

The Boston Globe

A radiant performance of an unusual work

By Matthew Guerrieri
Globe Correspondent / May 9, 2007

CAMBRIDGE - Quick, name the capital of Suriname. If you said Paramaribo, you're doing better than Canadian composer Claude Vivier, who inadvertently transposed the city's vowels in his 1978 chamber piece "Paramirabo." Vivier decided to keep the misspelling, as it could then also refer to the Mirabeau Bridge in Paris -- a typical, idiosyncratically poetic gesture for one of music's great uncategorizable modernists, who forged a deeply personal avant-garde style.

"Paramirabo" was the highlight of the Radius Ensemble's concert at MIT's Killian Hall on Saturday night. Scored for flute, violin, cello, and piano, the work is filled with unusual techniques -- harmonics, glissandi, whistling, even the sounds of the performers' breathing -- but Vivier's use of them is never gimmicky, always emerging organically from the musical discourse.

A distant, luminous chorale opens the piece, and then gunshot piano chords startle the other instruments into more exotic sonic realms. Later, the chorale texture returns, slowed to a crawl, while the piano tolls in the background, the passage of time made as dense and languid as the jungle. A soft, sharp inhalation ends the work in literally breathless fashion. Flutist Alicia DiDonato, violinist Biliana Voutchkova, cellist David Russell, and pianist Alison d'Amato were technically assured and deeply musical.

Equally engrossing was Sofia Gubaidulina's 1991 "Silenzio," for violin, cello, and bayan, a Russian accordion. Each of the five movements takes two or three motives or sonorities and recombines them into quietly intense dramas.

The ensemble's artistic director, oboist Jennifer Montbach, along with clarinetist Eran Egozy and bassoonist Susannah Telsey, began the concert with a reading of Jean Françaix's "Divertissement" that never subsumed the music's challenges into its casual Gallic charm; it was hard liquor's blunt edge rather than champagne's misty fizz. But, joined by d'Amato and horn player Anne Howarth, they closed with a genial and meaty performance of Beethoven's Op. 16 Quintet for piano and winds. The band reveled in the youthful composer's sudden accents and dynamic contrasts. ■

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Music Review

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Radius Ensemble

Jennifer Montbach, artistic director
At: Killian Hall, MIT, Saturday

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