

GRAMOPHONE

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SORABJI

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Bach/Sorabji Transcription in the Light of Harpsichord Technique for the Modern Piano of the Chromatic Fantasia of JS Bach, followed by a fugue **Ravel/Sorabji** Rapsodie espagnole **Sorabji** Quasi habanera, Op 8. Passeggiata Veneziana (based on the Barcarolle from The Tales of Hoffman by Offenbach). Symphonic Variations – Variation 56 (based on the finale of Piano Sonata No 2 in B flat minor by Chopin). Pasticcio capriccioso (based on the Waltz in D Flat, 'Minute', Op 64 No 1 by Chopin)

Michael Habermann *pf*

BIS © **BIS-CD1306** (68 minutes: **DDD**)

Fearsomely difficult piano music played with aplomb – shame about the sound!



Forget about orchestral timbres in the transcription of Ravel's *Rapsodie Espagnole* that opens this recital. These are pointedly pianistic sonorities. But would they have been more refulgent on a different instrument?

This one, closely recorded, is brittle at the top and shallow at the bottom; and it imparts a flinty edge to an interpretation that appears to aim only for clinical clarity.

Persevere, though, because the other pieces, more characteristic of Sorabji (1892-1988), are rewarding. Habermann is in sympathy with them, too. As he says: 'Extensive use of counterpoint coupled with decorative figurations, fluctuations between free atonality and tonality, extreme textural density, technical difficulty, complex formal layout, and complicated rhythmic structures, are all present in his compositions' (*Sorabji – A Critical Celebration*, ed Paul Rapoport; Scholar Press: 1992). And how!

If that is scary, the Bach transcription might be a good place to start. It could push you back in your seat (Habermann's technique is also pushed at times) but it still has the aura of Bach. Not even Sorabji could obscure his unique indestructibility, though the fugue used is not the *Chromatic Fantasia's* companion but BWV948.

Passeggiata Veneziana introduces another factor that mattered to Sorabji – length. A six-movement fantasia based on the Barcarolle from Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*, it lasts under 22 minutes (the longest work on the disc); and Habermann considers it to be one of the composer's greatest. Its demands don't bother him at all, but listeners are entitled to demand a realistically expansive sound to appreciate fully what both composer and performer are trying to say.

Nalen Anthoni