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MUSIC REVIEW

From the Levant to Brazil, or Vice Versa

By PAUL GRIFFITHS

The Ethos Percussion Group offered an engagingly open-minded miscellany on Monday evening at Merkin Hall. One of the players rather abashedly suggested in his introductory comments that there might be a kind of a thread running through the program, a thread of rhythmic energy traveling from the Islamic world through Moorish Iberia to Brazil. But the syncopated rhythms could equally have gone rattling back the other way, from the New World to the Old, for it would be hard now to find a musical culture that has not been touched by the sounds of the Americas.

Still, speculative musicology was beside the point. What the ensemble

Syncopated rhythms with an Arab tinge.

evidently wanted to do was just have a good time playing with musicians versed in traditions from either end of their supposed chain of communication: Simon Shaheen and John LaBarbera.

Mr. LaBarbera's "Marim ba ba" was a set of three cheerful homages to Brazilian folk music: bouncy, dreamy and bouncy again, scored for two players on marimba plus two more on light percussion. This was music you wanted to be dancing to.

Mr. Shaheen had been attracted by the same marimba, to which he gave an Arab tinge not so much with his rhythmic models as by adding quarter-tones that enabled the instrument to function in Levantine modes. All around the marimba were pattering skin drums.

In another largely improvised contribution from him, he featured as soloist on the ud, or Arab lute, on which he produced frothy waves of tremolandos at dizzying speed. Everyone else was duly given a solo break: Mr LaBarbera on guitar and the four Ethos players, among whom Michael Sgouros proved himself a virtuoso on the clearly underrated triangle, finding varieties of color and exact rhythmic antics.

The group also played "33 Samra Zabobra" by Carlos Stasi and Cage's "Second Construction."