

NEW YORK

**Pianist Christopher Berg, others: Sorabji Piano Quintet No. 1 [premiere]**

They journeyed to New York from Chicago, Philadelphia, Montreal, London. Word had spread about the event at Merkin Hall last December 6—premiere performances of chamber, vocal, and piano works by English-born Parsi composer Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892-1988). In his early years the enigmatic, legendary Sorabji was a provocative music critic. His most famous composition is the four-hour, awe-inspiring piano work *Opus clavicembalisticum* (1929-30). Most of his output (11,000 pages, it is said) is unpublished, never performed. However, the works on this program, with one exception, appeared in print in the 1920s and are from the composer's early period.

With darkened stage bathed in ruby-red lighting, the program opened with the Interlude, excerpted from the Prelude, Interlude and Fugue for piano (1920-22). The program's organizer, Christopher Berg, justly captured the atmosphere of this austere aperitif. He was then joined by string players Marshall Coid, Lalit Gandel, David Cerutti, and Cristine Gummere for the first performance of the Piano Quintet No. 1 (1920). In this continuous 26-minute roller-coaster ride, the performers—faced with a complex, difficult score—accomplished a rather amazing feat.

Soprano Felicity La Fortune gave the US premiere of *Trois fêtes galantes—L'allée, A la promenade, and Dans la Grotte*—(ca. 1919) set to Paul Verlaine's 1869 poems, accompanied expertly by Berg. La Fortune admirably conveyed the myriad aspects of these genuine art songs. They sound like something Debussy might have written had he lived another decade or so.

One anticipated a fair amount of listener-squirm during the first US performance of the adventurous, non-stop, 50-minute Second Sonata (1920). As 21-year-old pianist Tellef Johnson battled its thorns and concrete blocks, it was difficult to discern appealing melody, motivic association, rhythmical continuity, or a sense of form; but it was easy to relish an astonishing, heart-palpitating climax near the end. One assumed that the bravos when it was over were primarily for Johnson's heroic endurance. I wondered how many listeners would grasp the chance to sit through this sonata again.

About 30 years ago pianist Michael Habermann single-handedly began championing Sorabji, introducing many works. In Stockholm last March he premiered the unpublished *Pasticcio Capriccioso* (1933), Sorabji's second take-off on Chopin's *Minute Waltz*. Its New York debut was like sipping an exotic liqueur extracted from delicate, overripe fruit. Auditors were charmed as Habermann demonstrated his elegant mastery of the keyboard.

The after-concert panel discussion, deftly moderated by Bruce Posner, was a forum for some heated discussion of Sorabji's music, pro and con.

History was made by these fine American musicians. I look forward to Round Two of another Sorabji experience under Christopher Berg's very able aegis.

DONALD GARVELMANN

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