

Radius Ensemble's Season Finale

by Jonathan Blumhofer
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The Rasas are but the latest in a series of remarkable scores John Harbison has been turning out over his eighth decade (the Symphony no. 6 and String Trio are but two other recent triumphs).



Radius Ensemble. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

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All good things music come to an end, goes the adage. And so the curtain came down Saturday night on “Fresh Paint,” the Radius Ensemble’s premiere-themed 2015-16 season at Longy’s Pickman Hall. In keeping with the

year's theme, this weekend's finale offered the first performance of a new piece, this time one by John Harbison. Sandwiched in between came a score by Lev Zhurbin and an old favorite by Franz Schubert.

Commissioned by Radius members Eran and Yukiko Egozy, Harbison's *Nine Rasas* (for clarinet, viola, and piano) takes its general inspiration from the composer's study of the court of Ibrahim Adil Shah II, the 17th-century king of the Indian province of Bihapur. Ibrahim's court was evidently filled with artists and craftsmen who, with the king, endeavored to reconcile ancient Greek theories with Sanskrit teachings, a pursuit in which music played a vital role.

In the present piece, the Indian influence, such as it is, is mostly to be found in the juxtaposition of specific emotional states, which references an ancient Hindu tradition that leads to mastery of them. Thus, four of *Nine Rasas'* five parts pair either complementing or contrasting moods (Attraction/Desire and Play/Mirth in the first; Fury/Obsession and Regret/Remorse in the second; Terror/Foreboding and Disgust/Self-Pity in the third; Courage/Confidence and Wonder/Amazement in the fourth; the last focuses on Tranquility/Repose).

Harbison's writing throughout is, stylistically, of a decidedly Western variety and it relates, with a sort of general directness, to each specific theme. Thus, the clarinet and viola exchange playful, seductive figures in "Attraction/Desire"; gradually they join in a unison melody before splintering again. Echoes of jazz mark the whimsical second movement, "Play/Mirth." Strict contrapuntal figures climaxing in piano clusters characterize "Fury/Obsession" while tremulous melodies predominate in "Terror/Foreboding" and mocking exaggeration scores "Disgust/Self-Pity." And so on. The closing movement offers a songful clarinet melody at first accompanied by the viola playing harmonics; the roles are then switched and the *Rasas* end in a state of meditative suspense.

It's a striking, at times haunting, overall emotionally direct piece and this first performance, played by the Egozy's (clarinetist Eran and pianist Yukiko) and violist Noriko Futagami, ably captured its delicate energy. Futagami, in particular, navigated Harbison's demanding viola writing with color and verve, though the whole trio was remarkable for the rhythmic precision and tonal richness of its playing. While the music's theatrical elements should develop a harder edge over time — the more ominous affects might have, overall, glowered a bit more — *Nine Rasas* left a strong impression.

Also making a positive impact was Lev Zhurbin's *Lullaby & Memory*, a wind quintet that, to quote its program note "recalls both...collective memory, and a very personal, intimate, one" (the last being Zhurbin hearing his grandmother-in-law whispering to her deceased husband in her sleep). The score is perhaps most striking for its employment of English horn and bass clarinet instead of the usual quintet instrumentation of oboe and clarinet: the darker, more plangent sonorities of both instruments afford it a rich timbral quality.

And Zhurbin was quick to take advantage of this characteristic of those instruments as well as across the whole ensemble. The piece opens with a gently rocking bass clarinet riff over which some striking doublings are heard: flute and horn is one, bassoon and horn another. After a short while, the music picks up in energy and, around its midpoint, comes a brief, responsorial section; the *Lullaby* recommences and the work ends with a gently quizzical statement.

Saturday's reading was warm and well-played, with the ensemble led by Lisa Hennessey's clarion flute. *Lullaby & Memory's* overriding nostalgic character was plainly evident (especially thanks to the scoring) but it roused nicely, too, particularly in the cantorial sections.

If only such a positive report could be made for the evening's finale, a spirited but sloppy rendition of Schubert's *Trout* Quintet. In general, it sounded as though the players — pianist Sarah Bob, violinist Gabriella Diaz, violist Futagami, cellist Jan Müller-Szeraws, and bassist Randall Zigler — would have benefited from another rehearsal or two: their sound never blended comfortably and intonation slips marred several passages,

notably in the Scherzo and finale. That said, the performance was at least richly grounded, thanks to Müller-Szeraws' and Zigler's muscular accounts of the low string parts.

But, in the end, this concert was never so much about the Schubert as it was about the Harbison. The *Rasas* are but the latest in a series of remarkable scores Harbison has been turning out over his eighth decade (the Symphony no. 6 and String Trio are but two other recent triumphs). If it can be said that too much new music offers just striking individual moments, it's true of Harbison's *Rasas* that they far exceed the sum of their parts. They're a major addition to the (admittedly narrow) repertoire for clarinet, viola, and piano and, as such, ought to be played far and wide by such ensembles.

So, if you play in one of those groups and missed Saturday's concert (or if you don't and still weren't able to be at Longy this weekend), don't despair: Radius is in the process of [producing a CD](#) featuring the *Rasas* — as well as this season's other premieres. It's slated for release later this summer, as a primer for the group's 18th season, which is set to be announced in full in July.