

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

Sonic Clarity Radiates

by Leon Golub

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A crowd of cold-tolerant souls gathered in Longy's Pickman Hall Saturday to hear the Radius Ensemble dispatch an eclectic mix of works ranging from some with the ink barely dry to an early Brahms looking back to the early Baroque. The ensemble's marketing title "Clarity" – implied a shared *fiat lux* character.

Philip Glass's hypnotic *Façades* of 1981, originally written for the movie *Koyannisqatsi* (but not used therein), arrived last night arranged for oboes and strings by Radius's artistic director Jennifer Montbach, with the composer's blessing, as Montbach recounted with a radiant smile. Two oboes — Montbach and Mary Cicconetti — replaced two soprano saxophones, and in place of the synthesizer, violinist Gabriela Diaz doubled cellist Jonathon Butler and violinist Katherine Winterstein doubled violist Stephanie Fong. The changes led to interesting differences between the two versions: where the synthesizer created a throbbing, threatening alien presence and the sax mournfully surrendered to a blind fate, the violins gave us more of a cosmic indifference to human presence; the oboe piercing and plaintive, lyrically determined to find meaning in the face of a void. It was a most successful transcription, capturing the essential Glass in seven minutes.

David Rakowski's nearly 200 preludes and etudes for solo piano explore the possibilities of the instrument in a variety of appealing ways, characterized in large part by persistent rhythmic drive and energy. Sarah Bob offered three preludes he wrote for her. *Mind the Gap #18* moved from fitful starts to a jazzy and flowing middle to a big band swing, fading away at the end. *Wayo* was soft and gentle, a child's daydream, moving to a lilting dance and then off to sleep. *Ghepardo* gave us a marvelously feral portrait of a leopard stalking its prey, moving in brief bursts, repeated notes signaling alertness, a short intense chase leading to rapid passagework and a descending crash of chords, ending in unrelaxed restfulness. The performance was exciting and evocative. At Bob's invitation, Rakowski himself sprung up from the audience, hoisted himself onto the stage in a memorable display of youthful vigor, and accepted the audience's homage with simplicity and grace.

In big band jazz arrangements, the "shout chorus" is typically the last chorus, a full-voiced closing statement designed to leave the listener saturated with sound. Kenji Bunch has written of his "Shout Chorus" that it is "a highly demanding, virtuosic work that pushes the instruments to the extreme." Joining Montbach to constitute the wind quintet were Sarah Brady, flute, Eran Egozy, clarinet, Adrian Morejon, bassoon and Anne Howarth, horn, the latter wisely playing slightly muted to preserve balance. The lively and joyous traversal gave little indication of technical difficulty. The individual voices fought fraternally for attention, each rivalling the other for a place at center stage. Bunch used the difficulty of blending the disparate timbers to advantage, the tutti portions still allowing each voice to be heard separately, the moments of reflective quietude giving the impression of spontaneous improvisation. The momentum toward a big finish — the out chorus — gathered spectacularly, the voices suddenly blending their distinctive colors miraculously in a brilliantly unified white light of sound. Viscerally and beautifully interpreted as it was here, Bunch's *Shout Chorus* purifies the air we breathe of a thousand little hidden dark demons and empowers us to celebrate diversity in the clarity of a brilliant sun.

The young Brahms scored his *Sextet No. 1* in B-flat Major for what amounts to a double string trio. Diaz, Winterstein, Fong and Butler joined forces with violist Noriko Futagami and Cellist Emileigh Vandiver in a rich and lush reading of the work. The first movement *allegro* featured beautiful cross-currents under the main themes, the sound layered and complex, with a perfect execution of the Beethoven-style recapitulation, the group splitting into portions playing both the ongoing development and the return of the first theme simultaneously. The coda, led by Butler's cello sank beautifully in quietude before the startling cadence. The high point unsurprisingly came in the chaconne-like theme and variations second movement *andante*, here played with great depth of feeling and power. The first variation evoked the subtle inner resolve of a Marin Marais, while the third seemed to

place us in a great wave-tossed ocean in a violent storm. The final three variations brought us wistful serenity, the bittersweet clarity of perspective, allowing us to depart with a sort of incipient self-knowledge.

The brief scherzo could not have been more different. Radius took it with Beethovenian mischief, imbuing the farandole-like B section with infectious *joie de vivre*. The final movement rondo (which Joachim had found so challenging at its premiere) was tackled nicely through a prism of patience, which allowed various inner voices, often contradicting one another, to unfold in fullness. A good example of what the *Radii* accomplished in this movement was the episode starting with a tzigane-like rhythm, which they nicely emphasized, only to shift rapidly to a brief but nicely audible Brandenburg moment, as though recognizing that Brahms wished to ground himself periodically even as he looked forward to experiment and diversify. The aesthetic of diversity of Bunch's *Shout Chorus* intriguingly sensitized us to the elusive complexity of Brahms's rondo movement— another deliberate exploration of uniting disparate ideas. The ensemble brought convincing clarity to Brahms's shifting moods, laughter and scars.