

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

Radius Ensemble Sends Us Orbiting

by David Patterson
October 18, 2015

On paper Radius Ensemble promised multi-cultural, but in performance it went pretty much Latin. Paquito D’Rivera’s *Aires tropicales* quintet for woodwinds though multi-colored, was hardly adventurous. A safe trip, too, was Elena Ruehr’s *Quetzal Garden* billed as “inspired by flute and string music from around the world.” Sandwiched between these two, György Ligeti’s Horn Trio appeared as though coming from another planet.

The late Hungarian’s virtual stand-alone oeuvre found a home Saturday night at Pickman Hall, Longy School of Music at Bard College, this on account of Anne Howarth, Gabriela Diaz, and Sarah Bob, longtime regulars of Radius Ensemble. Their immersion vis-a-vis the astronomical demands of said trio had to have the minds of a hefty turnout orbiting over a half-hour.

As Howarth pointed out in a pre-performance mini-talk, Ligeti’s use of the natural horn series might lead the concert-goer to think she was playing out of tune. How Howarth, or was it Ligeti, or both, can make such tuning—shunned by nearly all other composers—feel right is well beyond me.

Often tough to swallow, Ligeti’s idea of music somehow, someway, eventually can make its way under your skin. A case in point is his Horn Trio. And in the hands of players the likes of this trio of exceptional musicians, a Ligeti adventure is expected. With sound-guides Howarth, pianist Bob, and violinist Diaz you could not find yourself lost in the advanced tonal writing of Ligeti, not for a moment. Throughout the Ligeti trio, Radius’s spectra of sound dazed. Certainly, Radius and Ligeti, together, were the highpoint of the evening.

This Radius trio showed a magnificent grip on Ligeti’s torturous rhythmic schemes, on view especially in the third movement, *Alla marcia*. The three players equally presented their luminous ways with Ligeti’s textural assemblages most markedly noticeable in the subtly shifting combinations of instrumental space of the *Lamento, Adagio*. In this, the last movement, ghostly thinness and eerie suspended horn tones turned to devastating piano jabs and then near silence.

While emotion came with the trio’s performance, somewhat missing overall was attention to an atmosphere of human endeavor. With such, Ligeti’s work, with it all its compositional flashes, would have become more of our world—and made its way more under our skin.

Quetzal Garden by Elena Ruehr ventured into the Latin realm. If there were other areas of culture as stated in the news release, they passed me by. Culture signaling in the form of scales and rhythms was made obvious, the former in the flute and the latter in the string quintet. Notwithstanding detail, the work, described as a chamber concerto for flute and strings, situated itself in what seemed to me to be quasi-Latin grooves. The three-movement concerto was brought to life through not so much the bird (the *quetzal*) writing itself but at the hands of Sarah Brady. Her flutings, in fact, took on a life all its own. Brady is a consummate artist, every breath and every move a little miracle.

Concluding the program was music indigenous to warmer climes, this, from Paquito D’Rivera, his *Aires tropicales*. Seven movements were too many, nor did they really dance or ever channel the heat associated with the composer’s Cuba. Only moments of ear-catching instrumental voicings of intriguing harmonies held attention. One appeal to the quintet of Brady, Jennifer Montbach, Eran Egozy, Hazel Malcolmson, and Breanna Ellison must have been the big parts provided for each. Together they illuminated D’Rivera’s dances with color galore.