

Thematic Metamorphosis
and Perception in the
Symphony [No. 1] for Organ
of Kaikhosru Sorabji

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Thematic Metamorphosis and Perception in the *Symphony [No. 1] for Organ of Kaikhosru Sorabji*

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892-1988) recognized his *Symphony [No. 1] for Organ*, from 1924, to be the seminal work in the development of his mature style.¹ His sizeable keyboard works predating the *Symphony* have a tendency to be freely rhapsodic and lack thematic development. The narrative in these pieces is based on loosely connected motives compelling the listener to forage for recurring musical material, only to be confronted with a seemingly endless stream of new ideas. Although through-composed works are not unusual during the first quarter of the 20th century, the early works of Sorabji are remarkable due to their long duration.² The question of providing unity to extended forms, while maintaining a quasi-improvisational style, is the key problem that Sorabji confronts in his first multi-movement work for solo keyboard, the *Symphony for Organ*.

At the time of its composition, and even today, the magnitude of the *Organ Symphony* is unparalleled in its scale within the literature for the instrument, and indeed unprecedented in Sorabji's previous output; his only earlier composition containing organ relegated the instrument to a marginal role in an orchestral piece³. The fact that Sorabji had only a few organ lessons from his mother and sometime later from another unidentified organist may suggest the reason he chose the instrument as to implement a method of thematic metamorphosis not encountered before in the history of Western music: it is an objective laboratory, one in which a contrapuntal instrument akin to the piano remains at his disposal, with the tonal capacity of a large orchestra, yet one that remains somewhat distant from the kind of invested involvement that he committed to the piano.

Although Sorabji casts the first two movements of the symphony in the conventional forms of a passacaglia and fugue, these *a priori* factors alone do not establish the type of

perceptive path towards unity that the composer is seeking, nor the variety that would sustain cohesiveness in a piece that has a performance time of no less than two hours. Even in these forms, which are ordinarily associated with a paring down of materials, Sorabji does not refrain from presenting an abundance of motivic ideas, or the unrelenting ornamental figuration which is part and parcel of his dense, intricate style, in this effort to gain congruity. What he does create is a new approach to the interdependence between contrasting materials through a process of perception that can only be accomplished through a broad expanse of time - in effect, a gradual comprehension. As the work progresses, themes become intertwined and critically altered as they are restated. Some material is not reintroduced into the musical texture for over an hour, and even then in completely different contexts. This allows Sorabji to distil from each of the themes a proto-melodic profile, and make use of them as memory triggers to activate the perception of the listener, while metamorphosing, or even obscuring, the original function and character of the material. This is intensified when themes are carried forward from one movement to the next, but in which only the fundamental contours of the melodies are retained. In these cases, Sorabji drastically transforms the material through modifications to their intervallic content as well as their scope.

Due to the increasing length of his major compositions beginning with the *Organ Symphony*, the audible properties that formerly separated motivic elements as they were originally perceived by the listener become, in effect, indistinct. The limitation of the ear's ability to retain and recall individual musical components within the expansive narrative developed by Sorabji is in fact utilized by the composer as the melodic contours alone become the connective tissues for recognition. In so doing, the importance of the specific intervallic content of any single musical line diminishes to the point where it becomes utterly unidentifiable when compared to its original statement.

The third movement of the *Symphony* is structured as a fantasia, culminating in a stretto (which here has a meaning distinctly different than its fugal connotations - Sorabji uses the term to indicate any juxtaposition of many different elements). The arrangement of placing rigorous structures, such as the first two movements, adjacent to free forms, such as the third movement, would become a prime format that Sorabji would use for the remainder of his compositional career. This composition, therefore, justifiably stands at the crux of his development for many reasons. The ambiguous polytonal vocabulary that he had already established in his previous output, but which lacked organic unity in regards to its relationship with formal designs, finds a functional context within the framework of this newly forged style wherein the musical materials *evolve* rather than develop. Although Sorabji is thorough in his treatment of this method within the *Organ Symphony*, it would only come to fruition and exposure to the public in later, more expansive works, such as the *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (1929-30)⁴. In this cyclical piano composition, which has a duration that exceeds the *Organ Symphony* by over two and a half hours, Sorabji contributes a valuable addendum: a brief analysis of the work with a catalogue of the numerous themes and their prolific metamorphoses found throughout the twelve constituent movements. This provides insight as to the manner in which he extrapolated the motive-developing concepts drawn from his experience with the *Organ Symphony*, and a glimpse into a possible method for preparing themes from a pre-compositional perspective.

In order to understand Sorabji's motivation for taking the most basic elements within the Western musical canon and reorganizing their inherent principles, one must look to the Parsi side of his heritage. Indian poets, such as Jami, who were writing during what is the equivalent of the Medieval era in the West, were among his inspirations during the formative years leading to his mature stylistic approach.⁵ Although disavowing any connection to the classical Indian music

tradition, Sorabji speaks of his overall artistic approach derived from the craftsmanship of India abounding in Epicurean ornamentation and visceral complexity.⁶

Specific works can be examined in assessing the technical contributions that Sorabji assimilated from other composers he held in high regard. The *Grand Sonate* of Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-88), a composition Sorabji adorned with the highest praises, presents a variety of themes that are transformed throughout its four movements in a fashion not dissimilar from that of his own. Particular thematic fragments are buried within the texture as ornaments as well as being incorporated into subsidiary themes. The Romantic notion of a single musical gesture being transformed to illuminate a multitude of emotional states is indeed an ideal embraced by Sorabji. However, when applying rigorous musical forms, he turns to other composers as models. Fugal sections in Karol Szymanowski's (1882-1937) *Second* and *Third Sonatas* are described by Sorabji as having subjects and free counterpoint so interwoven that they were as "water flowing."⁷ It is not surprising, then, when we read that Sorabji himself wished to compose music resembling "natural phenomena...like running water or wind in trees."⁸ As well, Sorabji venerates the *Introduction, Passacaglia, and Fugue* of Max Reger (1873-1916) above all his other organ works, as embodying a "volcanic nature,"⁹ a trait he subsequently reserved for descriptions of the climaxes of his own works. Indeed, Reger exhibits many of Sorabji's musical qualities, including hyper-extended tonalities, exuberant embellishment (albeit without the copious strata of polyrhythms), and opaque textures wherein the volume of activity can sometimes overwhelm individual details and becomes the expressive means in and of itself. The expanding duration of Reger's most penetrating organ works appears to be a model for Sorabji in more than one way. However, Reger clearly maintains a distinction between main material and passing figuration while Sorabji's process revolves around the dissolution of such differentiation.

The listener's ability to assimilate the sheer quantity of material found in the *Organ Symphony* is a study of cognizance itself. This may also be true for the composer, who, over the extended period of time during the composition of the work, may have sublimated the gestural and intervallic content of its themes into the musical discourse. The approach to the handling of the materials is derived from Sorabji's will "to create...inherently cohesive [music] without traditional motivic and formal procedures"¹⁰ which transforms the sonic fabric into a subconscious echoing¹¹ of suggestive melodic configurations. Psychologically, the listener begins to 'hear into' the piece, to the point of even imagining the integration and development of main material when it may not in fact be present at all. Sorabji apparently takes the bold step to allow the listener to *create* unifying structures *outside* what is supplied by the music through the introduction into the narrative of a transformational grammar that requires active participation.¹² This type of indirect dialogue, through the conduit of a singular musical vocabulary and an equally unique technique, between composer and audience is in essence Sorabji's goal, and only through the passage of time - Sorabji's protracted temporal structures - can the listener become fluent enough to become conversant.

Charting the Metamorphoses

Since it is in the third movement that the majority of metamorphoses representative of his experimental style can be found, it will be analyzed with the greatest scrutiny. In order to illustrate the manner in which this organic unfolding takes place, the accompanying charts provide a delineation of the thematic configurations and reconfigurations as they occur chronologically throughout the course of the work. The primary themes examined include the passacaglia from the first movement, and the two fugue subjects from the second. The gradual

process by which they are consumed into the prevailing sound surface is a particular focal point of the analysis.

Measure numbers are not indicated by Sorabji, therefore, examples drawn from the printed edition will be identified by movement, page number, and system.

Examples 1-5. As references, reproduced here are the expository statements of the Passacaglia theme [PT], Fugue Subject 1 Rectus [FS1/R] and Inversus [FS1/I], and Fugue Subject 2 Rectus [FS1/R] and Inversus [FS1/I], as they appear in the score. It is important to note the musical ideas common to both the PT and FS1, in particular the scalar portions that are followed by a compensated of a large leap. As well, the chromatic, three note terminal descent in FS2 is a characteristic shared by the end of the central section of the PT. Another integrative element is the diminished triad, a component of all three theme groups, which is used extensively in the third movement.

Ex.6. a/b. These fragments are not found in the score, as they delineate the *actual* inversions of the fugue subjects. When compared to these same materials as they are implemented within the composition, the manner in which the composer transfigures the inversus forms of the fugue subjects is made apparent. It is intriguing to note that although the rhythmic values are unaltered, and the general contour of the melodic inversion is kept intact, the degree to which the internal interval structure is modified is more varied. Sorabji aids the performer's interpretative discernment by leaving the beaming virtually untouched, regardless of the changing rhythmic contexts in which the theme groups are placed. Instead, the alterations are generally confined to the relationship between the motives from which the themes are constructed. In the transformation of the FS1/I, one can discover that he does so that the *incipit* of the PT becomes implied internally, therefore creating a connection that would otherwise not be present. Also, in

the inversion of the FS2, Sorabji interpolates a descending diminished triad which otherwise would not be found in the subject. What can be deduced is that Sorabji uses rhythmic identity and contour as primary factors for explicit perception of thematic material. In the *Organ Symphony*, particularly, portions of the PT become the predominant thread interwoven throughout the entire composition. In the *Introductio* of the second movement alone, there are three allusions to it (Ex. 7, 8, and 9). In the body of the *Fuga* further use of the PT incipit can be observed (Ex. 10 and 11), as well as a larger portion in an interior voice (Ex. 12). However it is in the *Coda* that the PT finds its most extensive integration within other material (Ex. 14, 15, 16, and 17).

Ex.7. Although PT incipit remains intact, the central section is modified, although the contour and specific pitch content is maintained. For Sorabji, this is adequate to make an audible connection with the original statement while allowing the theme to development.

Ex.8. and 9. The PT incipit melodic shape is maintained and sequenced, although each succeeding restatement contains altered intervallic content.

Ex.10. and 11. Each of these statements introduce the PT incipit into the discourse of the double fugue. Each occurrence involves interval alterations but maintains rhythmic integrity and the prevailing melodic contour of its archetype. Ex.10. is distinguished by the use of the theme in augmentation, and 11. for the interposition of material within the course of a line. Here, then, the motive that was once associated with the opening of a phrase becomes an interior component within a longer passage.

Ex.12. This statement of the PT incipit, plus part of the center section, is conspicuous because the rhythmic integrity begins to erode as the durations become reduced to straight eighths.

Ex.13. The chromatic descending material found in both the PT center section and the FS2 is emphasized here by stating it as part of the FS2/R, but in augmentation, which further binds it to the next figure, which begins the FS1/R.

Ex.14. The PT incipit is connected to an extended pedal passage, interestingly used as the terminal statement rather than an opening. Therefore, the PT incipit has now functioned in numerous roles, as an opening, central section, and closing fragment.

Ex.15. The center section of the PT is altered and integrated within a longer melodic element. It is less discernable from its surroundings than previous similarly integrated statements: the alterations being imposed by Sorabji onto the primary themes are becoming more significant. The triadic sub-section of the PT has a modified contour and a much narrower ambitus, and the chromatic, three-note descent has been extended into a four-note diatonic descent.

Ex.16. The PT incipit is dovetailed with the FS1/R. This cohesion is made more seamless through the adjustment of the note values into even eighths. It would seem that Sorabji chooses to modify either the rhythmic parameters if the interval/melodic contours remain for the most part unchanged, or vice versa. This allows the listener, by the end of the second movement, to clearly make substantial material connections with the ideas of the first movement. However, this transparency is only to become internalized, and made part of the overall fabric in the third movement.

Ex.17. The chromatic three note descent, rhythmically augmented and modified, becomes the terminal point to a descending pedal line unassociated with either the FS2/R or the PT. Sorabji had used a similar figure in the *Introductio* section (page 40, system 2) at the conclusion of a large descent as well.

Ex.18. The ascending diminished triad motive becomes the platform for an asymmetrical sequence of ornamented material. Of interesting note is the extension of the rising minor thirds beyond the initial triad itself.

Ex.19. The concept of sequencing a motive fragment in order to create a larger contoured construct is made manifest in this example. Notice that the steps within this pedal sequence of the PT incipit are irregular, encompassing a minor third, major third, major second, and perfect fourth.

Ex.20. Although not in any way obscured by the texture, the PT incipit here takes on an inverted function as a terminal motive, thus reversing the role that the listener has thus far perceived to be its nature.

Ex.21. As the fantasy continues, the motive fragments become more entwined with freely improvised material. In this pedal passage, the central portion of the PT emerges from previously unrelated ideas. As well, the scalar descent is braided within a two tiered contrapuntal line within itself.

Ex.22. Here again the ascending diminished triad is employed, this time not once but twice, in an anticipation of the PT, which itself is represented in a highly contracted and rhythmically altered form.

Ex.23. The ascending diminished triad now becomes infused within a longer line, repeated at irregular intervals, then blended into a statement of the FS1 before taking on a new trajectory. What is important is the manner in which the materials are becoming fused without any

demarcation. The fugue subject does not function as it originally did to provide a point of imitation, but solely as part of the overall fabric.

Ex.24. and 25 This manual cadenza exhibits a hidden interior motive (an intervallically compressed transformation of the PT incipit) that appears as suddenly as it subsides into an improvised flourish. All the while, the underlying pedal creates a rhythmically irregular chain of rising diminished triads.

Ex.26. Another transformation and sequence of the PT incipit is juxtaposed with the FS2/R. The fugal theme maintains the rhythm and directionality of the original statement from the second movement, but its intervallic content is severely compressed.

Ex.27. FS2/I undergoes a similar sequence-transformation wherein the interval content is altered within each succeeding statement. In addition, the line is placed amidst an ongoing ornamental line, and therefore does not have a distinct entrance as such.

Ex.28. In this pedal line, the FS1/R incipit is placed within a larger melodic contour, its profile distinguished perhaps only by the fact that its note values are augmented.

Ex.29. The PT incipit is embedded within an inner ornamented contrapuntal extrapolation in the manuals. It is further obscured from any obvious perception as its rhythmic disposition is uniformly coordinated with the previous figuration.

Ex.30. This pedal excerpt joins the incipit of the FS1/R in augmentation with a transformation/contraction of the PT (incipit and scalar sections) and another transformation of the FS1/R incipit. The aural perception of the themes as being distinct from one another is continuously broken down by Sorabji as elongated melodies of motivic strands accumulate.

Ex.31-33. These three excerpts are free transformations/compressions of the whole PT.

Intervallic content is irregularly distorted, although the directionality of the melodic contours remain always intact. Sorabji is illustrating that melodic shapes are the connective tissue within his work rather than precise reiterations. As the composition continues, the character of these proto-melodies become increasingly abstracted and concentrated into distillations of the forms from which they were originally stated.

Ex.34. The PT incipit is employed in this sequence as an accompanimental figuration, disguised amongst diatonic and chromatic scalar ornaments.

Essentially, the process which guides Sorabji's mature compositional syntax, and finds its first expression in the *Organ Symphony*, allows primary themes and their constituent motives to evolve within, and adapt to, a multitude of compositional contexts in order to stimulate and transform the perception of the listener. The elaborate and layered textures which constitute a significant portion of Sorabji's works, in turn, present the composer with immeasurable fertile ground for his equally expansive imagination to invent unique cognitive correlations.

Notes

¹ Alistair Hinton, brochure notes for *Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji: Organ Symphony #1*, Continuum CCD 1001/2, 1995.

² Schönberg's strictly through-composed *Drei Klavierstück* Op. 11, No. 3 is under two and one-half minutes in length, while a comparable work of Sorabji, such as the *Sonata [No. 1] for Piano* (1919), is over thirty.

³ The *Symphony [No. 1] for Piano, Large Orchestra, Chorus, and Organ* was composed between 1921 and 1922, followed by the *Black Mass* which was intended to include organ, although work on the composition was abandoned.

⁴ The *Organ Symphony* would not receive a complete performance until shortly before the composer's

death, while *Opus Clavicembalisticum* was performed by Sorabji himself shortly after the completion of the work.

⁵ Michael Haberman, brochure notes for *Sorabji: The Legendary Works for Piano*, Élan CD 82264, 1995.

⁶ Alistair Hinton, brochure notes for *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, Altarus AIR-CD-9075 (1-4), 1988.

⁷ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, *Around Music* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1932), 63.

⁸ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, *Mi Contra Fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1947; New York: Da Capo Press, 1986, reprint), 23.

⁹ Sorabji, *Around Music*, 88.

¹⁰ Michael Habermann, "Piano Music of Kaikhosru Sorabji," *Piano Quarterly* 122 (1983): 36.

¹¹ Hinton, *Organ Symphony #1*, brochure notes.

¹² This explains Sorabji's restriction that his music only be performed for the most sophisticated listeners.

Sorabji: *Symphony* [No. 1] *for Organ*

Charting the Thematic Metamorphoses

Ex.1. Passacaglia theme [PT] - mov. I, page 4, system 1

ascending diminished triad

incipit *center section* *scalar section*

Ex.2. Fugue Subject 1 Rectus [FS1/R] - mov. II, page 42, system 1

ascending diminished triad

Ex.3. Fugue Subject 1 Inversus [FS1/I] - mov. II, page 47, system 3

PT incipit transformation *ascending diminished triad*

Ex.4. Fugue Subject 2 Rectus [FS2/R] - mov. II, page 51, system 3

terminal chromatic descent

Ex.5. Fugue Subject 2 Inversus [FS2/I] - mov. II, page 55, system 3

descending diminished triad

Ex.6.a/b Fugue Subjects 1 and 2 - Real Inversions

Ex.7. - mov. II, page 40, system 3

PT incipit

Ex.8. - mov. II, page 41, system 3

PT incipit

Ex.9. - mov. II, page 41, system 3

PT incipit

Ex.10. - mov. II page 54, system 3

PT incipit augmented

Ex.11. - mov. II, page 56, system 3

PT incipit

Ex.12. - mov. II page 58, system 1

straight eighths

Ex.13. - mov. II page 58, system 2

FS2/R *FS1/R*

terminal chromatic descent

Ex.14. - mov. II page 59, system 2

PT incipit

Ex.15. - mov. II, page 59, system 3

center section

Ex.16. - mov. II page 60, system 2

PT incipit *FS1/R*

Ex.17. - mov. II page 60, system 3

terminal chromatic descent

Ex.18. - mov. III page 63, system 1

ascending diminished triad

Ex.19. - mov. III page 64, system 3

PT incipit sequence

4:3 *4:3* *4:3* *4:3* *4:3*

Ex.21. - mov. III page 66, system 1

Ex.20. - mov. III page 65, system 1

PT incipit (chordal)

PT center section

PT scalar section

Ex.22. - mov. III page 66, system 3

ascending diminished triad

PT contracted

Ex.23. - mov. III page 67, system 1-2

asc. dim. triad

asc. dim. triad

asc. dim. triad

FSI

Ex.24. - mov. III page 69, system 1

PT incipit transformation

Ex.25. - mov. III page 67, system 2

ascending diminished triads

Ex.26. - mov. III page 74, system 1

PT incipit sequence

FS2/R compressed

Ex.27. - mov. III page 74, system 2

FS2/I transformations

Ex.28. - mov. III page 75, system 3

FS1/R augmentation

Ex.29. - mov. III page 76, system 1

PT incipit transformation

Ex.30. - mov. III page 76, system 3 to page 77, system 1

FS1/R

PT incipit transformation

FS1/R

Ex.31. - mov. III page 78, system 1

Ex.32. - mov. III page 78, system 2

Ex.33. - mov. III page 84, system 1

Ex.34. - mov. III page 81, system 1

PT incipit as figuration

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