

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

Radians Re-Assemble Ensemble for Year 19

by Vance Koven

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Both the pros and cons of the mixed-ensemble, mixed-repertoire model that they have pursued over the years emerged in the first concert of Radius Ensemble's 19th season. The balance, as the sizeable audience at Pickman Hall @Longy @Bard discovered on Saturday evening, tilted decidedly pro.

The first half stressed newish (at least 21st century) work, beginning with Andrew Norman's *Light Screens*, a 2002 single-movement piece for "flute quartet" (i.e. flute, violin, viola and cello, following in the footsteps of the Haydn brothers and Mozart). At the time of writing, the precocious Norman was but 22, and in the 15 years since this ingratiating entry has become one of his more popular (you can easily find it on YouTube). One nice thing about it is how well the flute is integrated into the ensemble, so that, despite the presence of a short cadenza-like passage near the end, it doesn't read like a concertante exercise. Norman had described his inspiration as coming from the stained glass windows designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, and from a structural standpoint the ensuing music suffers, as do many others of its ilk, from the attempt to recreate in a temporal medium something from a spatial one. Still, if one can tolerate not making any sense of its progress, among light and lively and pensive, even somber, moments, it sounds well. Sarah Brady, flute, is a committed and persuasive advocate for this music, and her nimbleness was matched by that of her string colleagues Gabriela Diaz, violin, Stephanie Fong, viola and Miriam Bolkosky, cello, each of whom had opportunities to shine in brief moments (the latter's solo leading to a somber section near the beginning was especially affecting).

The second contemporary entry was the 2008 *Objets Trouvés* (actual French titling conventions would not have capitalized the second word) by Laurie San Martin, whose musically formative years were spent here but who now teaches at U Cal Davis. In fact, we haven't heard any of her music since she decamped, so this was a welcome opportunity. This piece, in three movements, for the ensemble comprising clarinet and piano trio made famous by Messiaen in *Quartet for the End of Time* (though Messiaen didn't invent it; there was an earlier work for it by Hindemith). San Martin, however, had "*Q40E0T*" firmly in mind for her effort, and even quoted a few snatches here and there (helpfully illustrated before the performance by clarinetist Eran Egozy and the others). What she did not do, and probably could not do as an American living in a time of peace and prosperity, was emulate the throat-grabbing emotional power of Messiaen.

That said, San Martin's quartet opens with a bow to the big Romantic style, to which Sarah Bob's muscular pianism contributed greatly. A couple of features dominate the entire work: the Messiaen-like bird-calls announced by the clarinet on its delayed entry, and arpeggio-like figures, which in the first movement evoke *Petrushka* and in the others are more compacted. These unifying tools, and the conventional fast-slow-fast-ish movement sequence, somewhat mitigate the effect of the structural issues inherent in the "ABCDEFGH" form (or, as a composer friend puts it, the "just one damn thing after another" form). The slow movement is particularly affecting and successful, while the finale, headed "Intense, free," conjured the finale of Shostakovich's First Symphony, with its many tempo digressions from the nominally fast pace—designed in that case as satire, though we think not in this case. Egozy was quite impressive in tone and phrasing, as were colleagues Diaz, Bolkosky and Bob.

Jean Françaix was, like Andrew Norman, only 22 when he composed his Wind Quartet in 1933. The story of why he left the horn out of what was intended as a wind quintet, as recounted in Kathryn Allwine Bacasmot's program note, is quite amusing, but the elision was felicitous in this piece and perhaps prompted one of the more endearing subsequent efforts in the genre, by Arthur Berger seven years later. The Françaix Quartet, in four short movements, is jovial and utterly charming in its homages to Poulenc and Milhaud (Françaix was not a member of Les Six, but carried its traditions to the end of his long life in 1997), and

some more surprising ones, especially in the slow movement, to Ravel. The objective of the younger French composers after World War I was to dry music out from Romantic excess, and the technique was basically to eschew development in favor of contrasting emotional messages in the melodies themselves (and their harmonizations). Poulenc was the ultimate master of this, but Françaix no slouch, and this piece is a textbook example of how to do it. Radius's wind complement of Brady, oboist Jennifer Montbach, Egozy and Adrian Morejon, bassoon, delighted in this concert-hall-meets-music-hall mashup, with light and deft fingerwork and the occasional languid sigh.

The String Quintet No. 2 in G Major, op. 77 (in his original catalogue, listed as op. 18) is perhaps the earliest piece by Antonin Dvořák to earn a staple place in the repertoire. Although written in 1875 it wasn't published until 1888, and its maturity justifies its company with his later work. In the by-then unusual instrumentation of string quartet plus contrabass (you'd have to go to the 18th century to find more than isolated examples), it is full of the composer's characteristic melodic fecundity, rhythmic bounce, Czech folksiness and high-sheen craftsmanship, with an almost jolting depth in the first movement's development (and without, as is too often the case with early Dvořák, any debilitating prolixity). It does, however, come with a dollop of controversy. Instead of the usual four movements, it was originally written with five, with an "Andante Religioso" inserted after the first movement. The published version lacks this, as the composer axed it, *saying* that it made the whole thing too long. What he didn't say, however, was the truth, which is that the extra movement (which he later published separately) was inferior in inspiration to the other four.

Composers make decisions like this all the time. Schubert excised and replaced the original slow movement to his B-flat piano trio, the excision being the exquisite Nocturne in E-flat, and Mahler ditched the *Blumine* movement of his First Symphony, about which decision our esteemed colleague Jeffrey Gantz [has just written](#). We are ever indebted to our readers, and one of them, responding to Gantz, made the following unanswerable riposte: "When the artist reaches a conclusion, 'finishes' a work – that is, declares it to be finished – it [is] as if it has been signed into law, and is no longer open for debate." For this reason alone, we disagree with Radius's decision to perform the Quintet as a five-movement work. The deleted movement's weakness, in comparison to the rest, just reinforces the point.

All that said, the quintet received a thoroughly respectable reading by the Radius strings (Diaz and Katherine Winterstein, violins, Fong, and Bolkosky) augmented by bassist Scott Fitzsimmons. In fact, in tone, phrasing, pitch, rhythm and most of the other usual accouterments of professional musicianship, a really very good one. We especially admired the punch of the obsessive Schubertian motif developed with such surprising ferocity in the first movement, the vigorous peasant stomp of the scherzo's main section, the sweetness and warmth of the Poco andante (we especially commend Diaz's lovely solos in the B section, as well as Winterstein and Fong); admittedly, the finale could have been tighter. The "but" in all this has to do with an unfortunate decision to tone down the bass instead of revving up everyone else. A truly robust performance, like [this one](#) featuring Nate Martin with the Borromeo Quartet, demonstrates both better ideas about balance and the perils to ad hoc ensembles in putting out a fully unified product. The Andante religioso? Well it is what it is, a bit of a nothing-burger, timid (played mostly with mutes) and melodically weak, and apparently uninspiring even to the players. So, bottom line, nobody was disgraced, it was high quality professional music-making, just a little too wan and loose-jointed to be transporting.