

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

William Matthews apparently considers himself a small-town composer composing for local musicians and audiences, often in a variety of styles. The works on this disc fall into two separate genres that Matthews has cultivated: traditional acoustic music and electronic works. The first, and longest, of the works on this disc, *A Book of Hours* (1995–97), certainly illustrates that stylistic variation. Conventionally scored for piano trio, it is a collection of six diverse pieces organized to illustrate the passing day, the conceit being the emulation of the medieval practice of compiling Books of Hours, illustrated manuscripts of prayers, and other texts appropriate to worship at various times of day. Matthews clearly relishes illustrating local color—Maine, in his case—as well as pulling in allusions to Schoenberg and Webern, and to Thelonious Monk. The first piece, “Catbird Matins,” sets the scene for what is to follow—though, by definition, each movement is strongly different from the others. “Catbird Matins” is full of ornithological content, presented in a relaxed manner (this isn’t Messiaen). My personal favourite is the final movement, “Le Tombeau de Monk,” an “upside-down take” on Monk’s *Round Midnight*. “Evensong” concludes with a remarkable song (the only word) for cello with light, high violin and sparse piano. The whole piece, which vaguely reminds me of the Fujiwara disc recently reviewed, was written for the present performers, and receives a clearly committed performance.

It is with the second piece, *For Jonathan Kramer* (2005–10), with whom Matthews had studied, that things get more unusual. It is scored for piano trio, prerecorded “stereo tracks,” and computer processing of the live instruments. The piece is impressive, though it is best to say that its apparent ease and simplicity belies the battery of technology employed. This isn’t the brilliant, look-at-me world of Boulez’s essays in this medium. Instead, we have a study in timbre, *Klangfarben*—the colors of sound—that grips from the beginning. Well, actually, from just after the beginning. It ill-advisedly starts with a little snippet of dialogue recorded at the sessions presumably between the composer and Hilary Cumming, the violinist. No attempt is made to integrate this into the rest of the work (à la Stockhausen’s *Hymnen*) and it already irritated on second hearing. But that slight cavil aside, the music itself is startling. Matthews creates something for which the cliché “haunting” is the only word. Kramer had died young, the booklet tells us, so perhaps it is easier to hear the sense of loss, of isolation, of yearning, but they certainly make a powerful impression. The melodic material is slight, primarily a descending theme and one insistent falling second in particular. I love the way that the acoustic space is handled so the electronic dimensions added by the technology are presented entirely convincingly as extensions of the real instruments, which fade in and out like ghosts. There is not much for them to do, particularly the piano, but as a concept piece, the overall effect is far more than the sum of its parts.

*Island* (1989) is an attractive collage of sounds—water, meadow birds, a car, an airplane, two children, more birds—knitted together by gentle synthesized sounds. The whole is intended to depict a passing day and is rather pleasant and relaxing. There does not seem to be any processing of the recorded sounds, which are just presented naturally; still less is there any attempt to use the timbres and colors of the sounds as functional components of a musical argument in the way that Stockhausen did, for example, in *Telemusik*. And the *Duo for Violin and Piano* (2000), written as a wedding gift for the present players, Duncan Cumming, piano, and Hilary Cumming, violin (no electronics), is also somewhat modest in aspiration. It’s enjoyable and successful in its own terms but I am left feeling slightly undernourished by the end. Indeed, the disc as a whole leaves me wanting to hear some more of Matthews’s music—something to get one’s teeth into. I am left feeling that here is someone operating well within his comfort zone: Everything is enjoyable, done well and, in the case of *For Jonathan Kramer*, rather moving, yet I am sure the man can do more. Excellent performances and recording. Jeremy Marchant

This article originally appeared in Issue 34:5 (May/June 2011) of *Fanfare* Magazine.