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Sorabji! How does that name strike you? It may conjure up all sorts of imagined but intriguing demons and delusions to the cognoscenti, while probably incurring a response ranging from a quizzical "Sorab-who?" to an expression of real curiosity among the less clued in. Whether this cautiously prepared program cleared up some of the mysteries for the latter group would be impossible to say, but to this reviewer, at least, it served as a fascinating introduction, thanks to the dedication of pianist-organizer Christopher Berg.

K.S. Sorabji (1898-1988), like several other 20th century composers, seems to have had a two-part career, pursuing a musical path during which at some point a decisive fork in the road was encountered and the newer direction was chosen. Some composers — Lukas Foss comes to mind — began their careers as "Peck's-Bad-Boys," showing how far ahead of their time they were, only later to turn to a more listener-friendly mode; others the very opposite.

But Sorabji is quite a complex case. His early works are not necessarily easily absorbed — certainly in their day they must have chased more than a few out of the concert hall — but his late works are said to be unremittingly bumptious and are seen by some as outrageously self-indulgent for their length alone. His *Opus clavicebalisticum* (1929-30), which may be considered the beginning of a new period (at age 37), calls for "great length and complexity," according to the program notes. (It has been recorded on four Altarus CDs — AJR-CD-9075.) A later choral work, the *Messa alta sinfonica* encompasses 1,001 score pages, requires about the same number of performers and takes about five hours to do.

No doubt such works would have to be specially programmed and/or recorded by and for Sorabji adherents. (See end of article.) On this evening the planning was modest, sensible. Only two works took over 8½ minutes, though the piano sonata ran well beyond that. The opening piano interlude, played by Mr. Berg, shows the influences of Debussy and Scriabin, without the inherent mysticism of the latter. The songs (3) by Verlaine do show that Sorabji was searching for a different vocal style, sometimes testing the limits of the singer. They were sung gallantly, if not quite convincingly, by the versatile and elegant Felicity La Fortune with Mr. Berg accompanying. But the evening's finale was a bit of a treat — one of several humorous transcriptions of Chopin's "Minute Waltz," played with knowing assurance of the piece's odd charms by Michael Habermann.

The first of the two lengthy works, the piano quintet, is a product of Sorabji's youthful period. The lead violin adheres to a tonal center but with a lot of subsidiary chromaticism by him, as well as the pianist and other string players who at times find themselves fiddling banal phrases. The composer may have been swayed by Schoenberg's use of a line (not a tone row), putting it through strenuous metamorphoses with meter shifts, redirection and a roller coaster ride of varying energy levels. But it comes over as a unique design, an experiment in a new approach to chamber music that sometimes sounds truly revo-



Sorabji

lutionary, at other times like a hellish regurgitation of others' ideas. (In one passage the pianist sounds as if he's trying to stop the other players with a temper tantrum, à la the snare drummer in Nielsen's *Fifth Symphony*.) Of course, there is no precedent to this live performance, so one can only guess that the players — Mr. Berg, again; Marshall Coid and Lilit Gampel, violins; David Cerutti, viola; Christine Gummere, cello — had it right.

But no one in the audience dared question the performance of 21-year old Tellef Johnson in Sorabji's *Second Piano Sonata*, a work that cannot be truly judged after but one listening. Apparently Mr. Johnson has decided to launch his career by taking on works few pianists would dare touch, though he is still an undergraduate at the Eastman School. The Sorabji requires 50 minutes of relentless concentration of effort. Ostensibly it is a sound picture of an unbearably long struggle between the same elements all of the great composers have tussled with, from Beethoven to Busoni (to whom the work is dedicated) and Scriabin (whose music it often suggests). This struggle brings about a kind of catharsis in which all of the frightful pounding chords, arching melodies, arpeggios and trills finally give way to an harmoniously ecstatic Eden. That assessment, however, can in no way describe the pianist's role in this seemingly impossible task. But our pianist appeared as fit and fresh in the end as in the beginning. (Mr. Berg, in the role of page-turner this time, confessed later that he was totally exhausted by the end.) Tellef Johnson is certainly a young star on the new-music horizon.

In an interesting post-concert panel discussion in which Messrs. Johnson and Berg joined Sorabji experts Bruce Posner (moderator), Kenneth Derus and Alistair Hinton, a gentleman in

K.S. Sorabji's *Second Piano Sonata*: "...fifty minutes of unrelenting concentration..."

the audience rose to question all of the attention being paid to music he found maddening. While the panelists seemed to humor the questioner, some members of the audience took outright offense and felt obliged to argue the

cause of new music with the man. It led to nowhere leaving one with the impression that the man showed more guts than his offended challengers. Maybe the cause of new music needs to open itself for questioning now and then if for no other reason than to check its own occasional smarter-than-thou attitude.

(The concert was recorded by Altarus Records which has produced eight CDs devoted to Sorabji's music.) **B.L.C.**

THE MUSIC OF KAIKHOSRU SHAPURJI SORABJI.
Interlude (from *Prelude, Interlude and Fugue*); *Quintet for piano and strings* *(1920); *Trois fêtes galantes de Verlaine* ^ (1919?); *Sonata #2 for piano* ^ (1920); *Pasticcio capriccioso sopra Op. 64 #1 dello Chopin* + (1933). Various artists. Presented by PPI at Merkin Concert Hall, Dec. 6. (*World ^U.S. and +New York premieres)