

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji. *Piano Music, Volume 3. [Prelude - Interlude - Fugue; Valse-Fantaisie; Hommage à Johann Strauss; St. Bertrand de Comminges: "He was laughing in the tower."]* Michael Habermann, piano. Musical Heritage Society MHS 7530H. (digital record) and MHC 9530 (cassette). Commercially distributed by MusicMasters MM-20118Y (record), MM-40118Y (cassette), and MM-60118W (compact disk).

It is unlikely that you will ever hear these works performed by anyone besides Michael Habermann. You will surely never hear them performed better.

In an age of such incompetence and so many botches, especially in the natural, political, and social sciences, it is a solace to turn to the arts—one of the few areas where one finds excellence, accomplishment of the highest order, and a striving for perfection. In an age when most evidence seems to reiterate man's frailty and lackluster achievement, the arts at least occasionally transcend the limitations that shackle most people.

So with this recording. Michael Habermann's achievement cannot be overstated. He has taken three fiendishly difficult works, harnessed the powers of all of his eight hands, and given us consummately crafted and flawlessly executed performances.

As you listen to the recording, you will be aware of uncommon intricacy, fist-busting chords, precipitous leaps, melismatic runs, and a host of other physical and technical horrors; unless you examine the scores, though, you will be unable to appreciate just how difficult Sorabji's music is. The printed notes are formidable enough, but the mere task of deciphering them from a handwritten manuscript (e.g., *St. Bertrand*) demands a level of concentration and stamina few can muster. The cover of the MHS recording reproduces a page penned by Sorabji. Imagine learning a twenty-minute work from pages like that one. It is a task that few people would have the patience to undertake, much less master. That Habermann can not only read the notes, unsnarl the rhythmic and thematic relationships, negotiate all the technical demands, but also determine the relationship among all the various structural units and synthesize all the disparate pieces into an organized whole—is an accomplishment beyond any but the most exceptional talents.

The *Prelude - Interlude - Fugue* (or "P-I-F") was written between 1920 and 1922 and was published by J. Curwen and Sons (copyright 1924). The prelude is a five-page, perpetual-motion study for both hands comprising 456 units of unrelieved sixteenth-notes, each unit containing four notes. Sometimes the hands are moving in parallel motion; sometimes they are widely separated. Habermann's timing is remarkable: he doesn't drop a note or miss a split second. Everything is exactly right. Although four notes are stressed at the beginning ("B"/"C"/"D"/"F-sharp"), they are not particularly developed in this digital tag-game of a prelude. They do, however, form the basis for the subject of the fugue. The interlude is a languishing nocturne; while it does use material from the prelude, its echoes are not apparent. The eye studying the score will see the relationships before the ear can hear them. The fugue, too, uses patterns that appear in the prelude. It is a single-subject, four-voice fugue that ultimately takes the perpetual-motion motif of the prelude and turns it into right-hand chords, while the left hand presents the fugue subject in octaves. The last pages are structurally immaculate; the eye can see exactly what the composer is doing. But the ear may be overwhelmed and may need to take shelter, suspecting that the day of judgment is coming (or that a herd of chimpanzees is doing gymnastics all over the keyboard!). Again, what Habermann does is remarkable: every detail comes through. You may not be able to hear all these details, because Sorabji's writing is much too dense. But if you follow the score, you can see that the pianist is in complete control, even if he has to swat some of the chimpanzees from time to time.

After all the racket that ends the fugue, the *Valse-Fantaisie* (1925) comes as a relief. The opening cadenza is gossamer, and once the main theme enters, Habermann maintains a suave, lilting quality throughout this crazy mega-waltz. Sorabji calls this work a reminiscence of Strauss. To the extent this work is a series of waltzes, strung together in the fashion of the Viennese waltz cycle and unified by a single melody, this is true. But as I hear this work, I visualize social and cultural deterioration. I imagine a group of elegant socialites at a grand ball; they are ever-so-proper and graceful and elegant at the beginning of the affair. As they take to their cups, however, they become a bit edgy, snapping at each other, little by little showing more and more of their true selves; they gradually lose their grace and make feeble efforts to regain it or to disguise their clumsiness. One steps on the feet of his partner; another stumbles and falls; a third

bumps into a pair of dancers; a fourth belches indiscreetly; and so on. Finally, as the fête comes to a close, they all try to regain their footing for one last round, but by now they are so far gone that they have the elegance of cows dancing on hind legs. The theme that introduced the cycle reappears at its end, but this time it is vulgar, gauche, and clumsy. What began as elegant has become unseemly. I have no idea whether Sorabji intended such satire, but it does not take much effort to sense jabs at the would-be elegance affected by some of high society. The more one listens to this *Valse-Fantaisie*, the more decadence one hears.

Sorabji wrote two works based upon stories of Montague Rhodes James: *St. Bertrand de Comminges* (1941), based on James's *Canon Alberic's Scrap-book*; and *Quaere reliqua huius materiei inter secretiora* (1940), based on *Count Magnus*. Both stories appear in James's *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, published by Dover and Penguin. *St. Bertrand*, taken from an unpublished, sixteen-page MS. similar in appearance to that on the MHS album cover, is much more mellow and certainly more fantastic and visionary than the *Valse* or "P-I-F." The following are some of the figures to listen for: a) the pentatonic scale line suggested by nine opening chords: ["E-flat," "F," "A-flat," etc.]; b) the *Dies irae* melody from the Gregorian Mass for the Dead; c) repeated chords, sometimes appearing as jagged, gulping declamations in the left-hand part [e.g., the four sets heard immediately after the opening nine chords], at other times as menacing open chords [e.g., at 2.5 and 7.3 minutes into the piece], still others as tremolos broken between the hands; and d) very sudden contrasts—between calm and violence, order and chaos, tonality and atonality, density and leanness, and so on.

The more one studies *St. Bertrand*, however, the more one realizes that cells from the *Dies irae* motif are the unifying factor throughout the piece. For instance, the relationship suggested by the notes "F"/"G"/"E-flat"/"F"/"D" or by the interval of the minor third (e.g., "F"- "D", the third and fourth notes of the *Dies irae*) or by the second interval (e.g., "F"- "E," the first two notes of the *Dies irae*), or by "F"- "D"- "E" (the third, fourth, and fifth notes of the *Dies irae*). The more you listen to the piece, the more easily you will hear these cells—sometimes prominent, sometimes unobtrusive.

The music of *St. Bertrand* does not so much follow the James story as try to depict some of the story's emotional foci. The pentatonic plainchant melody described above suggests the solemnity of the church of St. Bertrand located in the decayed town of Comminges in southern France. The various *Dies irae* fragments also suggest the death and decay that permeate the story. The sudden outbursts of violence and the abrasive tremolos suggest the obtrusive voice that can be heard laughing in the tower; the ten sudden "ff" chords at the opening are a fine example. The outbursts of cacophony and atonality suggest the evil forces that come in and out of the story and are finally exorcised. The sudden, frequent contrasts described above suggest the conflict between good and evil, for "St. Bertrand putteth devils to flight." Finally, the overall restlessness and instability of the piece reflect the anxiety that the sacristan feels throughout the story, an anxiety that is not relieved until the very end of the tale as it is not relieved until the very end of the music with the unembellished reappearance of the nine notes that opened the work. In the story and in the music, order is finally restored.

The importance of purchasing Habermann's recording cannot be overemphasized. Certainly the Musical Heritage Society has taken a chance. This is not a disk that is going to attract the average consumer. It is an esoteric issue; even the most sophisticated among us will find it difficult as well as fascinating. As lovers of the piano, we can fulfill a responsibility to ourselves and the recording industry by demonstrating support for Habermann's work. With encouragement, the MHS may issue more Sorabji on disks or CDs.

A couple of concluding comments: It would be easy to fake a lot of this music. There is no performance tradition; hardly anyone knows how it is supposed to sound; hardly anyone has access to the scores. Even if the scores were available, there are so many notes in them, the rhythmic relationships are so complex, and the textures are often so dense that a pianist could cheat . . . and get away with it. Habermann cuts no corners. We have come to expect performances of the utmost integrity from him, and his latest recording does not disappoint us.

Robert J. Gula
Groton, Massachusetts