

# The Boston Musical Intelligencer

## Radius's Inspired Programming

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The Radius Ensemble deserves some sort of prize for inspired programming, witness their October 6<sup>th</sup> performance at Longy's Pickman Hall of a Prokofiev quintet for winds and strings, the Weber flute trio, a horn, percussion and electronics piece by Mark Schultz, and a suite for clarinet and contrabass by Morton Gould. What had us a bit perplexed was the program order: conventional wisdom says you finish a program with the largest ensemble, which would have been the Prokofiev. Instead, the forces dwindled from five to three to two and a half (the electronics) to two. Maybe someone had Haydn's *Farewell Symphony* in mind?

Programming vagaries aside, the evening itself was a substantial success. The Prokofiev op. 39 Quintet for the odd ensemble of oboe, clarinet, violin, viola, and contrabass owes its quirky instrumentation to the work's origins in the composer's 1924 ballet *Trapeze*, whose dance company had these instruments as its "orchestra" and of which the Quintet is effectively the orchestral suite. The ballet has a circus-based scenario, and so the six movements of the Quintet depict scenes from the story. The opening theme and variations is by far the longest movement. The performers—Jennifer Montbach, Eran Egozy, Jae Young Cosmos Lee, Noriko Futagami Herndon and Susan Hagen on oboe, clarinet, violin, viola and bass respectively—got off to an assertive start, and maintained fine pacing and balance throughout, with every instrument's characteristic tone fully realized both in isolation and in ensemble. The use of contrabass in this piece is interesting: with no cello to carry the melodic functions of the bass line, the contrabass here does double duty, necessitating substantial use of its uppermost register. Hagen was notably effective in this role. In other movements, like the "bear dance" second, Prokofiev gave the gruff lower register more air time. This work is, truth to tell, not one of Prokofiev's best, being a 1920s Paris-based working out of influences, notably of Stravinsky, from *Petrushka* (well, it is a circus theme) and *Rite of Spring* into *The Soldier's Tale*. The fourth movement *Adagio pesante* doesn't have much going on musically—we don't know what it purported to depict, but its chief means of varying content was dynamic. We give the performance credit for implying more in the piece than may actually be there.

The Trio in G Minor, op. 63, J. 259 by Carl Maria von Weber dates from 1819, a year, according to cellist Miriam Bolkosky's oral description, in which the composer was deeply depressed over the death of his daughter. The effect this had on his output, however, seems a bit counterintuitive: by our count he completed or was engaged on at least 21 works that year, more than in any other, including finishing a mass and continuing work on *Der Freischütz*. Moreover, according to the Jähns catalogue, the very next piece Weber finished after this trio was his bubbly and infectious *Invitation to the Dance*, so either Weber's mood swings were pretty severe or the genesis and affect of the flute trio were more complex than Bolkosky suggested. Regardless, the players, comprising Radius's three "Bo"s — Bolkosky, Ann Bobo, flute, and Sarah Bob, piano — took its cue from the tragic element, with an intense, Romantic reading, occasionally leavened with typically frothy Weberish tunes (there's a particularly incongruous lilting one in the finale). The third movement of four, the *Andante*, is subtitled the "shepherd's lament," after a poem by Goethe, a translation of which Bolkosky recited. The movement sounds very much like a song setting, as lovely as anything in Schubert. The finale, which as noted combines dark and light colorations, takes formal cues from Beethoven — think "*Archduke*" Trio — in its principal structure based on motivic materials rather than fully fashioned themes (apart from the one mentioned above). The performance was intense and committed, occasionally suffering some technical lapses. It may have been the acoustic of Pickman, but Bobo's lush tone, perfectly rounded and shaded, seemed unduly subdued, even in its most brilliant passages.

After intermission, Radius brought us closer to our own time with Mark Schultz's 1989 original scoring for *Dragons in the Sky*, a tone poem for French horn (Anne Howarth), percussion (Aaron Trant) and electronics (Apple PowerBook). Schultz scored a major hit with this piece, which won a prize from the International Horn Society in 1994 and has been performed, by his web site's count, over 400 times, perhaps including the versions in which the electronic part was rescored for wind ensemble or orchestra. The piece, last of a series of three on this subject, is based on scenes from Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, in this case depicting the battle between the evil god Morgoth and the elves of Middle Earth. The character of the music is appropriately martial (we couldn't help thinking of Holst), between the horn's battle calls, the percussion's ominous thwacks and creepy runs on the pitched mallet instruments, and the computer's spooky atmospherics. The electronics are often used to extend passages for the live instruments, a nice touch. Howarth and Trant were put through virtuoso paces, and both delivered impressively. The music overall was fun and movie-trackish, a bit over-reliant on minor-third *ostinati* and barline-heavy thrumming rhythms. Still, there are great licks for the horn and especially the xylophone, so we won't argue with success.

The closer was a terrific piece by the underappreciated Morton Gould (1913-96), *Benny's Gig*, dating originally from 1962, with a final movement added in 1979. Its impetus was a goodwill tour to the Soviet Union by Benny Goodman, and Gould created a carefully structured but oh-so-casual-sounding suite of seven pieces — preludes, really — for a classic chamber jazz combo of clarinet and bass. The eighth movement, a gift for Goodman's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, admirably rounds out the set, which otherwise closes with a slowish foray into bitonality. The moods go from (these are Gould's descriptions) "nostalgic," "lazy," and "hesitant," through "calypso," "brisk," and "jaunty." To use the phrase applied in the 1890s by The Boston Transcript to the Scherzo from Chadwick's Second Symphony, the music "positively winks at you," but its demotic exterior covers a lot of learning. All but two of the pieces call for purely pizzicato bass, against which Gould sets a variety of long or bouncing lines, many of which have clear origins in Bach. We wish we could say that the performance on Saturday presented the work in its best light, but while the spirits of Egozy and Hagen were willing, there were enough problems, in Egozy's case some technical, some of articulation (the bouncy bits were a little too smooth in execution), in Hagen's case an excess of deference to the clarinet — these pieces were billed as duos, not as accompanied solos, and the bass part is as good in its way as the clarinet's — to prevent a full endorsement.