

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

Full Radius of Color and Expression

by David Patterson
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In existence for a decade, one of Boston's finest music ensembles continued its 2008-09 concert season at Killian Hall on the campus of MIT in Cambridge, Saturday March 7. From Radius came bursts of color and expression.

Three pieces—*Fuga e Misterio*, *Oblivion* and *Libertango*—by Argentinean composer Astor Piazzolla, who is best known for reinventing the tango, were well within reach of the Radius woodwind players. Flutist Sarah Brady's flirtations with those jazzy moves of Piazzolla made them catchy. Unbounded Argentinian-like energy in the oboe playing of Jennifer Montbach drew undivided attention. Rane Moore on clarinet achieved attractive colors from everywhere on her instrument, all suggesting the kind of heat one expects from music born of the tango.

Carlos Arias' lively bassoon snapped, crackled, and popped with Piazzollaian flavors, while Anne Howarth's horn devoured an extraordinary range of sounds—soft, sweet, loud, and raucous—making that notoriously difficult instrument seem easy, if not fun, to play. What a part she got from Jeff Scott who arranged these compositions and who is himself a hornist! In this arrangement for winds, Piazzolla's voice pretty much made it through. However, with neither the bandoneón nor the jazz-type ensemble characteristic of Piazzolla's performances, some of the taste of tango and Argentina got lost in translation in this woodwind performance.

Moving from warmer Argentina to colder Russia, shrill fanfares in the high piano register announced vast wreckage and destruction in Sophia Gubaidulina's *Quasi hoquetus*. Distant ghostlike responses from the high viola register meant to send chills down the spine, in turn, led to painful cries from the high bassoon register. Then, 12 shots fired from heavy artillery sounded down deep from the very bottom of the keyboard, these, too, intended to evoke tragedy.

Quasi hoquetus can become visual in another way. With passages that outline distinct shapes, blocks, lines, solids, and the like, one can imagine the music emanating from the likes of a Kandinsky. Carlos Arias, bassoon, Stephanie Fong, viola, and Sarah Bob, piano, came very close to painting such a canvas. In creating the utter devastation inherent in every aspect of this modern piece of Russian expression, they were a little less close.

Described as one kind of culinary delight or another in both pre-concert and concert remarks, *Aria*, by 20th-century French composer Jacques Ibert, completely changed the program's direction—once again! Further indulgences: Ibert takes recipes from Bach, peppers the harmony and adds other seasonings to come up with his own *nouvelle cuisine*.

Call it a *pièce de résistance*, light, pleasant, tasty. Hooray for this *daring* programming here in Boston. Luscious sounds radiated. Where the Gubaidulina could have been more devastating, this performance could have gone a little lighter on the cream. At times it became effusive.

Opening its colorful program with a woodwind quintet, Radius concluded it with *String Quintet No.1, op. 88* by Johannes Brahms. How rare! Violinists Jae Young Cosmos Lee and Jesse Irons, violists Stephanie Fong and Marcus Thompson, and cellist Miriam Bolkosky were spectacular. Each of the five personalities could be seen through a range of physical expressions from the dynamic to the restrained. All, though, were entirely on the same page.

Radius strings sent Brahms' usual gravitas and formal leanings into an emotional orbit, taking the composer at his word, as he wrote to his publisher Simrock, "You have never before had a more beautiful piece from me." This performance was beautiful *and* emotive. History informs us that this piece has not always been well received. It just might mean an effort such as this by Radius is what it takes to captivate the listener.

Artistic Director Jennifer Montbach and her circle of musicians issued an alert. Some of the finest professionals around can still find a youthful enthusiasm which shines so obviously in their programming and performance.