

Comparisons:

Fantaisie espagnole:

Amato (Altarus) AIR-CD-9022 (1992)

St Bertrand de Comminges:

Amato (Altarus) AIR-CD-9025 (1994)

Le jardin parfumé:

Solomon (Altarus) AIR-CD-9037 (1992)

Opus clavicembalisticum:

Madge (BIS) CD1062/4 (1983, three discs)

Ogdon (Altarus) AIR-CD-9075 (1986, four discs)

In 1980, Michael Habermann made the first commercial recordings of music by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji for the American MusicMasters label. Two more MusicMasters discs followed in 1982 and 1987, along with another Sorabji release (this time on Elan) in 1995. None of these CDs has been particularly easy to find in the UK, although ASV reissued selections from the second and third MusicMasters releases (CDAMM159). All the more reason to celebrate 'Sorabji – Legendary Works for Piano'. The three Habermann MusicMasters Sorabji discs, plus the Elan release, are regrouped here on three CDs and given a sonic facelift. All the original booklet notes are reprinted (penned by Habermann and the late, great Sorabji advocate Donald Garvelmann), along with recent additions by the pianist.

More than 15 years after his death at 96, Sorabji's reputation as the composer of the world's largest, most complex solo piano works have attracted a crop of young super-pianists who can more or less toss off this composer's gargantuan, impossibly difficult works in their sleep after sight-reading them a few times. Habermann, however, has always taken the trouble to put Sorabji's better foot forward, musically speaking, aiming to cover as wide a stylistic and genre range as possible, including variation sets, long nocturnes, miniatures, transcriptions, paraphrases and short contrapuntal flights. And technically, Habermann's Sorabji interpretations transcend mere accuracy. He approaches these scores with the patience and skill a meticulous watchmaker brings to an intricate and recalcitrant timepiece. Habermann's gaunt sonority and innate grasp of Sorabji's labyrinthine polyphony, for instance, enliven the busy textures so that their complex component parts sound distinct and logical.

It's interesting to compare Habermann's readings of certain pieces with subsequent recordings by other pianists. The introspective and impressionistic *Le jardin parfumé* may sound more 'atmospheric' and warmer in tone in Yonty Solomon's pliable hands, yet Habermann's more detailed attention to the composer's dynamic indications imparts a stronger sense of linear clarity (you might say that Habermann is George Szell to Solomon's Leopold Stokowski). For virtuosic flair and panache, Donna Amato generates more surface excitement throughout *St Bertrand de Comminges* and the *Fantaisie espagnole*, but, again, Habermann's carefully delineated

foreground and background textures seem to bypass the piano and go directly to the music's sultry core. He also proves to be cleaner and swifter than either Geoffrey Douglas Madge or John Ogdon in the opening section of *Opus clavicembalisticum*, and one wonders how the complete work might fare in Habermann's hands.

It would be rash to proclaim Habermann as the greatest Sorabji pianist alive, yet he has internalized this composer's daunting aesthetic to unprecedented and possibly unsurpassed degrees.

Jed Distle

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Sorabji

Reissue

Legendary Works for Piano.

In the Hothouse^a. Toccata^a. Fantaisie espagnole^a. Valse Fantaisie: Hommage à Johann Strauss^b. Pastiches^a – After Rimsky-Korsakov's Hindu Merchant's Song^c; After Bizet's Habanera^a; After Chopin's Valse, Op. 64 No. 1^c. Le jardin parfumé^c. Djâmi^c. Gulistan^d. Opus clavicembalisticum^a – Introito; Preludio-Corale. Prelude, Interlude and Fugue^b. Fragment for Harold Rutland^a. Fantasiatina sul nome illustre dell'egregio poeta Christopher Grieve ossia Hugh M'Diarmid MCMLXI^d. Quære reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora^d. St Bertrand de Comminges: He was laughing in the tower^b. Habermann A la manière de Sorabji: Au clair de la lune.

Michael Habermann (piano).

British Music Society BMS427-429CD

(medium price, three discs, 3 hours 18 minutes).

From MusicMasters ^a20015, ^b20018Y, ^c20019,

^dElan 82264. Website www.musicweb.uk.net/BMS.

Dates 1980-1995.