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Radius plays Marti Epstein premiere

By Matthew Guerrieri
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WESTON - Composers have often longed after nature's organicism, the notion of a natural world creating beauty with no distinction between process and content. In her new piece, "Torrid Nature Scene 2," Marti Epstein rather ingeniously pays tribute to that ideal. Commissioned by the Radius Ensemble (the Boston composer is its composer-in-residence this season) and premiered by them this past weekend, the music both happens and grows, simply and slightly mysteriously.

"Torrid Nature Scene 2" (the title playfully stolen from Epstein's fellow composer Nicholas Vines), scored for woodwind quintet, updates the Renaissance prolation canon — the same melody, simultaneously played at different speeds. In this case, the material is a slow chain of gnomic motives, and the varying speeds are left up to the players; no two performances are ever the same. The ear catches intervals and fragments easing from instrument to instrument but can never quite predict their appearance.

But the piece still unfolds with direction. The melodic material is designed around gentle dissonance, engineered to produce hazy whole-tone clusters and major-minor ambiguities. The arc rounds off to a leisurely coda, the motives fading into isolated tones. Epstein pitches the sounds deep: Joanna Goldstein played the alto flute, and Radius director Jennifer Montbach the English horn, lower cousins of their usual instruments, the better to mix and morph with Eran Egozy's clarinet, Gregory Newton's bassoon, and Anne Howarth's horn — the musical equivalent of teeming, textured shadows. The whole is a hypnotic hybrid of minimalist order and improvisatory serendipity.

Epstein's repose came amidst a program of otherwise fairly brawny playing. Montbach, Newton, and pianist Sarah Bob gave a robust account of Francis Poulenc's 1926 "Trio," Haydn-esque neo-Classical high spirits that repeatedly dissolve into lush and unsettled nocturnes. Violinist Sheila Falls and cellist Miriam Bolkosky were similarly vigorous in David Ott's 1998 "Conversations," programmatic vignettes illustrating various types of parley, each of which stretched its charms out a little too long.

The Clarinet Trio (Op. 114) of Johannes Brahms, as played by Egozy, Bolkosky, and Bob, mirrored the program's split personality. The inner Adagio and Andantino movements had a balmy, amiably phrased elegance. The outer Allegros were ringing and assertive, with the finale rising to a surprisingly aggressive conclusion. It was, perhaps, a performance to call to mind both the richness of nature and the dream of dominating it. ■