

## Somewhere in Chingford

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Your editor, in a spirit of warped seasonal humour, has sent me a trio of recordings which in no way can be said to constitute a balanced diet. Despite the Promethean claims made by the pianophile brigade about two of them, and the fact that a different pair (I leave you to guess which) wrote pieces about parrots, the three composers have very little in common. 'Legendary' is for once, however, exactly the right word to describe the music of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji. From 1940 he forbade all further performances on the grounds of unsuitability under 'present and future conditions' and awareness even of the music's existence became limited to a very few collectors of pianistic exotica. Born in 1892 in north-east London, of 'Parsee and Spanish-Sicilian parents', Sorabji was undoubtedly cursed (he wrote for *The Musical Times*, after all) and his criticism often flares with outrage despite also showing unfashionable enthusiasm for Szymanowski and Mahler. The 'unsuitability' of his own music may, however, be less to do with the War than with its Byzantine complexity and technical difficulty. The most legendary of all the works, the three-hour *Opus clavicembalisticum* (understandably not included here), is notated on up to seven staves and carries a density of counterpoint and sinuous ornamentation which he presumably felt was unlikely to appeal to the likes of Benno Moiseiwitsch or Eileen Joyce and their audiences. In 1976, however, under pressure from the pianists Michael Habermann and Yonty Solomon, Sorabji lifted his ban and some of the music began to get heard.

It is difficult to get a handle on Sorabji's stylistic methods – scores are still mostly in manuscript and performances remain 'extremely rare'. A concert of *Opus clavicembalisticum* by the late John Ogden first aroused my interest, but it is the near-miraculous playing of Michael Habermann on this record and elsewhere that is most likely finally to lift the veil on some of the most elaborately textured and perversely sensual music in the repertoire. Best of all here is the *Nocturne: 'Djami'* of 1928, at 21 minutes a short work by Sorabji's standards. Its form unfolds with what Donald Garvelmann calls a 'continuous narrative evolution of melodies' punctuated by bell-like polytonal chords, subterranean pedal points and the multi-layered gauze of chromatic counterpoint which is characteristic of all the pieces that I have heard. *Djami* never rises above a *piano* dynamic, but cadences into sections of monophonic simplicity offer welcome structural signposts. However, even in passages of the most Moghul rhythmic and polyphonic complexity, Sorabji's style seems strangely self-explanatory. Despite the disorientation of hearing four different pianos on this disc, in recordings of variable technical quality, I can only suggest that you sample this extraordinary music for yourself – nothing more ravishing ever came out of Chingford.

Writing in 1932, Sorabji described Alkan's *Sonatine* op.61 as sounding 'like Berlioz attempting to compose a Beethoven sonata'. This was meant as a compliment. Conversely, Glenn Gould (admittedly in a spoof review) suggested that 'no-one deserves obscurity more richly'. Liszt, an almost exact contemporary, credited Alkan with 'the finest technique of any pianist' but opinion remains divided over whether the works themselves are radically inventive or merely naive, eccentric and grotesquely overblown salon pieces. From a technical standpoint the op.39 *Etudes* certainly present formidable problems and Jack Gibbons comes closer than any other pianist I have heard to resolving them. Nonetheless, the question remains as to whether the music is worth the effort. *Etudes* nos.4–11 form between them a Symphony, Concerto and Overture, but this is no experiment in closed-form manipulation like *Wozzeck*. Instead the effect is of partially digested orchestral music still in piano score (for four hands). No.8 (the first movement of the Concerto) works well as a parody of the Grand Virtuoso style, since it is fun to spot which material belongs where. In far too much of the other music, however, the lack of convincing melodic invention and sudden alternations of whimsy, sentiment and bombast rapidly become tiresome. Claims that Alkan's harmony influenced Debussy and Busoni I find unlikely. However, a title like 'La chanson de la folle au bord de la mer' (Prelude op.31 no.8) could well have appealed to Satie, who might also have appreciated the piece's dirge-like repetitions.

In such company, the piano music of Gian Francesco Malipiero (1882–1973) is refreshingly un-epic. He is probably best known as the (not always reliable) editor of the complete Monteverdi Edition, but he also has a reputation, in Italy at least, as the author of some structurally adventurous music-theatre pieces. ASV have already issued a set of the complete string quartets and this new disc contains music from the years during and immediately after the First World War – short, sombre pieces in the main, which alternate explorations of sonority with febrile passagework. Malipiero attended the first performance of *The rite of spring* and claimed Stravinsky's music had woken him 'from a long and dangerous lethargy'. Echoes of Debussy and Ravel are also apparent, however, and much of the piano music ends up sounding rather like Janáček (although lacking the near-operatic melodic intensity of *On an overgrown path*). Bartoli's playing is beyond reproach, though he should perhaps rethink his biographical material. A statement like 'If there exists a romantic image of a pianist, Sandro Ivo Bartoli is its epitome: with his long-haired, darkish figure, he could be a fugitive from a Dostoevsky novel' invites a variety of responses, none of which will help him in his professed aim of proselytising music which is not already 'tiresomely repeated in the concert halls'.

Sorabji: 'Gulistan' (*The Rose Garden*); *Nocturne for piano*; 'Quaere reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora'; *Fantasiottina sul nome illustre dell'egregio poeta Christopher Grieve ossia Hugh M'Diarmid*; *Nocturne: 'Djami'*; Habermann: *A la manière de Sorabji: 'Au clair de la lune'* Michael Habermann (piano) Élan CD 82264

Alkan: 12 *Études* op.39 Jack Gibbons (piano) ASV CD DCS 227 (2 CDs)

Malipiero: Piano Music Sandro Ivo Bartoli ASV CD DCA 929