

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

Texture and Timbre from Radius Ensemble

by Sandra Fallon-Ludwig
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If you are a lover of chamber music – not only masterpieces of the 18th and 19th centuries, but modern works and newly composed music as well, you must experience the Radius Ensemble. A chamber group comprised of winds, strings and piano, it is dedicated to performing classical and modern works alike and bringing that music to a new generation of concert-goers. On Saturday, November 13, 2010 at MIT's Killian Hall, Radius presented four unique compositions composed between 1891 and 2010, each with its own distinctive style and orchestration.

The program opened with a highly enjoyable performance of Francis Poulenc's *Trio for oboe, bassoon and piano, op. 43* (1926). One could not help but smile at the bright and lively character of the first movement and the enthusiastic playing of Jennifer Montbach (oboe) and Gregory Newton (bassoon). The timbre of the oboe and bassoon were well-suited to the dance-like quality and playful exchanges of the third movement, despite occasional imbalance between the piano and the softer wind instruments. The bassoon in particular shone in the second movement – a highly expressive movement characterized by singing melodies and a more romantic style. Montbach introduced the Poulenc as a guilty pleasure filled with schmaltzy moments. Only the second movement truly fit this description, but the outer movements were a joy, with playfulness and interesting contrast in timbres.

In David Ott's *Conversations* (1998), a dialogue between violin and cello, the instruments represent two opposing voices in an argument from its inception to its shaky resolution. The instruments alternated with one another in "Serious Thoughts," the first of six movements, and the unresolved ending clearly signaled that the disagreement had only just begun. "A Difficult Issue" included increased dissonance and a rhythmic complexity that drove the work forward and underscored the dissension between instruments. The highlight of the work was certainly the third movement, titled "Picky! Picky! Picky!," which featured *pizzicato* among other percussive sounds, such as *col legno* performed by the violinist and the cellist hitting her thumb against the body of the instrument. In a technique reminiscent of *hocket*, the rapidly paced *pizzicato* in each individual part formed a complete theme only when performed together, resulting in an exciting and intricate texture. "Two Views on the Same Subject" began with a fugal texture, highlighting the disagreement between instruments. Lyrical, expressive and at times very serious, this movement again emphasized differing views as the cello and violin avoided playing the same material together. The quieter "Chat at the Fireplace" suffered from tentative playing by the violinist and a thin sound in her upper register, also evident in the first movement; however, the final movement, "Differing Opinions," recaptured the work's intensity. This movement, more than any other, expressed the aggression and tension between the two parties, fighting for the last word. Although movements I and V succumbed to a few lackluster moments in sound quality, the remaining movements, and "Picky! Picky! Picky!" in particular, were interesting and exciting.

The third work on the concert was a world premiere titled *Torrid Nature Scene 2* by Radius's composer-in-residence, Marti Epstein. Epstein stated that she envisioned "chaotic growth in a rainforest" and the humidity associated with that environment. Just as the plant growth in a rainforest is entangled, so too were the instruments as they played the same melodic ideas at overlapping intervals. In fact, the instrumentalists were instructed not to coordinate with each other in order to realize a rhythmic profile too complicated to notate. The orchestration was for a non-traditional woodwind quintet, utilizing alto flute and English horn in place of the flute and oboe in the standard quintet. By removing these upper register instruments, Epstein emphasized middle- and low-range harmonic structures and hoped to mitigate the issue of connecting upper *tessitura* instruments with horn and bassoon. In performance the work was a collage of sound with ever-changing timbres. However, many of the timbres were lost in the mass of sound. Because the instruments were playing in the same range, the horn overpowered the alto flute, clarinet and even the bassoon when their motives overlapped. Only at the end of the composition, when the texture was more sparse, did all of the individual timbres come through.

The final composition of the night was Brahms's *Trio for clarinet, cello and piano, Op. 114* (1891). From the very first phrase played by Miriam Bolkosky on the cello, Brahms's penchant for dark colors and sonorous melodies was evident. The silky sound of Eran Egozy on clarinet answered the cello, and the instruments blended in the unmistakable sound of Brahms's romantic expression. Throughout each movement, the performers maintained their connection to one another; they genuinely understood Brahms' music and the way that their parts intersected. A highlight of the work was pianist Sarah Bob, who captured the character of the *Andantino grazioso* – *Trio* perfectly and exhibited brilliant playing in the final movement as well.

The Radius Ensemble will perform a repeat of this concert at the Rivers School Conservatory on Sunday, November 14th at 4 pm.