
Record Reviews

Sorabji

Was Sorabji the Ferneyhough of his day? At least since Sorabji's prolific period there has been a change (whether one can call it an advance is another matter) in the technical and intellectual capacity of those performers called upon to interpret the most complex music set before executants. Sorabji himself acknowledged this change by lifting the ban he had imposed in 1940 on all performances of his works, thereby recognizing that the likes of Yonty Solomon and Michael Habermann met his exacting standards. Even the gigantic *Opus clavicembalisticum* (1929–30) has received its first complete modern performance, lasting three and three-quarter hours, from Geoffrey Douglas Madge in Utrecht in June 1982. The marked contrast in duration between this and the reported length (two and a half hours) of Sorabji's own performance in Glasgow in 1930 suggests that modern performers have recognized the need for space and clarity in the presentation of such mammoth pieces.

In Habermann's third recording of Sorabji's piano works (Music Heritage Society, MHS 7530H) this concern is immediately apparent in the Fugue of the Prelude, Interlude and Fugue (1920–22) and in many parts of the 20-minute, single-movement fantasy *St Bertrand de Comminges: 'He was laughing in the Tower'* (1941). Habermann has the knack of letting the music breathe so that the ear's bewilderment at hearing and attempting to comprehend the complexities of Sorabji's musical argument is eased and at times even completely dispelled. This success is clearest in the Fugue because Habermann, despite one or two stumbles, avoids the helter-skelter effect and lets the music drive forward by subtle use of rubato, clear articulation and amazingly transparent textures. In my view he is less successful in this respect in the latter stages of *St Bertrand* . . . and of the *Valse fantaisie: Hommage à Johann Strauss* (1925), seemingly unable to sustain the lightness of touch and

contrasting bursts of power that make earlier passages so convincing.

Part of the problem in sustaining conviction emanates inevitably from the nature of the pieces themselves. Sorabji's freestyle structuring must be a nightmare for the pianist trying to make sense of the content for himself let alone interpret it for the listener. This is probably exacerbated on this recording by the fact that it was made live before an audience in Ohio in November 1984. But that only serves to highlight Habermann's achievement. Without the safety-net of the splicing process he has managed to demonstrate a technical finesse and intellectual rigour that go a long way towards establishing Sorabji's piano music as more than just eccentric and entertaining. And in the Prelude, Interlude and Fugue, where the composer's natural effusiveness is formally disciplined, he makes a strong case for wider acceptance of such pieces in other pianists' repertory. The recording is plain (matched by the packaging: my disc was wrongly labelled but fortunately clearly banded) but more than adequate to reflect Habermann's exceptional approach.

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