

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

Radius Picks up on MIT's Celebratory Mood

by Vance R. Koven
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The MIT campus was bustling with energy as it continues to celebrate its sesquicentennial: public art abounds, student theater troupes are rehearsing and performing, exhibits and symposia are everywhere. That was how things looked on May 14 when we took in Radius Ensemble's twelfth-season finale at Killian Hall. This a finale for Radius in more ways than one, since as Artistic Director and ensemble oboist Jennifer Montbach announced, this would be Radius's last concert as a resident ensemble at MIT; they begin next year in a similar role at Longy, at the other end of Cambridge.

The program picked up a bit of the celebratory mood around campus, focusing largely, though not exclusively, on music for woodwinds and, again not exclusively, on the lighter, festive end of the affective spectrum. It began with two short works for woodwind quintet, the *Piccola Offerta Musicale* by Nino (Giovanni) Rota, and the *Scherzo, op. 48* of Eugène Bozza. Rota (1911-79), of course, is famous for his film scores for Fellini, Coppola, De Sica, and many others, but like many another film composer, from Korngold to Herrmann to Williams, produced a notable *œuvre* of concert music. The "little musical offering"—a titular if not much of a musical nod to J. S. Bach—is a product of 1943, a time of great disruption for many but not, apparently, for him. It is a straightforward piece with lyrical outer sections in moderate tempo and a faster and more contrapuntally active middle one. The lyrical bits featured a warm and blended sonority (not easy with a wind quintet), while the faster section brought out the individual characters of the instruments. No revelations in the music, no wartime agony, just pure pleasure. The Radius quintet, comprising Joanna Goldstein, flute, Montbach, Eran Egozy, clarinet, Gregory Newton, bassoon, and Anne Howarth, French horn, was suave and assured.

We were especially looking forward to hearing the *Scherzo* by Eugène Bozza (1905-91), having written a piece in this genre for this ensemble. We confess lack of prior familiarity with the composer, so let us tell you what we have since found out: he was one of the back-benchers of the twentieth century whose work is more respected than heard, except among woodwind players, for whom he wrote scads of effective, idiomatic, playable, listenable, trouble-free repertoire. A Parisian originally from Nice, Bozza made his peace with the Vichy regime and settled in as conductor of the Opéra-Comique, which is where he was in 1944 when he wrote the *Scherzo*. A stylistic magpie, Bozza drew on most of the less threatening currents rippling through Paris in the early 1900s, and one detects in his little scherzo riffs of Ravel, Poulenc, Milhaud and even d'Indy and Saint-Saëns. You have probably spent more time reading these sentences than it took Radius to perform the *Scherzo*. It scurries with passages in slidey decoratively chromatic (but firmly tonal) harmony, almost like a *moto perpetuo*. We said that Bozza wrote idiomatically for every instrument, but that doesn't mean he made things easy. To their immense credit, none of the Radius players gave the slightest appearance of breaking a sweat, though there were places where some were left gasping for breath.

The outlier on the program, sonically, stylistically and in ambition, was the first-half closer, Beethoven's *Archduke Trio*, No. 7 in B flat, op. 97. A program of mostly lighthearted work for winds needs a bit of *gravitas*, and here it was. For purposes of programming, the *Archduke* was a nearly perfect choice—in major mode, with some of Beethoven's most gratifying tunes, a scherzo of witty gruffness and even a touch of satire (of the waltz craze then only beginning to sweep Vienna), yet with all the richness and complexity of development and structure one expects from a late-middle-period Beethoven work. That there were no wind parts in it also helped set it apart from the rest of the program.

Of course, the fact that the *Archduke*—nicknamed for its dedication to Beethoven's patron, student and friend Archduke Rudolph of Austria—is a pillar of the chamber music repertoire, puts special demands on those who perform it. Established ensembles play this stuff over decades, and create serious barriers to entry, as the economists say. Every new performance should seek to contribute something to our understanding by way of interpretation or execution. The trio of Radius performers who tackled it, violinist Jae Young Cosmos Lee, cellist Miriam Bolkosky, and pianist Sarah Bob, gave a professionally competent and workmanlike reading consistent — one is driven to add "strange to say," considering the

performers' background in new music — with the older central European Romantic tradition. That's neither here nor there, but there were problems of balance and execution that kept the performance from gelling: Bolkosky's cello is ravishingly resonant in tone and she pulled out all the stops. The problem, however, was that Lee produces a rather small and refined sound that couldn't pack enough wallop to match. Bob sensibly chose to keep Killian's boomy and somewhat thick-voiced piano at short stick, but the balance problems of the ensemble, exacerbated by a lack of brilliance in the piano's upper range and Bob's occasional difficulties articulating Beethoven's passagework, were ameliorated only in the scherzo's trio and in the slow movement, where the piano does most of the heavy lifting and Bob was particularly engaged and effective.

The program got back on its primary track after intermission with two relatively recent (if you think less than fifty years old constitutes recent) compositions, beginning with Jan Bach's 1964 *Four Two-Bit Contraptions* for flute and horn. The overall name, an obviously jokey reference to the two-part inventions of That Other Bach, to whom Jan is unrelated except, in works like this, perhaps by way of PDQ, covers four short character pieces apparently, per Katherine Bacasmot's program note, intended to portray Bach's then-roommates, who played those instruments. "Second Lieutenant" offers military flourishes capped with a jazzy riff. "Calliope" is a fractured circus waltz that reminded us of Ives's Mr. Riley, as well as Peter Schickele's comment that PDQ Bach's dance music proved one of his legs was shorter than the other. "Gramophone" offered a jazzy 1920s tune in the flute, to off-kilter harmonies and appropriate 1920s percussive effects engendered by tapping a bit of wood on the end of the horn's mute; the period effect was crowned by a simulation of a scratched record. "Pinwheel" was another *moto perpetuo* that challenged the players' breath control. They (Howarth and Goldstein) were up to it, but we wish Goldstein's tone were as brilliant as the music seemed to demand.

Michael Daugherty, now 57, is a composer who has made his name by integrating aspects of American popular music and culture into concert music — his most famous piece, probably, is his *Metropolis* symphony of 1988-93—the reference is to Superman, not Fritz Lang. Nothing in his professional CV would have led one to expect these developments: he did his time in the post-serialist groves of Darmstadt and IRCAM and had all the proper academic credentials of a proper academic (he still teaches at the University of Michigan). From 1993 also are his two meditations on the rise, fall and afterlife of that supreme pop icon, Elvis Presley: *Elvis Everywhere* for string quartet and tape, and *Dead Elvis* for bassoon and mixed ensemble. Radius performed the latter, which is a kind of morality play on the sacrifice of authenticity for celebrity. Among the many factors within the piece contributing to the message are the instrumentation — violin, contrabass, clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, trombone and percussion — taken directly from Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat*, itself a Faustian tale; from the juxtaposition of tunes from the Elvis canon with musical commentary based on the famous plainchant tune of the *Dies Irae*, so beloved of Romantics from Berlioz to Liszt to Rachmaninov; and from the personification of Elvis in the solo bassoon.

In this latter regard Radius went truly over the top, with soloist Newton (an unimaginable coincidence, that—is anyone else thinking of that other Elvis successor named Newton?) replete in wig and full sleazeball-Elvis jumpsuit and jewelry. This bit of irresistible theatricality did not, fortunately, detract from Newton's performance, which was bravura all around. The same goes for the rest of the ensemble, comprising Lee, Egozy (who also did a turn as narrative "emcee," including the final send-off after Newton had taken his bows and exited — we don't have to tell you what he said, do we?), John Russell, trumpet, Gabriel Longfur, bass trombone, David Goodchild, contrabass, and Aaron Trant, percussion — who performed this work uncondacted. Bravo! The piece itself struck us as excessively didactic, but it was effective and well built. You will be able to hear it for yourself whether or not you were at the concert: Radius will post a podcast of it on their web site [here](#).