

SORABJI: *Piano Transcriptions*

Michael Habermann—BIS 1306—68 minutes

The English-Parsee composer Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892-1988) is a cult figure to many and a puzzle to others. His large piano output is one of extremes and often over-the-top writing of ferocious complexity. The booklet cover refers to these pieces as "transcriptions", but paraphrases might be a better description, since the originals are merely points-of-departure for imaginative journeys that often set out in a post-Scriabin manner for new dimensions to conquer.

Habermann, long a champion of the composer, begins with an almost traditional re-creation of Ravel's *Rapsodie Espagnole*. At no time does the listener lose site of the original as Sorabji explores each movement's possibilities with showers of notes and crushing tone clusters. With bloat aplenty, Sorabji seems to wallow in both his respect for the original and his desire to interpret it on his own terms. I suspect that Ravel would have found the results deliciously wacky. Regardless of how you might feel about what he has done with (to?) the music, it certainly is impressive.

In *Passeggiata Veneziana* Sorabji takes the well known 'Barcarolle' from Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann* and pushes it to its limit. At over 21 minutes it is the longest and most complex work here, and it is a more than adequate representation of the Sorabji style. For much of the time listeners will be hopelessly lost in their attempt at finding Offenbach's theme. After the opening the familiar "Barcarolle" takes a vacation and only reemerges from the fog in time for a new adventure into more craggy territory. Habermann has the agility and imagination to bring all of this off in style.

The *Transcription in the Light of Harpsichord Technique for the Modern Piano of the Chromatic Fantasia of JS Bach, Followed by a Fugue* is not a complete success. Sorabji is at his best when the sensuality of his ideas can take full flight. In adhering to Bach's formal arrangement he seems inhibited and unwilling to tamper much beyond tonal clusters and endless filigree. It is hard to escape the feeling that his efforts seem unnecessary and add little to Bach's masterwork.

At over four minutes, the *Pasticcio Capriccioso* based on Chopin's *Minute Waltz* seems like an exercise in wrongheadedness. The piece, trudging along in slow tempo, manages to be an annoying parody without humor. This sort of thing works for Godowsky but sounds silly here.

The remaining time is taken up by a *Quasi Habanera* on Sorabji's own themes, and a

tour-de-force reworking of the finale from Chopin's Sonata No. 2. Both have considerable appeal, and both serve as showpieces for Habermann's considerable artistry. According to the notes, all but the *Pasticcio* are first recordings.

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