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SORABJI: *Piano Works*

Michael Habermann—BMS 427 [3CD] 197 min

The title of this monumental set, "Legendary Works for Piano", is not an overstatement. The unique career of English-Parsee composer Kaikhostru Shapurji Sorabji is indeed the stuff of legend: championed by Busoni, Delius, Tovey, and Cortot, he imposed a ban on public performance of his works, many of which were not published for half a century. Much more astonishing is the music itself, which is wild, mystical, unpredictable, improvisatory, multi-textured, and mind-bogglingly dense. A visionary romantic, Sorabji goes straight for the sublime, without compromise; modernist wit and irony are not part of his aesthetic. Though dissonance abounds, it always in the service of beauty. His music floats and soars in the otherworldly realm of late Liszt and Scriabin, but its density and intensity are unique and strangely exhausting. As Donald Gravelmann puts it in his extensive notes, "Spareness of texture, economy of means, and brief statement are not characteristic. His goal seems to be to pack more detail into each composition than the average listener can possibly absorb."

And what of the poor pianist? The efforts of Michael Habermann, who began playing and recording this punishing, never-heard music in the mid 1970s, can only be described as heroic. He plays these Nocturnes, Fantasies, Waltzes, Fugues, and Pastiches with coruscating color, breathtaking virtuosity, and go-for-broke nerviness. These recordings, which have plenty of richness and presence, have been around for a while (some, recorded for Music Masters, were reviewed in M/A 1988); having them all in one package is gratifying. It is hard to distinguish between pieces—like Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, they seem like one monumental opus—but if I had to choose a favorite genre from this set, it would be the Nocturnes in Volume II, where Sorabji's mysticism takes on a sinister delicacy and sensuality. This important set is available from Records International. Don't miss it.

SULLIVAN