

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

Radius Ensemble Players Enjoy Themselves

by Brian Schuth

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Can there be such a thing as a pops concert for a chamber music group? The Radius Ensemble came awfully close to it on Saturday night, with a program at Longy that was predominantly light. There wasn't a whole lot to chew on here, but it was diverting and pleasurable.

"Light" doesn't necessarily mean "light-hearted", and the most intellectually engaging piece of the evening was a mostly solemn curiosity, John Fonville's *Music for Sarah* for solo flute and solo dancer. Fonville is a composer and flutist currently at UC San Diego, with a particular interest in extended techniques. The six movements of *Music for Sarah* consist almost exclusively of etudes in the production of untraditional sounds for the instruments, with a vaguely Eastern cast to most of them. The movement titles describe the intended effects or techniques: "I. whistle tones are overblown to make harmonics, sometimes producing multiphonics on 3 basic fingers"; "V. Shakuhachi flute"; "III. Tibetan chant – throat singing". Flutist Sarah Brady assembled and disassembled her flute several times, blocked the end with duct tape, blew across the open tube like a bottle, and often sang while playing. The music lacked a strong pulse, either choosing to produce clouds of these intriguing noises, or on a few occasions to drop into a kind of *moto perpetuo*. According to Brady, some of the music and dance was improvised. As such, the dancing was of the type I can only call "interpretive," as performed and choreographed by Alissa Cardone, a striking presence, whose work contrasted undulation with off-kilter geometry, having an underlying emotional core that was frequently troubled and unsettled. Brady is clearly a master of extended flute techniques; the "Sarah" of the title refers to Fonville's original dancer, Sarah Brumgart, but you could be forgiven for thinking it referred to Brady. Fonville has a strong sense of how to deploy these techniques, but the material they use is limited and the writing is atmospheric rather than developmental. Once one had the gist of the flute technique in play in a given movement, it was Cardone's movement that kept one's attention. The two performers created an atmosphere hieratic and atavistic – only in the very brief fourth movement ("IV. A 9 note pattern with ingress singing influenced by a young woman from a pygmy tribe") did the mood lighten. It was performed on a bare stage (and at first in a side aisle) with subtly dramatic lighting; Brady acknowledged the light designer from the stage, but I missed the name and the program does not credit him or her.

The other pieces on the program were variously soothing and comforting. Evan Ziporyn wrote *Be-In* back in 1991 for bass clarinet and string quartet, and it has a modest but enduring popularity. Ziporyn has produced a number of arrangements of the piece, most of which permit the bass clarinet to be replaced by another bass instrument; I have yet to hear the version for clarinet, mandolin, cello, electric piano, double bass and hand percussion. Beginning with a pulse and a 5:4 rhythmic figure that instantly establishes a syncopated groove, the work slowly evolves in density and complexity through several different episodes. The rhythms occasionally break away from the steady pulse, but always dance around it; the melodic figures run a gamut from minimalist repetition to brief but impassioned exclamation. It's hypnotic and kind of groovy, with a cool sense of everything being all right. Clarinetist Eran Egozy characterized it as having a sound that was "Middle Eastern and sort of southeast Asian"; it's also jazzy and bluesy and kind of poppy in places without pandering or becoming ventriloquism. Egozy played with Charles Dimmick and Omar Chen Guey, violins; Noriko Futagami Herndon, viola; and Miriam Bolkosky, cello. One wanted more rhythmic precision and shaping – the piece felt fragile at times, moments where the pulse no longer held and the music threatened to float away. It was a relatively straight performance of a piece that invites just a touch more drama.

“Ventriloquism” might be the best rubric for organizing thoughts about the second half of the concert. Claude Debussy’s 1880 Piano Trio in G major is new to me. A youthful work of 17, it was not published in Debussy’s lifetime and only surfaced in the 1980s. It is four movements of a kind of post-Brahms, post-Franck swooning romanticism that sounds precisely unlike anything else you’ve heard by Debussy. Its finest moments come from melodies and harmonic episodes that have a calculated naivete; its most affecting moments come from naïve gestures that are just naïve. You cannot listen to this music and keep saying to yourself “Debussy wrote this” without being tempted to laugh out loud—not that the music is laughable, but the distance from this piece to the mature Debussy is almost absurd. You will look in vain for any sense of greatness; there’s a restless ingenuity here, but also impatience. There’s a lot of imitative “development”, with the occasional endearingly clumsy cadence. Young Debussy still had some architectural work to do as well—all of the movements ended just a bit before I expected them to. Dimmick, Bolkosky and pianist Anastasia Antonacos played with warmth and sympathy, and never allowed the Romanticism of the young composer to run away with them.

It is churlish to end by complaining about the evening’s last piece, a mock-classical fluffy concoction for wind quintet by Lalo Schifrin entitled *La Nouvelle Orleans*, but I’m going to anyway. Despite the general ovation given at its completion, despite oboist Jennifer Montbach’s passionate exclamation that it is “so fun to play”, I found it charmless and predictable. The first half takes an off-center ostinato and decorates it with flurries of runs, to no dramatic or developmental effect. This gives way to a second half consisting of a stereotypical New Orleans upbeat funeral tune with just enough harmonic thickness to sound like concert music. This is the sort of thing where the oboe bending “jazzy” notes gets laughs from the crowd. If the intention was just to put something light and fun in front of us, the few bars of the “Mission Impossible” theme played before the piece to identify Schifrin pointed the way. I’d rather have heard four minutes of creative riffing on that undeniably ear-catching fragment than *La Nouvelle Orleans*, a piece whose very name is both shallow and pretentious, and whose material is impoverished. Egozy, Montbach and Brady were joined by Adrian Morejon on bassoon and Anne Howarth on horn, and they played with a sense of play and, yes, “fun” that I wish I could have shared.