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Radius demonstrates its ‘Pluck’ at Pickman Hall

By Matthew Guerrieri
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CAMBRIDGE — “Pluck” was the title of the second concert of Radius Ensemble’s 16th season, presumably referring to the harp called for by two works on the program. But as a general characterization, pluck — meaning resolution in the face of difficulties — seemed somewhat inapt. Here were four largely untroubled works with little in the way of grit or disruption. Most of the music was sonically effervescent or elegantly fashioned.

Or both, in the case of the Quartet for English Horn and Strings by the French composer Jean Francaix. Despite a career spanning the 20th century, Francaix (1912-97) wrote music so avowedly tonal that you have to search carefully for clues that the Quartet was composed in 1971. One hint is a strange blossoming of string harmonics that ends the third movement, seemingly arriving from nowhere. It’s a quirky but amusing piece, played well (if not always in tune) here.

More Dionysian was Ravel’s Introduction and Allegro for string quartet, winds, and harp, commissioned in 1905 to showcase the last instrument. The piece, though, is true chamber music, luxuriant yet impeccably balanced. The harp gets its spotlight moment in the cadenza, which was played with lithe intensity by Ina Zdorovetchi — a key part of the evening’s strongest performance.

She returned, with flutist Sarah Brady and violist Noriko Futagami Herndon, for “Nothing Is More Important” by Keeril Makan, a composer on the MIT faculty. The instrumentation provokes thoughts of Debussy’s famous sonata, but Makan stakes out very distant ground. Instead of Debussy’s elusive cool, Makan’s piece begins with an obsessive focus on a single note, from which it never completely escapes.

A set of rhythms, gestures, and motifs reappear throughout, heightening the sense of the piece being a kind of closed circuit. Makan’s program note mentions that it was inspired by a 16th-century painting by Carpaccio, whose art resisted the enriched spatiality of the Renaissance; that may be why this tonally grounded piece has an almost archaic air compared with Makan’s more avant-garde works. Regardless, it has an idiosyncratic beauty.

Closing out the program was Beethoven’s Quintet for Piano and Winds. Sometimes taken as an homage to Mozart’s work for the same forces, it shares some of that piece’s elegant craftsmanship, especially in the Andante. Radius’s performance, though, accentuated its extroverted, rough-hewn character in the outer movements, capturing a young composer impatient to refashion inherited models. Perhaps there was some pluck here, after all.

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