Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji’s *Toccata Seconda*

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1. Introduction

The *Toccata Seconda* occupies a unique place in Sorabji’s oeuvre: it was written on the cusp of his mature language, and was also the last work Sorabji played in public, in 1936. It was also the last major work to be heard in public until the 1960s (see section 7.2). The concert was given for his friend Erik Chisholm’s Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music in Glasgow. It was presumably the last of his works to be heard in public for several decades. He did, toward the end of his life, sanction certain public performances of his works by some enterprising pianists who had sought and received his blessing. Critical reception was not particularly encouraging, as in this quote from Musical Opinion: “one could listen to many more performances without really understanding the unique complexity of Sorabji’s mind and music.”¹ Hopefully the time has come for a reevaluation, and this paper can provide some impetus toward a better understanding of Sorabji’s music at first reception.

Sorabji, as was usually the case with works he just finished, was particularly pleased with the *Toccata Seconda*, describing it thus in a letter:

I think the Toccata will surprise you, particularly the romantic Aria and the tropical night Nocturne. The fugue will roll you out flat. Technically a “simple” one, it includes huge episodes of a fugal nature upon the four countersubjects, and is as fine a fugue as any I’ve ever done, I think. The Stretto is an imposing affair too.²


The *Toccata Seconda* is the second of four works that he wrote in the form, the third of which is, unfortunately, lost. It is cast in nine movements and lasts for about two and a half hours, typical of the long multi-movement piano works he wrote in the following decades.

A brief description of the nine movements will be given, as well as a description of an underlying harmonic argument that plays out between the movements, providing a sense of unity throughout the work. This will be followed by a more specific look at the sixth and seventh movements: *Notturno* and *Interludio – Moto Perpetuo*, respectively. They will be used as a springboard to a discussion of Sorabji’s handling of form, both on the large-scale and small-scale, and his use of compositional models and his influences. Afterward, the work will be discussed from a performer’s perspective, with an evaluation of some of the challenges faced in its preparation.

### 2.1 Preludio-Toccata

The first movement shares the title of the opening movement of Busoni’s own *Toccata*. Marked *Scorrevole e non troppo legato*, it begins in a single line of running 16th notes that are soon joined by commentary in the left-hand. The movement is consistent with Michael Habermann’s description of Sorabji’s *Toccata* movements in general:

Toccatas differ from preludes and perpetual motions in that they display freer rhythmic treatment, as well as declamatory phrases in accented, longer note values set above or below the quick figurations.³

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It is instructive to compare the first movement with the eighth, which is a *moto perpetuo*, and is based on the material of the first movement.

The movement steadily builds in texture while maintaining the almost constant flow of faster values in uneven groupings.

There are also several baroque references in this movement. As seen in example 1, the key of D-minor and the unison passages in both hands recall perhaps one of the best-known essays in the genre: Bach’s *Organ Toccata and Fugue in D minor BWV 565*, which Sorabji certainly knew both in its original form and also in Busoni’s piano transcription.

**Example 1: Sorabji, Toccata Seconda, Preludio-Toccata, p.12 system 2**

Another example is the unison passage on p.17. Like the previous example it recalls the unison passages in Bach’s *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue BWV 903*, a work much admired by Sorabji. He especially enjoyed Busoni’s edition and was to make his own transcription of the piece only a few years later in 1940. Interestingly, he didn’t transcribe the fugue but paired the Chromatic Fantasy with another fugue by Bach in D-minor, BWV 948, as he felt about the original: “badly let down by the very shoddy and
inferior fugue with its halting subject and its extraordinarily uninteresting treatment."^4 Marc-André Roberge points out other areas in which this work may have influenced Sorabji:

Bach’s Chromatic Fantasia, which Sorabji may have had in mind when writing the opening “Preludio-Toccata” of his Toccata seconda per pianoforte, was to be the inspiration a few years later for the massive penultimate of the Études transcendantes, marked “Quasi fantasia (nello stile della Fantasia cromatica di Giovanni Sebastiano)”.^5

The Preludio-Toccata begins and ends on F#, but with a certain tension with C in the concluding pages. The F# could be heard in a dominant function rather than the tonal center, and this duality is developed further as the movements continue.

### 2.2 Preludio-Corale

The second movement begins in the style of a Bach-Busoni transcription as seen in example 2: rather tonal, in solemn slow values and replete with Baroque-sounding suspensions and rich basses. Busoni transcribed ten of Bach’s organ chorale preludes, among other works. The chorale theme is in three parts, stated first in the tenor, with a rich bass accompaniment and a running counterpoint between the two. Each of the three parts of the theme is interspersed with commentary in a higher register, over the sustained tones of the end of each respective part of the chorale theme.


The movement slowly gains momentum through an increase in the shortest rhythmic value of the accompanying figuration: the first statements of the chorale theme are accompanied by quarter notes, later by quarter note triplets, then eight notes, eighth note triplets and finally sixteenth notes.

There are three more or less complete statements of the theme, followed by several partial statements. A statement in powerful full chords in each hand and accompanied with a similarly full texture of triplet chords in both hands, forms a culmination of the movement to this point, after which partial statements in counterpoint are set off against a background of constantly flowing sixteenths leading into the multilayered pealing of bells in the final climactic line.

Regarding the tonal plan of the entire work, the opening reference to D major in the Preludio-Corale would seem to support the case of F# serving a dominant function, in the case that D major could be a relative major to B minor. However, the ending of the movement in C major returns us to the ambiguity of the first movement.
2.3 Scherzo

This is a title less frequently used by Sorabji. There are examples in the Piano Sonata no.4 and in the Concerto Per Suonare Da Me Solo: marked Scherzo Diabolico, it is most likely a reference to Alkan’s work of the same name, op.39 no.3. The present movement remains true to the humorous character implied by the title, brimming over with short, active and sometimes insistent motives in fast rhythmic values as can be seen in example 3. Sorabji occasionally indicates the use of the third pedal, as in example 3, although there are many other places where it could be employed usefully in order to clarify the texture. He often employs an overloaded texture where a mixing of harmonies can add to the impression of grandeur, or can simply be difficult to avoid. This problem will be further discussed in section 4.1.

Example 3: Sorabji. Toccata Seconda, Scherzo, p.44, system 1

Unique among his works is the quoting of text above the music on p.45, which Marc-André Roberge notes as:

... three “jeering references” presented one right after the other (p. 45). The first one is marked “Printemps qui commence, printemps qui finit”. It refers to Dalila’s Spring Song in the opera Samson et Dalila by Camille Saint-Saëns, which begins with “Printemps qui commence, / Portant l’espérance / Aux cœurs amoureux” (act 1, scene 6). Sorabji writes the words above the theme,
which is modified rhythmically and marked “Impertinente”. He probably did not remember the entire text and unconsciously paraphrased it. The second reference is labelled “Buy British”. Sorabji quotes a modified version of the incipit of God Save the King, whose three initial notes (B–B–C) also spell the name of the British Broadcasting Corporation. He might also have wanted to refer to the Buy British Campaign of 1931, an attempt by the government to solve the balance of payments crisis without the recourse to tariff protection. The final reference is marked “Dove sono i bei momenti”, the opening words of the aria (act 3, no. 19) in which Countess Almaviva, in Mozart’s Nozze di Figaro, recalls the time when the Count was in love with her. Sorabji quotes the aria’s incipit in octaves in the bass, starting on G and slightly modifying it melodically and rhythmically.\footnote{Roberge, Marc-André, \textit{Opus Sorabjianum}, Version 1.12, 2015, \url{http://www.mus.ulaval.ca/roberge/srs/07-prese.htm}, p.212.}

After a \textit{Quasi recitativo} on the last page, the movement ends with an ascending pianissimo scale extending to the last note on the keyboard followed by two \textit{Quasi pizz.} iterations deep in the bass.

\section*{2.4 Aria}

The \textit{Aria} is framed by short sections of constantly shifting four-note chords in both hands. In groups of five eighth notes and each marked \textit{tenuto}, they cover a narrow range and create a hypnotic effect while the right hand thumb spells out a slow melody in long note values. In the middle section the centrally-located melody continues, framed on either side by more florid figurations in eighth-notes, often in irregular groupings. The range of the figures is much larger in this section and has a distinctly diatonic feel, much of the material being often on white keys, making a reference to C-major. The beginning section returns in truncated form and the movement ends in B-minor. Although the movement starts,
arguably, in B-minor, it more importantly emphasizes the pitch F#. As such, the movement spells out the harmonic argument of the entire work up to this point: it is essentially in B-minor but there is the ongoing conflict of the tri-tonal relationship between C and F#.

Sorabji was a great lover of singing, and held some strong opinions on the subject. That this movement could be a reference to a singing character is touched on in this excerpt from an interview with Geoffrey Douglas Madge on his performance of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*:

> It’s very hard to describe, but it has a great deal in common with bel canto singing, a subject Sorabji had an immense knowledge of and which we discussed frequently … I think it is very important to listen to recordings of singers of the early part of the century, to appreciate their skill in the art of phrasing and tone production. O.C. is unfortunately more famous for its technical difficulty than for its singing qualities, but it is in fact just what Sorabji said, a colossal song.\(^7\)

Although there is certainly a central melody through much of the movement, the reference to aria may be a more dated one, as is often the case with Sorabji: the aria as a tripartite form, as in a *da capo aria*. It could be also an even earlier reference, as simply an instrumental form, much as Bach uses it in his fourth or sixth keyboard partitas.\(^8\) Sorabji often preferred older meanings, as when he described his own use of the word *sonata*:

> Strictly speaking, the sonata is merely a generic label for any extended or large-scale work for one or more than one solo instrument. To attempt to lay down the law and dogmatize upon the “requirements” of sonata form, to attempt, really, even to talk about sonata form apart from sonatas, including, as the classification does, works of such polar divergence and such

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\(^8\) The sixth partita actually features a movement titled *Air*. 

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antipathetic tendencies as the three already alluded to [Medtner’s op.22 and op.25 and Vincent
d’Indy’s Sonata], and those of Scriabine or Stravinsky or my own four, is about as intelligent and
instructive as discussing the temperamental and psychological divergences of human beings in
terms of their skeletons. It is better therefore to accept, for practical purposes, the definition of
a sonata as an extended work on spacious lines for a solo instrument – something that is
“suonata” – that is to say, played during a fair duration of time.\(^9\)

2.5 Ostinato

This movement would be more appropriately titled *Basso Ostinato* as the *ostinato* figure appears
throughout in the bass, or perhaps *Passacaglia*, a term he used more often in subsequent works, as
each iteration of the bass brings a different variation. The first statement of the bass theme actually
appears before the title of the movement, at the end of the *Aria*, with the indication *attacca no.V*
(Ostinato). Sorabji marks the number of each variation in the score, arriving at a total of 49. It should be
mentioned that Sorabji was greatly interested in numerology, and often numbers of variations are
squares, as here, or numbers exhibiting certain other traits. Marc-André Roberge describes Sorabji’s
particular brand of numerology in practice:

This can be seen in the number of pages of some two dozens of his works and in practice of
often deciding the total number of pages of a work before writing (or at least completing) it ...
As striking as Sorabji’s grasp of large-scale planning may be, the results, it must be said, are
sometimes achieved with some “tweaking”. His usual procedure was to write works whose
length could be expressed by a number possessing certain characteristics or whose last page

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would carry such a number. In several instances his page numbering is chaotic; numbers are omitted or used twice, sometimes with added letters to tell them apart, the idea being that the final page number should exhibit the desired characteristic.  

Perhaps this is why he put the first bass theme before the beginning of the movement, as he does not include it in the total count, finally arriving at 49 variations – seven squared – and not 50!

He does again resort to some neo-baroque techniques, as the gradual adding of voices, not to mention part-writing in general. For example, the first statement of the bass is a single voice alone. The first variation is in two voices, the second in three, the third in four the fourth in five and the fifth in six voices, although he does resort to block chords in the right hand and an octave statement of the theme in the bass to realize this number of parts in the fifth variation. He uses the same device in variations nine through thirteen, beginning in two and ending in six voices, this time with more elaborate part-writing.

Much of the rest of the variations are in a thick multi-layered texture, similar to Reger or early Szymanowski. He particularly admired both composers around this time. Toward the end there is a gradual thinning of texture and slowing of note-values which provides a sense of symmetry.

2.6 Notturno

This movement will be discussed in section 3.4: Chopin’s Berceuse, Sorabji’s Notturno and variation form.

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2.7 Interludio – Moto Perpetuo

The Interludio carries the indication Riflesso del Preludio-Toccata, and is fashioned out of material from the first movement. The first lines make a clear reference to the opening movement, but afterward the references are more discreet. As a Moto Perpetuo, it is in constant running sixteenth-notes, and as such, has perhaps even more in common with the traditional Toccata character than its model.

The texture, although by no means thin, is notably less thick than in previous movements – usually consisting of two musical lines, sometimes a single one when shared between the hands. It is occasionally augmented however, by the doubling of a line at some interval. Michael Habermann notes that “decorative figurations doubled at various intervals suggest the off-unison or mixture stops of an organ.”¹¹ Sorabji also often begins a group of sixteenths with a triad: a typically “Sorabjian” figure to be discussed more in greater depth in section 4.3.

Although the sixteenths are constant, the groups are irregular in length and punctuated by strands of melody here and there. The cascading passage work divided between the two hands is present here as in the first movement, and this forms the basis for the culminating moments of the piece as seen in example 4: a grand cascade building to the upper register of the keyboard and crashing down all the way to the depths of the bass. Incidentally, there is a missing 8va indication in this passage (see section 7.1: Errata).


The cyclical nature created by the return of this movement recalls the construction of the *Vergessene Weisen*, op.38 of Medtner: a cycle of eight pieces, the first of which is *Sonata Reminiscenza* and the last of which is *Alla Reminiscenza*, a short piece recalling the material of the sonata. Sorabji was a great champion of his music, as can be seen in his article, *The Greatness of Medtner*.¹²

The implied harmonic plan of this movement again reinforces the tri-tonal relationship between C and F# permeating the work: as the first movement begins and ends on F#, this movement begins and ends on C. Likewise, just as the C was given some importance in the ending passage of the *Preludio-Toccata* before finishing on F#, the top of the finishing cascade of this movement starts on F# before ending on C (see example 4.).

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2.8 Cadenza: punta d’Organo

Sorabji here uses *cadenza* in the old sense: as an ornamented or lengthened dominant section in preparation for a final statement or movement, and not in the sense of a technical display. The movement does precede the concluding fugue and is entirely in the character of a dominant section leading into the fugue, except that E flat is not the dominant. Keeping in mind the ambiguous role of F# up to this point in the work, it is in some sense logical, if unorthodox, that this section would not be centered on the dominant, keeping the harmonic argument unresolved.

This movement is related to Szymanowski’s *Piano Sonata no. 2, op. 21*, a work Sorabji held in high esteem: “The Second Sonata is a very broad and powerful conception, and the boldness and originality with which the design is handled are masterly.” He went on to describe what probably represents the genesis of the present movement: the section at the end of the second movement variations and immediately preceding the fugue in Szymanowski’s work:

> Here again the form is handled with vast mastery: the variations merge and melt into one another with such a natural and spontaneous inevitability of transition, that for all the varied treatment, the whole movement is remarkably of a piece. Tradition again is observed, even in the long and immensely interesting punta d’organo into which the last variation leads, an astounding essay in chromatic writing of immense power – a chromaticism wholly free from any suspicion of the lushness or over-ripeness that the word is apt to suggest: the boldness and bite of the harmonic writing is magnificently astringent.

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14 Ibid., p.181.
The last description could easily be applied to many passages from Sorabji’s works. The punta d’organo that he found so interesting became a recurring feature in many of his large scale works.

### 2.9 Fuga libera a cinque voci

As it proved a fair comparison for the preceding movement, another look at Szymanowski’s Piano Sonata no. 2, op. 21 is warranted here. After his praise of the Punta d’organo, Sorabji went on to describe the final movement:

...That remarkable fugue to which I have often had occasion to refer, a fugue as powerful and original as any written since those phenomenal fugal finales to some of the later Beethoven sonatas. The working of a subject of such crankiness is a prodigious tour de force, and makes a fitting close to this powerful, stormy, tumultuous, volcanic composition.

Sorabji clearly admired the originality of Szymanowski’s fugue writing and tried to emulate this in his own. He also admired the challenge presented in the “working of a subject of such crankiness” as many of his own fugal subjects could be similarly described, as here, by Michael Habermann:

Sorabji’s fugue subjects are among the most unusual, if not perverse of his melodic constructions. Some subjects consist solely of a gradual ascent or descent, without the overall change of direction which usually occurs in melodic writing. Other fugue subjects are surely the longest ever penned...they make an impression, not only because of their unusual and

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uncompromising nature, but because of the eventual comforting familiarity they provide in the otherwise forbidding labyrinth of polyphony they generate.\textsuperscript{16}

At 42 pages, the fugue is by far the longest movement of the \textit{Toccata Seconda}. This is in part owing to the extraordinary length of the theme, which is three lines long, totaling 84 quarter notes - although this is by no means unusual for Sorabji. The exposition is not complete until the end of the 4th page.

Marc-André Roberge notes one of the sectional indications that sometimes appear in Sorabji’s works:

The remainder of the movement is divided by means of double bars into four sections at the beginning of which the composer writes “C.S.” followed by a number (from I to IV). The countersubjects formerly identified as comes now appear to become fugue subjects in their own right and are heard with the main theme.\textsuperscript{17}

Notwithstanding his enthusiastic description of the fugue quoted earlier, Sorabji’s example, although extended, is not particularly innovative.

There is little in Sorabji’s thematic counterpoint that is compositionally unexplainable. His contrapuntal treatment is basically conservative. He begins all his fugues with the subject in its original form and develops his material in a traditional way. In some works, every alteration and transformation of a subject is labelled or bracketed (by the composer) in the score, whether it be an inversion, retrograde inversion, stretto, or other variant.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{17} Roberge, Marc-André, \textit{Opus Sorabjianum}, Version 1.12, 2015, \url{http://www.mus.ulaval.ca/roberge/srs/07-prese.htm}, p.213.

Sorabji does employ some classic fugal techniques here, as, for example, on p.147 where the theme can be seen in augmentation in the bass in the second system, and again in double augmentation in the third system. After the beginning of the *Coda Stretta* on p.153, the theme can be seen in the bass in the second system in both augmentation and inversion.

The *Coda Stretta* becomes noticeably thicker in texture, resembling more closely the texture of the end of the first movement than the beginning of the fugue, as he incorporates more chords and doublings, rather than strict counterpoint. It is mostly notated on 3 staves, while the final 4 pages are notated on 4. The work comes to a thunderous conclusion in B major.

The beginning of the fugue on B would seem to resolve the ongoing question of the harmonic relationship between the movements. One does not feel, however, a particularly strong tonal center in the theme of the fugue. As the general harmonic progress of the movements can be understood as an expansion of the C-F# tri-tone to a fifth, the C resolving downward to B, the fugue has a similar internal relationship: with the tri-tone of B-F expanding upwards to the fifth B-F#. The harmonic argument of the whole work then, hinges on the very opening note of F#. In the concluding pages of the fugue, just as in the concluding pages of the *Preludio-Toccata*, the tri-tone is emphasized in the bass, as can be seen in example 5, and the F does not resolve to F# until the final chord.
Example 5: Sorabji, Toccata Seconda, Fuga libera a cinque voci, p.164 (complete)

This internal relationship is spelled out in the very head of the theme, as the opening B climbs five notes, not to F♯, but to F. The eventual rise to F♯ is alluded to at the end of the first slur.

Example 6: Sorabji, Toccata Seconda, Fuga libera a cinque voci, p.126, system 1
Although this underlying harmonic argument may not be immediately apparent to the listener, it does provide an underlying sense of unity. It must be stressed that these points of emphasis are not so much tonal centers, as references. Placed mainly at the beginning and end of the movements, they ease the transition between pieces and provide some signposts in a vast and immensely complex musical narrative.

3.1 Sorabji and Formal Organization

To facilitate the discussion of form, reference will be made to certain compositional models: works of other composers Sorabji used directly as examples or that could have influenced him in some way. Sorabji was a great amateur of piano music and was familiar with and championed many composers who were unknown or under-appreciated in England at the time, chief among whom was Busoni.

“Amateur” in Sorabji’s opinion was rather the opposite of what an English-speaker might expect today:

To this day “amateur” in France suggests a discriminating lover of good things; the term has the most emphatic implication of a cultivated and elegant taste... There is plainly no hint of the suggestion of incompetence of judgment or lack of expertise that are almost inevitably inherent in the use of the word among English-speaking people.\(^{19}\)

Sorabji was quite serious about his “amateur” pursuit. According to Marc-André Roberge he spent a great many hours in the reading room of the British public library educating himself on the literature of his instrument:

Sorabji also developed his knowledge of music by studying scores and visiting libraries or the British Museum, where, in 1931, he had “betaken myself for an afternoon’s work and research”. And in 1955 he mentioned that, many years earlier, he had been “rooting about among obscure and familiar piano concertos in the British Museum Reading Room”... One thing is sure, his musical culture was extensive and in many respects went far beyond that of most musicians.\(^{20}\)

As such the application of compositional models, especially in the aforementioned case of Busoni, is a logical path of inquiry. Busoni’s *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* is known to have served as a model for Sorabji’s *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, and so I will make a similar comparison between Chopin’s *Berceuse* op.57 and the *Notturno* movement, using it as a point of departure for a discussion of Sorabji’s formal processes on the small-scale.

### 3.2 Sorabji’s Large-Scale Form

Sorabji’s *Opus Clavicembalisticum* is perhaps his best known work, although its notoriety is due in part to its having long been one of the few available works of the composer in a published score. It is however, of true significance, as it paved the way for several large-scale piano works written in the 1930s, among them the *Toccata Seconda*. *Opus Clavicembalisticum* bears all the hallmarks of Sorabji’s use of large-scale form to come: great length; division into many movements, often of a neo-baroque character; and the use of fugue as a culminating device. In Sorabji’s own words:

> This work is admittedly an essay in the form adumbrated by the immortal BUSONI in his great FANTASIA CONTRAPPUNTISTICA which, with the Hammerklavier Sonata and the REGER

Variations on a theme of BACH are three of the supreme works for piano. Like the FANTASIA CONTRAPPUNTISTICA, the Opus Clavicembalisticum is primarily a Fugue-Sequence ...

A brief look at the structural division of each work will show some obvious relationships:

**Table 1: Busoni's Fantasia Contrappuntistica and Sorabji's Opus Clavicembalisticum**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Busoni</th>
<th>Sorabji</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.Preludio corale</td>
<td><strong>Pars prima</strong>: Introito</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.Fuga 1</td>
<td>Preludio corale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.Fuga 2</td>
<td>Fuga I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.Fuga 3</td>
<td>Fantasia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.Intermezzo</td>
<td>Fuga II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.Variazione 1</td>
<td><strong>Pars altera</strong>: Interludium primum (Thema con XLIX variationibus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.Variazione 2</td>
<td>Cadenza I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.Variazione 3</td>
<td>Fuga III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.Cadenza</td>
<td><strong>Pars Tertia</strong>: Interludium alterum (Toccata, Adagio, Passacaglia cum LXXXI variationibus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.Fuga 4</td>
<td>Cadenza I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.Corale</td>
<td>Fuga IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.Stretta</td>
<td>Coda-Stretta</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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A comparison between the *Preludio Chorale* of Busoni’s *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* (example 7) and a corresponding section from Sorabji’s *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (example 8) show obvious similarities:

Example 7: Busoni, *Fantasia Contrappuntistica*, measures 23-27

Example 8: Sorabji, *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, *Introito*, page 6, system 2
3.3 Sorabji’s Small-Scale Organization

Some further examples of possible compositional models will serve to show the influence of other composers Sorabji admired, although he did not advertise their origins as he did with Busoni.

An early example of Sorabji’s nocturne style is *In the Hothouse* from 1918, seen in example 9. A possible inspiration is Ravel’s *Oiseaux tristes* from *Miroirs* seen in example 10, which features a similar ostinato figure in the center of the texture with sustained basses below, punctuated above by crossing of the hands. Sorabji may have been attracted to Ravel’s subject: an evocation of birds lost in the forest during the hottest hours of summer. Heat was a favorite subject of Sorabji’s, as can be seen in his early orchestral piece *Chaleur-Poème*. It is interesting to note that Michael Habermann references Ravel’s *Le Gibet* from *Gaspard de la nuit* as a possible inspiration for some of his sections labelled *punta d’organo*,

22 interesting not only because *Le Gibet* features a pedal-point throughout, but because it evokes an image of heat once more: a body hanging from a gallows and reddening in the afternoon sun.

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A comparison of the opening theme of Sorabji’s *Fantaisie Espagnole* (example 11) and Debussy’s *La Puerta del vino* (example 12) again show signs of inspiration from French models – note the ornamented line and typical Spanish mode employed in both. Sorabji thought very highly of Debussy: for him, “La mer was ‘unquestionably one of the very major masterpieces of the music of modern times’ and ‘a work at once most highly-coloured and subtle, powerful yet delicate in its drawing’”.

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3.4 Chopin’s *Berceuse*, Sorabji’s *Notturno* and Variation Form

In a similar manner to the examples given above, Chopin’s *Berceuse* can be compared to Sorabji’s *Notturno* movement. The *Notturno* is quite typical of Sorabji’s nocturne style, as described by Michael Habermann:
Rhythms, melodies, and textures are always in a state of flux, each in its turn providing interest. Only the dynamic level is fixed; the nocturnes – dreamy, flowing pieces – are meant never to be played louder than mezzo forte. The neutral dynamic level does not interfere with harmonic and rhythmic progressions; it does not superimpose upon the music a false sense of direction. The nocturnes are not lengthy, and the main melodic line guides the listener through the sonorous haze.24

On the subject of the nocturne it is impossible to avoid association with Chopin, perhaps the composer most strongly associated with the form. As with many composers, Sorabji had mixed opinions about Chopin:

Sorabji’s reception of Chopin was strongly influenced by the performances that he heard. Someone like Egon Petri could take the composer “out of the overheated drawing-room and pansy-parlour where he so often languishes”, offering “powerful pieces of music, virile, austere yet at the same time delicate and tender upon occasion”.25

Sorabji did evidently feel strong enough about Chopin’s music that he transcribed the “minute” waltz not once but twice, in addition to quoting it elsewhere.

Sorabji’s Notturno begins with an ostinato, a broad, arching left hand figure, anticipating the right hand entrance as seen in example 13. This is fairly typical of Chopin’s nocturnes, and it is also how the Berceuse begins: a left hand ostinato stated twice before the right hand enters as can be seen in example 14. Incidentally, the Berceuse is often grouped together with the nocturnes, as it is in James

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Huneker’s *Chopin: the Man and his Music*, a work published in 1900 which Sorabji certainly must have known.

**Example 13: Sorabji, Toccata Seconda, Notturno, beginning**

![Example 13: Sorabji, Toccata Seconda, Notturno, beginning](image)

**Example 14: Chopin, Berceuse, op.57, measures 1-6**

![Example 14: Chopin, Berceuse, op.57, measures 1-6](image)

The similar character, sound-world and figurations aside, the most interesting comparison between these two pieces is one of form: according to Wojciech Nowik’s study, the *Berceuse* was at one time to be called *Variantes*,\(^\text{26}\) as it is in fact a rather seamless set of variations. The ostinato continues without

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pause, while the right hand continues with all manner of gossamer figuration, filigree and ornamentation. The variations are never delineated and never break the cradle-song mood. Nowik’s describes this way of constructing the variations:

    It should be stressed that the motivic relations which most strongly unite the type with the variant are gradually loosened and even obliterated throughout the course of the piece’s composition. The variant then becomes integrated with the model by means of more general connections: melodic (e.g., a similar direction in the unfolding of the melody), harmonic and dynamic. If, however, their action is too weak and a structural analogy is not clear on the micro-architectural level, then the macro-architecture takes on the main integrating role.27

One could describe the Notturno in similar terms, although it is not a set of variations. Variation form was, however, often used by Sorabji, and its influence can often be seen in the organization of his material.

Almost all of Sorabji’s multi-movement works contain at least one movement in variation form. He even incorporated entire variation sets within variations, a process taken to an extreme in the Sequentia Cyclica. This work is a set of variations on the Dies Irae, variation 22 of which consists of a passacaglia with one hundred variations! The Toccata Seconda contains two variation movements: the Preludio-Corale, and the Basso Ostinato, essentially a passacaglia.

Marc-André Roberge notes the influence of Reger:

    The German composer’s reliance on the variation forms and the fugue was obviously a foremost influence on Sorabji, who described the Variations and Fugue on a Theme by J. S. Bach, op. 81,

as “one of the most conspicuous in all music” for its “cumulative grandeur and stately massiveness”. 28

Variation form essentially provided Sorabji with a way to organize on the small to medium scale in the same way that he organized his large-scale structures: by section. Variation forms are sectional by design, but Sorabji makes use of a similar and more organic process in many other places. He organizes sections by figuration, much as he does in his actual variation forms. He explores a figuration or pattern for several beats and then abandons it in the search for novelty, very seldom, if ever, returning to it in the rest of the piece. In slow music such as the Notturno, there are often long chords sustained underneath the figuration, which changes with each new harmony.

This process also lends itself more readily to through-composition. Sorabji plays with a certain set of compositional parameters until he tires of them, and then moves on to something else without ever having a formal need to come back. This is also an understandable explanation considering that he wrote directly into fair-copy manuscript without sketches or making corrections. The resulting flow of figuration weaves itself into a certain kind of organization. According to Habermann:

> Regarding form, Sorabji believed that content should create its own: form and substance must be intertwined. Standard ideas of form were no substitute for organic structure ... He frequently stated that the material cannot successfully be poured into the mold of “form”, often attacking academicians and their espousal of classical forms ... 29

He detested more clearly-defined approaches to form and expressed his opinion in his characteristic style:

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I myself, for instance, have no hesitation in declaring that for me the click-clack symmetry, the rhythmic and melodic poverty (yes, even that!) of much of Schubert, Brahms or Schumann is unendurable except in the smallest doses ...  

Sorabji described his organic variation process, as it appears in his Third Piano Sonata of 1922, in a letter written in 1930. In it he draws a comparison to his more recent style. It is important to bear in mind that the Toccata Seconda was begun only three years later.

Development proceeds rather I think on the lines of what the biologists call mitosis i.e. cell fission and division. The work is asymmetrical and polyrhythmic; it is an attempt to create a music that shall stand entirely on its own feet by reason of its inner logic and sense-cohesion without any support from formalistic or formalistically derived adjuncts. [...] Extensive use is made however in all this apparently anarchic freedom, of scholastic devices applied in rigid strictness, canons, fugato and the like which you will spot easily enough for yourself on investigation that the work marks a turning point I feel ... my later manner in it with its strongly marked architectonic prepossessions is I think foreshadowed in it fairly plainly.  

A variety of incredibly intricate figures arise through this process, and it is in the Notturno that many of Sorabji’s greatest rhythmic complexities are to be found. Some are needlessly so, and may have escaped Sorabji at the time of writing. They may also have been the result of a desire to compose complex music. He did have rather strong feelings on the subject, as this tirade against the theory “that the supreme things in art are ever the simplest” shows:

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As far as music is concerned, there is not one single work universally recognized by musicians as belonging to the highest rank that is not an incarnate living contradiction of the theory. 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 cognizant 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 ...

In example 15 we are confronted with a mind boggling 53:32 in one hand played against 27:18 in the other (assuming a subdivision of 16th note triplets for each eighth note in the left hand).

**Example 15: Sorabji, Toccata Seconda, Notturno, p.104, system 1**

![Example 15: Sorabji, Toccata Seconda, Notturno, p.104, system 1](image)

If one realizes that the ratio is almost 54:27, or a mere 2:1, that simplifies things considerably. Executing the passage becomes simply a matter of making up for one “missing” note. One could arrive at a group

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of 53, while maintaining an imaginary 54 notes by simply making one eighth note group of 5 notes either at the beginning of the system, or, perhaps more effectively, at the end.

Another example from the Notturno (example 15) was perhaps caused by a slip of the pen:

Example 16: Sorabji, Toccata Seconda, Notturno, P.105, system 1

We are again confronted with a seemingly impossible ratio – 23:16 in the right hand against 12:8 in the left, or 23 against 24. Note however, that although the note heads have been arranged to accommodate this rhythmical feat, the brackets outlining the rhythmical groupings are different: the upper one includes the eighth-note rest, while the lower one does not. To complicate matters, the lower number does include the rest: there are only 11 groups under the bracket. Assuming both brackets are to include only the notes, we arrive at a much more symmetrical ratio of 22:11 or, again, 2:1. This complexity is but one of many challenges the performer of Sorabji’s music faces. Some others will now be evaluated.
4.1 Challenges for the Performer

Even with the underlying harmonic relationship between the movements mentioned earlier, uniting a multi-movement piece of this length presents a significant challenge for the performer. There are two obvious points that need to be overcome:

Firstly, Sorabji’s “more is more” approach to almost all aspects of composition leads to regularly overloaded textures rife with all manner of figuration, counterpoint and coloring. The result is that without reprieve, and certainly over a long period of time, there is a certain sense of uniformity that emerges for the listener. It is ironic that the immense variety he employs should, over time, engender exactly the opposite of what he most likely hoped to achieve.

In light of this, choices about the pedal and variety of touch are necessary for textural clarity. One often gets the impression that Sorabji is working against the performer in this task, as he sometimes asks for several layers of sustained notes over which the harmonies change. This is often the case in the slow movements, where one harmony is sounded in the bass and there are pianistic elaborations over it. It is usually not possible to use the sostenuto pedal in these situations, and it is also clear that Sorabji wants a certain mixing of harmonies. Deciding on how much this can be allowed to happen while still balancing the clarity in different levels of the texture is one of the primary tasks of the performer. Sorabji occasionally does indicate the use of the third pedal – one of his 100 Transcendental Etudes is devoted to its use – but it is usually possible and even desirable to mix the harmonies to a certain degree. Consider this representative passage from the Notturno (example 17), where the arpeggiated chord needs to be sustained for the whole bar, there are shifting chords above, a melody in the middle and more figuration below:
4.2 Sorabji and performance indications

On the subject of performance indications it is interesting to note that Sorabji almost never writes any. In the course of a multi-hour work, one may find tempo or character indications for the movements and an occasional dynamic or slur. Though it seems counter-intuitive for a composer who would pack his works with such a wealth of detail to not do the same with performance indications, there are two things to consider: firstly, his works were not being performed and he was not actively seeking their performance; for most of his life it was actually the opposite. As he had written them himself, and had them for his own use, he full well knew his own musical intentions. Secondly, he was known to write directly into the fair copy manuscript of his works, almost never sketching them beforehand or revising them afterward. As such, whatever apparently secondary performance details made it into the score on first passing, were likely to be the only ones.

One should also consider what Sorabji wrote on the subject in the preface to his *Sequentia Cyllica super Dies Irae*:
The comparative lack of what are quaintly called “expression marks” in this work is thus explained. The composer considers that the music itself makes clear what “expression” is needed, if any in any particular passage. The “intelligence” of the player will do – or undo – the rest.34

Notwithstanding Sorabji’s flippant attitude, expressivity is one of the primary concerns for the performer, especially when considering my previous comments about the uniformity of impression the listener can have with Sorabji’s works.

4.3 Sorabji and Keyboard Figuration

Any performer of Sorabji’s music will face a vast amount of keyboard figurations. Sorabji’s imagination conjured up a great variety of figuration, but much of it had its genesis in standard piano figurations. As with the concept of compositional modeling, many of the figurations bear a great resemblance to those in the music of the composers he admired – Symanowski, Reger, Busoni and others. In many places, one can observe tonal elements juxtaposed bi-tonally, as if Sorabji borrowed from a standard vocabulary of figures and pitted them against one another in his own language. In this sense, much of his writing seems to be generated from the keyboard, so to speak. This will be explored further in section 4.4.

Variety of figuration is one of the most prominent aspects of Sorabji’s music; the issue of fingering thus becomes central for the performer. Many figures lie fairly well under the hand, and it is interesting to note that often they fit in a five-finger pattern, making the fingering fairly obvious. Although of course it is possible to use other combinations, and one might be tempted to use standard diatonic scale

fingerings in, for example, the *Interludio – Moto Perpetuo*, I have found that applying a five-finger approach to Sorabji’s figures is often a good solution.

Another idiosyncrasy of Sorabji’s piano writing that elicits obvious fingering choices is his use of chords combined with scalar figures that are connected at the top. This is a predominant kind of figuration in Sorabji’s music, and it requires continuous use of the outside fingers: 3, 4, and 5, which cross over one another instead of the thumb, leaving the thumb and second finger free to fill out the chord underneath, and giving the running figure a fuller sound. This technical difficulty is not unlike the second Chopin *Etude*, op.10 no.2 (example 18).

**Example 18: Chopin, *Etude op.10, no.2*, measures 1-2**

![Example 18: Chopin, *Etude op.10, no.2*, measures 1-2](image)

This kind of figure – connected, usually at the top, and featuring octaves or chords – abounds in Sorabji’s piano music as in example 19:
Sorabji was probably well aware of Busoni’s extensive use of this kind of figure. A typical example that can be found throughout Sorabji’s works would be something like example 20, from Busoni’s transcription of Bach’s *Prelude and Fugue in D major BWV 532*.

The contrast between the two passages of octaves in this example illustrates the practicality of this kind of figure in performance. The first ascending scale is in octaves, Adagio. The second is presto and much
more difficult to execute, but by omitting certain notes, Busoni achieves almost the same effect. The line is connected with the top fingers, maintaining the legato that would be lost with interlocking octaves, but without losing the fullness of texture. This is especially typical in Busoni’s organ transcriptions, which were much admired by Sorabji: “the great Bach transcriptions – the greatest things of their kind that have ever been done – are universally recognized now as part of the established repertoire.”

Other figures the performer is sure to encounter include those modified through rhythmic grouping. This is usually done through augmentation or diminution: a group of 6 notes is followed by a group of 5 notes, then by a group of 4 notes, etc. The pattern is not always complete, and sometimes remains at one “level” of grouping. Example 21 is an example of a 4, 3, 2, grouping of sixteenth notes in a descending sequence:


![Example 21](image)

Example 22, from the same movement, has decreasing rhythmic values but each group is repeated twice: a group of four sixteenth notes twice, a group of three sixteenth notes twice, etc.

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Sorabji makes liberal use of this device in the *Interludio – Moto Perpetuo*, which employs running sixteenth notes only. As such, he is limited in his sectional divisions by variety of figure. He overcomes this by either intervalllic variety, coloring of the line with double notes (as discussed in section 2.7), or through rhythmic patterns like the ones above.

### 5. Conclusion

Although certain aspects of Sorabji’s music are undoubtedly unique – most obviously the unprecedented scale of much of his music – there are certainly many weaknesses as well: among them his unwillingness to revise works, and the probably unintended “saturation” experienced by most listeners. While criticizing the wealth of detail present in Sorabji’s music goes against everything he stood for – notably his rather elitist attitudes about art in general, and refusing to lower himself to pander to, in his mind, the uneducated masses – it is a legitimate concern in an evaluation of his work.
One should question why he would want to compose on such a grand scale in all aspects, and his need to create works of such complexity. He was an outsider in British society in most regards: he was the child of a single mother, he was of mixed race, his father was from a colony, and he was homosexual. Evaluated in that light, much of the grandeur of his work cries out for recognition. Even his ban on public performance of his works smacks of a childish reaction to the lack of early interest in or understanding of his work as he did actively promote his works in his youth.

Consider an excerpt from his written work *Il Gran Rifuto*, where he describes his reasons for not allowing public performance. Throughout he makes references such as “a composer known to me” which seem fairly transparent in hindsight.

Consider for a moment the cycle of events in the course of the ordinary composer’s life. He completes a work after many months, possibly years, of labour. This he proceeds to hawk around like a bagman, to this conductor and that, pestering this performer and that, getting the while the most shocking and humiliating of rebuffs … He has frequently to put up with agonies of misreading and misinterpretation of his musical intentions, scarcely daring to hazard a suggestion to some stick-swishing swash-buckler, for fear of upsetting that personage, and either having his work deliberately and utterly ruined at the performance … or having it struck off the program.

But what a feeling of release, of liberation, to any composer who has the stamina to turn his back on all that…behold him henceforth forever emancipated from the unpleasant necessity of waiting hat in hand upon conductors, performers and such cattle, or from having to listen with a pose of respectful attention to the learnedly idiotic gibberings of critics. What a relief no more to have to dine and wine star conductors of the tenth magnitude, or listen with an air of simulated
interest to the outpourings of egotistical and vanitous trash from performers obsessed with themselves!³⁶

One cannot help but sympathize with Sorabji’s plight. His works contain many pages of beautiful and original music. Notwithstanding the great challenges – to both performer and audience – of presenting his music, there is more and more interest in it in recent decades. Hopefully this will continue, and Sorabji’s works can finally receive the attention they deserve. Among them the Toccata Seconda is a score full of opportunities for performers: written in his mature language, it is full of variety, virtuoso writing, color and moments of great beauty. There are many challenges for the performer, but among Sorabji’s music this piece is fairly accessible and quite rewarding to performer and audience alike.

6. Appendix – Errata

A partial list of possible errata in the printed score is given below.

Marc-André Roberge points out that the *Toccata Seconda* is among just four piano works that exist in almost identical manuscripts, and one of just two of that group that are in the composer’s hand. One can, therefore, be reasonably confident that there should be fewer errors possible than in other of Sorabji’s works. This list, then, contains only errors that are fairly obvious, and is limited to two of the three movements I have prepared thus far: VI. Notturno and VII. Interludio – Moto Perpetuo. Again, it is by no means exhaustive.

*Notturno*

- P.102, system 2: the first group of 64\(^{th}\) notes should contain 8 notes, not nine. Likewise, the second group should contain 8 notes, not 7.
- P.102, system 3: the 5\(^{th}\) and 6\(^{th}\) groups of 64\(^{th}\) notes in the right hand should be one octave higher.
- P.105, system 1: the top bracket should not include first 8\(^{th}\) note rest. Right hand grouping should then be 22:16 and left hand grouping 11:8 (see Example 22).
- P.105, system 2: the final group of 5 8\(^{th}\) notes should be one octave higher.

*Interludio – Moto Perpetuo*

- P.113, system 2: the two groups of five 16\(^{th}\) notes in the right hand, followed by a 16th note C# major chord, should be one octave higher.
- P.118, system 2: the first seven groups of 16\(^{th}\) notes should be one octave higher (see Example 23).
Bibliography

- Roberge, Marc-André. Opus Sorabjianum. Version 1.12, 2015,
  [http://www.mus.ulaval.ca/roberge/srs/07-prese.htm](http://www.mus.ulaval.ca/roberge/srs/07-prese.htm)


