

SORABJI: *Gulistan (The Rose Garden)*

Charles Hopkins, p
Altarus 9036 (Albany) 35 minutes

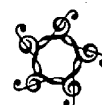
with *Quaere reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora*; *Tiny Little Fantasy on the Illustrious Name of the Distinguished Poet Christopher Grieve, i.e., Hugh M'Diarmid*; *Djami (Nocturne)*; HABERMANN: *A la maniere de Sorabji: Au clair de la lune*

Michael Habermann, p
Elan 82264 (Albany) 72 minutes

Here are two strong entries in the ongoing exploration of the thick, impenetrable, perfumed undergrowth that is the music of the Parsi composer Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892-1988). The Altarus disc continues an interesting survey of Sorabji's piano music from this label and with various pianists. Read Hopkins's bio and you'll feel that the polymath Sorabji has found a kindred spirit: we are informed that he is an expert on chess, crosswords, and Medtner and has written monographs on all sorts of things relating to philosophy, medieval history, oriental art, and mathematics. (But can he balance his checkbook and make a decent soufflé?) Certainly Hopkins has an aptitude for Sorabji's highly impressionist but monumental nocturne after the Sufi Persian poet Sa'di (1213-91), music effecting harmonic lushness through what Habermann calls "hallucinatory rhythmic complexity". He traces the sinuous and delicate lines with skill and sympathy, and the Altarus recording is appropriately lush and resonant. This is a really an outstanding disc, and the booklet draws you even further into Sorabji's world with no fewer than 36 pages of essays, notes, biographies, bibliography, photos, and color illustrations.

That said, I enjoyed Habermann's performance even more. The pianist describes in the notes his discovery of a recording Sorabji himself made of *Gulistan*, a performance full of deviations from the score and "remarkable tonal beauty". Whether or not by way of emulation, Habermann approaches the music with more sensitivity, tonal variety, flexibility of pulse, and overall spontaneity than Hopkins. He does the same in the nocturne *Djami* of 1928 but plays the two shorter works with greater strictness and intensity. He is a remarkable pianist, fully equal to every extravagant demand in these scores. Unfortunately, the recording jobs are a very mixed bag. Best are the recordings of the two long nocturnes—made in-concert before a perfectly silent audience (with applause after *Gulistan* but not after *Djami*), but sounding distant, muddy if atmospheric, and possibly monaural. Habermann's ability to create an ethos must be particularly remarkable if it comes across so well in these circumstances. One of the other two pieces sounds like it was recorded on an electric piano, and the other sounds very close and wooden—the damage is less than it would have been in *Gulistan* or *Djami*. Elan's notes are fine but can't compare with the veritable tome that Altarus gives us. I won't be separated from either of these two discs. If forced to decide at gunpoint, though, I'd probably choose Habermann over Hopkins and follow up on the cue of his recording engineers to give the music a quiet, distant, late-night listen.

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