

Recording Review

Michael Habermann Plays Sorbji. *The Legendary Works for Piano*. Élan CD 82264 72:22 minutes.

Gulistan (The Rose Garden)—Nocturne for Piano 1940, 29:38. “*Quaere reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora*” 1940, 16:55. *Fantasiettina sul nome illustre dell’ egregio poeta Christopher Grieve ossia Hugh M’Diarmid* 1961, 2:43. *Nocturne: “Djāmi*” 1928, 21:10. Michael Habermann: *A la maniere de Sorabji: “Au clair de la lune*” 1972, 1:50.

Habermann continues his dedicated journey through the piano music of Sorabji with this exquisite recording. *Gulistan* (The Rose Garden) is a world premiere recording. This impressionistic piece is to be performed at the quietest dynamic level, making it all the more difficult to bring off. The harmonies are as rich as the textures are varied and the melodies are extravagantly beautiful. Multilevels of sound must be carefully balanced and Habermann makes it sound so easy, when it is so terribly difficult. Habermann had to prepare this piece from manuscript, since it is not published.

“*Quaere reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora*” (Seek the rest of this matter among the things that are more secret) is based on a ghost story by the English writer Montague Rhodes Jannes (1862–1936). The title “derives from an inscription that the main character encounters in an alchemical tract while prying into some of the deceased count’s books.” From program notes. This work is very different from *Gulistan* although they were written around the same time. Musical opposites permeate the whole piece and tension fills every element. Bell sonorities are heard from time to time.

The piece is enormously challenging but again, Habermann is up to the task and comes out a real winner.

Fantasiettina sul nome illustre dell’ egregio poeta Christopher Grieve ossia Hugh M’Diarmid (Tiny Little Fantasy on the Illustrious Name of the Distinguished Poet Christopher Grieve, i.e., Hugh M’Diarmid). This is a very short piece for Sorabji, but his musical personality is stamped all over it. Two contrasting parts conclude with a “volcanic eruption” (Sorbji’s words). Letters from the subject’s name are used motto-like. Great textural globs of sound mixed with complex polyphony make up the piece. The manuscript is absolutely foreboding and for Habermann to make such wonderful musical sense out of it is truly amazing.

Nocturne: Djāmi. Sorabji was a follower of the ancient Persian religion Zoroastrianism and so it should come as no surprise that this mystical

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN LISZT SOCIETY

Volume 42 / July–December 1997

work honors the Persian poet Jāmī (1414–92). *Djāmi* is the French spelling. Quotes from Jāmī’s poetry appear in the manuscript. Habermann gave the first American performance in 1980 and recorded it in 1982 for Musical Heritage/MusicMasters label. The piece uses a very quiet dynamic range. Habermann performed the work for Sorabji who was enormously moved by his performance. Sorabji’s words regarding this performance were: “I have just heard my music played more marvelously than I ever imagined possible.” Those words have surely been an inspiration to Habermann to continue tackling this incredible repertoire.

This work is somewhat easier for the listener to grasp than say *Gulistan*. It is a work of great ethereal beauty interspersed with moments of supreme complex polyphonic passages. This writer doubts if there is another pianist in the world who could “bring off” this work so satisfyingly. One has to hear the performance to believe it.

Habermann’s *A la maniere Sorabji: “Au clair de la lune*” concludes this CD. The popular and charming French tune serves as a cantus firmus with all kinds of musical activity decorating it throughout. It is a beautifully written piece that is a delight to hear. This writer would love to hear some of the other pieces Habermann has written in a homage series to various composers.

It must require hundreds of hours to perfect certain sanctions of this music, but with performances like those demonstrated on this CD, Habermann may yet make the piano music of Sorabji become famous and well known.

Reviewed by Maurice Hinson