

MATTHEWS A Book of Hours. For Jonathan Kramer. Island. Duo for Violin and Piano • Capital Trio • ALBANY TROY 1239 (65: 10)

The predominant observation I had while listening to this thoroughly engrossing disc the first time was the suspicion that the composer had to be an intellectually curious person with catholic tastes and an extensive knowledge of and affinity for multiple approaches to composition. I don't think I've ever heard a recording that leads the listener down so many divergent paths, all of which provide an abundance of treats.

His full talent and considerable power to convert images and experiences into aural forms is on full display in *Book of Hours* for piano trio, a six-movement work described by the composer as "a secular take on Medieval illustrated manuscripts of prayers and devotions appropriate to the cycle of six religious services in a day." It opens with "Catbird at Matins," and the fun begins with chirps in the upper register of the cello and continues as the other two join the din. Matthews's avian creatures seem closer in spirit to those of Saint-Saëns than Messiaen. The "caffeinated" are the dedicatees of the second movement, "Morning Song," which seems to combine morning grumpiness and touches of pastoral Copland with a bit of leftover bird song. "L'Après-midi d'Arnold Sch____" also includes references to other composers (more Stravinsky than Schoenberg to these ears) and his birds provide the occasional encore. Perhaps it is his use of this unusual mash-up that the specter of Charles Ives also seems to be evoked. A soothing unaccompanied cello opens *Evensong*, described by the composer as a "peaceful twilight hymn without words." Again I hear a bit of Ives in the combination of a consonant, lyrical song with a sometimes harmonically wayward accompaniment in the piano.

For Jonathan Kramer (for piano trio and electroacoustic sounds) opens with what sounds like an excerpt from a rehearsal involving the trio and the composer. The dedicatee was an important influence on the composer, opening to him new ways of thinking about the progression of time and form in music. The contours of this piece suggest that beginnings and endings can be viewed as arbitrary constructions. As I've described it here, readers may balk at this suggestion as a kind of academic gimmick. The proof is in the music itself rather than a description of it, and Matthews shows a keen ear for blending the various components into a satisfying whole, the music often moving in long, slow blocks of sound.

Island is purely a tape piece, assembled in 1989 from computer-synthesized sounds with acoustic sound recorded on a coastline in Islesboro, Maine. It's fascinating to observe how the composer seems to mimic or relate the electronic with the acoustic, while at other times he plays up the contrasts and obvious dualities.

The Duo for Violin and Piano comes from another world altogether, a kind of *hausmusik* (in the composer's words) intended as a wedding gift for friends. He uses the pitches D and B to represent their initials, and this leads to some melodic fragments that have a distinctly diatonic and folkish quality. Later the music takes on hints of music-hall popular music from a century ago, and rarely is traditional tonality challenged. Charm seems to be his primary goal, and in this he succeeds admirably. The performances are all first-rate and enthusiastic. Michael Cameron

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