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## REVIEWS

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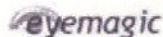
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THE PALMERBY ENGLISH RECORD COLLECTION

**SORABJI Piano Music and Transcriptions • Michael Habermann (pn) • BIS CD-1306 (68:22)**

**Transcription of Ravel's Rapsodie espagnole. Passeggiata veneziana. Symphonic Variations: No. 56. Quasi habanera. Transcription in the light of Harpsichord Technique for the Modern Piano of the Chromatic Fantasia of J. S. Bach, followed by a Fugue. Pasticcio capriccioso sopra op. 64/1 dello Chopin.**

**About 25 years ago on a minor label, Michael Habermann began recording LPs of the music of Sorabji. In fact, those were the first recordings of Sorabji's music. They were pretty good. Now he comes to BIS, and the result is even better.**

**First, a word about the composer. The background of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji was Parsi, even as he was born and lived in England. He was born in 1892, but refused to divulge that to any but his closest friends. (Amusingly, one place in the notes to this CD says 1894.) He studied music privately for a few years around the start of World War I but was essentially self-taught. He wrote music for 70 years, most of it unperformed to this day. He died in 1988.**

**His most famous work is *Opus clavicembalisticum*, for piano, lasting about four-and-a-half hours. Unbelievably, it has been recorded three times. It is by no means his longest composition.**

**His music often derives from Baroque and post-Romantic models; for classical symmetry and dualism he had no use, ditto for most of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Bartók, and other 20th-century pioneers. He admired most Ferruccio Busoni, whom he heard and for whom he once (very nervously) played. He often wrote favorably of Liszt, Alkan, Reger, Mahler, Szymanowski, and Rachmaninoff when they were derided or even unknown in England.**

**Sorabji's works are alarmingly difficult to play because of their luxurious ornamentation, often in many voices spread over three or more staves; unrelated simultaneous rhythms; other highly virtuosic demands; lack of tempo, dynamic, and other phrase markings; and a free, improvisatory approach to musical elaboration. On top of that, as suggested, many of his works are extraordinarily long.**

**Some have remarked that Sorabji never used one note where six would do. But the thing is, those six usually do very well!**

**The works on this CD aren't long. Mostly they are impossible to play anyhow—except that Habermann**

**plays them. He doesn't merely get through them; he convinces us that they're no great problem. Following some of the manuscript scores while listening to this CD indicated to me that Habermann must be an extraterrestrial with three or more hands (and brains).**

**The real find here is *Passeggiata veneziana*, five inspired short movements based on the beautiful "Barcarolle" from Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*. The much earlier *Pasticcio capriccioso* is the second of Sorabji's mortifying transmogrifications of Chopin's "Minute Waltz."**

**The transcriptions alone show Sorabji to be a master composer not far from great transcribers, such as Liszt and Busoni. He didn't like Bach's fugue to his own *Chromatic Fantasy*, so he substituted another, which may not even be by Bach. It doesn't matter. His creative imagination could have used a fugue by the King of Siam. The Ravel transcription captures Ravel in a most unRavelian way, if that makes any sense.**

**The *Symphonic Variations* probably last seven-plus hours; this one variation is all that has ever been recorded, and it's scintillating. *Quasi habanera* is an early work that projects no inexperience, rather a marvelous Hispanic manner that Sorabji returned to in several works.**

**The *Passeggiata* is also on Altarus, the label producing the most Sorabji recordings by far. Jonathan Powell plays it differently, sometimes with more sweep. But Habermann is clearer, thanks in part to a better-recorded acoustic and his mania for accuracy. (That's a reference to Sorabji's well-known understatement that he had a "mania for privacy.") Powell plays the Tarantella movement more effectively (faster, unbelievably), but Habermann brings out the magic near the end of the *notturnino* more.**

**Powell's CD also has the late *Villa Tasca*, a whole other story. No one seriously interested in Sorabji can do without both recordings or—the other comparison—Fredrik Ullén's wildly different recording of the *Pasticcio*, on a BIS CD with many transcriptions by other composers.**

**I'd put Habermann's CD on this year's Want List, but I put it on last year's, having obtained a copy a little early. Except for the most baroque and most extended, it's a fine introduction to Sorabji's music.**

**Paul Rapoport**