

A Sonata Obsessed

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A neoclassicist with minimalist endurance

photo: Barbara Nitke

In case anyone's been wondering, writing a three-hour piano sonata is one way to get my attention. I may have the longest attention span in the business. If I'm enjoying a novel I get disappointed if it ends before page 800, and when I first heard La Monte Young play his six-hour-long *The Well-Tuned Piano*, I lifted my head as the last tones died away and asked, "Is that all?" If I like something, I want it to go on for a long, long time. So the three-disc length of Andrew Violette's Piano Sonata No. 7, which appeared recently on the Innova label with the composer performing, was already by itself something of a commendation.

As it turned out, I didn't care for the sonata on first listening—it seemed empty, lacking in tension, and made up of common, overly simple materials. But such an ambitious venture deserves multiple chances, and halfway through the second listening I found myself deliciously caught up in the maniacal intensity of a section called "Colorfield 1." It's not that the music was particularly high-energy or chaotic, but that it spun chromatic filigrees over slow bass arpeggios with a relentless obsessiveness, like a man possessed by the memory of a traumatic emotion, muttering to himself. From then on I listened differently. Violette's sense of continuity, static in texture but not repetitive in any minimalist way, is unlike anyone else's, and new paradigms for musical rhetoric always interest me.

The Sonata No. 7 is divided into 26 sections—I won't say movements, because they generally succeed each other without a break. Something in the manner of *The Well-Tuned Piano*, ideas reappear: The opening "Adagio I" has a reappearance half an hour into the piece and again near the end

reappear: the opening, *Adagio I*, has a recap half an hour into the piece and again near the end, and there's a "Refrain" movement that returns three times. As with Young, passages have titles: "Rocket Dance," "Stride Piano," "Descending Into the Abyss." Though interrupted by ear-cleansing, fortissimo forearm clusters, the music is mostly tonal, sometimes frozen for minutes at a time in a single minor mode. Descending scales and repeated major chords extend to the point that they seem iconic rather than syntactical. A middle section called "The Song Deconstructed" is a 12-minute classical cadence, like one of Liszt's "angelic" moments stretched out to seeming eternity.

Yet Violette's Sonata shares neither the organic atmosphere of Young's magnum opus nor the emotionalism of New Romantic music. Unlike the tear-jerking descending scales in Gorecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*, Violette's detached tonal commonplaces have an icy objectivity to them, as though he had started with Stravinsky's neoclassicism and extended it with a minimalist sense of endurance. Despite page after page after page of figurations that might feel at home in Brahms, the music is never tender, and rarely descends from a certain Olympian majesty, though it frequently achieves a sense of timelessness that it shares with Messiaen's austere late works. There is also violence, always of a controlled nature: The final section of the first half is entirely in tone clusters—283 of them, the liner notes tell us, all on white keys, and all different.

Filling out the final disc is a more conventional Violette sonata lasting only 15 minutes, No. 1 from 1978: atonal, prickly, and distinguished by clocklike rhythms and drawing of melodic lines in widely separated registers. The disc's cover and visuals, stressing leather and metal, seem dangerously close to drawing a tough-guy cult of personality around Violette, which threatens to make one take the music less seriously than it deserves. That would be a shame, for his audacity is deeper than the hipness of some recent young composers, and it's great to have—along with *The Well-Tuned Piano*, Larry Polansky's 90-minute *Lonesome Road*, and Kaikhosru Sorabji's four-hour *Opus Clavicembalisticum*—another piano work that lasts as long as my interest in hearing it.

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