

Erik Chisholm and the Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music

IAML Congress, Prague, July 2022

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Introduction

Erik Chisholm (1904-1965)



Kaikhosru Sorabji (1892-1988)



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

Edited by Brian Inglis and Barry Smith

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

Edited by
Brian Inglis and Barry Smith



Erik Chisholm Collection, Jagger Library
University of Cape Town, South Africa

Annotated list of selected ASPCM concerts

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	<u>LIST OF ACTIVE SOCIETY CONCERTS</u>
20th September, 1930 ✓ [Oct. 28. 1930?] ✓	- Walton conducting his "Facade" entertainment with Parry Gunn narrating.
10th November, 1930	- Hindemith playing Sonatas for viola d'amore, viola solo and viola, with myself as the unworthy accompanist.
1st December, 1930	- Sorabji giving the one and only performance of his notorious "Opus Clavicembalisticum" in mauve pyjamas.
17th December, 1930	- There was a rumpus around this time when van Dieren cancelled his concert because he considered our local band unsatisfactory
4th February, 1931	- Medtner gave his first performance of his Sonata Romantica, Op. 53 - there was some unpleasantness with A.M. Henderson.
23rd February, 1931	- Casella conducted his Serenata and played some piano solos.
23rd December, 1931	- when Egar Petri played a programme of Busoni piano works, including the 'Fantasia Contrapuntistica'.
29th January, 1932	- Bax appeared for the first time to play his viola sonata with Margaret Ludwig, songs and a group of piano solos.
29th February, 1932	- (probably the most important date of these) - Bartok played his Suite Op. 14, Elegies, Allegro barbaro, etc., and along with Bessie Spence, the Rumanian Folk Dances and a transcription of the piano sonatina: then with Angela Pallas singing the Village Scene.
12th April, 1931	- John Ireland came to perform his Fantasia Trio (with Bessie Spence and Gasparini? and his second violin sonata, and accompanied James Reid in some songs (including 'Sea Fever') and soloed "The Island Spell", "Ragamuffin", etc.
14th December, 1932	- Bax came for a second concert of his works - his second and third violin sonatas, the viola legend with Margaret Ludwig; Sally Thomson sang some songs.
14th March, 1933	- We had the unrelenting Florent Schmitt playing the Piano Sonata part in his great Quintet. I remember there was a rehearsal of his violin sonata with Edward Dennis at H.K. Wood's house, 118 Pitt Street; things blew up between the two performers and this item was cancelled.
May, 1933	- Some time during this month, Cyril Scott arrived with Esther Fisher and played mainly a Scott programme.
2nd November, 1933	- Another important date, when Bela Bartok gave a piano recital, playing his transcriptions of Purcell, Marcello and Rossi, works by Kodaly and then his own Sonata, three Rondos, etc.
16 Dec. 1934 31st October, 1934	- Szymanowski's programme (about which I have only the haziest recollection).
16th December, 1936	- Sorabji played his second Toccata.

Jagger library, UCT: before and after fire



Royal Conservatoire of Scotland Archive
Glasgow, Scotland



AC 1396.1.1.3, 23-7-29

Letter

175, CLARENCE GATE GARDENS,
REGENTS PARK,
N.W. 1.

Dear Mr. Chisholm:

You will think I am quite mad
but in reflection I really think "the Sack but"
would be the best place for an exhibit after all.
"The Telegraph" would not give you sufficient space.

This is an encouraging spirit such as
an enthusiastic fanatical in all the musicians - if
you know what most musicians are!!! - and I am
deeply touched if you are thorough and interested
and I am afraid I have been a bit naive in
expressing my appreciation. please forgive me!

I hope we shall have great friends - many I
say without offence. I like you - and I don't
want to be like musicians!! This insignificant

but 3 of my closest friends and admirers are
Scottishmen - Scotland is over 20, I am at least
Scottishmen over!

At least of good wish and
deep appreciation
Yours truly -
Karlhosse Loraht.

You will find that Mr. Curran is away. But Mr.
Lawrence is seeing him his affairs, so will
you please write him for the same?

Erik Chisholm Archive - Sorabji

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https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/02a3a9d0-6ec4-37f7-ae4-55f2b289f38c?component=25630612-c161-390f-bdbd-0dced

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This material is held at

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland Archives & Collections

Reference

GB 2607 EC/2

Dates of Creation

1926-1965

Name of Creator

Erik Chisholm

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji

Leon Dudley Sorabji

Language of Material

English

Physical Description

2 boxes

Access Information

Open.

Next

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Paul Rapoport, ed.
Sorabji: A Critical Celebration
Aldershot 1992:
Scolar Press

Part 2, The Prose -
'Sorabji's Other Writings'

John Purser,
Erik Chisholm, Scottish Modernist
1904-1965
Chasing a Restless Muse
Woodbridge 2009: Boydell &
Brewer

Chapter 2 – 'The Active Society:
Bringing the Heroes of Modernism
to Glasgow'

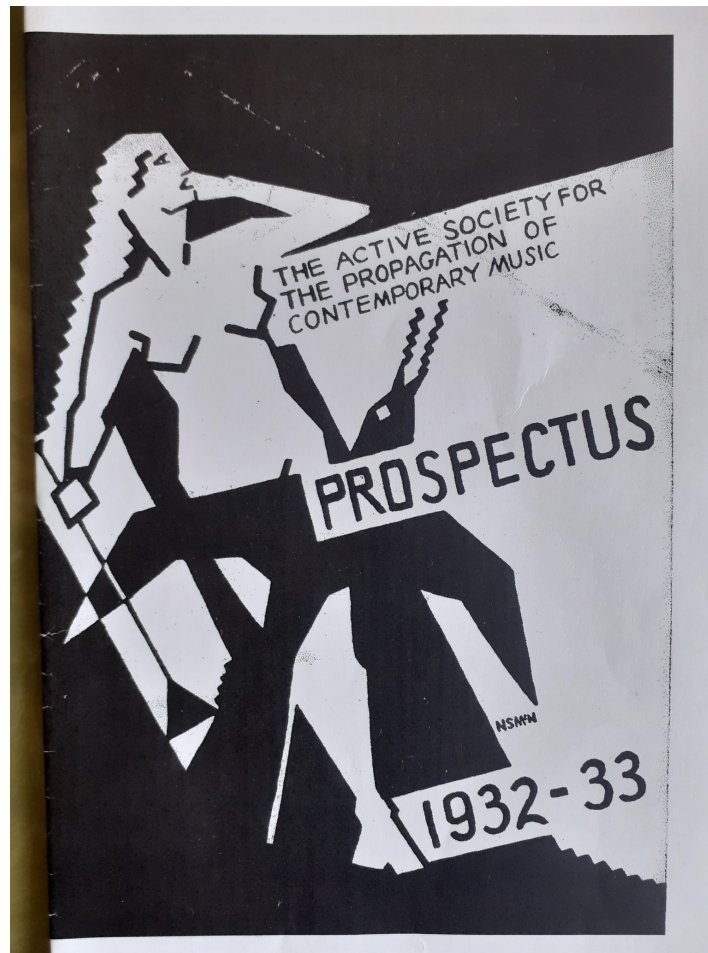
Interlude – 'The Love of Sorabji'

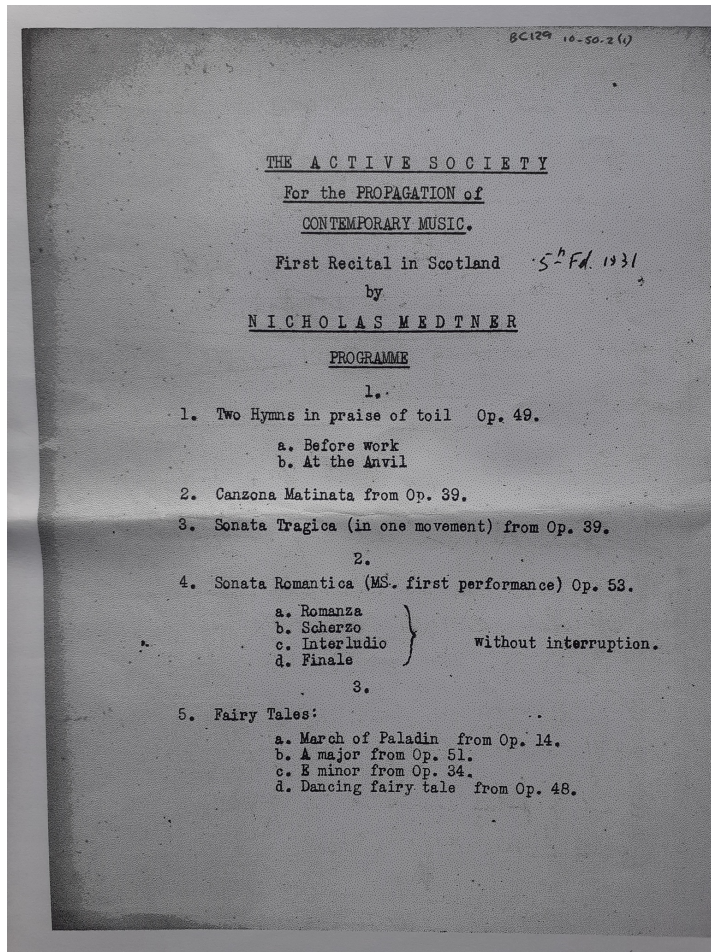
Paper outline:

- Erik Chisholm
- The ASPCM
- Sorabji at the ASPCM
- van Dieren at the ASPCM
- Some issues & potential next steps

Erik Chisholm

Diversity & inclusion in 1930s Glasgow?





It was with regret that (after seeing some the programs given by your society) I realised that the activities of the society, of which you invited us to become members, were completely antagonistic to my convictions. I consider the activities of the composers active among (the majority of them) not only hostile to our art but even pernicious.

For this reason I would beg of you to cancel our names from your list of membership. [Medtner to Chisholm, 1 September 1931]

I have never yet met anyone who made any money out of a concert. All those connected with the organising of concerts complain of the small audiences, of the lack of public support, of the lack of funds, and of the rank conservatism of the musical taste of the public. [Erik Chisholm, article 'New Pieces for City', October 1935]

Apart from Sorabji (who had pots of money...) we gave all our distinguished visitors as large a fee as we could afford in addition to paying their travelling expenses and hotel bills, if private hospitality was not available. On the other hand, in the 10 years of the Society's existence, none of our local performers ever got a penny for their services – there just wasn't any money left over.

[Chisholm, *Men & Music*, unpublished]

We wrote of Mr Erik Chisholm's Active Society some time ago that it was "one of the most interesting enterprises we have heard of for a long time." Now comes the detailed prospectus of its first season's concerts. Happy, happy Glasgow. May Glasgow have the intelligence to realise how lucky she is.
[London *Evening Standard*]

I am neither surprised nor disappointed when a major musical event such as the recital last month of Busoni's music given by the greatest living authority on this composer, Egon Petri... attracted an audience of little over a hundred.... The present economy urge which is sweeping the country just now is a heaven-sent excuse for the mean-fisted... to do without what they don't want. A new car or a fur coat... Ah! But that is different. We *must* have our bit of fresh air and fun, mustn't we?

[Erik Chisholm, article 'Scottish Music in 1931']

Sorabji at the ASPCM

‘Now that I come to think of it, it seems odd that the very first composer I should invite to perform at the Active Society concerts, should be the most remote, the most un-get-at-able of all my contemporaries. I like to think that this choice was determined by my audacious courage, my un-heard of enterprise; the fact is, however, that Sorabji was “news” around 1927.’

‘I received a reply - a very courteous and charming letter - saying he would be delighted to do so.... He came again in [December] 1930 to play his famous or notorious... “Opus Clavicembalisticum” and in 1936 performed the nine movement of his second Toccata.’

[Chisholm, *Men & Music: Sorabji*]

- **Othering and hyperbole as advocacy:**
- the GREATEST MUSICAL ENIGMA OF ALL TIME
- *this astonishing phenomenon*
- **Exoticising:**
- this little INDIAN WIZARD
- **Jeopardy:**
- *so unique an event*
- the hall is smallish, so better get tickets before they are all snapped up

‘a composition hiding its emptiness under a bravado of merely brilliant florid technique. This music is tiresome to the last degree.’
[J.B., ‘Kaikhosru Sorabji: An Oddity’ 1930]

Throughout the great newspapers of the Kingdom, and throughout such aristocratic periodicals as The Saturday Review, The Spectator, etc, no attention is paid to Sorabji and his compositions; they are, indeed, ignored everywhere. And justly so for he is regarded... as a freak musician...

[J.B., 'Sorabji's Music' 1930]

‘the presence of this overlay of decoration prevented the texture from declaring itself’
[Our Music Critic, ‘Active Society Recital: “Opus Clavicembalisticum”’, 1930]

Bernard van Dieren at the ASPCM

We pointed out that an orchestra which satisfied composers like Mr Walton, Herr Hindemith and others was assuredly not inadequate to perform “The Tailor” In fact the rehearsals available for Mr van Dieren were considerably more numerous than those allowed for the production of new works in any of our leading orchestral organisations.
[17.12.1930]

The orchestra that was available for the one rehearsal I tried was filled with deputies and not even complete... it appeared that I could only hope for a last-minute rehearsal with the players that had been promised... and therefore I did not feel justified in undertaking the responsibility of securing a satisfactory rendering of the work. [22.12.1930]

‘Van Dieren stalked off madly into the artist’s room and slammed the door. I followed after him to try and soothe his ruffled feathers but was told to get out. In about 10 minutes time he flung open the door, stampeding into the room for all the world like a raging bull....’

‘We learned afterwards he had taken a dose of cocaine....’

‘He stamped, raged, almost foaming at the mouth, and finally with a furious gesture flung his baton down and said the rehearsal was over.’ [*Men & Music: Van Dieren*]

‘first that there was no horn player nor first violinist present at the Sunday rehearsal, that the bassoon and flute couldn’t play their parts and how the players started leaving one after another... and something about a newspaper story about 3 rehearsals not being enough for v. D. when it was enough for Hindemith which appeared to have upset them [the van Dierens] rather’ [Sorabji to Chisholm, 25.12.1930]

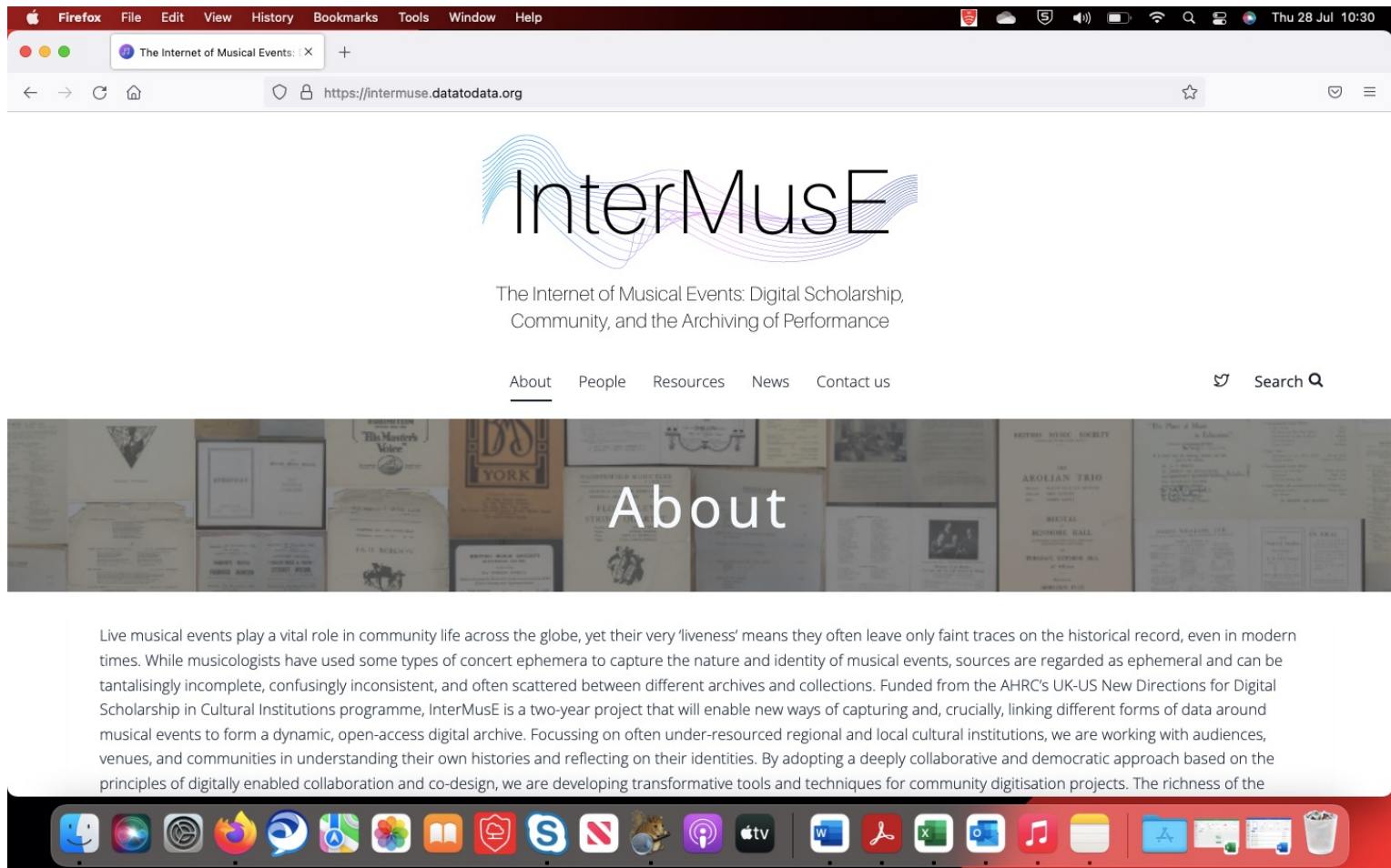
I never asked for “considerably more rehearsals”, but only for rehearsals with a complete orchestra and without deputies.... There may have been an orchestra at some time that satisfied Mr Walton and Herr Hindemith but... this was admittedly not the orchestra I rehearsed with. [5.1.1931]

Some issues, and potential next steps

To collect a whole run of printed programmes and then correlate them with the reviews to establish what actually occurred would be a substantial and possibly impossible task.

[Purser, *Erik Chisholm, Scottish Modernist*, Boydell 2009: 214]

- Internet of Musical Events
- Rachel Cowgill & Charlotte Armstrong
- <https://www.york.ac.uk/music/research/musical-cultures-communities/projects/intermuse/>



Bowdlerisation of letters?

Later on :-
July 8th, 1930.

Erik dear -

You know don't you that I would like you to consent to be my guest at Corfe Castle? I have said that not once but several times. . . . Won't you consent? I go to Corfe on Thursday, July 17th.

I do not quite know how I am living out these last days literally of anguished impatience for Corfe . . . and you at it it is like someone watching in a condemned cell for liberation as the sand slips grain by grain down the hourglass

Forgive me if I am irritating or trying or repeat myself . . . only those who endure what we endure know all we go through in our crucifixion hours of unutterable loneliness indescribable desolate solitude divided from the only ones who make life worth living for us can know what it is I am so bloody miserable that even the thought that Y.O.U are only 3 weeks or so off hardly consoles me I get desperate at times. I would like to send you that private letter but it isn't safe better wait

For God's sake be kind to me and write me a few consoling words!!!! they can only come from you

Bloody rumpily and
miserably but none the less
your
E.

You will have got my letter of this morning about your questions.

Email: b.inglis@mdx.ac.uk

Twitter: @BrianAInglis

Link to blog posting excerpts from Sorabji-Warlock correspondence (Inglis/Smith 2019: Routledge):
<https://www.blogger.com/blog/posts/8056585196517942667>