



Sorabji Two Piano Pieces. Fantaisie espagnole. Valse Fantaisie: Hommage à Johann Strauss. Three Pastiches. Le jardin parfumé. Djâmî. Gulistan (The Rose Garden). Introito & Preludio-Corale from Opus Clavicembalisticum. Prelude, Interlude & Fugue. Fragment for Harold Rutland. Fantasiettina sul nome illustre dell'egregio poeta Christopher Grieve ossia Hugh MacDiarmid. 'Quaere reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora'. St Bertrand de Comminges: 'He was laughing in the tower'. **Habermann** A la manière de Sorabji: 'Au clair de la lune'. **Michael Habermann** (pf)
British Music Society BMS427/429CD Full price: 3 discs for price of 2 (195 minutes, ADD/DDD).

Michael Habermann can justly claim to have been the pioneer in recording the music of Kaikhosru Sorabji, as one of the first two pianists (the other was Yonty Solomon) in whose favour the composer rescinded his long-standing, notorious – and in fact probably unenforceable – ‘ban’ on the performance of his music. Although several fine pianists have followed in his wake (Solomon, John Ogdon, Geoffrey Douglas Madge, Marc-André Hamelin, Donna Amato, Charles Hopkins, Carlo Grante and, most recently, Jonathan Powell come to mind) – and although Habermann has not, like Ogdon and Madge, essayed a complete recording of the Brobdingnagian [see *Gulliver's Travels* – Ed.] *Opus Clavicembalisticum* – there is no doubt that he has recorded the largest number and widest spread of the Anglo-Parsi/Spanish-Sicilian master's work over a number of LPs and CDs released from 1980 onwards.

Though some of his earliest LP recordings were briefly reissued on CD by ASV, the British Music Society has now re-mastered and repackaged all Habermann's Sorabji recordings, up to and including those originally issued on an Elan CD in 1995, as a three-disc set. They have thus performed a signal service to the discography of a composer who – though English-born and English-resident, and in some of his foibles and manners as English as any fourteenth earl – usually indignantly denied any trace of 'British' nationality. There is some irony here, but only a little; and champions of British Music generally may draw some satisfaction that British Piano Literature sports the most exotic of all the blooms that sprang from the great stem of post-Scriabinesque piano writing: a composer by whose side such figures as Ornstein, Godowsky, or even Sorabji's adored Szymanowski, pale into comparative orthodoxy.

In some cases Habermann's performances have been superseded or at least equalled by a rival reading. One may prefer, for instance, Ogdon's reading of the opening of *Opus Clav*, Yonty Solomon's *Jardin parfumé*, Charles Hopkins's *Gulistan*, Donna Amato's *Fantaisie espagnole* (all on Altarus, the label which has most faithfully carried the Sorabji banner aloft). But in general he remains as reliable a guide as any through the fantastic thickets of Sorabji's pianistic imagination, and one can hardly withhold admiration for the sheer prestidigitation and cool-headed aplomb with which he negotiates the most impossible-looking pages. All except two of the works listed above were premiere recordings at the time of their release, and even now there have been no alternative versions of seven of them.

Habermann has always been careful in constructing his recorded programmes, and the original releases presented a judicious mix of Sorabji's output in various pianistic genres. These have now been recombined into three 'themed' discs – respectively 'Early Works', 'Nocturnes' and 'Assertive Works'. By ironing out some of the stylistic and dynamic contrasts, this makes it a less attractive option to listen to any of the three straight through.

'Early Works' starts logically with the *Two Pieces* of 1918-20: *In the Hothouse* and *Toccata* respectively, miniature adumbrations of Sorabji's later, vaster languorous nocturnes and spiky percussive manner. It also includes the *Fantaisie espagnole*, a work which despite its apparent over-elaboration has come to seem a classic example of the post-Impressionist 'Spanish Fantasy', as genuine and necessary a part of its repertoire as Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole*. (Sorabji made a piano transcription of the latter, included by Habermann on his recent BIS CD, which of course is not part of the present anthology.) Also 'Early' are the three *Pastiches* of 1922, which wittily take familiar themes from Rimsky, Bizet and Chopin for an opium-induced wander through the most humidly tropical groves of added-note chromaticism. (Habermann's own miniscule *A la manière de Sorabji* shows how it's done, meting out the same treatment to *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*.)

Gorgeous in their ornamental *fioriture*, opalescent textural sheen and mysterious analeptic calm, the three big Nocturnes, *Le jardin parfumé*, *Djâmî* and *Gulistan* take up one whole disc and illustrate an aspect of Sorabji's art of which he was indeed a master. It is mainly in contrast to their tranced ecstasy and profound stillness (despite the fantastic coruscations of their surface detail) that I suppose the third disc has been

titled 'Assertive Works'. These are certainly bold, clangorous, dissonant and rhythmically busy, even if the rate of harmonic change is not always that much faster than the nocturnes'. As well as the *Opus Clav* fragment it includes a couple of tiny miniatures, the splendid *Prelude, Interlude and Fugue* (as 'early' a work as most of those on disc one, but with a welcome reminder of Sorabji's powers as a strict-ish contrapuntist), and culminates in the two big fantasies inspired by MR James's ghost stories – as labyrinthine in their way as anything in disc two's rose-gardens, yet as raucous as Ives in *Hawthorne* mode. In short, most aspects of Sorabji as piano composer are here, except for the gigantic architectonic structures of which *Opus Clav* is only an early representative, and which of their nature have to be experienced over several discs. An essential set, therefore, to explore some of the most amazing pianistic composition of the 20th century.

Calum MacDonald