

The Boston Globe

Radius Ensemble leaves lasting impression

By Matthew Guerrieri
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CAMBRIDGE - Good composers are sometimes actors, trying on different characters for size, and sometimes adventurers, steering their musical personalities into uncharted waters. Saturday's concert by the Radius Ensemble, curated by artistic director and oboist Jennifer Montbach, spotlighted both roles with particularly vivid examples.

MIT professor and Bang on a Can veteran Evan Ziporyn's "Four Impersonations" transcribe traditional music from across the globe for solo clarinet. Initially, clarinetist Eran Egozy seemed stuck in limbo between the work's improvised origins and its notated incarnation: The shakuhachi-derived "Honshirabe" and the rhapsodic gamelan "Pengrangrang Gede" had neither satisfying formal geometry nor convincing dip-and-glide spontaneity. But Egozy found the balance in the tintinnabulating "Thum Nyatiti" (originally for Kenyan lyre) and the Balinese shadow-play excerpt "Bindu Semara," mesmerizingly rendered in veiled tones of arresting non-Western intonation. Despite a sometimes grainy tone, Egozy drew the listener in, especially in his attention to color at delicate volumes.

Surrounding the "Impersonations" were wind-and-string combinations. Flautist Alicia DiDonato, violinist Gabriela Diaz, and violist Wendy Richman gave a wily, tight-focus reading of Ludwig van Beethoven's Op. 25 "Serenade," the proto-Romantic hero trying his hand at a little night music. The trio's sound skated across a glassy surface, digging in only for short, sharp accents and voluble interjections. A light, judicious use of vibrato contributed to a pleasantly astringent quality (enhanced by Killian Hall's dry, bright acoustic): pen-and-ink rather than paint. Diaz and Richman, along with cellist Miriam Bolkosky, backed Montbach in Benjamin Britten's "Phantasy Quartet"; while Montbach shaped the architecture with long, unfussy phrases, the similarly etched string timbre brought out the work's expressionist qualities, a reminder that the 18-year-old Britten harbored an unrequited desire to study with Alban Berg.

DiDonato, Montbach, and Egozy were joined by bassoonist Gregory Newton, hornist Jason White, and pianist Sarah Bob for Francis Poulenc's "Sextet," composed between 1932 and 1939, as Europe spiraled into war. Introducing the piece, Newton perpetuated the image of Poulenc the carefree bon vivant, suggesting the work bore no trace of its era. That dubious claim was promptly contradicted by the music, which the ensemble paid the respect of a robustly dramatic interpretation. The boulevardier parade tunes turn fractured and shrill with desperate, forced gaiety; torch-song melodies wind over rich, regretful, shifting-sand harmonies. With clarity and sympathy, Poulenc saw both the impending conflagration and the human desire to avoid facing up to it for as long as was possible. ■

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Clockwise from top left: Wendy Richman, viola; Alicia DiDonato, flute; artistic director Jennifer Montbach, oboe; Eran Egozy, clarinet; Gabriela Diaz, violin; Sarah Bob, piano; and Miriam Bolkosky, cello.

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