

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

Mixes and Matches of Colors by Radius Ensemble at MIT

by David Patterson
March 14, 2010

It was not a surprise that Radius Ensemble, one of Boston's most colorful groups, would come up with the *Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon* of Francis Poulenc. No, a piano is not involved in this, just those two instruments. Then there was a 1994 piece for woodwind quintet, *Roaring Fork*, composed by Eric Ewazen, which Radius founder Jennifer Montbach just happened to come upon, liked, and then programmed. After intermission, Radius changed to very different colors in *Piano Quartet No. 2 in A*, Op. 26 by Johannes Brahms. Where can you go in our town and find a wind quintet and a quartet with piano and strings both on the same concert? Radius, of course!

Furthermore, today's concerts are few and far between where you would come upon the woodwind quintet. Granted, the repertoire does not match that of string quartets and the like. One reason might be that its instrumental diversity can cut both ways, toward timbral rainbows or annoying mélanges.

Poulenc's mischievous little sonata running about nine minutes, though for two reed instruments that match up more readily than do other instruments in the traditional wind quintet, ended in a mix of interpretation. Bassoon-making mischievousness played out more like tongue-and-cheek fair. Gregory Newton's bassoon downplayed his part just enough to bring about smiles, leaving one to want more of the same. His higher and more naturally dynamic partner on clarinet went a bit far as do others with the clarinet part. Eran Egozy eliminated all vibrato. At times his playing became garish. Instances of real working together could be heard in passages where both played parallel lines. The rapid-fire ending misfired.

With the Ewazen piece came color galore. "Eric Ewazen," the program notes tell us, "studied at the Eastman School of Music and the Juilliard School, where he is currently on the faculty." Radius described his 20-minute wind quintet as "tonal" with "modern textures." *Roaring Fork* finds its inspiration from that river located near Aspen, Colorado. For some reason, images of "Maroon Creek," "Snowmass Lake" and "Buckskin Pass," subtitles of the movements (I realized well into listening to this colorful and old-fashioned glimpse of Americana) did not come to mind. Curiously, though the music sounded very much like a soundtrack, it remained music pure and simple—finally fatiguing in the end particularly due to its narrow, if not familiar, confines.

Radius, however, showed what a mix of woodwinds as theirs can do. For example, toward the close of the piece, horn and bassoon were in their low-end register, while the flute and oboe were at their opposites. These vibrant pairings were balanced and articulated in striking fashion. Overall, quintet members, flutist, Sarah Brady, oboist Jennifer Montbach, clarinetist Eran Egozy, bassoonist Gregory Newton, and hornist Anne Howarth, mixed and matched colors in the most inviting ways. Further into the piece, I found myself drawn to the woodwind personalities of the players, all of whom were fully engaged and fully engaging.

From the introductory comments of violinist Jae Young Cosmos Lee could be gleaned the reverence and enthusiasm this Radius configuration was ready to inject into the Brahms piano quartet. And they did so: the best moments came in the slow movement, *Poco Adagio* where Dina Vainshtein's piano arpeggios were mysteriously countered by string iterations of a short motive. *The Scherzo, Poco Allegro* proposed the clearest outlines of all of the movements, the quartet playing up most of them, sometimes with gusto and other times with reticence.

Cellist Rafael Popper-Keizer and violist Sarah Darling really had the best ideas. They found emotion and shape in this powerful novel-like work of Brahms. Unfortunately, they were all too often blanketed by an unyielding violin that, in addition, was all-too bright. The piano part needed more in-between fair. There were lighter and grander passages (some of the latter overpowered the instrument). Surprisingly, it was the strings and the string-piano combinations that did not match up. Brahms might have put it as he did in his motto for his women's choir: *fix oder nix* or, "up to the mark or nothing."

The concert took place Saturday, March 13 in Killian Hall on the campus of MIT. It will be repeated Sunday, March 14 at 4 pm at the Rivers School Conservatory's Rivera Hall.