and Medtner, I think, felt that it was the peak of his achievement and Sorabji felt that too. But I never did. It is

funny, I remember saying to K that I just can't get to it. I don't know what on earth K must have thought about my comment, but he didn't argue with me. I said, 'I think that people have said "Russian Brahms" to Medtner so often that he got quite irritated and said, "If that is what you want, here we go, Russian Brahms it is."' It sounds a bit like that to me.

SO: I am curious, it is a pity that an oral biography couldn't have been conducted at a time when the majority of Sorabji's friends were still alive, but of the people that are gone now, who do you feel are some of the pivotal figures that K did consider close friends, who may also have influenced his artistic and intellectual development? There was Sacheverell Sitwell of course.

AH: Well, how do you describe a close friend? MacDiarmid championed K's work and encouraged him to go on to do big things.

SO: Fortunately MacDiarmid wrote out his impressions of K.<sup>387</sup>

AH: Yes, that's true. One of the extraordinary things, and I think that it is important to mention this, was that most of K's friends were not professional musicians. Egon Petri,<sup>388</sup> I suppose, was perhaps the most notable exception of the musicians that we know. John Ireland,<sup>389</sup> sure, but years would go by before he would see him. Certainly in terms of encouragement, MacDiarmid was one of the first to do that. With Sitwell's case it was rather the other way around. In Sitwell's first letter to K that we have, which was written just before K went to Vienna to play his first two sonatas, it is clear that Sitwell was very keen that Schoenberg be at the concert and was also very keen that K was to meet Schoenberg. This didn't happen. K did invite Schoenberg, but whether Schoenberg got the letter of invitation, I don't know. Sorabji had obviously been telling

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<sup>387</sup> MacDiarmid, *The Company I've Kept*.

<sup>388</sup> Egon Petri (1881-1962), Dutch pianist and pupil of Ferruccio Busoni, who was greatly admired by Sorabji both as a musician and a friend. Petri was the dedicatee of Sorabji's enormous solo piano work *Sequentia cyclica super "Dies iræ" ex Missa pro defunctis* (1948-1949).

<sup>389</sup> John Ireland (1879-1962), famous English composer to whom Sorabji dedicated his *Opus clavisymphonicum* for piano and orchestra (1957-59).

Sitwell all about Schoenberg, or rather what he knew about Schoenberg, along with a great many other things, and I think that Sitwell was fascinated by Sorabji and what he had to say. So I think that it was almost in the opposite direction with Sitwell, but as for the real encouragement to do the things that he was to go on doing, I suppose MacDiarmid looms as large as anybody in the early days. I think that Sorabji was very independent minded and he was going to do what come may, whatever it cost him. So figures like Norman Douglas,<sup>390</sup> for example, I wouldn't say he influenced him particularly. There was more confluence than influence between Sorabji and some of these people, if we are talking about writers and musicians.

Obviously, like the rest of us, he responded in his young days to particular music that would have an effect on the way he did things himself in the early days. If you look at the pre-First Sonata music for example, music from his first four to five years of composition, you can detect influences there, rather more strongly than you can do immediately thereafter and they are numerous and fleeting. He heard Scriabin play live in London, a performance of *Prometheus* – I think that was conducted by Henry Wood – and a recital that Scriabin gave less than two years before Scriabin died. Scriabin was certainly one of the early influences. He changed his mind about Scriabin's music quite a lot, but in the early days he was very taken with his music and fascinated with it. But again, this was music that he was discovering as it came up; what was Scriabin going to write next? But Scriabin was just one of a number of composers of whose music Sorabji was involved with, awaiting the next publication.

Fleeting influences? Cyril Scott,<sup>391</sup> I suppose, Leo Ornstein,<sup>392</sup> one could almost say, Ravel. He wrote a letter to Philip Heseltine about plans for writing a book on Ravel. It never came to anything. I don't know if he ever actually met Ravel. Ravel wasn't at the concert when K played the piano, accompanying Marthe Martine<sup>393</sup> in 1921 in Paris.

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<sup>390</sup> Norman Douglas (1868-1952), an expatriate English writer of fiction, essays, travel books, and autobiography.

<sup>391</sup> Cyril Scott (1879-1970), English composer and author of books on homeopathy, philosophy, occultism, and theology.

<sup>392</sup> Leo Ornstein (1893-2002), Russian-born composer who fled to America with his family in 1906.

<sup>393</sup> Marthe Martine, French soprano with whom Sorabji performed his *Trois poèmes pour chant et piano* (1918, 1919) in Paris on the 2 June 1921.

I believe Roussel was there and Florent Schmitt<sup>394</sup> was certainly there, it was through Florent Schmitt that the invitation occurred. But the French music of the time certainly exerted quite an influence upon him until the 1920s when the *Les Six* thing started and he felt himself completely at odds with that. It was also a time when he was becoming increasingly at odds with what Schoenberg was doing and in particular with what Stravinsky was doing. So in a way, this distancing himself from contemporary music, if you like, happened very early on in his creative career, and as you know his early works came rather late in life for a composer, since his first works that we know of come from when he was 22 years of age. The independence of spirit was so prevalent that the early influences soon dissipated and then at the same time he was moving further away from new trends in music, which had been his principal passion in the early days of musical discovery before he began to write.

The thing that I find most extraordinary of all, and I don't know if this is a well-kept story – I don't think it can be – was that he didn't seem to find the urge to compose until he was in his twenties. Here was somebody that had been immersing himself with great enthusiasm and great diligence in so much modern music, you would think that composing would be the first thing he would be drawn to do. He didn't actually seem to have any form of idea as to what he wanted to do as a professional of any kind until his twenties.

SO: You don't think that he had any clear youthful ambition? He was just in a process of discovery, perhaps?

AH: No youthful ambition in terms of his teens. I think that he was so busy discovering new music that he didn't really think about his career and when he did start to think about it, as the letters to Heseltine suggest, he was considering a career as a critic. This was about the time he began to compose his first songs and when he began to write these songs he had no idea he was going to expand at such a rate. I don't think he could have imagined himself fifteen years afterwards writing *Opus Clavicembalisticum*. There

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<sup>394</sup> Florent Schmitt (1870-1958), French composer whose compositions Sorabji greatly admired, in particular his Piano Quintet. Incidentally, this composition was performed in 1933, with Erik Chisholm at the piano, for the Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music.

didn't seem to be a persuasion there at all, it just happened to him. Again, he just found himself grabbed by it. If it had started three years younger, or ten years younger, or three years later, for goodness sake, it might have just hit him right between the eyes unexpectedly in just the same way. But I find it so very odd and bizarre, his initial approach to the act of composition. Most people compose because they have to; they are drawn to it in some way, not because someone tells them to do it. It was almost someone telling him to do it, as he puts it himself and there is nothing to disprove this. Charles Trew,<sup>395</sup> with whom he was having lessons in species counterpoint, sent him to go home and write something original entirely of his own. His attitude seems to have been that he went home and thought, 'Oh dear, what do I do?' Which when you think of what he spent the next seventy years of his life doing seems more than improbable. But that is an aspect of his life that I don't understand at all. So I can't give you anything about how that came about, because clearly it wasn't as though he suddenly discovered music for himself, he had been doing that very extensively. I don't know why it was that he didn't get an urge to compose until well into his twenties.

So influences? Well, obviously as I say the early ones we know of, but as for people in his life, he had some encouragement, but I don't think really anything that would have stopped him from doing what he did.

SO: Did he have perfect pitch?

AH: Yes. Well, how perfect is perfect, but perfect to a semi-tone I suppose you could say.

SO: Mervyn Vicars expressed in writing that Sorabji would simply sit down before a page of manuscript paper and begin composing, that he didn't require the assistance of a piano.

AH: Oh yes, he didn't compose at the piano.

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<sup>395</sup> Sorabji claimed that Charles A. Trew was his music professor during his youth, but unfortunately very little is known about his man.

SO: But Albert Dodd, who was his neighbour in Corfe Castle, could hear Sorabji whenever he began playing his piano and said that it very often sounded as if Sorabji was composing at the piano. I might add that Albert Dodd is a musician.

AH: Yes, he would get ideas and work at them on the piano, but never when he was actually writing. He wouldn't start writing until he got a good way through a piece, as a rule, in his head that is to say. The piano was certainly an immense stimulus to him. I suppose you could say that he used the piano while he was composing, but not while he was writing down his compositions. So there was actually no question about the fact that the piano was very much a part of that, but only in the early preparation stages. He said to me once that somebody made this ridiculous remark - the fact that it was a cliché was bad enough, but it was just so stupid – about 'Oh yes Mr. Sorabji, the piano is an extension of your personality isn't it?' He said, 'I have never heard so much rubbish. It is not something that is just there, it is part of me, physically a part of me. I feel if you took my piano away you might as well cut off my forearms.' So that was the kind of attachment that he had to the piano. The things that you read about piano design that he wrote, his persuasions about that and his interests in piano manufacturing and design were varying expressions of that great passion. The piano was the very great love of his life. Although he never had any pretensions as a professional public pianist, it was obviously a very big part of his life. To what extent he used it when he was writing non-piano works I couldn't tell you, but it was certainly a stimulus to his imagination, but that was all. It wasn't a composing aid while writing or anything of that nature. What was it that Ravel was supposed to have said to Stravinsky? 'Some composers compose at the piano and some compose away from the piano,' meaning actually writing down, 'as for you, Igor, you write at the piano,' which he did. Fine, I don't, you find your own best way of doing it. Some composers find that they compose some works at the piano and other works away from the piano, while other composers say that their skill as a pianist interferes with the compositional thought process and therefore they try to get away from the piano when they are writing. I have no skills as a pianist, but I do find the piano a nuisance when writing. Sorabji would have found that the piano was something of an

interference when in the physical business of writing the notes down. There is no way any of his works were just dependent upon his very considerable skills as an improviser at the piano, because the formal disciplines were such that just couldn't have happened.

SO: Speaking of improvisation, Mervyn Vicars wrote that Sorabji was capable of improvising fugues.

AH: I never heard him do that, but it wouldn't surprise me, considering how many he wrote. I wouldn't be surprised either if he was encouraged to do that kind of thing in his early days when he was learning his craft.

SO: It would require an immense skill.

AH: Well, it is an important thing to do, but that sort of thing has become unfashionable now and even was fifty or sixty years ago. Dutilleux made some remark about that; where he was looking at some of the things that his colleagues were doing and he was still thinking about writing fugues, not necessarily in compositions, but part of an exercise for developing himself.

SO: How would you say that your relationship with Sorabji evolved? How often did you see him at first?

AH: From once or twice a year to about seven or eight times a year. Sometimes it was far less often than others depending more on what my commitments were rather than his, because he was at The Eye most of the time and I was travelling around a lot. So it varied, but as often as I was able within reason. He could see that I was not hell bent on talking about music all the time or talking about his music all the time, though obviously I did try to bring it into the conversation. I was careful about disciplining myself to ration the amount of time I would speak about what was going to happen to all of his music; but I wasn't going to let go, because this was a primary concern and remained a primary concern even after the first performance up until K's death and even remains a concern

now. I think that because I wasn't trying to write a book on him or an article he was all right. He seemed to be more at ease since the first time I wrote to him, because I made a point of the fact that I wasn't a lexicographer, or journalist, or author, or pianist, that I was interested in him because I was a composer myself. This seems to have struck a chord somehow. I don't have the letter to see what I wrote now, but I know that it took me a long time to write it. But that seems to be what tipped the balance in favour of his ringing up and making that invitation in the first place.

You were also saying that it was a pity that some of these things couldn't have happened sooner, which of course in retrospect is easy to say and of course it is undeniably true. But certain things did happen; it was just a question of when. The microfilming of manuscripts that happened in the 1950s through Norman Gentieu, the work that Frank Holliday did to make those recordings, which grew out of many years of persuasion and work, so there were certain things that happened at different stages and yes it would have been great if things would have happened sooner, but it wasn't to be. And yes if they had, I know what you are saying, we would have been able to talk to the second generation of Sean Owen about people who are no longer alive, so yes that is true and it is a pity. In the long run, what we do have is the legacy of his work, principally in music and also a not inconsiderable literary legacy. Whilst one of the thrusts of your research, which you are doing now, is what kind of man was it that did this in this particular way and went on doing it regardless if anyone thought anything of it, knew anything about it, let alone what they thought of it, good, bad, or indifferent. I think that this is an important issue, because he did have this courage and sustaining power to keep large works going and keep himself going writing them over a very long period of time. I think that anybody that really was the kind of negative image that people sometimes painted him to be wouldn't have lasted that long, certainly wouldn't have. That kind of work would have killed them in a shorter period of time.

It is interesting to think about the kind of person that it was that did this, but the kind of person that did this was essentially a very private person, but a very communicative one at the same time; a contradiction in terms. You can see in his literary writing that they do go out to people, it is a style that you either love or hate, they are remarks that you either love or hate. You can't really have too many hard measures

about it. But he had a real urge to communicate, which you can see more easily in his words. You can see it more easily now in his music, but back then you couldn't because the music wasn't being played. That communicative urge was certainly there, but like I said about his joining societies, he wanted to stay on the edge of it. All of those things that you said, the defence mechanism, the shyness, the lot, he didn't want to make an exhibition of himself; those were his words when I asked him about going to concerts of his own music, 'Why should I make an exhibition of myself?' I said to him, 'K, why indeed would you make an exhibition of yourself? But that wouldn't be the reason for going.' He wasn't having any of it. He didn't feel that he had to be seen. He said, 'People go to hear the *Pathétique Symphony* and they are not disappointed that they can not see Tchaikovsky taking his applause afterwards.'

SO: What was it like, travelling as it were, down to The Eye to meet this man? And what an interesting friendship that was to evolve!

AH: I couldn't be sure that was going to happen, although the exchange of correspondence that we had beforehand, which took three or so letters each, were very warm, with an easy fluency. I was very nervous the first time I went down to meet him. He was quite a stickler for punctuality as well, so I wanted to be there with plenty of time. I had no need to be nervous though and such was so for all of the other occasions. Travelling down to see him were occasions of great excitement. I always looked forward to my visits with him, because they were always so delightful and so stimulating, without exception. I never caught him in a difficult mood or anything of that nature. The conversations always flowed very easily. Then again, there would be silences occasionally and it was another thing, which he appreciated really well, that conversation, just like music, could include silences without them being the kind of sores when nobody knows what to say next. They were wonderful occasions, every one of them, and I wouldn't have missed one of them for anything.

## CONCLUSION

Besides expanding the available biographical resources on Sorabji, which are rather limited, the purpose of this dissertation is to give perspective to this much neglected and misunderstood composer. The neglect of Sorabji's musical contributions was largely self-inflicted, due to the effects of his self-imposed ban, and although gradual recognition began to emerge in the 1970s with permission to perform his works being granted to Michael Habermann and Yonty Solomon, it has not been until quite recently that the preparation of his scores into legible performance editions has allowed a greater fruition of recordings and performances. With that said, the time is ripe for a more serious study of Sorabji's place in musical history, but that was not the task of the present work. Just as his musical neglect was self-inflicted, the various matters of confusion and misunderstanding in Sorabji's biography exist due to his propensity for fabrication, his joy in misleading lexicographers, and his life-time development of a complex self-constructed otherness. That is to say Sorabji portrayed aspects of his life in a manner that was not in keeping with reality and it is this perplexing behaviour that is ultimately scrutinised in the archival research of the current work while the oral histories provide, time and time again, the proof of Sorabji's otherness as perceived by those around him.

One of the more important revelations, in setting aright certain basic aspects of Sorabji's biography, has been the discovery of his mother's birth certificate. This important document, which was not supposed to exist, as it had been accepted that his mother was only a young Sicilian-Spanish girl when she was adopted by an English family, began a series of investigations, questions, and considerations. To begin with the construction of a brief maternal family tree with surnames like Worthy and Wood, shows that Sorabji, despite his many vehement expressions of the contrary, was half English. He did not have any immediate familial relationship to either Spain or Sicily and it is likely that there were no familial connections at all. Related to his Mediterranean claims, he often made allusions to his Catholic heritage, sharing frequently the magnificent story about his supposedly ancient papal ring, and causing some of the villagers in Corfe Castle to believe that he was actually Catholic. But the research shows that his mother and

every member of her family were baptised in Anglican churches and that the papal ring was a modern piece of English craftsmanship. Where does this Catholic influence come from? It is in keeping with the construction of his supposed Mediterranean heritage, but it also gives cause for contemplation. When one considers Sorabji's desire to be on the periphery of society without existing in the mainstream of the masses, the adoption of the rich and often violent history of Catholicism in Britain would provide the desired separation from the Anglican norm and blur his own family connection to the predominant denomination of the local masses. I suppose it is also possible that Madeline converted to Catholicism at some later point in her life and that her belief structure provided the influence for Sorabji's inventions, but this is mere postulating since no data has surfaced to support this idea. Nevertheless, Sorabji was an Englishman, and as much as he would have frowned upon this conclusion, one must wonder whether he was ashamed of his true identity or if perhaps the truth was painful in some way. Today England is one of the great multi-cultural societies in our world, yet times were very different during Sorabji's developmental years. Sorabji felt the pangs of prejudice as a child and was very sensitive to the notion of race, so it is not beyond the scope of possibility that as a mixed-race Englishman he could have been scorned, but as a Parsi, as a Sicilian, and as a Spaniard, he could claim the safe haven of essentially being a foreigner. Of course for this theory to work, his mother had to have been adopted, thus explaining why Sorabji, the foreigner, was born in England, but alas, the theory fails since Madeline was born to her natural parents in Camberwell, England. Whatever Sorabji's motivation, the issue of race was one of the more obvious ways in which he could distance himself from those who sought to learn more about his family's origin and, whether it was the desired effect or not, he successfully exuded a sense of exoticism that set him apart from just about everyone and ultimately provided a natural and safe enclave from any sort of conformed society.

Learning more about Madeline has proven to be very important in contemplating Sorabji's mind and unusual behaviours. She was an enormous influence on her son, with whom she lived up until he was in his mid 50s. The act of creating an alternative self was not unique to Sorabji, as Madeline too had a history of disguising her identity by using aliases, providing conflicting birth dates, falsifying legal documents, like an early census,

her marriage certificate, passport, and finally, admittedly with the help of her son, her death certificate, which not only marred her birth date, but also provided a distinctly non-English stylisation to her name. Madeline must have been a very strong and self-determined woman. Her own father died when she was merely twelve years old, and although it is not clear what happened to the Worthy family unit, one could presume that the loss of her father caused a financial pinch for her mother and her several younger siblings. The census data from 1891 shows that she was living with her older sister, Frances, and perhaps they had been living together for some time so as to ease her mother's financial burden. The census information also states that she was a music student, which is interesting, as Sorabji stated that his mother was a singer, and presumably, considering Sorabji did not receive a conventional education, Madeline had an enormous impact on the development and promotion of her son's musical talents. In many ways, Madeline sacrificed a great deal to support her son. She had a sexual relationship with Sorabji's father and although marriage followed, she entered wedlock with the future composer already growing inside her womb. This important fact causes one to wonder whether Shapurji Sorabji was sincere in his proposal to Madeline, which evidently he was not since he ultimately abandoned her and remarried bigamously to a woman in India, or if he was doing the relatively honourable deed of giving Madeline the status of being married so as not to condemn her even further from social grace by abandoning her to the life of an unwed mother with a mixed-race child. Madeline of course could have put Sorabji up for adoption had she desired to turn away from the entire scandal, as it may have been deemed by her family at that time, but she did not. Instead, she focused her attention upon the development of her son's natural musical, literary, scholarly, and linguistic inclinations, aided by the other decency that Shapurji Sorabji bestowed, a generous financial trust, to enable Sorabji with a privileged existence void of the occupational compromises that the necessity for a pay cheque can sometimes inspire.

In return for her dedication, one could imagine that Sorabji developed an intense indebtedness to his mother. He spent the majority of his life with her and one could argue that she was the most important figure in his life. He had her independent spirit, but ironically, he was never fully independent from her, so fused were their two

existences. He cohabitated with her throughout his London years and lived but a village apart from her after they relocated to Dorset. Part of their mutual correlation could have been their shared knowledge of their true identities and the ability to corroborate this presumption would be very interesting, for it would demonstrate that Sorabji's promotion of otherness was not exclusively his own, but rather a coalescent act choreographed with his mother. That is to say, it does not seem likely that Sorabji's fabrications were exclusive to his own individual eccentricity, nor is it reasonable to believe that Madeline fed recreations of her own background to Sorabji's naivety and he was merely expressing to others what his mother had shared with sincerity to him. For example, Sorabji could have believed the words of his mother that he had a Sicilian-Spanish background and that she had indeed been adopted, but this idea is quickly rebuked when it becomes clear that Sorabji had relationships with other members of his mother's, distinctly English, family.

It is completely plausible that archival research alone will never fully answer the questions as to what necessitated or motivated the masquerading of their identities and that the truth lies in the undocumented realm of personal psychology, in which case Sorabji and Madeline have likely taken those secrets with them to the grave.

Nevertheless, there is potential for future research on this particular issue, which would initially involve a more complete investigation into Sorabji's extended family tree, making contact, if possible, with living descendants of the Worthy, Wood, Shroff, and Sorabji genealogical strands. Once a detailed family tree has been constructed – a task that is potentially impossible to accomplish – the next stage of investigation would involve the invention and testing of hypotheses as to why the masquerading and development of aliases were considered necessary; what was there to conceal? I would not completely rule out the possibility of a scandal, either within the family itself or in relation to society, involving racism, class distinction, or a criminal prosecution, for example.

The beauty of identifying these falsehoods within Sorabji's biography is that an individual of immense perceived complexity has suddenly been shown to be even more complex than initially thought. These new and clarified revelations about Sorabji's biography should not be perceived as being defamatory; rather they are suggestive of hidden circumstances. The chapter on Reginald Best is of immense importance, for it

reveals that with Sorabji everything was not necessarily as it initially seemed. Sorabji required solitude for his creative productivity and there was an unmistakable tinge of elitism in the way that he protected his privacy, but he distanced himself from the villagers for other reasons as well. Sorabji was a homosexual in a time when such orientation was legally condemned. It was therefore prudent to have been secretive regarding his relationship with Mr. Best by not being explicit and instead allowing the villagers of Corfe Castle to spin their own conclusions: Mr. Best was the manservant, the cousin, the god-son, the friend, or the lover. Ambiguity was one of Sorabji's effective techniques for shielding his private life, just as he side-stepped lexicographers for years regarding his age by providing conflicting years for his birth. Although many of the villagers hinted at the real nature of his relationship with Mr. Best, there was never a clear consensus. As much as Sorabji did not wish to parade his sexual orientation for the local villagers, he was not abashed by his natural leaning and wrote openly about homosexuality. But it was his particular method of accepting his sexual orientation, strongly influenced by his time spent with Havelock Ellis as a young adult, which seems most relevant to his intense desire for seclusion. Ellis recognised that within society there existed an incredible number of inverts, his term for homosexuals, who defied the old notions of sexual inversion as a mental illness or developmental disorder and who were men of great accomplishment and intellectual ability. But he also felt that it was the fate of the invert, until social standards evolved and the inversion was better understood by the medical community, to live quietly within the restrictive laws and social norms of their time. For this reason Sorabji was not to deny the natural inclination of his inner feelings, but he was to live a strictly ascetic existence and not lash out violently in opposition against the status quo.

Another aspect to Sorabji's need for solitude was his responsibility to protect Mr. Best, not from social discrimination or any other form of reactive bigotry to their homosexuality, but rather from himself. Although Mr. Best's medical records have since been destroyed, a sad reality that forces one to surmise what otherwise could have been known with more certainty, it is clear that he suffered from a mental disorder, likely Schizophrenia or some form of acute nervousness. He received periodic Electroconvulsive Therapy as treatment, which is a barbarous technique that created even

greater suffering, both for Mr. Best and for Sorabji who tended to his traumatised friend. The villagers often mentioned the strange man who walked several steps behind Sorabji and they always assumed that this was an expression of Mr. Best's subservience, but they were sadly mistaken. Sorabji did indeed lead a private life, which greatly benefited his musical prolificacy, and he was not warm to the prying of others, but he had legitimate cause for removing himself from village life, beyond mere preference; he had to take care of Mr. Best. When reading the interviews with the villagers it is suggested that Sorabji's obsession with seclusion intensified as he got older, since those who knew Sorabji when he first arrived in Corfe Castle had recollections of him passing time in the village and being relatively more outgoing, while those who only knew him in his later years were aware only of his strong aversion from interacting with others. Although it is mere speculation, one could also presume that Mr. Best's mental condition would have also deteriorated over time, requiring more steadfast observance from Sorabji.

Although the technique of oral history would have been far more revealing had this research taken place several decades ago, while many of those who interacted with Sorabji in his prime and who were superbly influential in his life were themselves still alive, nevertheless by interviewing various villagers in Corfe Castle, who bore witness to Sorabji's later years, we have gleaned impressions of who he was as a man and how he was regarded by those around him. Leaving London to live in rural Dorset was an enormous change for Sorabji, not just of scenery, but also as a cultural experience. He seemed to desire the simplicity of village life and had essentially resigned his desire for concert going in London and the bustle of the city. One can also imagine that by living through the Blitz and being a target for utter destruction, it was an immense relief to relocate somewhere quieter and more anonymous.

The villagers were very intrigued by Sorabji and his mysterious mannerisms. He was deemed by many to have existed in a more elite social sphere. 'Sir Abji' and the 'Indian Prince' were titles that were bestowed upon him by the villagers. Such misconceptions would have pleased and amused Sorabji, as it demonstrated that not only was he misunderstood, but he was placed above the average villager; two desired outcomes that are akin to what Sorabji sought to engender in others with the stories about his intaglio ring. As time passed Sorabji acclimatized to The Eye and the villagers

respected his privacy. But such a condition, as physically removed and alluring as it may have been for Sorabji, provided a wealth of whisperings and rumours. The villagers were keenly aware of Sorabji's desire for seclusion, since such was expressed, not so subtly, by his admonishing signs exhibited at the bottom of his driveway and the thick grove of trees that acted as a defence against casual nosiness. Many of the villagers mentioned Sorabji's apparent dislike for women and that as a woman, if you were permitted into The Eye, you were indeed privileged. This is another interesting aspect of Sorabji's personality. It is true that he wrote scathing remarks about how he felt blessed to have not been drawn to the female sex, but such condemnations are almost always sweepingly general in nature and not specific. In fact, Sorabji had constant interaction with women and counted many of them as dear friends, such as Denise Vicars and Gola Martin-Smith. He was always courteous to the female villagers and we should not forget that where neighbours and acquaintances always required a special invitation to The Eye, 'Genuine Catholic, i.e. Roman Sisters' were always welcome. Also, he utterly adored his mother, but perhaps it was from his mother where this prickly and often contradictory misogynistic posturing first took root. As detailed in the chapter on John Dean, Sorabji stated that his mother could be damning of her own sex and perhaps, as a single mother, she did resent the traditional roles of womanhood that relied on the provisions of a strong man. Sorabji was sensitive to the dichotomy between the masses and the individual and it seems that in considering his feeling towards women that what he dismissed as a group, he openly embraced as an individual.

While living in London, Sorabji was a very active music critic and writer of letters, with a colourfully devastating wit, and although he retired to Corfe Castle, he did not retire his pen. Sorabji's corporeal being, like the trees that surrounded his bungalow, was well shaded from day-to-day life in the village, but quite frequently he did invite the public at large to take a glance into the inner-world of his thoughts by submitting letters to the local newspaper. Here again we experience the irony of Sorabji's behaviour; he wanted to be left alone and yet he was very much concerned with what was happening in the world around him, both on a global and provincial level. He was studious, a voracious reader, and always sought to penetrate the deeper meaning of things, hence his magnetic attraction to conspiracy theories. But obtaining knowledge for self-edification

alone was not sufficient; he actively shared his opinions both in casual conversations, for example with the postal workers, and in greater diffusion by publishing letters in the Swanage Times. Essentially, Sorabji was at heart a sharer. When villagers were given access to his home he loved to stroll about and point out the various treasures that he had collected over the years and if someone took a particular interest in one thing or another he was prone to simply give it to them as a gift. This was true with the villagers and more profoundly it was true in his relationships with younger musicians like Anthony Burton-Page and, especially, Alistair Hinton. Even as a passing opportunity to be influential he would not disappoint his dear friend, Mrs. Martin-Smith, by denying audiences with Patrick Douglas-Hamilton and James Kirby, who were also only young student musicians at the time.

Admittedly, the information provided by the majority of the interviews with the villagers of Corfe Castle is incidental, but not without value. The various scraps of published biographical data regarding Sorabji have successfully promoted the infamies, the mysteries, the alluring falsehoods, while simultaneously blurring the realities of Sorabji's very interesting life. The simple and straightforward messages provided by the interviews with the local villagers demonstrate quite concisely what Mr. Hinton alluded to in his interview, that Sorabji's written daggers were somewhat blunted by the exuberant warmth with which he welcomed his friends, his intense demand for isolation was contrasted by his enthusiasm for intimate conversation and personal sharing, and his supposed misogyny and ill disposition to others was more often directly contradicted by dear friendships with women and a consistent courtesy to whomever he met in public. The contradictions between his reputation and the actuality of his existence were known to Sorabji and they appear to have given him much amusement. This sense of humour was detected by many in the village, yet they too were prone to believe his stories. The papal connection of course was a particular favourite and as much as Sorabji detested being spotlighted in a large group, he was perfectly content in more intimate situations bringing direct attention to his ring or his thorny attitude regarding the ban on his music.

Using the technique of oral history, the present dissertation has brought deserved attention to three key relationships that Sorabji cherished while living in Dorset. The name of Mervyn Vicars is not new to Sorabji circles, but no one, up to now, has written

specifically about their relationship. Even Mr. Hinton states that Sorabji was not forthcoming in discussing specific aspects of his compositions, but in the case of Mr. Vicars, there was quite a lot of musical sharing. Sorabji showed his compositions to Mr. Vicars and Mr. Vicars shared his compositions with Sorabji. They were always fully supportive of one another, of course, and not at all critical. Yet Sorabji, who typically would not bother making a fuss about his own music, found in Mr. Vicars a companion with whom that form of sharing was natural and apparently a source of great personal enjoyment. Where the name of Mr. Vicars has appeared previously, Sorabji's relationships with Mr. Dean and Mrs. Martin-Smith are new revelations. Indeed, Sorabji was a very private man, but the term recluse is almost too severe. He had many active relationships in Dorset, although he did not always require the corporeal presence of a friend to be sociable, since he was quick to grab his pen or fumble clumsily at his typewriter and communicate, as he did with Mr. Dean, through correspondence. Sorabji gave the impression of solitude as he was in the habit of keeping his friends neatly separated from one another, yet collectively he possessed his own active circle of companions and was never truly lonely.

Unfortunately, Mr. Vicars, Mr. Dean, and Mrs. Martin-Smith are all deceased and their chapters were constructed second-hand by those who knew them. But in the case of Mr. Burton-Page and Mr. Hinton, both of whom were very young when they first travelled to The Eye to meet the mysterious composer, the oral biography accomplished its most potent form of direct presentation of very important relationships that Sorabji had in his later years. Sorabji was dearly attracted to both of these young men, almost paternally, and recognised that although they were keenly curious about his music, he did not perceive their enquiries as intrusive. It is as if he sensed that their curiosity was secondary to the budding friendships that were developing and this prioritisation of intent put Sorabji at ease. It is also possible that Sorabji looked at these two young men, both of whom were and are composers, and felt that in his own subtle way he could be influential without ever assuming the role of teacher. The interviews with these two men are as illuminating about Sorabji's personality as they are touching, relating with open admission Sorabji's tendency for fabrication and occasional difficulty, but always

resolving their recollections with the fond imprints of his incredible generosity and friendly dedication.

With growing enthusiasm for Sorabji's music and the absence of a thorough biography, the posturing of the many exotic but hopelessly incorrect aspects of Sorabji's life as biographical supplements is a condition of misinterpretation that is ripe for expiration. Although the current work does not, nor did it attempt to fully remedy this circumstance, it does present elucidatory material regarding Sorabji's active participation in the creation of an autobiographical otherness, the history of this preoccupation which seems to stem from his mother, and suggestions for motivational impetuses that may have necessitated a life of interspersed and false self-presentation. The creation of alternative realities is an integral part of Sorabji's biography, just as the more infamous stories about the ban and his vitriolic temperament are forever going to be a part of his written portrait. The purpose of the current study, in focusing on this aspect of otherness and the exploration of who Sorabji was as a man, not necessarily as a composer, is to provide the means and perspective for a more balanced representation of Sorabji's biography. Sorabji's current reputation on an international scale is somewhat akin to his reputation in Dorset. His music was rarely if ever heard by the vast majority of those living in Corfe Castle and his personality was never truly understood, yet they all somehow knew that there was a neglected genius in their midst, a man of great ability and achievement, whose world was apart from the mainstream of their life. With greater profusion of his music and the foundation for a more complete and multi-dimensional biography, may the neglect of Sorabji's legacy abate and although the fate of his music is never likely to be shelved in the canon of popularly played concert repertoire, he thoroughly deserves wider historical recognition for his prolific contributions and unique ascetic dedication to his art.

## Appendix A – Illustrations

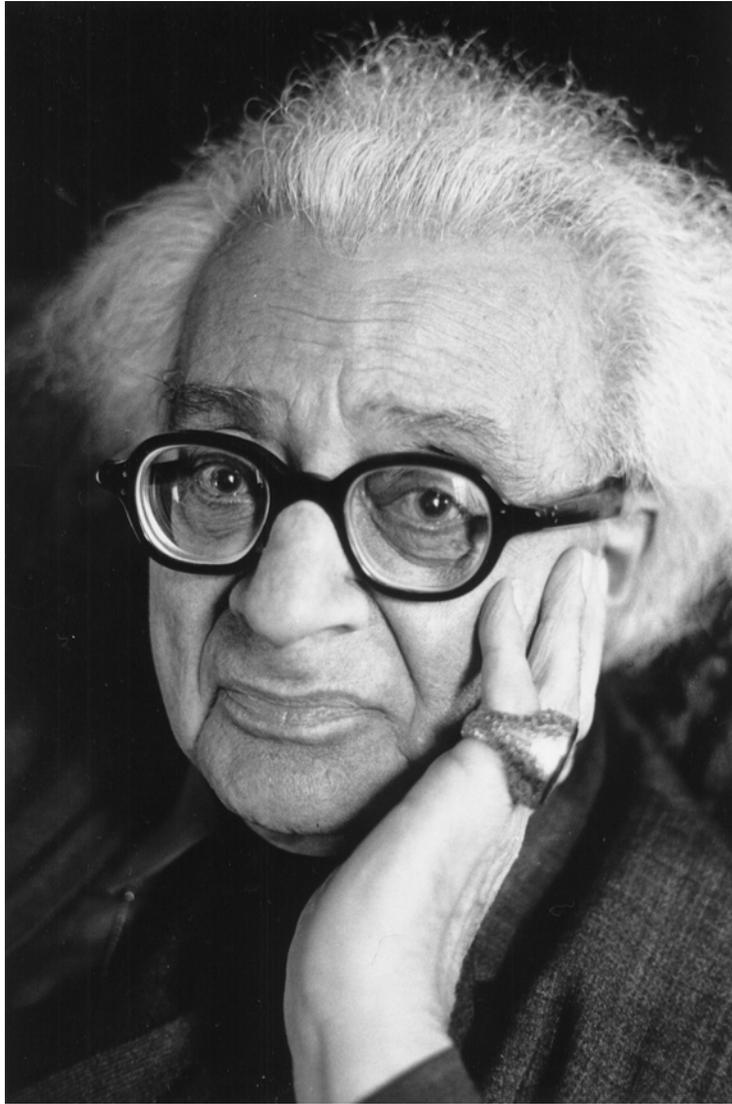


Fig. 1. Portrait photograph of Sorabji taken at The Eye in October 1977, with the infamous ring clearly displayed on the little finger of his left hand. Photograph by Sir Jeremy Grayson.



Fig. 2. Yonty Solomon, the talented pianist and promoter of Sorabji's compositions, visited the composer at The Eye in 1977. Photograph by Sir Jeremy Grayson.



Fig. 3. The composer graciously sharing his manuscripts with the enthralled Yonty Solomon. Photograph by Sir Jeremy Grayson, 1977.



Fig. 4. The composer performing for a very privileged Yonty Solomon in what is one of the few expansive photographs of Sorabji's music room, with its vast collection of books, pianos, antiques, and *objet d'art*. Photograph by Sir Jeremy Grayson, 1977.



Fig. 5. A fine capturing of a communicative Sorabji, expressive and animated. Photograph by Sir Jeremy Grayson, 1977.



Fig. 6. As many of the Corfe Castle residents recalled, Sorabji openly publicised his guarded privacy, as is reflected in this admonishment that was posted on the front gate of his home. Photograph by Sir Jeremy Grayson, 1977.



Fig. 7. On the other side of Sorabji's front gate was the Eye of Horus set above a quote from the *Queen of Sheba*, 'As for those impervious to sensitivity, those insecure in reasoning, those weak in discernment, who have no right to any life, it is they indeed who are the dead among the living. On them our indifference, more evil than a curse. Amen!' Translated by Paul Rapoport, *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration*. Photograph by Sir Jeremy Grayson, 1977.



Fig. 8. The ruins of Corfe Castle can be seen perched on the grassy hill. To the far right hand side of the photograph is the Banks Arms, the historic inn where Sorabji stayed when he and his mother used to visit Corfe Castle prior to their moving to Dorset and where Sorabji lived for a brief period of time after departing London. Photograph by the author, 2002.



Fig. 9. The ruins of Corfe Castle loom above the New Cemetery off West Street, where Sorabji and Reggie Best's ashes are interred. Photograph by the author, 2002.



Fig. 10. Sorabji's simple tombstone in the New Cemetery rests beside a similar tombstone for Reginald Best. Photograph by the author, 2002.



Fig. 11. The longest road in Corfe Castle is East Street, which winds from the ruined castle at one end to the road which leads off to The Eye on the other. Photograph by the author, 2002.



Fig. 12. A bird's eye view of Corfe Castle from the perspective of the ruined castle. The church of St. Edward the Martyr, where Sorabji's funeral service was held, sits centrally in the village. Photograph by the author, 2002.



Fig. 13. Sorabji sitting amongst the ruins of Corfe Castle. Photograph by Norman Peterkin, c. 1934.



Fig. 14. A very early photograph of Sorabji's mother, Madeline, on the left holding the hand of an unidentified woman. Unknown photographer.



Fig. 15. A rather glamorous photograph of Madeline, probably taken sometime in her early twenties. Unknown photographer.



Fig. 16. Madeline Sorabji's profile. Unknown photographer.



Fig. 17. A very early picture of Shapurji Sorabji, the composer's father taken in London when he was probably in his early thirties. Unknown photographer.



Fig. 18. Reginald Norman Best. Photograph by Joan Muspratt, c. 1945.



Fig. 19. 175 Clarence Gate Gardens, Glentworth Street, London, where Sorabji and his mother lived from 1916 until they departed for Dorset in the 1940s. Photograph by the author, 2002.

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF BIRTH

GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

Application Number G 207998

REGISTRATION DISTRICT Epping

1892 BIRTH in the Sub-district of Chipwell in the County of Essex

Column-	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No.	When and where born	Name, if any	Sex	Name and surname of father	Name, surname and maiden surname of mother	Occupation of father	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar	Name entered after registration
	15th Quinton Road Chingford Essex	Leon Dudley	M	Shapurji Sorabji	Madeline Matilda Sorabji formerly Worthy	Labourer	M. M. Sorabji Mother Quinton Road Chingford		David Octave 1892	Samuel Hills Registrar

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Births in the District above mentioned.

Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the 17th day of July 2002

BXBZ 585630

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WARNING: A CERTIFICATE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY.

REGISTRATION DISTRICT Camberwell

1866 BIRTH in the Sub-district of St George Camberwell in the County of Surrey

Column-	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No.	When and where born	Name, if any	Sex	Name and surname of father	Name, surname and maiden surname of mother	Occupation of father	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar	Name entered after registration
257	22nd St. Helen's Road	Madeline Matilda	F	Thomas Worthy	Ann Worthy formerly Wood	Labourer at the Manor House.	Thomas John Worthy Father 22 Helen's Lane Camberwell		David Worth August 1866	Samuel Hills Registrar

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Births in the District above mentioned.

Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the 24th day of August 2002

BXBZ 610029

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WARNING: A CERTIFICATE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY.

Fig. 20. The birth certificate of Leon Dudley Sorabji, a.k.a. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji. United Kingdom birth certificate, Epping, 1892. Family Record Centre, London.

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF BIRTH

GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

Application Number R411232

REGISTRATION DISTRICT Camberwell

1866 BIRTH in the Sub-district of St George Camberwell in the County of Surrey

Column-	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No.	When and where born	Name, if any	Sex	Name and surname of father	Name, surname and maiden surname of mother	Occupation of father	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar	Name entered after registration
257	22nd St. Helen's Road	Madeline Matilda	F	Thomas Worthy	Ann Worthy formerly Wood	Labourer at the Manor House.	Thomas John Worthy Father 22 Helen's Lane Camberwell		David Worth August 1866	Samuel Hills Registrar

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Births in the District above mentioned.

Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the 24th day of August 2002

BXBZ 610029

CAUTION: THERE ARE OFFENCES RELATING TO FALSIFYING OR ALTERING A CERTIFICATE AND USING OR POSSESSING A FALSE CERTIFICATE "CROWN COPYRIGHT"  
WARNING: A CERTIFICATE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY.

Fig. 21. The birth certificate of Sorabji's mother, Madeline Matilda Worthy, which proves that Sorabji's mother was neither adopted nor of immediate Sicilian-Spanish ancestry, if at all. United Kingdom birth certificate, Camberwell, 1866. Family Record Centre, London.



**CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF MARRIAGE**

GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE  
Application Number *R411232*

1856. Marriage solemnized at the Church		In the Parish of <i>St George the Martyr</i> in the County of <i>London</i>						
Sex	When Married	Name and Surname	Age	Condition	Rank of Profession	Residence at the time of Marriage	Father's Name and Residence	Rank or Profession of Father
<i>M</i>	<i>August 27</i>	<i>Francis John Worthy</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>Single</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>St George the Martyr</i>	<i>John Worthy</i>	<i>Labourer</i>
<i>F</i>	<i>August 27</i>	<i>Sarah Matilda Wood</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>Single</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>St George the Martyr</i>	<i>John Wood</i>	<i>Factor</i>

Married in the *Local Church* according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Established Church, by *License* or otherwise by *Law*.

The Marriage was solemnized before us, *Francis John Worthy* at *St George the Martyr* in the Parish of *St George the Martyr* in the County of *London* on the *27th* day of *August* 1856.

GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, UNDER THE SEAL OF THE SAID OFFICE, THE *27th* DAY OF *August* 2002.

St George the Martyr, Southwark

MXB 104666

This certificate is issued in pursuance of section 10 of the Marriage Act 1983. Sub-section 3 of that section provides that any certified copy of an entry purporting to be made or stamped with the seal of the General Register Office shall be received as evidence of the marriage to which it relates without any further or other proof of the entry, and no certified copy purporting to have been given in the said Office shall be of any force or effect unless it is so sealed or stamped as aforesaid.

CAUTION: THERE ARE OFFENCES RELATING TO FALSIFYING OR ALTERING A CERTIFICATE AND USING OR POSSESSING A FALSE CERTIFICATE. PENALTY: IMPRISONMENT.

WARNING: A CERTIFICATE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY.



Fig. 24. The marriage certificate of Francis John Worthy and Sarah Matilda Wood, Sorabji's maternal grandparents, which reveals yet another generation in the past, a lineage which seems to negate Sorabji's assertion that he was not English. United Kingdom marriage certificate, St George the Martyr, 1856. Family Record Centre, London.

What people who matter think of me!

**COPY OF PRESENTATION LETTER.**

**To Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji.**

We the undersigned have long admired your achievements in the realms of composition and scholarship. We are familiar with your music via the printed page but we would very greatly appreciate the opportunity of hearing authentic performances of it. We hope, therefore that you will accept the enclosed gift as a mark of our esteem, both to you personally, and for your contribution to the art of music, and that you may see your way to record such of your works as you may consider best suited to gramophone reproduction. You would naturally have complete control over any records so made.

In sending you this slight expression of our warmest and most deep felt friendship and admiration, we imply no obligation whatever on you to record, but we do beg that you will see your way to accede to our request that you should do so. We have taken the greatest care to restrict the knowledge of this letter to those we know to be your personal friends and admirers as we know this would be your wish. We would however, add that we are convinced that there is a much larger body of people who, like us, have a genuine desire to hear your music.

*Signed :*

York Bowen, Dion Byngham, Erik Chisholm,  
H. J. Cooper, E. Edroff-Smith, Norman P. Gentieu,  
Frank Holliday, Paul Howard, Philip Mairet,  
John Ireland, Clinton Gray-Fisk, Harold Rutland,  
Norman Peterkin, Egon Petri, Roger Quilter,  
Alec Rowley, Harold Morland, Denis Saurat,  
Osbert Sitwell, George Richards, Bernard Stevens,  
Mervyn Vicars, Frida Kindler-van Dieren.

Fig. 25. Frank Holliday's petition for Sorabji to record some of his own music, a request that was signed and supported by many of Sorabji's dearest friends and admirers. In keeping with Sorabji's exclusive manner, it is amusing to read his personal notation on the top of this particular copy of the petition, which Sorabji gave to his friend, John Dean, 'What people who matter think of me!' Frank Holliday, *Copy of presentation letter: to Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji*. Privately printed, ca. 1953. Annotation in the hand of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private collection.

*This may amuse you!*

TO THOSE WHOM IT MAY CONCERN, IF ANY,  
AND OTHERS WHO MIND ANYBODY'S  
BUSINESS BUT THEIR OWN.

Dates and places of birth relating to myself given in various works of reference are invariably false.

It is also stated that my name, my real name, that is the one I am known by, is not my real name. Now one is given one's name—one's authentic ones—at some such ceremony as baptism, Christening, or the like, on the occasion of one's formal reception into a certain religious Faith. In the ancient Zarthustrian Parsi community to which, on my father's side, I have the honour to belong, this ceremony is normally performed, as in other Faiths, in childhood, or owing to special circumstances as in my case, later in life, when I assumed my name as it now is or, in the words of the legal document in which this is mentioned "... received into the Parsi community and in accordance with the custom and tradition thereof, is now and will be henceforth known as ..." and here follows my name as now.

Certain lexicographical *canaille*, one egregious and notorious specimen particularly, enraged at my complete success in defeating and frustrating their impudent impertinent and presumptuous nosings and prying into what doesn't concern them, and actuated, no doubt by the mean malice of the base born for their betters, have thought, as they would say, to take it out of me by suggesting that my name *isn't* really my name.

Insects that are merely noisome like to think that they can also sting.

KAIKHOSRU SHAPURJI SORABJI.

Fig. 26. Infamous admonishment to those who would question the authenticity of Leon Dudley Sorabji right to be known as Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji. Sorabji's humour regarding this heavy-handed letter is clear from his written note, again to John Dean, 'This may amuse you!' Annotation in the hand of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private collection.

The Eye, Corfe Castle. xxix, xii, 1965.

Dear Mr. Dean;  
Sorry you weren't able to make anyone hear, and an even sorer you had all that  
bother coming over to deliver your letter ~~proving~~ ~~paragon~~, ~~likeless~~, well  
understand our distrust of the p.o. these ~~days~~ ~~ANY~~ days at all!  
Now my dear man, DID I give the impression that I am (a) so stupid (b)  
so callous (c) so ignorant and to be "offended" at your reasons for  
refusing my invitation to eat with me? WHAT sort of an immense mumbull,  
was in THESE days when most people are educated far far above the tiny intelli-  
gence given them, is it who would not feel the deepest sympathy for anyone  
suffering from any psycho-somatic disability like yourself? In ANY case,  
MINE is the least not being able to give myself the self-indulgent pleasure of  
entertaining you. BUT, in spite of all that we'll find ways round it. A cup of tea  
sometime when we perhaps? VERY VERY good tea... AND made with all possible care.  
IN THE REAL Chinese way...  
I was well understand your regret against public places. After some  
years or more years of concealing going and writing about the blasted things,  
the inside of a concert hall never sees me in these days, because, principally  
my detestation of human beings in the mass is so great that their physical proximi-  
ty in concentrated numbers, as in a concert hall or theatre is repulsive to  
me. I always say, as an excuse for this that my ~~own~~ ~~failings~~ failings are such  
a burden to me that I find these of other people ON TOP of them an INTOLERABLE  
one!

-2-  
I am deeply touched by your confidence in telling me the reasons for your  
condition. When I think of the numbers of very dear friends of mine whose  
lives have been spoilt or warped by females I go down on my knees and  
thank almighty Gods that they made me a natural-born celibate. My beloved  
mother who was the only woman I could ever stand about me took the DIMMEST  
view of her own sex, and her comments upon them were as withering as they  
were witty and diverting. I adored her... and when seeing the average  
(especially contemporary female specimen) I always think HOW I would  
LOVE to hear my mother's barbed comments on her!...  
My regards and best wishes to your lady Mother, AND of course  
yourself in 1966.  
Yours very sincerely,

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji

Fig. 27. Typical letter from Sorabji to his friend, John Dean, complete with mistyping, omissions, and corrections. Key aspects of Sorabji's personality, as it was shared with those that were dear to him, are evident in this letter: his wit, his humour, his graciousness, and his sincere consideration. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Corfe Castle, to John Dean, Swanage, 29 December 1965. Letter typed by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Private collection.

## Appendix B – Mass Mailing Letter

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing a biography on Kaikhosru Sorabji (1892-1988), who lived in Corfe Castle from 1951 to 1986. For this purpose I need to talk to people who knew Mr Sorabji, or who know something about his life and activities. If you have information about Mr Sorabji, no matter how seemingly insignificant, I would very much like to talk to you: you might have stories or impressions, know rumours, or possess Sorabji memorabilia, such as letters, drawings, gifts, or items purchased from his estate after his death. Most importantly, you might possess or know of original musical sketches or manuscripts. I would appreciate it very much if you would share anything of this kind with me. I plan to be in Corfe Castle some time in late March or early April to talk to anybody who can help me.

I have included with this letter a short questionnaire, which I hope you can take the time to fill out and send back to me. Its purpose is to help me organize a schedule for meeting people. However, if you have something to tell me about him, but do not wish to talk to me in person, I would be very grateful if you could put your thoughts into words and send them to me for inclusion in the biography. I am more than happy to refund the cost of postage for either returning a questionnaire or sending a written statement. If you do not wish to fill out a questionnaire, but would be prepared to talk to me, I have provided at the bottom of this page a few alternative methods for contacting me.

Thank you kindly for your time. I am looking forward to meeting you and hearing what you have to say.

Sincerely,

Sean Owen  
Ph.D. candidate at the University of Southampton

Sean Owen  
29 Gloucester Circus  
Greenwich  
London  
SE10 8RY  
Telephone: 0208 305 0761  
E-mail: [seanvaughn@hotmail.com](mailto:seanvaughn@hotmail.com)

## Sorabji Questionnaire

Your Name:

Your Address:

Your Telephone number:

Your E-mail address (if applicable):

Dates and times in which you would be available for an interview during late March or early April:

Please circle any of the options below that best describes the information that you have to share:

1. Personal Story
2. Story told to you by another
3. Letter from Sorabji
4. Letter that mentions Sorabji
5. Musical manuscript or musical sketch
6. Material object from Sorabji given to you or someone you know
7. Material object obtained from the auctioning of Sorabji's belongings after his death
8. Photographs
9. Drawings
10. Other (please describe briefly)

Please return this questionnaire to the following address:

Sean Owen  
29 Gloucester Circus  
Greenwich  
London  
SE10 8RY

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