



1-1-2017

# Nathan Thatcher, *Paco*

Reviewed by Michael Hicks

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Hicks, Reviewed by Michael (2017) "Nathan Thatcher, *Paco*," *Mormon Studies Review*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol4/iss1/12>

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Nathan Thatcher. *Paco*. New York: Mormon Artists Group, 2016.

*Reviewed by Michael Hicks*

*Mormon Studies Review*, vol. 4, 2017, pp. 125–29

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/msr.2017.0111> Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/mimsr.21568030>

THE STORY OF MORMONISM BEGINS WITH the digging up of a lost work. This book is in that vein. Part memoir, part archaeology, part travelogue, part critique, it recounts the brief, catch-as-can journey of its author across the world to unearth—from closets and file drawers—the compositions of Francisco Estévez, nicknamed “Paco.” Paco was born a month before VE Day in that long-contested Moroccan region known as Spanish Sahara. To be precise, he was born on April 5, a point I note only because the magic of the following date, April 6, has haloed the Mormon calendar since 1830. And this is something of a magic man, an enigma as Thatcher portrays him, for his half-invisibility not only to the “main” body of Mormon composers, but in some ways to himself. That’s how Thatcher depicts him, at least: serious, contemplative, and sketchily prolific, but a touch oblivious to artistic careerism and far from diligent about maintaining his own archive of works. Thatcher assumes the role of part-time amanuensis.

He overtly likens his book to a pop-music precursor of his project, the documentary film *Searching for Sugar Man* (2012), which sets out to find an obscure 1970s pop musician around whom a cult reputation had arisen in South Africa and to convey the passion of his new fans. In *Paco* we have a composer clearly more admired outside Mormon artistic circles than inside (although *admired*, *Mormon*, and *artistic circles* remain terms admittedly ill-defined, especially when linked together as if they meant something tangible and cohesive). That makes this a book whose major aim is redemption, both from obscurity and doldrums. It’s a book of advocacy, in some ways, a letter of recommendation with a touch of coattail riding by its author, who is ultimately both the CEO and the junior partner in this project.

The book is handsomely designed and produced, well copyedited and proofed. Apparently based on a detailed and disciplined journal of Thatcher's pursuit of Paco in Spain, it is prosed out in an appealing, relaxed voice (though I blanch at occasional vernacular clichés such as “movers and shakers”). The present tense is fashionable, though cloying to some readers (I just raised my hand). But in giving the sense of journalistic immediacy, the tense has its place. Thatcher's narrative is thorough, well spoken, dignified yet musing and breezy, with just the right amount of detail. It divides into four sections (“parts” 1–4), each ostensibly framing different aspects of the journey or the subject and his work. Within each section, subsections dwell on particularities—Paco's aesthetics (pp. 85–90); his conversion to Mormonism (pp. 128–29); his stylistic shifts from, say, formalism to *Gebrauchsmusik* (pp. 48–49); the state of his archive (pp. 61–73); the difficulty of being an artist with a nuclear family; and even some encounters with composer Nico Muhly (pp. 22–27), to name a few. Some of my favorite moments were the detailed on-site descriptions of the subject's desk, photos, and manuscripts-as-artifacts. There is a lot of subtle exposition here—comforting to some of us—of how artists make poor archivists, let alone housekeepers.

Meanwhile, one of Thatcher's virtues as a chronicler is his wide and authoritative knowledge of other, non-Paco composers' styles and techniques. I've spent a lot of my life in the field and can be fussy about nuances of history or style. But each time I caught an allusion to another composer, I learned I could relax, confident in the surety of Thatcher's authorial voice. Trust me: in a world of composerly description steeped in hogwash, Thatcher's reliability is a pleasure.

Following the main sections of the book is a long addendum that catalogs (with annotations) the extant works of the composer. (Some works, performed or unperformed, remain lost.) Happily, the works list will soon be outdated, since the composer has been energized by the attention he's now getting to create new ones and has even been commissioned by BYU's Barlow Endowment for Music Composition. Thatcher gives good, accessible entrées into each work, ones difficult

to provide for a lay (i.e., musically untrained) reader. In doing so, he offers a slightly grand, if necessarily hurried, tour through the thicket of modernist styles, techniques, and attitudes.

Fortunately, a high-end adjunct to this book is the semiportable, limited-edition archive you can acquire with it. It contains the bed-rock documentation of Paco, scores you can view and recordings you can hear, all tucked in a casket-qua-breadbox. Libraries, especially, can acquire this archive, as can acquisitive patrons of Mormon music, of which there must be a handful. This archive in some ways mimics its original mother lode in Spain: it's motley, with scores in photocopy as well as imprints from vendors of varying quality and renown, one-off compact discs, and Paco's esoteric book *Acustica Musical*.

The works will baffle many listeners attuned to something they might deem "Mormon music." For, even when the works have titles like *Preludio a la Memoria del Ángel Moroni*, the musical vocabulary is solidly modernist, sometimes what many would call "avant-garde." The CDs in the archive give documentary evidence of the sound, though often with a meager fidelity and sometimes mid-level performances. Beyond objects of curiosity, the scores themselves will have been worth unearthing only if they lead to more performances and high-grade recordings. (Some of those have already happened, via Thatcher's ongoing championing of his new friend's music.) Even so, there is a kind of antiquarian aura that surrounds the objects themselves. I find it almost spiritual just handling the objects, or at least as good a facsimile of spiritual as to make it memorable in an era of virtual, digitally preserved "objects." The scores, heard or unheard, have the whiff of art.

I spoke of this as a memoir of Thatcher's Paco-bound hejira. It's also biography—of a sort. Boswell comes to mind. Or, more on point, Ferdinand Ries, who followed Beethoven and wrote down sayings and anecdotes. Ries gave us many of the founding myths and tales of Beethoven that scholars have spent years sorting out, sometimes debunking, other times qualifying or confirming outright. I doubt whether Paco will get much of that. But in this book Thatcher begins what may be his own longer-term role as spokesman, scribe, and entrepreneur of

Paco's music. If that fails to happen, no matter. This book already goes so far in its portrayal that asking for more might be gilding the lily.

The book offers Paco as a kind of Everyman who has these little curios on the side of his role as a father and avid religionist. So, one might ask, why focus on this particular composer? His work stands up, for one thing. It has charm, rigor, magnetism, and yet lack of pretense. Most Mormons would find its presumptive elitism and arcane idiom odd at best, vexing at worst. But one will have to trust the critical ear on this one. As one elitist to the rest of them, I can testify that this music is true.

Estévez may seem an outlier, but one virtue of this book is to question the notion of outlying. Is he more representative of Mormonism in the twenty-first century or less? From the Wasatch Front point of view, he may seem an eccentric. But from the wider vision of Mormonism's transmutation around the world (which I hope will keep diversifying), he represents Mormonism well, at least the Mormonism some of us borderline eccentrics believe it could and should be. Converts are always the future of real religion. So if Paco seems marginal to some Mormons from this quadrant of the planet, he actually is a current of the mainstream to come, if we trust Mormonism to do more than just survive. Still, Paco cuts the figure of an underdog, a hero with a secret identity, possibly one who guards lost treasures. All these mythic tropes interplay in Thatcher's narrative.

If anything, though, this book's subject is serendipity, about which good books seem deserved but always inadequate. Offhand events, curiosities, whims, and bits of luck—especially Paco's—those are what made this quest and its chronicle happen. Refresher courses in how things actually take shape always seem worthy to me. This book is in that curriculum.

Some adjectives are traps. *Scholarly* is one of them. The term is now so denatured and rigid that it's a kind of rigor mortis: a "scholarly" book has certain physical dimensions, verbal tone, and, of course, footnotes. But books like *Paco* make us revisit the adjective. There are works that one cannot deny are scholarly in some fundamental sense: catalogs,

indexes, list-bound and annotated handbooks. There are other works that skirt—or transcend—the adjective, books of speculation, or long-view summations, or even collections of interviews. There are also mid-ground works: memoirs, confessions, even propaganda with no pretense of objectivity, but that, like Wagner’s *My Life*, are the massive roots to which one must not lay the ax. For intimate but aerial knowledge, one needs all types.

Some might find this book not scholarly enough in its dimensions, feel, tone, point of view, and dearth of footnotes. And indeed it seems like a huge *New Yorker* profile written by and about two non-New Yorkers. But it navigates many domains of what I, at least, regard as scholarship in some of the best and broadest senses. Add the Mormon-ness that broods over the whole work and one must find it an apt object for the contemplation of Mormon studies reviewers.

**Michael Hicks** is professor of music composition at Brigham Young University. His most recent book is *The Mormon Tabernacle Choir: A Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

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Terry L. Givens and Reid L. Neilson, eds. *The Columbia Sourcebook of Mormons in the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

*Reviewed by Max Perry Mueller*

*Mormon Studies Review*, vol. 4, 2017, pp. 129–37

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/msr.2017.0112> Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/mimsr.21568030>

IN 2009 THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS opened its new Church History Library (CHL). It is a huge building with a huge collection—230,000 square feet spread over five stories and home to 240,000 unpublished manuscripts along with countless published