

SORABJI: Le Jardin parfumé

Michael Habermann, piano. Donald Garvelmann, prod. MUSICMASTERS
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It is somehow depressing to contemplate how composers like Kaikhosru Sorabji and Ralph Shapey can build reputations simply by refusing, for a period of years, to allow their music to be performed. When you come right down to it, such behavior is a species of tantrum—"Give me respect, or I'll hold my breath till I turn purple"—and it is depressing to know that both have succeeded with such tactics, especially since neither is a very good composer.

It was a fascinating thing, 15 or 20 years ago, to come across the score of Sorabji's *Opus Clavicembalisticum* and find piano music written on seven densely packed staves; to wonder what it could possibly sound like, whether the sheer technical boldness of the thing would be matched by an equivalent power and originality. You get enough people wondering that, and after a while it ceases to matter that the emperor has no clothes: people will want to judge his nakedness for themselves.

I'll tell you what—why don't you find this record (or one of Michael Habermann's other Sorabji issues) in a library and satisfy your curiosity that way, rather than spending money on it. You'll find that most of Sorabji's vaunted counterpoint is mud. Remember, we're not dealing with New Music here, where density is manipulated for its own sake; no, this is real counterpoint, lines meant to be separately perceived and harmoniously blended—and most of the time, it doesn't work. Where it does work, as in the *perpetuum mobile* first movement of the *Prelude, Inter-*

lude, and Fugue, we find lines that are very widely spaced, or bunched at the top of the piano, where, as in Conlon Nancarrow's music, dense textures are clarified by highly percussive attacks.

Otherwise, ironically, the most effective—and affecting—moments in Sorabji are those of homophony or simple two-part counterpoint. One example is the fine chorale in the middle of the otherwise turgid *St. Bertrand de Comminges* (supposedly a ghost story—the "Dies irae" is quoted, though it sounds more like *The Attack of the Mud Creatures*).

Any pianist with the chops to bring off Sorabji's counterpoint would almost by definition be better employed elsewhere; but—and this is the hell of it—I'm glad . . . glad, I tell you, that Habermann has recorded this repertoire. I just had to hear it for myself. Playing time: 49:40. ANDREW STILLER