

SORABJI: *Le Jardin parfumé*. Yonty Solomon, piano. ALTARUS AIR-CD-9037 [??D]; 26:53.

SORABJI: *Fantaisie espagnole*. Donna Amato, piano. ALTARUS AIR-CD-9022 [??D]; 17:56.

THE MYSTIC SCRIABIN. Donna Amato, piano. ALTARUS AIR-CD-9020 [??D]; 63:37.

Piano Sonatas: No. 8, op. 66; No. 8, op. 68 ("Black Mass"); No. 10, op. 70. Two Preludes, op. 67. Deux Poèmes, op. 69. Deux Poèmes, op. 71: Fantastique; En rêvant, avec une grande douceur. Vers la flamme, op. 72. Deux Danses, op. 73: Guirlandes; Flammes sombres. Five Preludes, op. 74.

STEVENSON: *Passacaglia on DSCH. Recitative and Air. Prelude, Fugue and Fantasy*. Ronald Stevenson, piano. ALTARUS AIR-CD-9091/2 [??D]; two discs: 55:11, 60:42. (Distributed by Albany.)

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SORABJI: *A CRITICAL CELEBRATION*. Edited by Paul Rapoport. 512 pp. Cambridge: Scolar Press, 1992. \$69.95. (Available from: Ashgate Publishing Co., Old Post Rd., Brookfield, VT 05036.)

RONALD STEVENSON. By Malcolm MacDonald. Paper, 120 pp. Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1989. £ 8.95

Yesterday's concert was very nice, great success, two laurel-wreaths; I played my best. But they don't understand it, and it is almost useless playing to them. . . . Artists are only there for artists: everything to do with audience, critics, schools and teachers is stupid and dangerous rubbish. . .

Busoni to his wife, en route New York-Chicago, March 6, 1904

Turning up together almost by accident, it is doubtful that any similar handful of books and recordings could throw into more extreme relief the artist's perennial ambivalence between hiding his light within a covert bushel and casting his pearls before swine—relation is all, after all, but then, hell is other people. Scriabin escaped this dilemma by fleeing into solipsistic, godlike madness, leaving behind the elusive, hermetic—ever more spasmodic, fragmentary, hypnotic, and attenuated—idiom traced in Amato's recital, while the long-lived Sorabji (1892–1988) discouraged and forbade performances of his works even as Ronald Stevenson (b. 1928) was fashioning the elements of an embracing "world music." To all three, the piano has proven a personal microcosm taxed, through ever greater supra-transcendental demands, to focus macrocosmic—and, for Scriabin and Sorabji, frankly magical—intentions. Sorabji might play, mainly his own music, for hours for his friends, but as he ceased performing in public in 1936 the question of what he played—and how—recurs repeatedly in the essays of *A Critical Celebration*. Significantly, the only piece by another composer specifically named is Scriabin's *Désir*. More peculiarly personal is the almost necromantic symbiosis which Sorabji and Stevenson have, independently and rather differently, effected with Busoni and which has afforded both life and art the occasional aspect of a prolonged echo. As this has been adumbrated several times in these pages, and is explored in some detail in MacDonald's book and the *Critical Celebration*, a single example must suffice here.

In the summer of 1913 Busoni writes to his "disciple," Egon Petri, that

On 17 June . . . I enjoyed the great privilege of receiving the *Pierrot lunaire* ensemble in my house and of hearing a complete and well-nigh perfect performance of the cycle. A small audience was present, including Mengelberg, Schnabel, Serato; Schoenberg conducted, Steuermann and Kindler were amongst the performers. . . . It was an ideal musical afternoon; a highly ingenious new work, a perfect ensemble, afterwards stimulating exchange of ideas, tea and cigarettes and charming, intelligent women. This is the way in which art should be presented—and no other.*

Two world wars and a bifurcated Europe later, on December 1, 1959, the twenty-two-year-old John Ogdon, one of Petri's last pupils, gave a private performance of Sorabji's *Opus Clavicembalisticum* for its dedicatee, the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid, at Ronald Stevenson's house in West Linton, Peebleshire, in what was very likely the only hearing of the work in its entirety; since Sorabji's premiere performance in Glasgow in 1930. Sorabji, by the way, is said to have gotten through it in two-and-one-half hours, the young Ogdon (if a casual reference in MacDiarmid's *The Company I've Kept* may be accepted as accurate) in three, while the recording Ogdon made just before his death (Altarus AIR-CD-9075, *Fanfare* 13:4) sprawls over nearly four-and-three-quarters hours! Whether or not one finds the obvious differences between the brilliant gathering *chez* Busoni and this provincial huddling of musicians on the threshold of greatness symptomatic of a radical shift in artistic climate over the near half-century separating them, the fact is that both meet the requirements for the reception of art laid down by Berlioz and Busoni, and vehemently endorsed by Sorabji—the superlative performance of inspired and spiritually challenging work before a prepared and sympathetic audience. With the optimum achieved, what more could be wanted? Ogdon's request to perform and record the *Opus Clavicembalisticum* was adamantly refused—

I DO NOT WANT PUBLIC PERFORMANCE OF MY WORK EITHER BY OGDON OR ANYONE ELSE AT ALL. . . . I have set out my views about this often enough AND NOTHING NOR NO ONE WILL MAKE ME CHANGE THEM. SO THAT IS THAT, ISNT IT?

—in a letter of July 1962 from Sorabji to his friend Frank Holliday. A perhaps apocryphal story has it that Sorabji, snapped, "He's too fat to play the piano!" It is said, too, that Ronald Smith and Raymond Lewenthal also applied to Sorabji for permission to perform his works and were refused.

When, a decade later, Sorabji relented, allowing performances and recordings almost indiscriminately, nearly every pianist with a vital link to what may be called the heroic age of the piano—the age of Busoni and Godowsky—who had been avid to "create" Sorabji's music for an always small but ardent elite was either dead or otherwise occupied. Petri, often cited as saying that, given a year's leisure to master it, he would perform the *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, passed on in 1962. Smith and Lewenthal resurrected Alkan instead, which may have been the next nearest endeavor, given similarities which led the philosopher Kenneth Derus to suggest (only half-facetiously, I suspect) an occult connection between the two composers. Though he left an extensive recorded legacy, including a granitically magnificent reading of Stevenson's *Passacaglia on DSCH* in 1967 and the first (and still the grandest) recording of Busoni's awesome piano concerto the following year, Ogdon's career was bedeviled by bouts of mental illness—his belated performances of the *Opus Clavicembalisticum* over 1988–89 have been described as the work of "a magnificent ruin." A pity the young Ogdon might have succeeded better than anyone! And Stevenson, an inveterate collector of the *disjecta membra* of the heroic age who plays quite as if it were still with us, busied himself composing the *Passacaglia on DSCH*, which was to win him major recognition. Thus, the field was reserved for younger and lesser-known pianists, such as Michael Habermann, Yonty Solomon, and Geoffrey Douglas Madge, who loomed as almost freakish loners only recently, but whose numbers seem to be growing exponentially year by year, now. Consulting the *Critical Celebration's* roster of pianists who've tackled Sorabji in public, going back to the composer's own performance of his First Sonata at a *Sackbut* concert in 1920 (under the auspices of Peter Warlock and Cecil Gray), one finds that nine of the thirty-one have entered the lists, so to speak, over 1990–91, where the list breaks off.

In an essay of 1912 on "The Pianoforte Genius," Busoni remarked that playing the Liszt sonata "is a problem which has been solved. . . . Pianists of the present generation are born with the technique and style of this composition in their blood." Similarly, pianists who've grown up taking in stride the demands of Stockhausen, Boulez, Carter, Fernyehough, et al. may well have technique enough to take on Sorabji. His style, however—like the still hermetic art of late Scriabin—is another and highly elusive matter. Part of Scriabin's attraction for Sorabji lay, no doubt, in the increasing tendency of his music to flare from small repetitive gestures into orgasmic waves of sonority. ("And . . . CHRIST . . . HOW he could play the piano! . . . As a boy I heard both of his London recitals in March 1914"—Sorabji to Frank Holliday, February 15, 1972, quoted from *A Critical Celebration*, p. 200.) "Late Liszt, too, is rife with repetitions which, on paper, seem redundant though, rendered in kaleidoscopic shifts of clangtint, they become persuasive, hypnotic, and compelling with escalating intensity. Curiously, in both Liszt and Scriabin even very good pianists are often clueless here and monotonously repeat themselves. If performance indications are often sparse in late Liszt, Scriabin's effusive generosity—e.g., *très doux et pur, avec uno ardeur profundo et voilée, avec ravissement et tendresse, avec uno volupté douloureuse*, etc., from the Tenth Sonata—is seldom recognized as being at least as suggestive of touch as of his erotic psychology or a hidden program. Alexander Pasternak, brother of the novelist, has recalled hearing Scriabin as a frequent household guest from 1903—

I always sensed a special personal quality in his interpretation, one which I never met in any other performer. . . . as soon as I heard the first sounds on the piano, even if I was sitting with my eyes shut not looking at Scriabin's hands and fingers, I immediately had the feeling that his fingers were producing the sounds without touching the keys, that he was (as it were) snatching them from the keyboard and letting them flutter lightly over it. This created an extraordinary illusion that his fingers in some strange way were drawing the sound out of the instrument, a sound at once light, abrupt, and very strong. His enemies used to say it was not real piano playing, but a twittering of birds or a mewling of kittens. . . .

No one should be required to mimic the inimitable. The matter is not one of establishing an "authentic" performing style—whatever that may be and impossible in any case—but of seeking what turns the trick in an art in which classical and Lisztian concepts of form have dwindled to the vestigial while sonority as a formal element has become integral. Horowitz, whose Scriabin collection on CBS overlaps roughly half of Amato's program (MR 42411—the Ninth and Tenth Sonatas, the *Deux Poèmes*, op. 69, and *Vers la flamme*), is brilliant where *lumineux* is wanted and glaring where *radieux* is called for, prompting from critic Gilbert De Frenne the witticism that "Horowitz always sounds like he's playing an arrangement by Horowitz." But the chromatic sighs, chirping, thrusting fanfares, and voluptuously clinging harmonic tissue set off with glittering trills and tremolandi are given a titanic *timbral* articulation within the fluent coils of a serpentine

eroticism which clasps one as very little other Scriabin playing can. Boris Berman, with a more *caressant* palette, achieves a similar, if relatively muted, hold in the sonatas (Music & Arts CD-605, *Fanfare* 13:5, and CD-621, *Fanfare* 15:1). Heard after these classic performances, Amato comes across as less a siren of dark dreams than the plucky girl next door whose determination has seen her through and whose notion of climax is louder and faster. Her touch is generally heavy and her range of *piano* narrow and lacking in gradation, though that may at least partially owe to the ambient splashiness of the recording which, if close and immediate, is oddly veiled—an aural perspective afflicting the *Fantaisie espagnole* disc as well. The disjointedness which Scriabin's series of small repeated gestures invite is not always overridden, either. That is, these are strong, assured, effective—rather than great or divinatory—performances, though it is just the point that without a large measure of timbral divination these works will lack an entire dimension of effectiveness. Still, the disc will be wanted for its program which carries one chronologically and with sustained interest through the last hour or so of Scriabin's hallucinatory realm where grand and sinister visions end in oracular muttering—though one will resort to Horowitz, Berman, Ashkenazy, Richter, Paik, Villa, and yet others for more blazing light and somber shadow in this *caressante et empoisonnée* soundscape. Likewise, if we had only Amato's reading of the *Fantaisie espagnole* we would be grateful, but heard against Michael Habermann's deftly fluent, richly nuanced, and lightly colored 1981 disc premiere performance (now on MusicMasters MM 60015T, see *Fanfare* 4:5) it seems heavy-handed and garish.

Composed in 1919, the *Fantaisie espagnole* is early Sorabji with only broad hints at things to come, and doubly accessible as a drunkenly tongue-in-cheek take-off on a well-used genre. With *Le Jardin parfumé* (1923) we enter deeper waters. Pure sonority, or clangtint, is, if anything, a larger part of Sorabji's art than of Scriabin's: though he uses it differently, his demands upon it are far more lavish. In *Le Jardin parfumé* this nearly impossible coloristic requirement merges with what may be called the Scheherazade factor or the necessity of projecting a long, unusual, and therefore not readily recognizable melodic line while spinning out *with relish* the elaborate ornaments and arabesques in which it is sumptuously couched. If the subtle tension between line and ornament fails to generate enchantment, all is lost. On this analogy, Solomon's head should roll for his dawdling and homogeneously muted account, caught in transparent sound. At 26:53—against Habermann's already hypnotic 19:01 (MusicMasters MMD 60019Y)—Solomon's *Jardin parfumé* is less redolent of the "poisonous sweetness" Erik Chisholm heard in it, or the "real sensuous beauty" Delius praised, than of a shopkeeper's sleepy inventory of bric-a-brac. To be fair, Sorabji heard Solomon several times and gave him a glowing endorsement—"You have *everything* that I look for in a pianist who tackles Me . . . unfailingly beautiful tone, complete insight and sympathy with my way of musical thinking . . . AND well it was perfectly satisfying in every way." Sic. On the other hand, a private tape of the seventy-two-year-old composer playing the opening of *Le Jardin parfumé* is closer in tempo and spirit to Habermann's recording than to Solomon's, though it is generally agreed by those cited in *A Critical Celebration* that, at this time of his life, Sorabji's playing did scant justice to his art. Then, Habermann's chapter in *A Critical Celebration* on "Sorabji's Piano Music," including an almost phrase by phrase analysis of *Le Jardin parfumé* (with ample examples from score), is one of the most illuminating in the book, yet his own persuasive performance, for all its subtle fluency, seems not quite the thing itself, either. A complete catalog of the Sorabji tapes, by the way, and a list of the key archives in which copies have been placed, are included in *A Critical Celebration*, with the meager Sorabji discography complete through July 1990. Performance comparisons are at least a way of getting to grips with the music, and the avid listener may well be grateful for these additions to the paucity of recorded Sorabjiana. We are, after all, only beginning to hear him. The short, single work, discs, too, come at a reduced price, graced with excellent uncredited notes spun off from material in *A Critical Celebration*.

But despite the fact that Habermann and Solomon have been playing Sorabji privately and publicly for perhaps two decades, and Madge for three—to name the veterans—it seems that these performers, too, have yet to come to terms with vital area of Sorabji's art. "He who stands alone when he appears in public and is only imitated later on by others," Busoni writes, "who compels pianoforte builders to consider new principles and creates a new literature in which experienced pianists do not find their way at once, has a lawful right to the title 'pianoforte genius.'" When demands for color suggesting another, nonexistent, instrument, and the Scheherazade factor are compounded with the Magian time sense of monsterpieces playing over several or many hours—requiring a sense of receptivity in the hearer which can contemplate the "thousand and one nights" with *whetted* appetite—there can be no doubt that an art of quite different spiritual and somatic

dimensions is at hand, and, perhaps, a colossal assault. The manuscript of *Le Jardin parfumé*, not irrelevantly, ends with a violet inkblot worked into a face surrounded by the inscription "here Satan is invoked to rend asunder all such as we hate." One is hardly surprised to hear from Madge, who contributes a lengthy interview to *A Critical Celebration*, that he has refused offers for a studio recording of the *Opus Clavicembalisticum* and sworn off further performances of it; nor is a certain streak of charlatanism, which talks a good game over the performing ground where concentration faltered, by now wholly unexpected. Pianists newly come to the game are playing mainly the earlier, shorter pieces, but very nearly the entire Himalayan range of Sorabji's work is now available in manuscript copies from The Sorabji Archive (Easton Dene, Bailbrook Lane, Bath, Avon BA1 7AA, England) for those who will decipher and resolve them into performing editions—as the great Kevin Bowyer was obliged to do for the Organ Symphony No. 1 (Continuum CCD 1001/2, *Fanfare* 12:6)—and attempt to master them. No doubt, a number of opportunists will flitter at the edges of the Sorabji concern, while some foolhardy, heroic souls will lose their way and be overmastered. And, perhaps, a genuine superman will appear and confound the charlatans by performing, at solemn intervals, for an astounded but largely uncomprehending audience, such works as the *Tantrik Symphony*, the *Sequentia cyclica super "Dies irae,"* or the *Opus Archimagicum*.

Meanwhile, *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* is essential reading. After a brief, engaging dialog between the editor and a hypothetical Interested Person—whose turns will be familiar to anyone with enthusiasms beyond the standard repertoire—offering an outline of the Sorabji "case" in stage-setting fashion, the book proper begins, like a classic, *in medias res* with Alistair Hinton, a young composition student of Humphrey Scarle's at London's Royal College of Music, stopping by the library for Sor's guitar works and stumbling across the *Opus Clavicembalisticum* instead. "When I began to examine the music itself, I could hardly believe what I saw. . . I was fascinated, riveted, transfixed." Upon discovering what was to be known—and as often misknown—about Sorabji, Hinton wrote to the composer himself and was rewarded with a prompt, warm reply and, in due course, with Sorabji's trust and friendship, through which he won permission in 1976 for Yonty Solomon to perform *Le Jardin parfumé* and other of the early shorter (relatively speaking) pieces. The Sorabji Music Archive, by the way, is largely Hinton's creation. Perhaps a decade before, Donald Garvelmann, seeking permission to publish Sorabji's *Pastiche on Chopin's Valse, op. 64, no. 1* in a collection of "Minute Waltz" arrangements, was similarly befriended—a connection which led to Garvelmann's three-hour broadcast on the composer over WNCN (New York) in 1970, featuring segments from the Holliday tapes of Sorabji himself at the keyboard, including complete performances of *Gulistân* and the *Concerto da suonare da me solo*. It was through Garvelmann's good offices, too, that Michael Habermann was authorized, at the same time Solomon was given the go-ahead, to perform certain of Sorabji's works—though with restrictions to prevent a direct rivalry—and to make the first commercial recording in 1980 of any of Sorabji's music. Why did Sorabji relent? As with everything else about this strange and powerful figure, we have, despite the 500-page heft of this tantalizing volume, mainly questions, beginnings, and exploratory gestures.

Paul Rapoport, for instance, suggests that Sorabji's secretiveness about his date and place of birth was intended to prevent his enemies from working up his astrological profile. Several of his works are shown to have originally borne dedications to Bernard Bromage, a lecturer on the occult and initiate of Dion Fortune's *Fraternity of the Inner Light*—the *Opus Archimagicum*, in fact, incorporates a theme based on the letters of Bromage's name. Kenneth Derus presents a richly annotated selection from Sorabji's letters to Philip Heseltine—known to all lovers of English song as Peter Warlock—sketchily spanning the period 1913–22 and reflecting, amid period flotsam and jetsam, the impact of Modernism in the making. References abound to—on a precipitally sliding scale—Scriabin, Ravel, Schoenberg, D. H. Lawrence, Cyril Scott, Arthur Bliss, Wyndham Lewis, Aleister Crowley, et al. "Crowley I missed in Cefalu and in Paris," Sorabji writes Heseltine in April 1922, "but one of the priestesses said he was coming to London so I have written to him expressing my desire and yours to meet him when he *does* come." By June, Crowley has been dubbed "Salvarsan," after a quack syphilis remedy, and dismissed as a "fraud," though Heseltine was later initiated into at least one of the several hermetic societies founded by Crowley teaching

a debased "tantrism" leavened by the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms. Sorabji, meanwhile, seems to have found in composition the focus for an intense, transcendent, psychophysical concentration similar to that achieved in genuine Tantrism and some other highly disciplined offshoots of the religious life—an ineffable but ever-present element of his art which is perhaps the principal barrier to its performance.

If the foregoing suggests that *A Critical Celebration* is largely a tissue of fascinating anecdotes, that impression should be corrected at once. Amid the detritus which the bulk of academic publications represents today, *A Critical Celebration* looms as one of those rare and gratifying instances in which the scholarly ideal is triumphantly achieved: important, necessary work—much of it basic spade work—has been carried through with thoroughness and elegance, and presented as a graciously salient contribution to humane letters. Habermann's chapter on "Sorabji's Piano Music," for example, while spun off from his doctoral dissertation and pursuing some close musicological analyses, is free of the usual jargon-ridden waffling lubricated to impress other specialists: instead, we are shown how the music functions in a way which refocuses expectations and prompts the ear to take pleasure in, rather than shrink in bewilderment from, Sorabji's luxuriance. Those who've been intrigued by Sorabji will have traced down his two amazing collections of essays—*Around Music* (1932) and *Mi Contra Fa: The Immoralisings of a Machiavellian Musician* (1947)—culled from a quarter-century as a critic, beginning with pieces in *The Sackbut* in 1920 (during the brief period of its editorship by Peter Warlock and Cecil Gray), running over a decade with Gurdjieff-disciple A. R. Orage's *New Age* (1924–34) where his pieces rubbed shoulders with those of Gray and Ezra Pound, and extending through a tour as a regular contributor to *The New English Weekly* (1933–45). Nazlin Bhimani's chapter on "Sorabji's Music Criticism" provides the context for those brilliantly serpentine and often superbly envenomed performances which suggests that there reposes at least enough worthy material in those dusty periodicals to furnish yet another scintillant and valuable volume—valuable, that is, for a penetration and vehement outspokenness which, if often prejudiced and overstated, register the cultural life of the period as a spiritual, or existential, phenomenon. All too brief selections from personal letters and a *Commonplace Book* provide a glimpse into Sorabji's intensely introverted life, which seems to have turned in disgust from the putatively living to dwell with the immortal. "The fantastic spirit," as Synesius reminds us, "is the medium between the eternal and the temporal, and in it we are most alive." The composition of the *Opus Clavicembalisticum* chronicled in letters to the Scottish musicologist Erik Chisholm is riveting—"The closing 4 pages are as cataclysmic and catastrophic as anything I've ever done—the harmony bites like nitric acid the counterpoint grinds like the mills of God. . . ." Indeed, one might go on admiringly through the book's entire contents, but it must at least be noted that *A Critical Celebration* provides at long last a first thorough, detailed, reliable works list for Sorabji, replete with such basic but heretofore unobtainable information as dates of composition/completion, number of score/manuscript pages (an astounding 824 for the *Jāmī Symphony* and a staggering 1001 for the *Symphonic High Mass*), dedications (including the notorious inscription of the *Opus Clavicembalisticum* to Hugh MacDiarmid/C. M. Grieve and

likewise
To the everlasting glory of those Few
MEN—
Blessed and sanctified in the Curses and Execrations
of those MANY—
Whose praise is eternal damnation. . . .

and noting the canceled and replaced dedications documenting the vicissitude of Sorabji's friendship over nearly seventy years), details of publication, manuscript locations (though unspecified for those in private collections), forces—often mammoth—required in orchestral works, and contents/pagination for works in many sections (e.g., each variation in the numerous sets of variations). Finally, it is possible to form at least a remote notion of this legendary *oeuvre*, which appears to be far more fantastically daunting than anyone had yet dared to imagine!

Everything about *Sorabji: A Critical Celebration* bespeaks a labor of love whose ultimate benefactor is Professor Paul Rapoport, long familiar to *Fanfare* readers as a vastly erudite, intimately informed, and ardently generous champion of neglected music. Looking over the stylistic fragmentation of Modernism in the mid 30s and its inevitable splintering of the audience for serious music, Bernard van Dieren remarked that "For every composer, however disturbing his originality, there is a potential public. The essential difficulty is for them to meet." One may hazard that the audience for "originality" in van Dieren's sense, while slowly shrinking as a percentage of the total audience for, let us say, sound artifacts, may be increasing in actual numbers, though that number must necessarily be small and scattered worldwide—rather like *Fanfare* readers. A goodly portion of this select audience will know Prof. Rapoport not only from the pages of *Fanfare* but as the author of *Opus Est: Six Composers From Northern Europe* (New York: Taplinger, 1979), whose challenge to the stagnant notion of a "basic" or "standard" repertoire came as a rallying cry upon a blast of fresh air, braced by chapters on Holmboe, Valen, Vermeulen, Pettersson, Brian, and Sorabji. While the ongoing explosion of recorded music, which began as black discs yielded to silver, has made at least a cursory hearing of these composers, in a sense, inevitable, it is rather more than likely that Prof. Rapoport's slender volume provided a decisive spur to the performance and recording of the latter four. As a pontifex—a psychopomp, even—to Sorabji's music, Prof. Rapoport is, thus, uniquely qualified. For *A Critical Celebration*, the polemical tone of *Opus Est* is suavely, mercurially muted, while the crabbed analytical exposition of the earlier book—justly criticized by Walter Simmons in *Fanfare* 3:3 ("An Atrophy of Musical Creation in Our Time?" which is, despite tumultuous changes since, still revealing)—yields to the graciously fluent account of an intrepid and enormously resourceful scholar, weaving what little is known of Sorabji's life with the reminiscences of one who won Sorabji's friendship and thereby stumbled into the pristine, labyrinthine world of his work, then still in furious progress. One might even compare Rapoport's contribution to Liszt's in shaping the disparate pieces of the *Hexaméron Variations* into a single elaborately persuasive work: from the dust jacket photo of Sorabji, warily regarding the reader, to the acid Latin inscription (registering, very likely, the travail of securing a reliable publisher) at the foot of the excellent index, *A Critical Celebration* has been superbly "composed" and, despite its bulk, not only reads compellingly but leaves one avid for more. Best of all, it returns one to the music with renewed zest. The volume itself is handsomely, sturdily produced, printed on durable, glossy paper, and graced with an abundance of photographs.

One of those, not irrelevantly, captures Barry Peter Ould of Bardic Edition presenting Sorabji, just before his death, with a copy of his own *Fantasiettina sul nome Christopher Grieve* in a deluxe performing edition by Ronald Stevenson. The pianist curious about the look of Sorabji's music, the feel of it under his fingers, and its sound—without committing himself to superhuman feats—will find the six pages of the *Fantasiettina*, though minuscule by Sorabji's standards, a rich introduction to an order of difficulty daunting even to the well-equipped, while Stevenson's suggestions and exercises go about as far toward providing keys to these unique technical difficulties as may be managed from the printed page (available from Bardic Edition, 6 Fairfax Crescent, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, HP20 2ES, England). And by the time you're reading this, Altarus may already have made available a recording of Mr. Stevenson's performance of it.

If Sorabji is one of the great originals, Stevenson—following Busoni—is of the line of great inheritors. Indeed, Stevenson's first "masterpiece," the *Prelude, Fugue, and Fantasy*, is largely a virtuoso reworking of materials from, or ancillary to, Busoni's testament, the opera *Doktor Faust*, while Stevenson has dubbed its arrangement for piano and orchestra his Piano Concerto No. 1, or "Faust Triptych"—a remarkable homage! In his rapidly skimming, gracefully written, and richly illustrated life-and-works survey, Malcolm MacDonald suggests that Stevenson's *Passacaglia on DSC* is, in part, an inspired criticism of the *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, which contains a passacaglia wildly overrun with eighty-one variations. Where Busoni cared to inherit mainly the pinnacles of European art music in an ever-narrowing circle, and Sorabji—like Busoni's Faust—"delves more deeply into the track of his being," Stevenson makes a first foray into "world music" with the Dmitri *SCHostakovich* motto (D-Eb-C-B) carrying, through eighty minutes and hundreds of variations, such oddments as a fandango, an evocation of Bantu drumming, and an adaptation of

Highland bagpipe music. To be sure, the body of the work is formed by the staples of Western art music—saraband, jig, gavotte, march, étude, waltz, nocturne, etc.—and crowned with a great triple fugue in which the DSCH motto is combined with BACH and then with the *Dies irae*, to end with an allusion to the *stretta* of Busoni's *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* worked to a slow, gripping, inexorably building crescendo of visionary grandeur. But the intent to grasp the chthonic resonance of diverse cultures, albeit on the piano and with the closely honed techniques of European art music, lends a tensile suspensiveness of its own to the *Passacaglia*—a drama within the drama Stevenson is consciously projecting. In "A Caledonian Orpheus? Discovering Ronald Stevenson" (*Fanfare* 12:5, beset by typos and buried on pp. 520–27), I suggested that the exotic element in the *Passacaglia*, while emphatically not gimmicks, were superficial and smacked of "tourism"—itself a facile judgment calling for revision. Rehearing the work from compact discs, with the last sixth of its eighty minutes taken in an unbroken stretch, Stevenson's epic sweep—ninetly grained and richly nuanced as it is bar by bar—triumphantly subsumes its disparate parts in an arch of spellbinding magnificence. Remarking Sorabji's "peculiar lunar aloofness" in *The Company I've Kept*, Stevenson notes by contrast that ". . . some of the profoundest statements have been uttered in the vernacular: even Christ spoke a dialect. . . ." while "a popular aspect . . . always seems to stem from a definite national element." But the *Passacaglia*, despite its ambitions, is still too much the Western intellectual's conception ever to be popular, though it's readily accessible to anyone who cares for the more extensive works of the keyboard literature from Bach to Busoni. Yet, one who knows something of Stevenson's later work will also hear the *Passacaglia* differently, finding it an arch through which Stevenson himself triumphantly passed to the superbly realized world music of his Second Piano Concerto, called "The Continents," in which Gershwin seems to meet and meld with Busoni, East with West, the chthonic with the aerial, the visceral with the meditative, in an utterance of such multifaceted fascination that it *could* become genuinely popular if only it were known.

As I write, a recording of Stevenson's two piano concertos has been announced for distribution on these shores with one Murray MacLachlan—who studied the works with their composer—performing with Chetham's Symphony Orchestra of Manchester, a school band, conducted by a Julian Clayton (*Olympia* OL 429). While this is heartening, it must be said unequivocally that the fact that Stevenson has not been invited to perform and record these works with a major orchestra is not merely willfully ignorant, but scandalous, disgraceful, outrageous.

MacDonald's indispensable little volume, so graciously companionable in its freedom from grandiose claims or strident polemics, veils Stevenson in modesty even as it reveals a prolific adept who, through deepening mastery of his art, has grasped the four coigns of the universe in a Faustian embrace and, seeing that they are good, given them voice—where Sorabji, knowing evil, contrived a Magian art beyond time or place which, as Prof. Rapoport writes, "challenges us not just by its very existence but because we risk being destroyed mentally and physically in trying to grapple with it. His music is true alchemy, true magic, as dangerous as any art can be, and in a positive spiritual sense, extremely powerful and transfiguring." Fool and Magus, darkness and light: thus Busoni set a stage for supermen upon which the principal action remains to be played. . . **Adrian Corleonis**