

# The Boston Musical Intelligencer

## Historical Works of the Future & Some of the Past

by Vance Koven

March 8, 2015

Both the lightness of experience and the burden of history figured in Saturday's Radius Ensemble appearance at Longy-Bard's Pickman Hall. Two bona-fide historical works bookended the eclectic program while the two newer ones—one a premiere—invoked the past variously.

"Life is uncertain: eat dessert first" seemed to be the watchwords for the evening, as the program unwrapped with some bonbons in the shape of six arias from Rossini's *Barber of Seville* as arranged for two bassoons by Rossini's friend, the French composer and bassoonist François-René Gebauer. While the parlor piano was the usual means for disseminating music to the masses (or at least to the bourgeoisie) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, other means were variously employed, though few even haute bourgeoisie were likely to possess two bassoons. The two players, Adrian Morejon and Peter Kolkay, introduced the Gebauer set, wryly noting that they constitute a major contribution to the literature for two bassoons.

The six arrangements were of "Ecco, ridente in Cielo," Almaviva's serenade (in disguise as Lindoro) to Rosina; "Largo al factotum," Figaro's famous patter song; "Una voce poco fa," a cavatina for Rosina; "Dunque io son," a duet for Figaro and Rosina; "Zitti zitti, piano piano," which was actually a trio in Act 2, and the Act 2 finale, "Di si felice innesto." One can choose either to be astonished at Gebauer's ability to boil the essence of this music down to two single lines, or suspect that any vocal-orchestral work that *can* be thus boiled down didn't have much to it in the first place; but there's no denying the infectiousness of Rossini's tunes. The realizations were likewise ingratiating (indeed, the literally breathtaking "Largo" sounds more mellifluous this way than when pattered). The players' phrasing was carefully gauged, though Kolkay had the smoother legato (they courteously switched off taking the melody lines). Our one cavil was that the dynamic range of the playing was a bit narrow, not quite the treatment for the composer known as "Signor Crescendo."

The first half closed with the premiere of *Quintologue* for wind quintet, for which Jordan Chase, a 24-year-old MM student at Longy, won the school's Pappalardo Composition Competition. The composer's brief program note remarks that a wind quintet "consists of five unique instruments..." Well, yes. Having thus stated the obvious, it remained for him to create a work that exploited those timbral differences interestingly, which is always the great challenge to anyone writing for this potentially ungainly ensemble. In this he has succeeded pretty well. The structure of *Quintologue* fits well with the common understanding of the term "fantasy," having a series of sections of contrasting moods and textures that eventually recall the opening. It reminded us of the many works entitled "Phantasy" submitted in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century for the Cobbett Prize piece by eminent British composers from Vaughan Williams and Bridge to Britten. Chase's work opens with a rather Debussyan flute solo using a motif that provides a good "memory hook," which the instruments take up in pairs and develop into a thickening texture before being reduced to fragments. Lyrical passages segue into rhythmically jagged ones, culminating in a homophonous, rhythmically driven climax and a smoother statement, before the opening motif returns and leads to a coda with a soft landing. It seemed quite competently put together (while it employed no extended performance techniques, it had some nice color effects, for example in the muted horn) and, while it didn't induce any epiphanies or ecstasies; it was pleasantly enduring. The playing of Sarah Brady, flute, Jennifer Montbach, oboe, Eran Egozy, clarinet, Morejon, and Anne Howarth, horn, seemed secure, accurate and empathetic.

The second half began with another newish composition, the 2006 *Jane Wang Considers the Dragonfly* for flute and tape delay, commissioned by Brady from Elena Ruehr. The tape delay, one of the simplest of electronic manipulations allows the live triggering of ostinato figures. In introducing the piece, Brady said she wasn't sure now whether it was she or Ruehr who came up with the reference to [Wang](#), as a kind of metaphor for the interaction of the "natural" (in this case live) and the digital worlds. It really doesn't matter, historically or musically, although the dragonfly image does partly explain the flighty, fluttering quality of the melodic descants Ruehr sets up over the evolving series of most often rhythmically pronounced ostinato.

There is a distinct “Ruehr sound,” which is a modally or pentatonically inflected melody with little two- and three-note turning or repeated nodules—as much a signature sound as in Mendelssohn, Shostakovich or Copland. To be brutally honest, we like it, and in this piece, also structured in the mode of a fantasy, against the quintuple and sextuple meter ostinati (with Chinese-style pitch bends), it produces a very attractive counterpoint that seldom changes character but turns its face, so to speak, now to China, now to Latin America, and to thinner or thicker textures (using compounded tape delay tracks). Brady was appropriately fluid (or maybe we should say airy, though we certainly know that air is a fluid), and seemed more centered and meatier than the one she [recorded](#).

The weight of history came down most heavily in the final piece on the program the Piano Quintet in G minor, Op. 57, by Dmitri Shostakovich. One may disbelieve, as do we, the story that the composer only added a piano part to what was originally intended as his second string quartet so that he could go on tour with the Beethoven Quartet: there is nothing “tacked on” about it, although the writing is remarkable for the clarity and simplicity of its textures. In any event it has become one of his most famous and popular works. While not one of his wartime compositions—it was written in 1940, while the Soviet Union was enjoying the fool’s paradise provided by the [Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact](#)—it inevitably deals with the public and private responsibilities of the artist, its largely brooding content leavened by occasional outbreaks of what some have considered frivolity, but those were the masks Shostakovich was compelled to wear to get along. In this regard it inhabits a similar, though more intimate, world as the Sixth Symphony. However, in the Quintet, Shostakovich pared his expression down to severe simplicity, whereby it gained enormous emotional power.

The first two (out of five) movements are a prelude and fugue, both at slow tempos. This is a technique that informed his towering contrapuntal masterpiece, the op. 87 Preludes and Fugues of ten years later, but here the Bachian opening movements lead to a somewhat goofy scherzo, then a serenely tragic “intermezzo” and finally to a jolly finale whose smiling face might actually be a rictus.

The enormous popularity of the Quintet, and the politically and psychologically freighted and fraught status of its composer, has led to its being in the ring for all the great heavyweights among pianists and string quartets. There are literally dozens of screens full of YouTube examples, from the original Shostakovich recording with the Beethoven Quartet through Glenn Gould, Marta Argerich with an all-star pickup ensemble, Boris Berman with the Vermeer Quartet, Ashkenazy with the Firzwilliam, and on and on, including one by Condoleezza Rice. Therein lay the problem that pianist Sarah Bob, and the Radius quartet consisting of violinists Katherine Winterstein and Omar Chen Güey, violist Noriko Futagami Herndon, and cellist Miriam Bolkosky, had to confront. Bob acknowledged as much in her introduction, saying that she was honored to be performing the piece. Best not to be so self-conscious; just play it in the same spirit in which one would play the Schumann or Brahms quintets, and let the music do the walking and talking.

That’s not to say that there were any serious problems Saturday; in fact, it was rather good. Bob took command right out of the box, and the strings provided some luminosity, especially from Winterstein and Herndon in the solo turns of the third movement’s trio, and from everybody in the fourth movement. There were a few issues along the way: it may be a peculiarity of the room’s acoustic (which we’ve never heard criticized before), but the strings sometimes had a hollowed-out, distant sound (the violins in particular), and the opening movement’s entrance was a bit raspy (this may actually have been a deliberate choice, since several of the “classic” recordings do it this way, while others prefer a smoother sound). As if perplexed by the way the finale was written, the ensemble interpreted it a bit too slowly, though the evanescent ending was perfect.