

James Matheson's music awakens the air through which it moves. Deeply attuned to the potential of his own material, Matheson is composing works that are as notable for their expressive precision as for their warm and glowing sounds.

Trained at Cornell, Matheson is a prominent former student of Steven Stucky, a composer who has not only helped define a bright and contemporary type of orchestral sonority, but one who has secured the integrity of his compositional process while recognizing that we live in a time in which music needs to broaden in order to grow. He is also a devotee of the music of John Harbison (the subject of his doctoral thesis), an accessible but famously disciplined composer, which imbued in him a love of the variation form. Matheson is a man who wants to write ambitious music, but he has not cut his standards to suit the marketplace. There is a patient, organic quality to his creative mind that is observable in all of his works.

Matheson's music can be loud, of course, but it grows from quiet springs; a few favorite pieces can prove the point. *River, River, River* (2001), which was commissioned by the Chicago Symphony for the Chicago Civic Orchestra, may be his most outgoing piece. Its opening hints at great waves and the great ships that move upon them—did something about the City of Big Shoulders, proud, brawny, and water-ringed, creep into his mind? But T.S. Eliot, not Sandburg, is Matheson's poet of choice in explaining, and to some degree inspiring, the piece. The title is taken from the last line of Eliot's *Virginia*, a poem which describes the pace of a river, the paradox of movement within non-movement, life within stillness: "Delay, decay. Living, living,/Never moving. Ever moving..." Likewise, Jim's opening gestures bring sparking clouds of instrumental detail in their wake that cohere into layered counterpoint; then tender, almost childlike melodies trace themselves over a central chaconne sequence in harp, piano and percussion. As more variations ensue, the chaconne's chords are fragmented and chromaticized, with flared contrasts of soft and loud, before Matheson turns his boat around and heads back upstream.

The rich unseen relationship between large and small in "River" is a key element of Matheson's work; so is the clear, firm root movement in thirds, and, perhaps, a particular love of the pitch E. That note certainly underlines important parts of *The Paces*, a chamber concerto written two years later (for Philadelphia's Orchestra 2001) that unfolds as a series of x-ray glances of a dulcet piano tune, each made from a different angle. The contrasts here are far greater than in "River," and so are the stylistic influences: the melismatic, richly layered wind lines of Stucky, the pizzicati doublings and secundal counterpoint of much postwar modernism, and decorative and harmonic devices gleaned from the Francophone piano works of Chopin, Debussy, and Ligeti. What brings it into focus is a gnawing sense of vulnerability, most concentrated in a desultory cadenza, which twice comes to rest on a shimmering and restive bitonal chord. Matheson's "pacing" has an existential edge.

*The Paces* is in a sense a culmination of a growing interest in the keyboard that had started several years before in *Pound*, a solo work from 1999. *Pound*, designed for the amazingly gifted Xak Bjerken, is perhaps Matheson's ur-piece: its three-movement shape is organic and inevitable. The opening movement, its rhythmic layering and dynamic shadings deliberately conjuring up the illusion of two pianos, comes into being like one of Degas's bathers—a skeleton gradually acquiring an elegant suit of flesh and blood. (The piano's lean, exposed textures, which can intimidate many composers, merely spur him on.) Again, as in Degas, diaphanous sensuality is

tinged with melancholy and self-knowledge, as the work's material assumes a three-dimensional volume. Influences from the past—the lonely spaces of Schoenberg's *Klavierstücke*, the chilling sparseness of Ligeti's *Musica ricercata*—are deftly “stolen,” mere shadows of the music's passing through time. The second movement, seemingly a more straightforward melody-with-accompaniment texture, has its own ghosts, not only the restless chromaticism of American “ultra-moderns” like Ruth Crawford, but, in a lightly skipping tune, the 70's pop music of the composer's youth. The finale, an increasingly decisive scherzo, combines the vertical emphasis of the opening movement with the second movement's urgent linearity.

Chamber music shows Matheson at his most deft and determined. The piano trio *Falling* (2000), a rousing yet discomfiting work, is a result of both personal need (it is a tribute to the distinguished pianist and composer Leo Smit, for whom Matheson served as copyist for several years) and musical impetus in its purest form. The bare opening piano passage, built almost entirely from the interval of a third, not only draws from the spartan musical language of Copland (Smit was a renowned advocate of his music) but shows how powerfully Matheson can evoke the shades of neo-Romanticism without indulging in the self-defeating phraseology of actual Romantic music. The piece is his first, and, perhaps, most telling use of the variation technique he learned from Harbison. Little by little, the implications of the opening phrases are opened out and explored, with the violin and cello demanding more and more room to roam through a violent scherzo, a pinging E major interlude, a chaste, altered reprise of the opening bars, a tough-minded Brahmsian coda. The final bars (the composer reminds us that we sometimes “fall in love”), a benediction in the work's initial D major sonority, are daubed with yearning harmonies before winding down to an unsmiling close.

*Buzz* (first performed at New York's Merkin Concert Hall, in 2001), in contrast, is happily stress-free. Adding a clarinet, it's a breathless *ricercar*, its waves of energy sweeping over a chain of third-related pedal points—an indication of both Matheson's timeliness and his respect for tradition. Keep your ears open: this is a composer who has a lot to offer.

—Russell Platt is a composer and an editor at The New Yorker.  
© 2005 by Russell Platt.

**Bofa Music Publishing**

675 Sackett St #103 • Brooklyn, NY 11217  
(917) 676 1858 • music@bofamusic.com