

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

Evocations of Agrarian and Café Romp from Radius Ensemble

by Tom Schnauber
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On Friday, October 2, the Radius Ensemble opened its twelfth season with a fascinating program of four rarely heard chamber works. The performance took place in MIT's Killian Hall, which proved to be an unfortunate choice: the space is sonically stuffy and seemed to dampen any sparkle that might have radiated from the instruments, a handicap that weighed down most of the pieces, despite the performers' best efforts. Nonetheless, the interpretations were solid, energetic, and at times even inspired.

The program opened with an Adagio in C major, Paul Angerer's recent and tasteful fleshing out of a fragment from W. A. Mozart's last years. Scored for English horn and string trio, it is a lovely, lilting little gem of the rounded binary type that Mozart honed to near perfection. The players admirably attempted to capture the lightness and delicacy of the piece, but could not quite lift it out of the acoustic bog. Regardless, it was satisfying to hear a "new" work, especially one so masterfully simple, by this old friend of the concert hall.

Second on the program was Carl Nielsen's *Wind Quintet, Op. 43* from 1922. The story behind this work is that Nielsen, inspired by a performance given by Copenhagen Wind Quintet, decided to write a piece that would reflect the psychological characteristics of each of the five instruments and their players. As heady as this premise sounds, the result is a good-natured, pastoral exploration of neo-Classical symmetry that has taken a well-deserved place among the best pieces for this combination of instruments. The first movement, "Allegro ben moderato," gives the impression of five conservatory-trained shepherds in a well-structured conversation full of winks, nudges, and in-jokes. In the Minuet that follows, the shepherds break into a crafty, somewhat quirky dance in which each of them engage in a bit of fancy footwork to the delight of the others. The final movement has them revealing most deeply their true Arcadian personalities while still working together to negotiate short but odd variations on a chorale theme. Throughout the performance, the Radius players did a wonderful job communicating the individual ticks and mannerisms written into each part — especially clarinetist Eran Egozy, whose sensitive and energetic playing made me wish he had been featured on more than just this work. Those sections that called for balanced teamwork, however, caused the group some trouble, especially the harmonically slippery "Praeludium" of the third movement, which never really locked in to clear intonation. The shepherds needed perhaps a bit more time in the fields together.

Following the intermission was Toru Takemitsu's 1992 trio for flute, viola, and harp "*And then I knew 'twas wind.*" Like the Nielsen, this work, inspired by an Emily Dickinson poem, is infused with pastoralism, only here the countryside is reduced to a mesmerizing, though somewhat too-long meditation on breezes. It is essentially a collection of delicate, transparent, upward-sweeping gestures that swirl around each other and often blow away entirely. The players brought out the airy, blustery sonorities with true expressive skill — harpist Ina Zdrovetchi was particularly adept at negotiating the challenging harp part, making it sound almost as easy as a sigh — though they could have taken even more time between breaths, allowing each gust of wind to be fully taken in by the listeners.

The final work on the program seemed out of place among the four, carrying none of the agrarian overtones of the previous three pieces. On the other hand, it was the one piece that was well suited to the oppressive, almost smoky sonic atmosphere of Killian Hall. Paul Schoenfield's 1987 *Café Music* for piano trio is a raucous romp in three movements through a convincingly blended salon concoction of jazz, folk, and classical flavors. The Radius players dazzled here, especially in their ability to find the Romantic richness embedded in the swing and stride. Pianist Cory Smythe, the rhythmic and interpretive glue of the performance, was particularly adept at knowing when to dance and when to sing, both of which he did beautifully. The last movement, with its delightfully jarring changes of tempo and meter, brought the evening to an energized, foot-tapping finale.