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Radius Ensemble opens its 15th season

By Matthew Guerrieri
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CAMBRIDGE - Radius Ensemble opened its 15th season on Saturday in retrospect, after a fashion, with a concert referencing the idea of nostalgia. Nostalgia's usual musical gambits were everywhere: old-fashioned dance rhythms, comfortable dialects of tonality, ruminative melodic excursions. But more interesting was how composers on the program leveraged nostalgia, evoking an often inaccessible past to frame their own individual styles.

The nostalgic references in Nino Rota's 1945 Quintet were of venerable and idealized provenance. Rota's film-familiar lyricism — adopted by directors from Fellini to Wertmüller to Coppola — was here found in settings both sylvan (an Allegro ben moderato of gently-lapping, triple-time pastoral rhythms) and formal (an Adagio channeling the smooth wanderings of Renaissance polyphony). The finale seemed to place Rota's own voice in neoclassical and stylized-rustic company. The performance was committed to wistfulness, any possible irony banished behind leisurely tempi and lush sounds. (Radius's artistic director, oboist Jennifer Montbach, was joined by flutist Sarah Brady, violist Noriko Futagami Herndon, cellist Miriam Bolkosky, and harpist Ida Zdorovetchi.)

Brady and Zdorovetchi gave a sharp-creased and smartly polished rendition of the ingenious back-dated check that is Astor Piazzolla's 1986 "Histoire du Tango." Piazzolla conjures up an imagined ancestry for the dance — the bright insouciance of a 1900 bordello, the smoky haze of a 1930 cafe, the driving cool of a 1960 nightclub — that, by design, culminates in a "Concert of Today" exemplifying his own, most advanced style. Alternate history doesn't come more suave.

"Ten Images," by Luna Pearl Woolf, was the evening's outlier: not expressly nostalgic, aphoristically dissonant rather than indulgently melodic. Still, the miniatures for clarinet (Eran Egozy) and cello (Bolkosky) slipped in and out of tradition, distilling common musical tropes (a curl of waltz, a gruff report of Beethovenian octaves, a cat-and-mouse motivic chase), translating them into chromatic piquancy — an inoculation, perhaps, against cliché.

Johannes Brahms, on the other hand, in his Opus 40 Horn Trio, practically wallowed in one particular cliché: the sound of the horn itself, already in Brahms's time a time-tested symbol for nostalgic yearning. The Trio gallops and sighs in turn, shifting between hunt and quarry; the performance (by hornist Anne Howarth, violinist Charles Dimmick, and pianist Sarah Bob) had rough edges in more aggressive sections, but also moments — the opening, the Scherzo's trio, the Adagio movement — of poignant, reticent delicacy. In those passages, one could feel the pull of another nostalgia, a composer's nostalgia, a longing for a time when nostalgic commonplaces still had the frisson of novelty. ■