

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

Radius Ensemble Encircles Mixed Rep

by David Patterson

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The 16th season of radius ensemble opened Saturday at Longy with “Exhale,” in which an off-kilter boogie-woogie, moved on to a “feeling of summer,” shifted to darkness, took a break, and came back playing an hour’s worth of Schubert. Programmatically it was yet another ensemble radius coup, performance-wise somewhat of a disenchantment, the exceptions being Bob’s pianistic feats and Noriko Futagami Herndon’s string poetics.

After being away on maternity leave, Sarah Bob returned to radius ensemble with *...nobody move* by Randall Woolf. His aim was to “find the common ground between the menace of the hard-core Hollywood villain and the fearless bravado of the virtuoso pianist, with the audience as helpless victim, too frightened to bat an eye.” Bob’s achievement was high piano drama at daredevil rapidity, left hand furiously driving a walking bass line and right hand ripping in and out careening over the treble keys. She completely transformed a moderately interesting composition laden with budget chromaticism into an exciting keyboard coup.

Music for woodwind quintet doesn’t get any better than it does in Samuel Barber’s “Summer Music” Op. 31 (1956), a one-movement piece lasting a dozen minutes. Its size and shape figure into glimpses of the laidback and the blissful. But these qualities only made their way to the surface here and there. Edginess replaced tenderness. Singleness of purpose, though toned down, denied blend.

Katherine J. Allwine Bacasnot planted facts and connections from which sprang interest, if not fascination. Among the nuggets, here is one about the Barber piece that was commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Detroit. “Following a kind of mid-twentieth-century model of Kickstarter, each participating donor in the society contributed no more than \$10 or \$20. As a result and to his delight, Barber noted in an interview, everyone in the audience felt the music belonged to them.” And I also learned that “it was Irving Berlin and Richard Rodgers who commissioned his Piano Sonata.”

The lights dimmed, leaving Pickman Concert Hall dark save for an orangish glow on stage where Noriko Futagami Herndon Saariaho stood, dressed in formal black evening attire, two speakers flanking the stage. Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho’s *Vent nocturne* for viola and electronics (2006) began filling up the hall more and more. This was my first time experience at Longy School of Music where hall and music formed that kind of whole—were at one—that was spellbinding. Folk and macabre features of the piece, though, became mere shadows, if that. Moreover, on account of too much electronic reverberation, the live solo viola fogged over. As far as could be determined, Noriko Futagami Herndon, was spot on, syncing electronic breaths that very well might have come from a Halloween spook; her bow created sound objects at once sensitive and sweeping. The first movement of “Night Wind,” *Dark Mirrors*, overshadowed the second movement, “Breaths of the Obscure,” the latter virtually simulating sameness.

And for the finale came the music of Franz Schubert, the thirty-one-year-old’s Quintet in C Major Op. 163, D. 956 (1828), yet another reason for attending. However, there were too many tuning troubles and raspy bows. The main concern was that the five young musicians overdosed on dynamics in lieu of conveying Schubert’s natural feeling and power. And they certainly were aiming for that powerful expression, sometimes coming ever so close. The repeat taken in the first movement was questionable.

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It was surely a strong turnout for their opening concert; most of the seats on the main floor were taken with yet a few more folks in the balcony, which is quite a showing for this young force in Boston. Even though it came up short this evening on performance, its personality, reflected in its choice of repertoire, sets it apart from all others in our city. There are three more concerts scheduled for the season, all at Longy.