

Nathan Thatcher. *Paco*.

New York: Mormon Artists Group, 2016.

Reviewed by Luke Howard

If pressed, I would say *Paco* is probably closer to biography than it is to any other literary genre, but this hybrid work is so much more than the life story of a composer. The author, Nathan Thatcher, has penned an extraordinary text—equal parts biography, travelogue, composition catalog, music history, and coming-of-age narrative of a young scholar—that synthesizes a firehose of information into a coherent and compelling story. Thatcher writes with the seasoned voice of an experienced scholar, delving into carefully crafted discussions of analysis, compositional technique, and the technology of music. These are topics that can frequently trip up even the best music writers when engaging a lay audience, but Thatcher manages to write without compromising, oversimplifying, or alienating. What makes this book even more extraordinary is that Thatcher wrote *Paco* while still an undergraduate composition major in the BYU School of Music. (He has since embarked on graduate study at the University of Michigan.)

This book details Thatcher's encounters with Francisco Estévez Diaz—known to his friends and associates simply as “Paco”—an LDS composer from Spain, who, though deeply connected with the European avant-garde music of the 1970s and '80s, disappeared from the international radar in the latter part of his career. Through the efforts of the Mormon Artists Group and its director, Glen Nelson, Thatcher was invited to skip school for a week and travel to Spain to meet Estévez (now retired); gather as much information as possible about his life, career, and music; collect copies of all his available scores; and organize all of this into an authoritative bio-catalog on the composer. Thatcher's principal credentials for this daunting task, he modestly admits, are that he is himself an LDS composer, he speaks “mission” Spanish, and he was too inexperienced to know how impossible this project was likely to

be (14). Thatcher was just young and naïve enough to give it a shot. The result is a triumph.

The account begins *in medias res*—with barely a day’s notice, Thatcher skips classes at BYU and hops on a plane to Spain to meet a composer he knows almost nothing about and whose music he has encountered only in small doses. Thatcher creates an engaging first-person narrative, a glimpse of his internal maelstrom of thoughts and emotions as he wonders how to proceed now that he has unquestionably bitten off more than he can chew. The disparate threads and mental trajectories, embellished with Thatcher’s gift for verbal imagery, careen almost uncontrollably, but they do eventually, and brilliantly, coalesce around the central figure of Paco. In the meantime, Thatcher’s own excitement and doubt propel the narrative forward.

This is a genius move on Thatcher’s part, as the reader comes to Paco’s music through exactly the same sequence of surprising fits and starts as the author does. Thatcher gradually pieces together fragments, snippets, and details into a larger mosaic of this remarkable musician. He could have digested the information and presented it as a polished, finished study, but instead he chose to take us on the rough journey with him, to enjoy the discovery together.

Throughout the work, we get a glimpse not only into the author’s sensitivity to music—essential for such a task—but also his awareness of environment and the other arts. His prose evokes the streets and architecture of Madrid—the smells, tastes, and landscapes. A visit to the Alhambra is not so much a side trip, wedged between meetings with Paco in his home, as a rich parallel to the experience of uncovering great beauty and devotion in Paco’s music. Thatcher writes about all the arts, not just music, from a place of respect, sensitivity, and knowledge.

Part 2 of this book is a synthesis and contextualization of the information gleaned during the author’s weeklong visit with Paco. Here Thatcher tackles the issue of what it means to be an “LDS composer” (rightly questioning the usefulness of that label), along with thoughts about what “Mormon music” might or could be. He cites the emergent scholarly interest regarding the place of music in LDS society (with so much more work to be done) and applies all of this to a crucial figure whose experiences both with the LDS Church and with musical composition have all happened completely outside the Mormon Corridor of the western United States. Before his visit to Spain, Thatcher—a Utah Mormon in only the best sense of that phrase—had never left the United States; Paco has never left Europe. We eventually see, along with

Thatcher, that Paco is a singular example of the diversity of artistic voice that is so essential to the liveliness of a global faith. Thatcher recognizes and relishes the expanded vistas of possibility that Paco represents, not just to LDS musicians but to the LDS faithful working in all areas of artistic expression.

The actual biography of Estévez comes in the third part, which outlines a life filled with extraordinary successes, disappointing setbacks (including religious persecution, death threats, cancer, and the theft of his computer), and the often challenging intersections of career and faith. Most noteworthy in this section is the composite image that emerges of a person dedicated primarily to faith and family, not to his career. Thatcher presents Paco as a composer once on the cusp of international fame who now happily sits on the stand as a counselor in a bishopric, conducts the ward choir, dines with his family on Sunday evenings, and has no regrets about his career. As Thatcher concludes, “To paint a true picture of Francisco Estévez, it is infinitely more important to illustrate his family than to listen to his music. . . . For Paco, music is a means to an end and the family perseveres through eternity” (96).

Estévez holds four university degrees from four different institutions in three countries. He has been awarded prestigious prizes in international competitions and worked alongside some of the most influential figures in late twentieth-century European music. He knew Benjamin Britten and worked with Olivier Messiaen but also collaborated with the pioneering *krautrock* ensemble Kraftwerk in the 1980s. (Thatcher notes that the Venn diagram of people who have worked with both Britten and Kraftwerk produces an extraordinarily select subset of people—probably just Paco!) This is clearly a composer who deserves greater attention and yet has not sought it.

The fourth and final part of the book is a discussion of Paco’s compositional style, along with contextual summaries of some of his most important works. Among these works is the massive, oratorio-like *El Sueño de Lehi* (Lehi’s Dream), Paco’s magnum opus, which he recreated from memory after the first version was entirely lost when his computer was stolen. This portion of the book is the most technical, but Thatcher avoids most of the jargon of musical analysis. Any readers who paid attention during their childhood piano lessons should be able to follow the analytical discussion without too much trouble.

A lengthy annotated appendix catalogs all of Paco’s known compositions, even the lost ones. Paco joined the LDS Church mid-career in 1983, and while there are some works that explicitly reference his

new faith, including *Testimonio* (1983), *Preludio a la Memoria del Ángel Moroni* (2000), and *Paisajes del Alma* (2009), the vast majority of his compositions, including the “religious” ones, remain relatively abstract in their conception. Paco does not compose for a Mormon audience; he simply allows his Mormon faith to inflect the music he composes for all audiences.

Thatcher’s book is a tremendous achievement in its own right, even before factoring in the youth and inexperience of the author. But the story remains incomplete, because this book, like Paco’s music, is also a means to an end. The real story of Paco’s music will reach its conclusion only when his compositions are better known among those who share his faith and when the recognition of a major musical talent that doesn’t sound or look like Wasatch Front Mormonism is regarded not just as an interesting anomaly but as the way things should be.

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