

Bringing young people in

Radius' panoply of styles and instrumentation offered a rich range of expression on Nov. 18

by Liane Curtis

Radius Ensemble in the Pickman Concert Hall, Longy School of Music, Cambridge, November 18.

From the multi-media program notes on their WebSite, to the temporary tattoos of their logo available at the concert, Radius Ensemble is hip to the latest in image making and marketing of a product with a stodgy reputation: classical chamber music. And since what they provided on this night was an absolutely first-class, polished and carefully planned evening of varied music, their marketing skills are all to the good and seem to be successful in bringing media-savvy young audiences into concerts.

The panoply of styles and instrumentation of the evening offered a rich range of expression. Amy Beach's Quintet for Flute and Strings (of 1916) should be ingrained into our musical consciousness next to works of its time by better-known (male) composers. Tinged with but not overwhelmed by romantic lushness, this work suggests comparison with composers including Dvorak, and in its rich chromaticism, the language of Richard Strauss and early Schoenberg. Beach derived her theme from her own choral setting of a poem of Native American origins that refers to piping, probably suggesting to Beach the use of the flute. While the exotic, gapped scale might have evoked Native American to

Beach, its effect is one of an exotic otherworldliness, often abstract and with a certain mysteriousness.

While the flute does often play a leading role, flautist Orlando Cela's decision to stand placed him above the other musicians and made him a soloist rather than a member of an ensemble. His taut focused tone effectively complemented rather than blended with the warmth of the strings, but occasional rhythmic details, such as the ending of variation II, needed to be more precise. The strings offered a cohesive and intense ensemble that comes from extensive work together. Variation III provides a thoughtful twist on the Viennese waltz, followed by a dark and mysterious variation, and then a passionately introspective one. With its range of emotions, including the thick interweaving of the penultimate variation, a climactic fugue, Beach offers a rich emotional journey, an engaging opening to this concert.

A western hoe-down?

Bela Bartok's Contrasts for Violin, Clarinet and Piano was inspired by Bartok's friend, the violinist Joseph Szigeti, and the jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman, who actually provided the money for the commission in 1938. Yet Bartok was uninfluenced by the Jazzman's musical vocabulary, and instead drew from his own heritage of Hungarian folk song. In the first movement, a "recruiting dance," influences of another 20th-century take on a military theme, Stravinsky's famous "Soldier's tale," can be detected in the propelling, constant momentum and the jangling sonorities and in Bartok's use of the

clarinet as a shrill motivation to marching and motion. The hushed atmospheric effects of the second movement were compelling in their intensity and shadowy mystery. Could the open strings of the finale movement, for American audiences, evoke anything but a western hoe-down? This was surely not Bartok's intent, but the intensity and energy of the rest of the movement and the drive of asymmetrical rhythmic patterns mark it clearly as eastern European in flavor. Margo McGowan (clarinet), Biliana Voutchkova (violin) and Sarah Bob (piano) brought this off with brilliance. "Soviet oppression did terrible things to people" stated my companion to me at the end of Sofia Gubaidulina's String Trio. This dark and disturbing work, written in 1988, conveys a sense of hopelessness, with no awareness of light at the end of the tunnel. This carefully structured expression builds an overwhelming sense of 20th-century angst. With its focus on timbral explorations of a single pitch, the first movement suggests the influence of Ruth Crawford's serialization of elements including dynamics and place of sound among instruments (or a traffic jam, as my companion suggested). In the second movement, the violin and cello employ the non-western technique of heterophony, as they flexibly interweave a simple melodic cell in a non-simultaneous expression of excruciating repetition, while the viola provided the relent-



Radius Ensemble. Photo: Susan Wilson

lessly grating harmonics, like the hum of neon lights. The work ends with the violent gesture of the violist snapping her lowest string against the fingerboard (did the score instruct her to break the string? The performer certainly seemed to be intending to, in what was a stressful moment).

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Again, the strings had exquisite ensemble in all their range of techniques: Biliana Voutchkova (violin), Annette Klein (viola), and Michael Bonner (cello). It was a relief, then, to turn to the balanced classicism of Beethoven's Quintet for piano and winds. The graceful and expansive architecture of the first movement allowed all the instruments to shine in this sparkling combination. While the frothy Finale, a Rondo, was insubstantial, the middle movement is in an aria style of operatic intensity that allowed for a compelling singing style from each of the instrumentalists. Jennifer Montbach (oboe) was particularly evocative in her lyricism and nuanced phrasing. Montbach, who is also Director of Radius Ensemble, is to be commended both for her artistry and her vision in the planning of this impressive evening and in her energy and ideas for the goals of the Radius Ensemble. ▼

The next concert of Radius Ensemble will be January 27, with music including Janacek and Schubert. Info: 492-7737, or <http://www.radiusensemble.org>