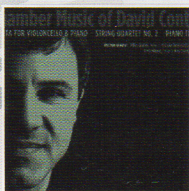


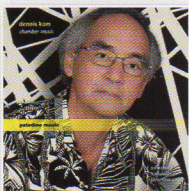
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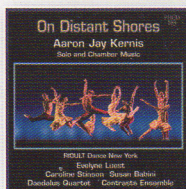
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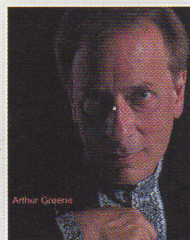
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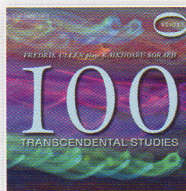
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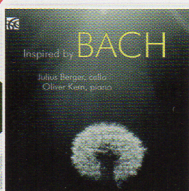
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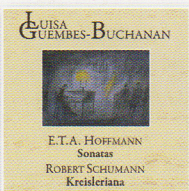
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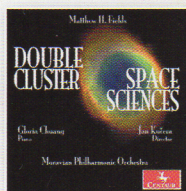
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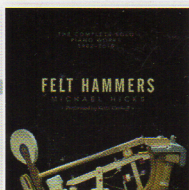
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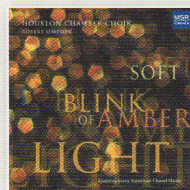
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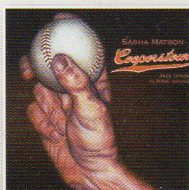
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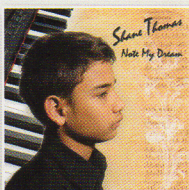
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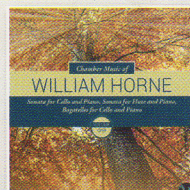
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# Michael Habermann PIANO

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[Max Harrison, Review of MM 20015 and MM 20019. Gramophone, 61 (Oct. 1983), 510.]

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## Music from the Borderland of Chaos: An Interview with Michael Habermann

BY MARC MEDWIN

He is enigmatic and brilliant, well-studied and somewhat reclusive; the stories he tells might exude a frayed idealism while somehow still brimming with vitality and a generous helping of humor. His literary voracity and its breadth border on the Herculean, an antidote to the whims and fraudulences of a world in whose externalities and superficialities he finds less and less of interest. He turned away from university teaching toward a life of observance, an endearingly disillusioned but, ironically, vital optimism imbuing every utterance. His criticisms of the world and of its often staggering apathy, and the way he expresses them, link pianist and teacher Michael Habermann with the composer he is most famous for championing, the British-Parsee Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892–1988.) As with James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and William Faulkner, Sorabji's ubiquitously complex music is tempered by moments of startling directness, a melody of infinite beauty or an exquisite sonority emerging from layers of the densest counterpoint or most complex superimposition of allusion. Habermann's narrative style follows suit.

As far as this writer is aware, Habermann was the first to record Sorabji's music, apart from some 1960s readings by the composer himself. Sorabji famously banned performance of his works



in the 1930s, only lifting the sanction some 40 years later and only in special cases. The majority of Habermann's Sorabji recordings, originally for the Musical Heritage Society and Elan, have just been reissued by Naxos in an excellent and thoroughly annotated three-disc set. The only omission is his 2003 disc for BIS, which remains available. Habermann does not tackle the gargantuan Sorabji, save for two sections of the infamous *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, which lasts four to five hours. He has chosen to focus on the composer's more compact works, no longer than half an hour. "I find these the most satisfying," admits Habermann. His voice often exudes certainty tinged with something approaching an apology.

Our interview, nearly canceled before it began, is a hodge-podge of email exchanges and phone calls, following no single thread for long but still, miraculously, managing to weave many threads all together. Habermann's energy is immense; those familiar with the lectures of Nicolas Slonimsky, or who have heard the Mozart specialist Robert Levin speak at any length, will be prepared to understand the inter-subject jumps, the sudden associations that bespeak a freedom unique to their genesis, which pepper his conversation. "I find interviews so painful," the pianist muses ironically. "I just imagine that I have anything worthwhile to say!" Once in a while, a laugh is squeezed out, often at a much lower dynamic level than the preceding and following discussion, something between apology and mischief informing the gesture. His emails range from one-liners to virtual parables, a non-linear journey through a life whose international beginnings, with multifarious music listening and study to match, would stand him in good stead for the dichotomy of Sorabji's atmospheric, improvisatory, but structured sound worlds.

In response to a question about Habermann's early listening and musical experiences, I received the following indicative message:

"During childhood: Schnabel playing Beethoven Sonatas; Alfred Kitchen playing Mozart's Fantasy in C minor; Alexander Jenner in Chopin's op. 25, op. 66, op. 53, etc. Beethoven – Toscanini Symphonies; Hindemith's *Nobilissima Visione*; Berlioz Overtures; some orchestral Wagner; Prokofiev; Caruso and other singers from that period. Those were my father's favorites.

"I was interested in the piano at an early age. Apparently, the upright was to be moved from the living room to the basement and got stuck going around a corner to the basement; it was taken apart piece by piece and used for firewood (that's what I was told). No instrument until years and two countries later.

"I still haven't figured out why the blood seemed to stop flowing to my hands at lessons. The weather in Mexico is temperate. Piano music was extremely interesting to me, and I responded to recordings and performances strictly emotionally. I was in love with music. Pieces I first learned on my own were the Brahms op. 116, Nos. 1 and 3 and the Berg Sonata. I remember one of my teachers announcing to those gathered at his house to hear me play the sonata: 'Michael is very talented, but he will play a piece that I am not sure is even music.' That's an incredible thing to say!"

Memories of a rarified nature emerge from him piecemeal, molten fragments of a questing life captured and frozen, uniquely ordered and then summarized, pitting the mundane against aphoristic insights that sweep the board of false generalization, leaving room for honest reflection.

"Dad was in the military, mom was attractive," quips Habermann of his Paris birth. A brief sojourn in New Jersey, where the piano was chopped up, would be followed by time in Canada, where B. Bumble and the Stingers' *Nut Rocker* would prove a formative influence. Unlike much of the guitar- and saxophone-driven rhythm and blues of the middle and late 1950s, the Tchaikovsky adaptation boasts a prominent and exciting piano foreground, an understandable influence on an eight-year-old with an as yet nascent musical future. "Oh, yes, I remember exactly where I was when I heard it—the room I was in, the radio, and my father telling me to turn it off. 'You're not going to listen to this type of music,' was all he said, but that got me really excited about the piano!"

The Habermann's 1962 move to Mexico brought a reduction in pop music in tandem with an explosion of musical diversity. "There was a station called Radio Universidad, which would play everything from Perotin to early 1960s minimalism; it was fabulous!" Twenty-four hours a day, Habermann could immerse himself not only in the canonic repertoire but in Stockhausen, Messiaen, Dutilleux, and other pillars of more recent music. His father, sensing a burgeoning interest, decided

that Habermann could have piano lessons, and it was during this time that the Berg Sonata incident occurred, leaving a formative impression of new music's reception. In tandem, Habermann began to frequent Mexico City's many bookstores and to explore the store associated with the music publisher Ricordi, during which time he began to gain visual familiarity with an equally wide variety of music. It was during one of these bookstore visits that a seed was planted. The encounter is detailed in Habermann's liner notes, written in 2003 and included in this new Naxos reissue, but I probed for further insight. "I found this very odd-looking score in an English bookstore, obviously misplaced; somebody had put it in the photography section. I think it must have cost around a dollar, but I didn't buy it. My sight-reading wasn't what it is today, so I couldn't make a whole lot of sense out of it, but something intrigued me. I went back a few days later, and as it was still there, I decided to take the plunge." The piece was Sorabji's *Fantaisie Espagnole*.

Over the next several years, Habermann became increasingly serious about studying the piano from an academic perspective. Some education in Mexico had proved less than satisfactory, and by 1974 he made the decision to go back to school, which he did at Nassau Community College. Sorabji was becoming a staple of Habermann's repertoire. A slight setback ensued. "I set up an audition for Peabody, but I never showed up! Maybe it was a self-confidence issue, nerves, some combination of both, I don't know, but I missed it." He was to get a second chance in 1977, when he played an all-Sorabji concert in Michigan at a meeting of the Liszt Society, which was also nationally broadcast. The audience reaction was instantaneous and decisive. "I'm still surprised that there was such a turnout for Sorabji's music, really an unknown composer at that time," Habermann remembers with what I understand to be characteristic humility. "Yes, the audience did react in a very positive way." There followed immediate offers from record labels and an inquiry from Fernando Lares, then the Liszt Society president and member of the Peabody faculty. "He asked me if I was still interested in attending Peabody. Of course I was, and that's where I completed my piano performance doctorate in 1985."

An idea of what the audience heard that 1977 evening, and much more, can be gleaned from listening to the Naxos reissue, whose recordings span the years between 1979 and 1993. Habermann's notes contextualize Sorabji's work along these lines:

"His *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (1930) was listed for years in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the world's longest non-repetitive piano work. Many of his compositions are intended to be the sole work on a program. Such a work is the *Djami* Symphony (1942–51), which spans nearly a thousand pages and employs performing forces of hundreds. His longtime and unique ban imposed upon public performance of his works, too, will not be forgotten. Despite enthusiastic praise from well-known musicians such as Ferruccio Busoni, Alfred Cortot, Frederick Delius, Karol Szymanowski, and Sir Donald Francis Tovey, his creative work remained largely unknown until the late 1970s, also due to the fact that only his earliest compositions were published. But these are only external characteristics, secondary to the music. Most important is the fact that his compositions stand out in the world of music for their unique and satisfying beauty."

In an introduction to the notes, the late Donald Garvelmann, long-time Sorabji enthusiast and, at one time, Habermann's agent, outlines the almost ineluctable relationship shared by Habermann and Sorabji, stating that the composer had found his ideal interpreter. Basically reclusive by the time he heard Habermann play and long annoyed by mediocre performances of his more-than-challenging music, the opinionated and often recalcitrant composer was obviously impressed by Habermann's rigorously imaginative pianism. In a fascinating bit of reportage, Garvelmann recalls Habermann spending a week on a single measure, making sure that all elements were in place. This kind of dedication brings to mind clarinetist Eric Dolphy playing one note for days, answering his father's rather impatient queries: "That thing has other notes on it, doesn't it?" with: "I haven't got this one right yet."

Then, there is the music itself. "It lives in the borderland of chaos," laughs Habermann. To elucidate Sorabji's compositional approach to someone who has never experienced it is akin to describing the myriad and constantly changing sensations of swimming to anyone who has never been in the water. How to catalog, let alone render sensible, a substance that is always the same yet always changing, whose temperature, density, intensity, and sonic properties exist in a constant state of measurable but also subjective flux? Even tempo becomes subjective. Certain pieces are faster than oth-



ers, but, as a sense of meter dissipates, at least to the listener, tempo takes on a certain fluidity. “There’s something impulsive about his work,” Habermann now emphasizes, and his voice rises as the long-fostered fascination and excitement pervade it. “It alludes to various compositional systems but doesn’t conform to any of them. I think that ambiguity of structure and form was what initially attracted me to his compositions, but it was more than that! There are all those sharps and flats that don’t resolve in the way they should, structural elements don’t follow each other or cohere as they should, and these long pieces shouldn’t work, but quite often, they do!” Habermann and I begin to explore the question of system in Sorabji’s music. He has spent considerable time and effort analyzing it, contributing a chapter to Paul Rapoport’s compendium *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* (Ashgate, reprinted 1994). “You know that phrase that Messiaen uses: ‘The charm of impossibility,’” he enthuses. “That is not the world Sorabji inhabits. In order to have an impossibility, the possible needs to be established; Sorabji’s music does not take possible and impossible into consideration!”

This is the point, the unifying factor at the heart of Sorabji’s aesthetic. Two staves are simply not enough; he needs three or more, especially as his music becomes more complex, to contain the palimpsests of ideas pouring forth from his pen. Habermann calls it “the Sorabji bottleneck.” He is kind enough to have shared a BBC program with me in which Sorabji discusses one of his favorite composers, the similarly *sui generis* Nikolai Medtner (1880–1951). Sorabji’s words trip over each other, sentences are left hanging, other languages are employed as English fails his constantly questing monkey-mind, to invoke the Buddhist adage.

Habermann has experienced this firsthand. A letter from Sorabji, again kindly shared, sets the date as August 6, 1980. “What you hear in that broadcast is what I heard,” he reminisces. “It wasn’t a castle, as might be suggested by the name of where he lived [the village of Corfe Castle]. He talked about the decline in the production of good paper, and we had tea, cake and wine. I remember thinking that he would be taller; you know who he reminded me of? Nicolas Slonimsky! I met him once....”

Habermann is off, speaking enthusiastically about Slonimsky, and there it is. Sorabji, Slonimsky, Habermann himself, all possess that fire-in-the-belly approach to living that imbues Sorabji’s music. Whether the layered chords of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, the floating harmonies of the nocturne *Gulistan (The Rose Garden)* or the serio-comic and parodic Chopin transcriptions, voluptuous and sometimes excessive ideas abound, scattering tempo, form, and tonality in their ever-morphing wake. An interpreter better equipped than Habermann, even so many years after the bulk of these performances was taped, is difficult to imagine. If melody is paramount to a work’s vision, he will foreground it, but never at the expense of whatever rhythmic and harmonic multiplicities are in play. His sense of the relationship between dynamics and color, and all the requisite shading, is second to none.

I ask Habermann that general and predictable question of Sorabji’s relevance in 2015. “I don’t know,” he says, almost curtly, after a brief pause. “I’m not sure how music like that stays relevant in a world where attention spans are getting shorter and investigation is getting more and more superficial. That’s one of the reasons I got out of university teaching and focused more on composition and transcription. People don’t want to learn anything anymore, especially at the university level; not only do they feel like they don’t have to know anything, they don’t even feel the need to apologize for their ignorance!” Student stories follow, along with anecdotes about technically perfect but emotionally arid competition interpretations. “We used to read through scores!” Habermann is indignant. “I’d bring in piles of them; there was a level of inquiry years ago that just isn’t there anymore.”

His work as teacher and composer—he taught at Peabody Conservatory from the middle 1980s until 2010—has been overshadowed by his Sorabji association. Experiences with students seem to have birthed the compositions and transcriptions. Again, from an email:

“I had a student who, after watching some videos on YouTube of amateur pianists massacring the first movement of Vivaldi’s ‘Winter’ concerto from *The Four Seasons*, decided she wanted to play it too. The arrangements were so awful that I felt impelled to make a few alterations to the best one of the lot. After this student migrated to another instrument, I still had some curiosity in this conversion process. Could this first movement be turned into a piano piece? I started from scratch, and ideas came. The movement done to my satisfaction, I thought my work was over. It would be impossible to transform the rest of the music into idiomatic piano music. But suddenly, one evening,

the whole second movement seemed to be dictated. Again, I thought my job was done. But 2/3 done? Not the whole work? How could that third movement be translated? But one evening it happened again! I started writing it down frantically. Now the work is complete.”

It is a *tour de force*, channeling Vivaldi through a late Romantic lens, with Rachmaninoff and Busoni providing the harmonic background. Vivid directions to the performer set the wintry scene, replete with gusts of wind and stamping feet. His Scarlatti homage is even more adventurous, transforming a C-Major harpsichord sonata into a wild and thorny landscape of accidentals that, somehow, end up safely in the home key, at least for a while, and the circuitous path by which it gets there would constitute a study in itself. These are virtuosic works, sometimes even using more than two staves to make their point, but they are rife with feeling.

My inevitable question about current and future activities is met with something approaching a sneer. “What am I doing now?” The laugh ensues, a bit louder this time. What emerges is a picture of a man in semi-seclusion, like Charles-Valentin Alkan before him, but with eyes and ears still turned toward the outside. “I want to play, I really do, but I guess you could say I’ve been pursuing other avenues of research. I really enjoy the private teaching; I find that I’m much more relaxed now, and I’m doing a lot of reading that I always wanted to do. You remember that I told you I approached music from a purely emotional standpoint? I’m trying to augment the approach by acquiring the historical knowledge I never had.” He surrounds himself with biographies and music histories, mainly but not exclusively of the 20th century, and when asked, as often as not evaluating the authors’ work in irreverent bursts. “Don’t read that—absolute garbage!” However, as might be expected, Habermann’s relationship with Sorabji’s work remains unpredictable. As I put the finishing touches on this piece, he informs me that he’s begun work on his sixth Sorabji disc, the first in some 12 years. “We’ll see, but somehow, at this point, it just feels right.” I hope it happens, as no one can bring form and order to the structured chaos that is Sorabji’s music quite like Habermann.

**SORABJI 2 Piano Pieces. *Fantasie Espagnole. Hommage à Johann Strauss. Pastiche: Hindu Merchant Song from Rimsky-Korsakov’s Sadko. Pastiche: Habanera from Bizet’s Carmen. Pastiche: Chopin’s Valse*, op. 64/1. *Le jardin parfumé. Djâmi. Gulistân. Opus Clavicembalisticum: Introito and Preludio-Corale. Prelude, Interlude and Fugue. Fragment for Harold Rutland. Fantasietina sul nome illustre dell’egregio poeta Christopher Grieve. Quære reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora. St. Bernard de Comminges: “He was laughing in the tower.” HABERMANN A la manière de Sorabji: Au clair de la lune* • Michael Habermann (pn) • NAXOS 8.571363–65 (3 CDs: 197:54)**

The music of British composer Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji will probably always be relegated to relative obscurity. Not too long ago, even while he was still alive (he died in 1988 at the age of 96), live performances of his music were almost unheard of, and only a handful of recordings existed. The chief reason for this low profile was the widely accepted truism that his music, consisting largely of works for solo piano, was so complex and unorthodox that it was essentially unplayable. It didn’t help that Sorabji himself was reclusive, and for a period banned public performances of his work.

Naturally, this kind of mystique and challenge excited a certain sort of super pianist, particularly those with an interest in the harmonic language of the *fin de siècle* last gasp Romantics, including Godowsky, Busoni, Scriabin, Alkan, and others, composers for whom Sorabji is a natural kinsman. One of the first to pick up the gauntlet was fellow Briton John Ogdon, whose four-hour performance of *Opus Clavicembalisticum* in 1988 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall is the stuff of legend. Geoffrey Douglas Madge is another pianist well regarded by Sorabji fans, and Marc-André Hamelin, though not well represented by recordings, is also a strong advocate.

Michael Habermann happened upon a Sorabji score in a Mexico City bookstore in 1967, and soon became obsessed with learning the “unplayable” music. He eventually established a long-distance relationship with the composer, who approved of the recordings Habermann sent him, and finally met the elderly composer in person in 1980. The recordings on this three-disc set date back to 1979, and none are more recent than 1995. Many are live recordings, and almost all of the performances are re-releases of two previous editions on the Elan and MusicMasters labels. Having this material in one set, which covers a broad range of Sorabji’s career, is a tremendous gift to both neo-



phytes and Sorabji devotees.

Each of the three discs groups the music into specific categories. The first CD is for “Early Works,” the second consists of three nocturnes, and the third includes “Assertive Works.” I’m not going to give a piece by piece break-down of the program; there is a lot of music here. Much of the early music, from the early 1920s, consists of highly chromatic homages to familiar tunes by Chopin, Strauss, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Bizet, most likely reflecting the influence of Godowsky, who also produced opulent homages to favorite composers. The “assertive” music includes the style that Sorabji is most renowned for, the overwhelming waves of notes that relentlessly crash about one’s sensibilities. There are a number of ways to experience this music; one can marvel at the incredible detail, overflowing with richly colorful embellishment, or simply let the whole thing wash over you, allowing no other distractions. Or, and this is a perfectly legitimate choice, run away in horror.

The CD devoted to the nocturnes is my favorite, and worth the price of the whole set. This is the Sorabji that Hamelin calls “a magic carpet ride.” The essential language is the same as the assertive music, but everything is served up at a lower temperature. This is extraordinarily lush music, *Gulistān* (The Rose Garden) in particular being as beautiful as any new work I can recall hearing, although it was written in 1940. Habermann’s 1993 Washington, D.C. performance, heard here, was the world premiere.

I cannot judge the accuracy or fidelity to the composer’s intentions of this playing. It sounds marvelous to me—miraculous, really. We know that Habermann had the approval of Sorabji himself, and my colleague Adrian Corleoni, to whose excellent commentaries on Sorabji’s music I am indebted, has praised the previous releases. Anyone with a whisper of interest in the music of Godowsky, Busoni, and the late music of Scriabin probably already knows about Sorabji; this set will be self-recommending. But it is also a superb introduction to anyone else with a decent sense of imagination, and the desire to experience artistic revelation. **Peter Burwasser**

\* \* \*

French-born pianist Habermann, who now resides in the U.S., is multi-lingual as well as musically multi-cultural. He is described in the liner notes to this three-CD set by the late Donald Garvelmann (who died in 2001) as Sorabji’s “ideal interpreter ... Habermann faithfully honors details of Sorabji’s scores to a ‘T,’ doesn’t simplify any passages for digital convenience and amazes by always performing entirely from memory....he once practiced a single measure of one of the pieces for a solid week until all the elements of that measure were perfectly in place.”

Thus, after having listened to and enjoyed Fredrik Ullén’s playing of the *Transcendental Studies* (see my review elsewhere in this issue), I was curious to hear this paragon of Sorabji interpreters. It should be noted that all the pieces on this set are reissues of recordings made between 1979 and 1994, most of them while the composer was still alive, and originally issued by MusicMasters and Élan. It took me some digging online, however, to discover that this is a duplication of the three-CD set *Sorabji: Legendary Works for Piano* issued in 2003 on British Music Society BMS427-429CD. A few of them are live performances; such as the *Valse Fantaisie* from November 19, 1984, despite the fact that the booklet does not specifically say so.

Typically of French-trained pianists, Habermann has a warm, almost relaxed approach to pianism, full of colors and shades, an aesthetic focused on details of sound. Thus one is perhaps not as aware of the extraordinarily difficulty of Sorabji’s music when listening to Habermann as one is, for instance, when listening to John Ogdon’s recording of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, as he tends to make those busy passages sound like water splashing off to the side of a massive waterfall. Everything flows and falls into place with astonishing ease. One might question whether or not Sorabji’s music is meant to be heard “with astonishing ease,” but apparently Garvelmann introduced the pianist to the composer, who heard him play, and thus gave permission (not easily granted) for him to perform and record his works. And certainly, in a piece such as the *Toccata* from the early Two Piano Pieces, Habermann digs into the rhythms in such a manner as to bring the music to vivid life. He also does a beautiful job on the 1919 *Fantaisie Espagnole*, a work clearly based on the music of Albéniz.

The *Valse Fantaisie: Hommage à Johann Strauss* (1925) sounds about as much like Johann

Strauss as *Le sacre du printemps* sounds like Rimsky-Korsakov. Only the use of triple meter makes you conscious that you are hearing a waltz at all; otherwise, the ear hears the music as if it were broken up into shards and tossed helter-skelter into the air, hoping that the mind of some listeners will be able to coalesce it into a recognizable waltz form. Around the seven-minute mark, one hears a snippet or two that resembles *On the Beautiful Blue Danube*, and there are equally brief or briefer snippets of Strauss elsewhere, but by and large this is musical deconstruction on a large scale, something like Ravel's *La valse* on acid. And speaking of Rimsky-Korsakov, Sorabji rewrites his famous "Song of India" (technically, the "Song of the Indian Guest") from *Sadko* with extraordinary reharmonization and revoicing in such a way that it sounds as if a three-handed pianist were performing it: one two-handed pianist to play the melody and the accompanying chords, and a third hand playing an entirely different melody slightly out of rhythmic and tonal kilter to the original. Ironically, for a pianist who clearly expressed his disapproval of jazz (which he called something like "music for the besotment of the masses"), his reworking of the *Carmen* "Habanera" bears a close resemblance to the kind of work Martial Solal, Clare Fischer, or Bill Evans would have done with it. (Considering the fearsome digital complexity of Sorabji's score, one could more easily imagine this showing up on one of Evans's *Conversations With Myself* albums.) The Sorabji-Chopin "Minute" Waltz takes more than four minutes but also pushes Chopin "out on a limb" into the kind of explorative territory that Lennie Tristano delighted in. This is great stuff! The first CD ends with the one and only composition by Habermann himself on this album, *À la maniere de Sorabji*, "*Au clair de la lune*." It's certainly like Sorabji, as the music bears even less of a resemblance to the tune of that name than Sorabji's pastiches do to those other tunes. This, too, ends with applause, and thus is a live performance.

*Le jardin parfume* is Sorabji's take on the exotica of his time. It has a certain Eastern scent to it, all right, but is busier technically than most music of this type. In the liner notes, Habermann makes it clear that although the technical challenges of Sorabji's music are fascinating, he would not have wasted five minutes on it if the music were not also interesting and communicative. This is a perfect example. *Djâmi*, his 1928 "nocturne for piano," is a very heady piece, paying homage to Persian poet Nûru'd-Din Abdu'r-Ramân Jâmî and described by Robert J. Gula as eclipsing even the *Opus Clavicembalisticum*: "*Djâmi* moves my soul as few other works for piano ever have." It is at once evocative of the East and rigorously logical in construction and development. To a certain degree, it may have been his farewell to such musical expressions for the time being, as his next great work was the *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, which focuses more on rigorous construction and less on evocative moods. Habermann plays *Djâmi* here with a bit of both moods, which suits it extremely well. Although Habermann refers occasionally to Sorabji's enthusiastic responses to his performances of his works, he doesn't say whether or not the composer heard the actual studio recordings or just live performances that Habermann sent him on tape. Either way, however, it is clear that Sorabji enjoyed his playing.

The nearly 30-minute *Gulistan*, a nocturne for piano, is based on *The Rose Garden* by the Sufi poet Sa'dî. Habermann describes it as "one of the most sumptuous and imposing of the nocturnes ... [creating] a magical world hitherto unexplored by any of his predecessors," a "unique masterwork, even to this day." It also attracts attention as one of the very few of his works that we have Sorabji himself playing, privately recorded at his home in 1965. Habermann, hearing it, was startled by his "enormous deviations from the score in every respect (pitch, rhythm, dynamics, articulation)" while still admiring its "remarkable tonal beauty." When he wrote to Sorabji questioning this, the composer wrote back, "I don't doubt it for ONE MOMENT! I am not ... repeat NOT a pianist and make no pretensions to being one....Such liberties as I take ... are dictated by the condition of my fingers at any particular time when I was recording; then I modify it AS SUITS ME. That's all there is to it. The music as printed embodies my INTENTIONS."

This is a very important letter and explains why no modern performer should seek to perform *any* music, regardless of era or style, in a manner that recreates the conditions of the initial performance or, for that matter, any particular performance given by the composer. Should you need further proof of this statement, just read some of Mozart's letters to his father (or some of Beethoven's letters) about the abysmal orchestras (such as they were ... most times he complained about their undernourished size and inability to play what he had written) he was stuck with when playing his



piano concertos in public. Composers do not always have the technical skills to reproduce what they write; or the instruments are defective, forcing them to work around their own music; or the accompanying forces are too small, or technically insecure, or unable to play the composer's style. Yet we keep forcing people to listen to solo instruments so underpowered and unable to express what is on the page that we are baffled by them, whiny, "white"-sounding, uninflected string and wind playing, equally whiny, "white"-sounding and uninflected choral and solo singing, including the use of countertenors where none were ever intended, as a means of grossly distorting the *music*, which as *written* embodies the composer's intentions, in the name of some bizarre cult.

As for the music of *Gulistan*, I felt it was too busy for its stated intention. One does not feel as if one is in a rose garden while hearing it, but rather in a rainstorm that never stops. The constant motion, shower of notes, and largely *mezzo-forte* and *forte* dynamics run counter to Sorabji's stated mood. Only between the 22- and 25-minute mark does one get the feeling of being in a rose garden. Moreover, I didn't find the music is very well developed; on the contrary, it just keeps "running off at the mouth," so to speak, whereas in the same vein *Djâmi* succeeds beautifully. It is simply a matter of degree and compositional execution. My impression is that *Gulistan* is the closest thing Sorabji wrote to musical wallpaper. This, too, is a live performance.

Habermann plays the "Introito" and "Preludio-Corale" to *Opus Clavicembalisticum* as well as I've ever heard it done, but then again, I only have two recordings to go by, the Ogdon and Geoffrey Douglas Madge. I wonder if he ever recorded this massive work complete or, if not, why not? We could certainly use his recording as a reference. The *Prelude, Interlude and Fugue*, a relatively early work from 1920–22, is a wonderful piece: busy, but busy in such a way that the opening Prelude creates a sort of *perpetuum mobile* of whirling sounds that coalesce into a stunning whole, while the Interlude provides a calm center that nonetheless attracts little swarms of notes that sound like fireflies in the night. The concluding Fugue has a feeling not unlike some of the composer's *Transcendental Studies* of the 1940s, a quirkiness that almost makes you feel that the music is running backwards (this is another live recording). The two brief pieces *Fragment for Harold Rutland* and *Fantasiottina sul nome illustre dell'egregio poeta Christopher Grieve* (a title that is almost longer than the piece itself) are still rather dense in texture and ideas. I was particularly taken by the latter, set to a quirky, galumphing beat at once elusive and attractive, which quickly becomes broken up as the music suddenly grows denser and thicker.

This Sorabji collection ends with two long pieces, the first of which, *Quære reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora* (Seek the rest of this matter among the things that are more secret) is one of Sorabji's most fascinating structures, unusually (for him) comprised of terse, almost objective-sounding blocks of sound; jagged, Stravinsky-ish rhythms; and at certain moments an ominous, almost stomping beat in the left hand. It is almost a cry of anguish. On the other hand, *St. Bertrand de Comminges: He was laughing in the tower* is "a musical depiction of M. R. James' ghost story, *Canon Alberic's Scrap-book*." For further description, I refer you to the liner notes. Such a piece is always open to question since it is allied to a specific literary work and the story it tells, just as politically motivated murals are tied to the promotion of an ideal. The message thus loses its universality; I, for one, have never read any of James's ghost stories nor intend to do so. Taken on its own merits and divorced from the imagery it seeks to establish, the score is very interesting, unusually (for Sorabji) episodic in mood, almost like a one-movement suite (at about the 10-minute mark we hear a hymn-like modal episode that, despite its quietude, amplifies the feeling of unease). Habermann's performance is wonderfully detailed and animated. This, too, is a live performance.

This set is enthusiastically recommended. As a footnote, I'd also like to enthusiastically encourage you to explore Marc-André Roberge's long-awaited biography of the composer, *Opus Sorabjianum: The Life and Works of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji*. It is available online for completely free downloading so that you can read it, print it out, or do whatever you wish with it. **Lynn René Bayley**

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It was nearly 35 years ago that Michael Habermann made the first commercial recording of Sorabji's music. The composer himself had given some scattered concerts in the 1920s and 1930s;

piano maven Donald Garvelmann produced a radio show in 1970; and a few tapes circulated among cognoscenti. But for the most part, those of us who had heard of Sorabji at all knew only the composer's self-nourished legend. Everything about him was hyperbolic. We "knew" that as a composer, his music was dense, hermetic, technically at the border of the unplayable (his music rarely fits on two staves), and often stretching the listener's patience beyond endurance. (His fame rested in part on the *Guinness Book of World Records*—inaccurately—having chosen *Opus Clavicembalisticum* as the world's longest non-repetitive work for solo piano, just as Brian's fame was bolstered similarly by Guinness's celebration of the scope of the "Gothic" Symphony). We also "knew" that as a writer, his persona was irascible, opinionated, dogmatic: "Elgar is a composer of no more than a limitedly local significance," he pronounced in *Gramophone* in 1945—and that was one of his less vitriolic remarks. Stendhal dedicated *Le rouge et le noir* "to the happy few"; Sorabji upped the ante by dedicating *Opus Clavicembalisticum* in part to "the everlasting glory of those few MEN blessed and sanctified in the curses of the MANY whose praise is eternal damnation." Vladimir Nabokov was, by comparison, a model of modesty.

In one stroke, Habermann—with confidence, interpretive penetration, and staggering virtuosity—allowed us to see beyond (or through) that legend. It was, of course, followed by a number of other Sorabji recordings, including competing readings of *Opus Clavicembalisticum* by Geoffrey Madge and John Ogden, and an ongoing project by Fredrik Ullén to record the 100 *Transcendental Studies*; but Habermann's pioneering disc remains a touchstone. It was reissued several times and, about a decade ago, the British Music Society bundled it together on a three-disc compendium with Habermann's two follow-ups for Musical Heritage/Musicmasters and his Elan recital (minus the alternative recording of *Djâmi*). It's that BMS set that shows up, again, in this new re-issue from Naxos.

Rehearing these performances, the most recent of which is now 20 years old, may well bring back the shocking illumination of that initial discovery. At the same time, the set may provide a clue about why—even with the advocacy of some of the most ferociously talented pianists of the age—Sorabji's music has remained arcane. On the positive side, it's hard not to be captivated, even hypnotized, by the sheer luxury of the three nocturnes on the second disc: *Le jardin parfumé*, *Djâmi*, and *Gulistân*, all inspired by Medieval literature of the Middle East, and all offering a timbrally and texturally rich tapestry next to which even Godowsky sounds threadbare. It's hard, too, not to be stunned by what Adrian Corleone (in *Fanfare* 19:2) called the "angular, dramatic, electrically crackling gestures" of *Quaere reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora*. (Its title might lead you to expect something of a religious bent, but it was in fact inspired, as was *St. Bertrand de Comminges: "He was laughing in the tower,"* by an M. R. James ghost story.) Anyone with an interest in the art of fugue will want to hear the brilliantly intricate final panel in the *Prelude, Interlude and Fugue*. And no lover of musical transformation could fail to be bowled over by his extravagant homages to (or caricatures of?) Chopin, Johann Strauss II, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Bizet (or rather, to add another turn to the screw, Bizet's adaption of music originally by Sebastian de Yradier), homages next to which the transcriptions of Liszt seem like child's play. From beginning to end, this is a collection that testifies to a musical mind equally at home in the sensual and the intellectual, in the dramatic and the burlesque.

At the same time, these short works (at least, short in the context of Sorabji's canon—*Gulistân* runs nearly half an hour here) point to the characteristics that still make Sorabji a difficult figure. To simplify: If there is a musical parallel to the literary distinction between narrative (which centers on the representation of an action) and lyric (the representation of a condition such as a mood or an emotional situation), Sorabji usually falls (his fugues and pastiches aside) on the lyrical side. That's most obviously true in the languorous nocturnes—but even the more dramatic works here ostentatiously avoid the traditional Western rhetoric (especially the rhetoric of the Romantic and post-Romantic periods) that marks out beginning, middle, and end or that sets up strong patterns of expectation and resolution. Harmonies are so consistently chromatic that there's rarely a sense of harmonic motion; rhythms are so intricate and fluid (don't count on time signatures and bar lines to guide you), and so many rhythmic patterns are superimposed, that any sense of pulse dissolves; and while recognizable gestures flicker and transform themselves through his music like ghosts, he steadfastly rejects "tunes which everybody can get hold of" (a phrase that became a token in a debate with H. A. Scott in *The*



*Musical Times*). It's easy to sit and soak up the "experience"—but for all its hyperactivity, it remains a paradoxically static aesthetic. In a *Gramophone* review from July 1993, David Fanning coined the phrase "sommabulistically surefooted"—and once you read that phrase, it's hard to forget it. For all Sorabji's admiration of Busoni ("a philosophical mind of the highest order, the like and equal of which happens at most half a dozen times in one millennium—a mind of the caliber of da Vinci's or Goethe's"), there's little of Busoni's lucidity here; for all his admiration of Medtner, there's little of Medtner's formal acuity; for all his admiration of Scriabin, there's none of late Scriabin's concentration. (Scriabin's projected *Mysterium* is another matter—but it's significant, and perhaps fortunate, he never actually wrote it; see 23:5 for a discussion of Nemtin's ill-considered realization.)

Then, too, Sorabji's scores are something of a mess, and sometimes internally contradictory (the opening of *Jardin parfumé* gives a peremptory order that the dynamics should never rise above *pianissimo*—but although dynamic markings are rare, several call for louder playing). Several contemporary pianists (including Marc-André Hamelin and Charles Hopkins) have had to devote what must be untold hours making new editions. To add to the problems, while Sorabji fashioned himself a recluse and an outsider, there's something disturbingly self-aggrandizing about his work. He justified many of his artistic choices by pointing to non-Western practices—and that's certainly fair, at least to a certain extent. Still, Sorabji was writing within a Western context, in Western notation, for the quintessential instrumental protagonist of Western Romanticism; and despite his disdain for the musical ignorance of "Tom, Dick, and Harry," his audience is ultimately Western as well. In that context, his refusal to prune his music, both vertically and horizontally, seems (dare one say it?) to border on the narcissistic. Once he gets you in his spell, he insists on protracted devotion.

Still, that spell is potent—and doubly so in the hands of Habermann, whose performances hold up well, even superbly. The *joie de battre* of the early Toccata, the huge waves of post-Impressionistic sound of the sultry *Fantaisie espagnole*, the sumptuousness of the melodic tendrils that eventually overpower the *Habanera*, the bolts of lightning in *St. Bertrand*, the quirks of the fugue in *Prelude, Interlude and Fugue* (which might, for a brief moment, make you think you're getting one of Shostakovich's fugues), the suggestive quiet of *Djâmi*—everything emerges with utter conviction. The sound, from a variety of locales, holds up well too. Whether you're a fan of the composer who somehow missed these recordings in their earlier incarnations or a newcomer wondering what the fuss is about, this set belongs in your collection. **Peter J. Rabinowitz**

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I have come across this three-disc set before, in its earlier 2003 incarnation on the British Music Society label (BMS427-429CD). The recordings predate that, even: Naxos cites MusicMasters and Elan as the original issuers. The set's special qualities, in terms of repertoire, performance and documentation (in the latter case, Naxos reprints the original) remain unchanged. But, how wonderful it is to have an excuse to experience this magnificent, heady music again.

In fact, even prior to the BMS issue, Habermann's Sorabji had been familiar to me, thanks to a recording on BIS of transcriptions (BIS 1306), where Sorabji out-Ravels Ravel in his 1945 transcription of the *Rapsodie espagnole*, for example. There is a similar instance here, where, in Sorabji's *Fantaisie espagnole* (1919), he out-Albéniz-es Albéniz.

Sorabji is not one for brevity, nor wall-flower understatedness. Excess is his watchword. One needs only think of *Opus Clavicembalisticum*. Talking of which, that brings up maybe this set's one miscalculation. Why include a 13-minute excerpt (the "Introito and Preludio-Corale") from that *magnum opus* when there is so much more Sorabji to present? That's pretty much the only gripe here, and in reality it is an unwarranted one. At the time of the recording of that excerpt (1979), people had to take what they could get, and a complete recording must have seemed an impossibility. We had to wait for John Ogden to turn his spectacles in Sorabji's direction (a recording exists on the Altarus label). The set here is neatly divided into three segments: Early Works; Nocturnes; Assertive Works. The last description just sounds made up, but is adequate to describe what goes on in disc three.

But to the disc of Early Works first, and what a mix it is. The extreme end to the *Fantaisie espagnole*, when dissonance is piled on dissonance in a sort of post-Lisztian riot, is extraordinary. But

then, extraordinary is the default setting for Sorabji. The delicacy of the opening to the “Valse fantaisie” *Hommage à Johann Strauss* is infectious. Habermann plays this a sort of “Liszt Fantaisie plus,” and quite rightly so. The pastiches are shorter, but no less effective. The heady fumes of the *Hindu Merchant’s Song* do rather make one wonder what said merchant smoked in his spare time (amusingly, Habermann suggests something similar about Carmen’s tobacco); the Bizet *Carmen* pastiche takes all such efforts around this piece before them and smashes them into a million shards in its harmonic genius (listen to those sinuous, snaky lines, those Messiaen-like chords, the multiplicity of layers...). Chopin’s “Minute” Waltz undergoes a heavenly transformation which quickly transmogrifies into something rather more grotesque.

Habermann’s own *A la manière de Sorabji*: “Au clair de lune” is a mere two minutes duration but actually resulted in a piece back from Sorabji to Habermann (“*The Golden Cockerel*” by Rimsky-Korsakov: *Frivolous Variations with an Anarchic, Heretical, and Perverse Fugue*; I for one want to hear the “perverse fugue”).

The second disc features but three works. In its MusicMasters incarnation, Habermann’s account of *Le Jardin parfumé* made Adrian Corleoni’s and Paul Rapoport’s Wants List in 1983. And so it should. This is a “poem for piano,” with allusions to the erotic book by the 15th-century Sheik Nefzawi. Marked to be never louder than *pianissimo* from beginning to end, it is, as Habermann rightly points out, predictive of Messiaen in its harmonies. No surprise that Habermann lavishes on it everything he has, while maintaining the real sense that this is tightly organized music: This piece was the subject of his 1985 doctoral dissertation. Habermann also gave the first U.S. performance of this piece (Richmond, Virginia in 1980). Rather more quizzical, *Djâmi*, a 22-minute nocturne that pays homage to Persian mysticism, seems to speak of Scriabin and Ravel, but passed through a portal to some Otherworld. Heady stuff, even perhaps for Sorabji. Finally for this disc, *Gulistân*, referring to the verse/prose *The Rose Garden* of the Persian poet Sa’dî (1213–1291; the text in English translation of the full poem is at [classics.mit.edu/Sadi/gulistan.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Sadi/gulistan.html)). Perhaps quoting the indicator gives an idea of what is in store: *Languido e dolcissimi, il tutto in un ambiente di alore tropicale e profumato, piuttosto nostalgico* (Languid and gentle, all enveloped in an atmosphere of tropical warmth and perfume, somewhat nostalgic). Habermann is amazing, presenting a lesson in controlled ecstasy.

The final disc is marked as “Assertive Works”—and how! The first 13:18 of *Opus Clavicembalisticum* makes one yearn for the balancing several hours; one feels lucky to hear the *Prelude, Interlude and Fugue*, though, recorded in 1984 and premiered only two years earlier by Habermann. The scales of the Prelude are swathed in mystery, and it by now comes as no shock to learn that the Interlude is a nocturne. Serene yet aching at the same time, and perhaps holding back on the perfume a little in deference to the Prelude and Fugue that surround it, leads to a single-subject fugue that grows into typically Sorabjian largesse.

The *Fragment for Harold Rutland* and the *Fantasiettina* are both uncharacteristically short. Rutland was a pianist and critic, amongst other things, and a Sorabji fan. There is a dark depth to this fragment, while the *Fantasiettina* actually honors the birthday of Hugh MacDiarmid, the poet (and friend of Sorabji). It ends with what the composer referred to as a “volcanic eruption.”

The final two pieces are companion works. Both are based on ghost stories by Montague Rhodes James. In the first, *Quære reliqua hujus materiel inter secretiora*, taking the story *Count Magnus* as its inspiration, the central character finds an alchemical work that changes his life—very much for the worse, it would seem, which seems a little harsh on alchemical tracts. The prevailing harmonic language here is sharply dissonant. The second is based on the story *Canon Alberic’s Scrap-Book*. An evil spirit laughs from a bell tower. The *Dies iræ* is used to great effect in this work of extreme contrasts. Habermann is here, as elsewhere, magnificent. His technique simply seems to know no bounds—just as well, really, given the scores.

Be warned: This is addictive music. Do not start a disc if you want to sample five minutes before you head out for a train. Sorabji’s sound-world draws you in like a vortex (in harmonic terms the vortex analogy is completely appropriate also, by the way), and only the mechanism of your CD player when the disc comes to an end might let you go. **Colin Clarke**

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# The 2015 Want Lists

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## Colin Clarke

Matson's *Cooperstown: A Jazz Opera in Nine Innings* is a terrific romp, but one that includes some really touching music. Skilfully written, and a miraculous blend of jazz (there is an accompanying jazz quintet) and opera, this is an imaginative, terrific piece. Who'd have thought in a million years this would have made this particular arch-modernist and Wagnerian's Want List?

Immortal Performance continues to gift us with treasures on a regular basis, and the choice was a hard one this year as to which particular one to include. In the end it was this Beecham *Tristan*, but the documentary and musical value of just about everything they offer is miraculous. The inclusion of two performances of Act II from different dates is of particular interest (I can't really say the same of the Vaughan Williams, but some might). Narrowly missing the slot was the 1941 Met Björling *Trovatore* (1052), and one must not forget the delights of Melchior, Traubel, Janssen and Alexander Kipnis in Szell's 1942 *Tannhäuser* (1053). Such a choice.

As a horn player myself (ex-horn player, if I'm honest), it was impossible to miss this (pardon the pun) cornucopia of delights out. *En Cor!* The playing is almost as hot as the excruciatingly bad pun that adorns the cover. Arrangements can be outrageous; and, fittingly, the playing is outrageously good. From Khachaturian to Mancini, from Debussy to Bernstein, from Bach to Tchaikovsky (that pizzicato movement from the Fourth Symphony), no-one is safe.

The genius of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji needs to be shouted from the rooftops until the World and his dog catches on, so it is timely that this British Music Society issue has found its way to Naxos. Sorabji's music is heady, intense, gritty, granitic, and much, much more. Habermann, who has links with the composer himself, gives miraculous performances. He is commanding, and at times the sounds he manages to coax from his instrument are heady and intoxicating.

Finally, Toccata Classics expands our knowledge of William Hurlstone, an English composer who died at the tender age of 30 in 1906. Some readers may be familiar with the Piano Sonata; Toccata prefaces Fujimura's performance with no fewer than eleven first recordings. Fujimura is a most powerful advocate for this incredibly strong music.

**MATSON *Cooperstown: A Jazz Opera in Nine Innings*** • Matson/Adams, Favela, Gilfry, Montenegro/Instrumental Ens • ALBANY 1553-4 (2 CDs)

**WAGNER *Tristan und Isolde*** • Beecham/Flagstad, Branzell, Klose, Melchior, Janssen, Schoeffler, Nilsson/Covent Garden Op O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1042 (4 CDs)

***En Cor! Various Works*** • American Hn Qt • ALBANY 1536

**SORABJI *Piano Works*** • Habermann • NAXOS 8.571363-5 (3 CDs)

**HURLSTONE *Complete Piano Music*** • Fujimura/Lu • TOCCATA CLASSICS 0289

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# The 2015 Want Lists

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## Marc Medwin

Kaikoshru Shapurji Sorabji (1892–1988) composed music of extraordinary beauty and with a difficulty level to match. Fiercely intelligent and equally rebellious, he pulls no punches as various musical epochs converge and diverge in his disparate structures. The sound-worlds he conjures, often on a vast scale, are voluptuous, complicated and humorous by turn, but repeated listening reveals its historically complex forms and myriad secrets. Michael Haberman's were the first commercially available recordings made of these demanding compositions; his playing balances virtuosity and rigorous study, enabling him to approach the challenges Sorabji offers with the requisite emotional and historical awareness. Naxos has done all piano music enthusiasts a great service by placing them back into circulation and in an expertly annotated three-disc package.

Ward Marston follows up his excellent Chopin release by the still neglected Cuban pianist Jorge Bolet (1914–1990) with this six-disc compendium of his concert and broadcast recordings. In his many studio recordings, Bolet combined an absolutely winning sense of poetry with what some have cited as an overabundance of caution. Not so in these performances, taken from throughout his very long career, and this set will prove to be a revelation even to those long familiar with Bolet's recorded legacy. Long-time fans will revel in the beauty and power they have come to expect from Bolet's renderings of Liszt and Godowski, but surprises aplenty abound, such as the wise and well-structured interpretations of Beethoven and Bach. Tracing the pianist's development is a thrilling and endlessly rewarding experience, one that only becomes deeper the longer I own this set.

There are so many sounds that form the landscape through which we travel in everyday life, sounds that we take for granted or simply ignore. The California-based composer Michael Pisaro has formed his aesthetic by exploring the cracks between sound and silence, and in this three-disc composition, he augments this process by merging various field recordings with live instruments to create a unified but diverse world that welcomes immersive listening and multifarious interpretation. As simple and complex as the snatches of existence it captures, Pisaro's vision is one of beauty and detail in expert symbiosis.

**SORABJI Piano Works** • Haberman • NAXOS 8.571363–5 (3 CDs)

**JORGE BOLET: *Ambassador from the Golden Age*** • Bolet • MARSTON 56003-2 (6 CDs)

**PISARO *Continuum Unbound*** • Pisaro/Stuart/Farmer/Panzner/Tsunoda • GRAVITYWAVE 011/012/013 (3 CDs)

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