

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

Radial States and Fishy Fingers

by Mark DeVoto
May 8, 2016

It is always a revelation to hear a new work by our own John Harbison, and last night's Radius Ensemble performance at Longy came with a particular pleasure: the premiere of *Nine Rasas*, short pieces for clarinet, viola and piano (the same combination as Mozart's *Kegelstatt* Trio). It was beautifully performed by commissioners Eran Egozy (clarinet) and Yukiko Ueno Egozy (piano) along with violist Noriko Futagami. The composer's program notes mention inspiration from the 17th-century poetry of Sultanate of Bijapur King Ibrahim Adil Shah II, adding that the nine *rasas*, an idiosyncrasy of Sanskrit aesthetics, "were conceived as flavors, essences, and seem not to have been described, as in their inevitable appearance within our modern self-help movements, as moods, and emotions." Harbison's musical realization, nine short movements grouped in five sections, includes titles beginning with "Attraction / Desire (Tempo giusto)" and progressing toward a middle group, including "Terror / Foreboding (Minuciosamente)," which I found more *minaccioso* (menacing) than *minucioso* (meticulous), and concluding with "Tranquility / Repose (Comodo, lento)." The ensemble conception variously featured the clarinet and viola as soli, in cadenzas, in duets, in strongly colored unison, and even paired collaterally (no. 7, "Courage / Confidence (Risoluto)"), with the piano more often in an accompanying role or in back-and-forth dialogue with the others; at other times there was a full partnership in three-part counterpoint, as in no. 8, "Wonder / Amazement (Con anima)." There was a nice sense of jazzy 6/8 in the strongly rhythmic no. 2, "Play / Mirth (Giocoso)," which ended with a resonant chord for the viola on the open C string and an octave harmonic G—another example of Harbison's sensitivity to instrumental color. No. 3, "Fury / Obsession (Con fuoco)" began with a ponderous octave D in the piano that sounded almost like a Brahms gesture, but it was followed by one of the highest notes—a genuine note, not a squeak—I've ever heard uttered by a clarinet, and the movement ended with gong chords in the piano, caught and echoed by the sostenuto pedal. No. 4, "Regret / Remorse (Mesto)" immediately ensued with a calmer F-major ambience.

The harmonic idiom throughout the nine movements ranged between strongly tonal dissonance and dense chromaticism, but tonal harmony predominated, though always complex. The most lucid texture appeared in the final "Tranquility / Repose," a calm G major that might well have been a tribute to Copland; one heard a cantilena of low clarinet with viola harmonics, and a repeated D bass that supported a concluding 6-4 chord—a lovely sound, and no other word for it.

The concert began with the five-minute *Lullaby and Memory* by Lev "Lyova" Zhurbin, for an unusual wind quintet: flute (Lisa Hennessey), English horn (Jennifer Montbach), bass clarinet (Eran Egozy), bassoon (Adrian Morejon), and horn (Anne Howarth). The "memory" evoked by the opening trochaic warbles on low D and A, followed by a major third F-A above middle C, might have been of Mahler's Third Symphony or even his "Einsame im Herbst," but the sound was gratifying even so, and the ensemble texture that gyrated afterward was interesting and well-planned.

The second half of the program was Schubert's *Trout* Quintet. This beloved work is remarkable for the unusual form of three of its five movements. Everybody knows the fourth, five variations on Schubert's own song, "Die Forelle," and the scherzo third movement is conventional. The first movement, however, is a nonstandard sonata form with recapitulation beginning in the subdominant; this is the only movement that has an independent development. (The recap, just to keep track of the bars, omits the first 24 bars of the exposition and cuts out an additional 14 bars before the third theme.) But the second movement Andante, in F major, begins

with a 60-bar sonata exposition ending in G major, followed by a literal transposition of the exposition, beginning in A-flat major, adding a single extra bar (m.104) to adjust the modulation, and ending the movement at m.121—formally, that’s all there is to it. The finale, *Allegro giusto*, is even more reductive: an exposition of 236 bars, A major to D major, and a literal transposition of the same, E major to A major, ending on m.472.

Besides transposition, the only differences in these manipulations, which for any other composer would be called shameless acts of copying, are some adjustments in register, moving a passage up or down an octave. So with all this copying, what is left to develop? The answer is that the formal interest lies in the wide-ranging tonality, covering a spectrum of keys, and the abundance of melody that overflowed out of Schubert every day. “Never compose what a copyist could write for you!” Schoenberg cautioned his pupil Berg. Schubert’s *Trout* Quintet is a perfect rejoinder to a composer who of course adored Schubert’s music — but perhaps more for its perfect nobility than for its formal invention.

The Radius performance was ragged, with a lot of dropped notes, but that didn’t seem to matter, because one was constantly aware of five friends making lovely music together for the joy of it — “like a perfect spring day,” as pianist Sarah Bob described the work before the performance, even though springtime has been delayed this year. The quartet, Gabriela Diaz (violin), Noriko Futagami (viola), Jan Müller-Szeraws (cello), and Randall Ziegler (bass) also enjoyed the weather. I have played the *Trout* a dozen times and still can’t manage the octave triplets in the finale perfectly. I’m convinced, too, that the difficult-to-tune high A trills for the violin in Variation 1 were composed at a time when people in Vienna didn’t eat as well as today; fingers were thinner then.