

The Boston Musical Intelligencer » Sick Puppy at NEC

JUNE 18, 2009, Sick Puppy at NEC, by David Patterson

An eager crowd appeared at New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall Wednesday June 17 for a concert presented by that institution's Summer Institute for Contemporary Performance Practice, aka Sick Puppy. This concert is part of a week-long series, one, by the way, that follows on the tail of another exceptional series, the Boston Early Music Festival, both of these together making Boston the place to be in the month of June.

Wednesday's program offered a rare opportunity to hear live Three Quarter-tone Pieces devised by American icon Charles Ives. One piano is tuned "50 cents lower" as Mark Whitlock put it. A much sought-after piano technician in Boston, Whitlock spent the last two weeks re-tuning one of the school's Steinway pianos in order to get it used to holding its new pitch. Did it hold for the concert?

"It did," he said, adding "Ives must have been inspired by a 'basement piano,'" in other words, out-of-tune.

As I listened, I could not help but think about the early keyboards (fortepiano, harpsichord and clavichord) I had heard last week at the BEMF. Unbelievably, Stephen Drury and long-time friend Paul Hanson made these two differently tuned pianos appear as one singular instrument with ever so alluring sound. On the same pages at every turn, both pianists, in the most finely tuned and empathic ways, fashioned images and their requisite feelings of a small American town of yesteryear-Ives' environment. Even nostalgia played into the picture. Through Drury and Hanson, transcendence pervaded all the way through Ives' musical Americana. At the close of the final movement, Chorale, came the expected harmony, a major triad, here, though, quietly and peacefully ringing in quarter-tones.

Three works from a century later by Sick Puppy composer-in-residence, Jonathan Harvey, took a far different tack. With his music, I was constantly made conscious of how his music was being made. Unlike Ives, Harvey removed, almost altogether, the human condition as a reason for creating. If there were philosophical or physical motives underpinning this music, they passed me by. The only image suggested by the surfeit of sounds coming from tape, piano, cello and sampler was one of a space odyssey featuring numberless, motionless, anonymous objects.

Despite a row of multiple music stands partially blocking him from view, Cellist Francesco Dillon held every bit of attention with his playing. He brought absolute involvement and reverence to the demanding instrumental techniques and strange sonic stances called for in Harvey's scores. A surprising, weird whistling came out of his amplified instrument in Curve with Plateaux. Like Curve, Advaya had moments where Dillon tangentially emoted; some of these moments were mysteriously reminiscent of expression found in traditional folk music from the Middle East, perhaps.

Pianist Emanuele Torquati brought unflagging commitment to Harvey's Tombeau de Messiaen, whose surface was sparsely sprinkled with Messiaen's very personal musical language. When guest pianist Aki Takahashi came on stage, she received well-deserved appreciation for her life-long involvement with contemporary music and many of its major composers.

Accompanying Takahashi were five brass players whose names did not appear on the program. All tackled a 1960s piece by Iannis Xenakis entitled Eonta. Brasses and piano form an odd couple you would think, but not here where they summon up an industrial environment that could have wowed listeners even those who may not have been moved or pleased by the music's unflinching hard edge. The treacherous piano part requires a sudden hand-jump from mid-piano to a single note at the high end. This and endless rounds of machine rhythms showed the incomparable agility and endurance Takahashi still possesses.

Drury conducted this highly capable ensemble. However, had this often overpowering, often overwhelming "experience" (Drury declares being "dedicated to the proposition that music is an experience") not followed the Harvey pieces, listeners would have been in a better, more ready state for the Xenakis. With more bodies to absorb sound in resonant Jordan Hall the very loudest of passages would not have verged on the intolerable. There were imbalances in ensemble playing and dynamics were too often roughly hewn, all of which contributed to more fatigue than to life-giving energy.

The series under the artistic direction of Stephen Drury runs June 15-20.