

P E R F O R M A N C E

Chords from Radius

“Playing chamber music for a white, affluent audience that is experienced in this kind of music doesn’t light my fire nearly as much as bringing a college student into the concert hall,” says oboist and impresario Jennifer Montbach ’95. “I love to play for young people who put many different kinds of music onto their iPods, enjoy hanging out in bookstores, and like to see independent movies. Those people are ripe for the kind of experience that the Radius Ensemble offers.”

Montbach founded Radius (www.radiusensemble.org) in 1999 to play chamber music in a casual and welcoming environment. The group presents four concerts a year (the next is September 29), these days in Killian Hall at MIT, as well as a popular annual program for children. Radius embraces nine core members (their instruments include two violins, viola, cello, flute, clarinet, oboe, French horn, and piano) who are first-rate, and the repertory mingles standard classics by Beethoven, Mozart, and Schubert with adventurous contemporary works. Though Montbach doesn’t play in every piece, each program features music for oboe. Radius adds guest musicians as needed, like the New England Conservatory’s sole accordion major, who recently played in a piece by the contemporary Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina.

Montbach says she’s proud that Radius has presented pieces by nearly a dozen living New England composers, including three, so far, who have served as composers-in-residence. A concert this spring featured a work by

the Canadian composer Claude Vivier that required the musicians not only to play their instruments but to whistle complex additional parts.

Radius always offers a free pre-performance lecture, and members of the ensemble enthusiastically introduce each piece during concerts. At a recent program, clarinetist Eron Egozy pointed out that Beethoven’s Quintet for Piano and Winds was so popular that the composer later rearranged it into a quartet for piano and strings. Egozy’s preference was clear. “The winds contribute such a wide range of color,” he said. “If you listen to the version with strings, you don’t get that, so you’re missing the point.”

Afterwards players and public gather around a table with coffee and cookies (“Starbucks donates the coffee,” Montbach says, “and the cookies come from

Trader Joe’s”). The musicians seem to enjoy sticking around to chat with their listeners. Surveys show that the average age of Radius’s audience is 31—a statistic most other Boston performing-arts organizations would kill for.

After completing her master’s degree at New England Conservatory, Montbach started freelancing as an oboist. To pay the bills, she worked in arts administration. “On the Boston Symphony staff, I was a tiny cog in a huge machine,” Montbach recalls. “But it got me to thinking: why is it that educated people who are so interested in developments in film, literature, the visual arts, and pop music are so ignorant about concert music, and especially about contemporary music? I hear all the time that classical music isn’t relevant any more, but I can’t imagine life without it. So I created Radius as a little laboratory for me.” The ensemble operates on an annual budget that ranges between \$18,000 and \$20,000, which comes from a combination of donations and grants. “All of the money goes to the musicians, because

we don’t have a staff, except for me,” Montbach explains. “We do have a board member who is a grant writer, but the buck stops with me.”

What’s stored on her own iPod? “Mostly rock music,” says Montbach, smiling. “My husband’s a drummer. I’ve recently discovered Pink Martini and I love them. I don’t listen to recorded chamber music all that much. To play and hear chamber music is such a joyous collaboration that I prefer to experience it live.” ~RICHARD DYER

Richard Dyer, A.M. ’64, wrote about classical music for the Boston Globe for 33 years.

Colleagues from Radius Ensemble flank founder and oboist Jennifer Montbach at MIT’s Stata Center

