

# The Boston Musical Intelligencer

## Radius's Audial Splashes and Sixth Sense

by David Patterson  
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How about a woodwind quintet, a string quartet with piano, a tsunami musical response, or “the sound of all your favorite late summer afternoons”? Check out Radius. In their thirteenth season, this ensemble sent colorful audial splashes — and something more — resonating through Pickman Hall at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge Saturday evening, October 1.

It felt to me as though there was a breakthrough in one of aesthetic's grandest values, oftentimes described as “distance”: To maximize artistic effect a certain level of distance between performer and listener must be formed. Artistic Director and Founder of the local ensemble, Jennifer Montbach, set a warm, even relaxed, tone with her cheerfully and naturally delivered welcome. During the break before his piece, music tsunami responder-composer, Nicholas Vines, continuing this easy conversation with the audience, spoke in a low key way about his music “...in the off chance that I might say something interesting... moreover, fill the time to set up for the piece...” Then, in introducing the Schumann *Quintet*, last piece on the program, pianist Sarah Bob began with some usual details, then surprisingly yet smoothly transitioned to a particular detail, turning her introduction into a kind of theatrical moment. She told us that Robert told his pianist wife Clara that only a man — not a woman — could play his *Quintet* well. Just imagine how that went over in Cambridge's Pickman Hall! But there was more when the quintet of four women pointed their fingers and their bows at the only male in this particular performance of Radius Ensemble. What a memorable moment, “fresh yet inevitable,” as Broadway composer Stephen Sondheim put it about bringing the best into the world of art.

Shorter and sweeter pieces juxtaposed with a longer serious contemplative work would prove to be a winning season opener for Radius. György Ligeti's *Six Bagatelles* for wind quintet (1953) zipped, bounced and frisked around stationary interiors that recalled Bartók and Stravinsky. And what did Radius do about that? Program annotator Kathryn J. Allwine Bacasmot put it this way: “brief experiments in sounds that may be immediately found and enjoyed,” and that is exactly the way it came across in the Radius performance.

Flutist Sarah Brady, oboist Jennifer Montbach, clarinetist Rane Moore, bassoonist Elah Grande, and hornist Anne Howarth demonstrated their highly accomplished instrumental techniques with evident awareness of Bostonian refinement and extensive experience with the 20th century repertoire. The five seem to have a sixth sense in melding the American way, an American innocence and exuberance altogether enticing, bordering ever so rightly on the musically raucous.

A name becoming increasingly familiar to Boston audiences is that of Nicholas Vines, the young gifted Australian composer who received his PhD in 2007 from Harvard University and who was recently appointed Artistic Director of Music at Sydney Grammar School. His *Obsidian Magnified* (2011) for flute and violin, he stated, “seems emblematic in a really concrete way of nature's primal power. Furthermore, its dark, often somber beauty is an apt reflection of the grief and nobility so evident in the catastrophes' aftermath” he writes about his commission that is part of a project in aid of victims of the tsunami, earthquakes, and Fukushima nuclear plant disaster. The piece reached some who were deeply moved, but, I gather, not others.

Brady and violinist Jae Young Cosmos Lee conveyed unreservedly the awesomeness of the fast and furious, the heart-jabbing punches and longer tidal wave-like crashes that mark *Obsidian Magnified*. They were sensational.

I felt these remarkably powerful signals emitted from this composition, but their transmission somehow missed completely firing all synapses. If I had to guess, it would be that the material's content gave way to the effect.

I loved being introduced to Mark Summer's (Turtle Island String Quartet) *Julie-O* (1988) for solo cello. Miriam Bolkosky brilliantly bowed, strummed, plucked, and tapped this jazzy and folksy mix, transforming the instrument into some kind of perfectly puzzling sound.

Bolkosky, Bob, violinist Monica Pegis, and violist Rebecca Gitter joined Lee in the *Piano Quintet Op. 44 in E-flat* (1842). Ensemble candor and sensibility satisfied, though there was not enough steam left for Schumann's final cadence to the four-movement chamber masterpiece.