

The Boston Globe

Marking a decade of adventurous music making

By Jeremy Eichler
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CAMBRIDGE - Currently in its 10th anniversary season, the Radius Ensemble and its artistic director, Jennifer Montbach, are clearly doing something right. A large and relatively age-diverse crowd turned out for Saturday night's concert with only one well-known piece on the program, suggesting Radius has earned the trust of its core audience. That trust of course is its most valuable asset, enabling the ensemble to curate adventurous programs and remain confident that listeners will regard the journey as a worthy experience in advance.

This season, Radius is celebrating its first decade by inviting prominent local musicians to appear as guests on its programs. Saturday night, it was violist Marcus Thompson, incoming artistic director of the Boston Chamber Music Society, who joined the players for the final work, Brahms's alto-rich F Major Viola Quintet. That was the well-known blockbuster on the program; there was also music by Astor Piazzolla, Sofia Gubaidulina, and Jacques Ibert.

The air in MIT's Killian Hall was stuffy but the atmosphere was not, as performers spoke to the audience before each work, often in very casual terms. Flutist Sarah Brady reassured the crowd that Ibert's Aria (for flute, clarinet, and piano) was short and breezy and could be thought of as "the sorbet on the program." And so it was, with Brady, clarinetist Rane Moore, and pianist Sarah Bob making brisk and elegant work of its fluid lines and jazz-flecked harmonic world.

Brady and Moore were joined by Carlos Arias (bassoon), Anne Howarth (horn), and Montbach (oboe) for three Piazzolla tangos. This smoky and darkly seductive music inevitably loses something in its translation for bright-hued woodwind quintet but these arrangements by hornist Jeff Scott of the Imani Winds conveyed a measure of the spirit of the originals and seemed to be a lot of fun for the players. Of the three presented here "Oblivion" traveled best as the group vividly conjured its languid atmosphere, saturated with a sense of longing for something just out of reach.

If that object of longing for Piazzolla was always at its core sensual, in the music of Gubaidulina it is so often a spiritual destination. "Quasi Hoquetus" for bassoon, piano, and viola conveys her signature blend of mysticism and an opaque yet vivid theatricality. Instrumental lines are frequently shrouded in a kind of sonic haze, punctured by forceful outbursts from the keyboard; tonality is treated like a found object, viewed with a sense of distance. The players - Bob, Arias, and violist Stephanie Fong - rendered the work with sensitivity and care.

To close the evening, violinists Jae Young Cosmos Lee and Jesse Irons joined Fong, Thompson, and cellist Miriam Bolkosky in Brahms's sun-drenched F Major Quintet. The presence of the two violas gives this work a wonderfully warm middle register, and despite a few rough patches Saturday's performance was enjoyably freewheeling and energetic. The end of the middle movement was drawn with rewarding delicacy, and the exuberant finale traversed with high spirits. ■

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MUSIC

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GLOBE STAFF

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Clockwise from top left: Gregory Newton, Jennifer Montbach, Sarah Bob, Anne Howarth, Eran Egozy, Jae Young Cosmos Lee, Miriam Bolkosky, Sarah Brady.

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RADIUS ENSEMBLE
At: Killian Hall, MIT,
Saturday night

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Jeremy Eichler can be reached at jeichler@globe.com.