

MICHAEL HABERMANN PLAYS SORABJI—*The Legendary Works for Piano*. Michael Habermann, piano. ÉLAN CD 82264 [DDD/ADD¹]; 72:22. Produced by Natalia Rodriguez. (Distributed by Albany.)

SORABJI: *Gulistān (The Rose Garden)*—Nocturne. *Quaere reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora. Fantasiolina sul nome illustre dell'egregio poeta Christopher Grieve ossia Hugh M'Diarmid¹. Djāmi—Nocturne¹. HABERMANN: *À la manière de Sorabji* ("Au clair de la lune").*

With the exception of Geoffrey Douglas Madge, in his long out-of-print set of the *Opus Clavicembalisticum* (four black discs, Keytone RCS4-800, *Fanfare* 7:4), and Kevin Bowyer in the Organ Symphony No. 1 (despite sepulchral sound, Continuum CCD 1001/2—two silver discs, *Fanfare* 12:6), no one has given us such an assured and extensive experience of Sorabji as the great but almost wholly unknown Michael Habermann. John Ogdon's go at the *Opus Clavicembalisticum* at the last gasp of his tormented career (Altarus CD-9075—four silver discs, *Fanfare* 13:4), though indispensable, is too eccentrically, desperately sprawling an assault—a fierce, titanic amalgam of Ogdon and Sorabji—to be reliable, while Marc-André Hamelin's superb performance of the First Sonata (Altarus AIR-CD-9050, *Fanfare* 14:4) is a brief hearing of the young Sorabji, before he'd mastered his chaos. Other pianists, e.g., Carlo Grante, Yonty Solomon, and Donna Amato (see *Fanfare* 17:2, p. 400ff.), have been largely content to essay, slackly, tepidly, pieces which Habermann had already recorded with aplomb. In accordance with Gresham's law, the former are still circulating while Habermann's three previous path-breaking Sorabji discs (*Sorabji—A Legend in His Own Time*, MusicMasters MMD 60015T, the first recording of any Sorabji—see *Fanfare* 4:5; *Le Jardin parfumé*, MusicMasters MMD 60019Y, see *Fanfare* 6:4; and *Sorabji: Piano Music*, MusicMasters MMD 60118W, see *Fanfare* 11:2) have cravenly, shamefully been allowed to slip out of print. Thus, the present album is not only an event and an indispensable item which the collector is advised to lay hands on immediately, but a godsend in once again placing the Sorabji experience unequivocally before us.

One speaks of the Sorabji experience rather than interpretative grasp, say, or supra-transcendental pianism because, when superlatively performed, as they are here, Sorabji's mature works afford the adept listener a different *order* of experience, a range of vividly colored but unfamiliar emotions, and, ultimately, a wisdom—in its technical sense of a knowing union of body and spirit for a magical purpose. In his *Adagia*, Wallace Stevens notes that "Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully"—certainly, Sorabji's art does this: it is not meant for the masses and will exasperate the average listener rather than sweep him off his feet: the adept places himself differently before Sorabji's art. If one says that *Gulistān* is a nearly half-hour orgy of the rarest oriental melody couched in astoundingly lush textures, the average "classical fan" expects to hear something like *Scheherazade* for the piano. Instead, he'll be put off and bewildered by the multi-planar, multidimensional writing—events of varying intensity and ornamental or contrapuntal significance taking place *simultaneously* all across the keyboard—through which an elusive, serpentine, melismatically spun melody hypnotically coils and uncoils. It is only when one has achieved an aural focus in which the events, in their overwhelming multiplicity, have been distinguished and heard to cohere, and grasped the serpent of wisdom, so to speak, by the tail and been led thereby into the garden of the title, that the particulars of Sorabji's unique rapture reveal themselves in an exquisitely controlled delirium, a rising dawn of ecstatic voluptuousness. Think only of the sheer mastery of dynamic gradations required to articulate such a polyphony and one begins to understand the magnitude of the demands Sorabji makes upon both artist and audience, to understand how the mere disgorging of notes more or less in score order by lesser pianists falsifies Sorabji's art for even the most meticulous listener—particularly for the meticulous listener!—and to comprehend just how rare such an event as the present collection must necessarily be. Is the effort "worth" it? If you must ask, probably not. Like the strangely glowing vastnesses of the Himalayas, the grandeurs of Sorabji's art are indubitably *there*—if that is not sufficient to pique your spirit of adventure, he is best left alone.

Also composed in 1940, "*Quaere reliqua . . .*"—"seek the rest of this matter among the things that are more secret"—is as different from *Gulistân*, or the similarly overrich *Djâmî*, as *Tristan* from *Die Meistersinger*. This and its companion piece, *St Bertrand de Comminges*—"He was laughing in the tower" from the following year (recorded by Habermann on MusicMasters MMD 60118W), evoke the atmosphere of ghost stories by the English writer M. R. James in angular, dramatic, electrically crackling gestures. Heard after Habermann, Donna Amato lacks electricity, going haphazardly through the motions, in a recent, interesting Sorabji collection featuring, in addition to the James pieces, four premieres, and extensive, informed annotations generously set off by photographs and illustrations which the collector will want, regardless (Altarus AIR-CD-9025).

Playing around three minutes, the *Fantasiettina*, rather remarkably on such a condensed scale, works together both the dramatic and the ecstatic elements of Sorabji's art in a pithy opusculum which is the best introduction yet for the interested musician, or listener able to follow the score, but lacking resources to confront the major works. Ronald Stevenson edited the piece, which may still be available from Bardic Edition (6 Fairfax Crescent, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire HP20 2ES, England), and, for good measure, recorded it (*Cathedrals in Sound*, Altarus AIR-CD-9043, *Fanfare* 17:4). Where Stevenson plays to its volcanic properties, Habermann draws out the ecstatic—both are revelatory, affording, if *in parvo*, the luxury of *superb* complementary performances.

Djâmî, from 1928, essays that ecstatic, nocturnal idiom which blossomed so riotously a dozen years later in *Gulistân*. Habermann turns in a somewhat more atmospheric performance before an audience at the Peabody Conservatory, November 28, 1982, than that heard in the close studio recording for MusicMasters (MMD 60019Y). There is a bit of tape hiss, as there is in the *Fantasiettina*, a private studio recording dating from 1980. *Gulistân* and Habermann's *À la Manière de Sorabji*—at less than two minutes, a whimsical nod at Sorabji's parody pastiche manner—are splashy but closely, serviceably detailed recordings of their premieres at the American Liszt Society Festival in Washington, DC, December 8, 1993, while "*Quaere reliqua . . .*" is a digital studio recording made in January of this year. The pianist's annotations are excellent, explaining, for instance, why his performance of *Gulistân* differs considerably from the composer's own meandering reading, which has circulated in the tape underground since Donald Garvelmann broadcast it as part of a three-hour Sorabji special over WNCN, New York, in 1970. That Habermann performed his miracles in concert is undeniably impressive, and these recordings would be valuable in any case, but the scattered provenance of this program is testimony to a certain desperation. For here is a pianist of genius with but a tiny handful of peers—Marc-André Hamelin, certainly, but who else?—compelled to patch together the most important Sorabji offering in nearly a decade, and, incidentally, a landmark of recorded piano literature, from archival sources. Perhaps Habermann prefers to emerge from obscurity, like an apparition, at rare and solemn intervals to bestow an evanescent witness to unprecedented, superhuman pianistic flights upon alternately perplexed and astounded audiences, only to retreat as abruptly as he came. But it must be self-evident that an artist of his stature should have *carte blanche* to give, under optimum conditions, that which he is so richly possessed of: and that if we are to be tantalized by these sudden—and suddenly disappearing—glimpses into another, vaster dimension of spirit, the door should be flung open wide so that those who can hear may hear. Meanwhile, get this recording. With Hamelin's inspired rip through the First Sonata, Madge's now very scarce set of the *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, and Habermann's own deleted recordings, this is destined to be regarded as one of the very few authentic portals upon Sorabji's ravishing, recondite art. Don't let it miss you.

Adrian Corleonis