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PROMOTERS OF THE BRITISH MUSICAL HERITAGE

SORABJI IN NEW YORK
MERKIN CONCERT HALL, 6 DECEMBER 1998

Interlude from *Prelude, Interlude and Fugue* (1922)[2] Quintet for Piano and Quartet of Stringed Instruments (1919-20)[2,5] (world premiere) *Trois fêtes galantes de Verlaine* (1919?)[1,2] Sonata II for Piano (1920)[3] *Pasticcio capriccioso sopra Op. 64 No. 1 dello Chopin* (1933)[4] Felicity La Fortune[1] (soprano) Christopher Berg[2], Tellef Johnson[3], Michael Habermann[4] (pianos) Marshall Coid[5], Lilit Gampel[5] (violins), David Cerutti[5] (viola), Christine Gummere[5] (cello)

Excellent performances of the quintet and the sonata made this the most important Sorabji concert since Geoffrey Douglas Madge played *Opus clavicembalisticum* in Paris in 1988.

The 25-minute quintet and 50-minute sonata are dissimilar structural experiments: extreme examples of what Sorabji called music creating its own form. As such, they involve challenges and opportunities, for listeners and performers, very different from Sorabji's other works. (Sonata III, written two years after Sonata II, is more difficult to play but easier to make sense of. It is structurally and harmonically conservative. The opposite of an experiment.)

Understanding is no prerequisite for enjoyment. People enjoy driving cars and making babies without understanding, in detail, the processes involved. Many people in the Merkin Hall audience (of around 300, including friends of the composer and performers of his music) appeared to have no trouble enjoying both works, despite some hand-wringing about "following" the music.

(Understanding is no guarantee of anything either, which is the side of things that Sorabji always emphasized: "What an odd delusion, and how prevalent, that when some composition that one dislikes has been put on the dissecting table, one will dislike it less, or, in that singularly meaningless phrase, 'understand' it better. [...] It is like someone, who, having introduced you to some antipatico person, shows you a radiograph of him, saying, 'Oh, you are ridiculously prejudiced against him! Just look at what a fine skeleton he has!'")

Actually, the quintet unwound with unusual persuasiveness, beauty, and power. The thing that was hard to understand had to do with the string parts, which were scarcely audible. This should have been a problem but wasn't. Listening to the quintet was like listening to piano music while thinking about something else—as though Sorabji had created more than a piano piece, but not exactly a piano piece plus additional sounds. The experience was extraordinary.

(Important music is mostly important for unintended reasons, which is why composers rarely deserve credit for how people feel about their work. Sorabji didn't set out to create musical designs that could be remembered but not heard, and might not have anticipated how his quintet would sound. He said he sometimes wrote music just to see what would happen.)

Sonata II lacked beginnings and endings on all possible time scales, rather like the situation in p-adic topology where every point of a disc is a centre. No music has ever seemed more paroxysmal, perhaps in part because of this peculiar always-in-the-middle-of-something aspect. (A 90-minute piano work by the American composer George Flynn has the same structural feature together with its eversion.) Somehow it all added up—without excuses, like life itself.

As a further curiosity, there were two moments during the performance of the sonata when a couple of notes moved a bit too fast to be possible. (Such moments are altogether unknown in the best performances of substantially more active music, e.g. Ian Pace's performances of Richard Barrett and Michael Finnissy.) The effect was unnatural and deeply disturbing—like an earth tremor in Iowa.

The remaining things were on a smaller scale—less exciting, less valuable, and less interesting to think about—but in other ways more perfect. The *Pasticcio capriccioso*, in particular, is a work of transcendental chinoiserie and posed greater performing challenges than anything else on the concert. (It shouldn't be confused with a less demanding *Minute Waltz* pastiche published and recorded many years ago.)

Sam Johnson's dog story. "Sir, a Sorabji performance is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all." This is funny but no longer true. These days, Sorabji performers copy out scores, correct mistakes, talk to each other, play the right notes, and understand what they're doing. (The tradition began with Michael Habermann—the least famous genuinely great pianist in the world.) But even by today's standards, the Merkin Hall event was remarkable. Someone said the quintet had eighty rehearsals and this may well be true. Tellef Johnson is 21 years old and could end up being the next Marc-André Hamelin. Someone should ask him about those two supernatural moments. Felicity La Fortune sang with wit and insight. Her performance was a welcome antidote to Jane Manning's 1979 BBC broadcast. Michael was Michael. Modest. Civilized. Brilliant. The understated *Pasticcio* should have been an irritating distraction, after the riveting chaos of the sonata, but it functioned instead as corrective and palate cleanser. The audience loved it. Best of all was Christopher Berg—a pianist of startling sensitivity and intelligence. (Only a musician of exceptional talent and determination could have hoped to fathom and perform the quintet—a work which has had more that its share of botched and aborted premieres.) It should be noted that Berg, an interesting composer in his own right, went to the considerable trouble of producing and promoting the concert. He also prepared the helpful programme book (including the excellent Verlaine translations). None of this should suggest that the performances were free of problems, or that the big works couldn't profit from more hard thinking.

The concert was followed by a panel discussion. About a hundred people stayed for this. Altarus recorded the event and will be releasing a CD of several of the performances. The next place to hear Berg's Sorabji will be in Santa Fe in April—in the world premiere of *Trois poèmes du "Gulistan" de Sadid_* (1926) for voice and piano. (Kevin Bowyer will be playing Sorabji's second organ symphony in Malmö, Sweden, in October. The performance, with intermissions, will last eight hours.) This isn't the place to dish up the usual explanations of who Sorabji was and what he was up to—explanations that were simple-minded and misleading twenty years ago. The place to go for reliable information is still Paul Rapoport's book. © *Kenneth Derus* Information about the Sorabji Archive at: http://www.music.mcgill.ca/~schulman/sor_arch.html.