

Arethusa.  
Flight and Transformation  
as  
Identity

Wade Matthews

Perusing Ovid while translating a text on Ruben's *Vertumnus and Pomona*, I came across the story of Arethusa, a metaphorical tale of flight and transformation that speaks to the identity of the musicians on the present CD—Stéphane Rives and Wade Matthews—their artistic evolution and their way of making music. Arethusa—a Nereid nymph and virginal servant of the Greek goddess Artemis (Diana the Huntress to the Romans)—takes a dip in a stream, not knowing it belongs to the river god, Alpheus. Smitten by her beauty, Alpheus pursues her with carnal intent. Arethusa flees but is unable to outrun the libidinous river. She cries out to Artemis, who quickly envelops her in a dense cloud, successfully hiding Arethusa from the god. Fear and the exertion of running cause her to perspire so heavily that, hidden in the fog, she gradually turns into a stream. Alpheus is eager to mingle his waters with hers, but Artemis opens a subterranean channel that bears Arethusa's stream to Ortygia in Sicily, where she becomes a fountain.

For two expatriate musicians, this story speaks of attitudes towards change, perception and identity. Arethusa is fleeing not Alpheus sexual aggression, but rather, the change it would wreak. And therein lies the first paradox, for Arethusa's escape is brought about by her transformation. It is unbidden metamorphosis—not the cloud—that actually saves her. While Alpheus continues to search for her in the mist, Arethusa becomes water and flows away from him. But what has she escaped? And what has she lost? In her flight from change, she is irremediably transformed. From a forest-dwelling nymph at the service of Artemis, she metamorphizes into a Sicilian fountain. She has not escaped change at all.

And here we reach the second paradox. Not only has Arethusa changed; *In her quest to remain herself, she has become exactly what she fled.* The forest nymph's contact with water is irremediable, her change, ineluctable. First, she takes a dip in the water, then she is pursued by a god in the form of a river. Artemis hides her in a cloud—yet another form of water—while she perspires until she, herself, becomes a stream, flowing until she becomes a fountain. *Fleeing from a river she fears will rob her of her all she holds dear, she becomes water herself.*

Of course, change and identity are keys to any improviser's praxis, for change is the only constant, and improvising calls for a carefully weighed mix of action and reaction. Action comes from within; reaction, from a clear grasp of what is happening at every moment, that is, the capacity to perceive change and flow with it while remaining oneself. We generally associate perception with learning and thus with knowledge, yet its strongest ties to change and identity may lie in the attitude that accompanies the perceptual act. For improvisers, the most fecund may be that of acceptance.

Improvisation is context-based art making and contexts are in constant change. Perceiving change is thus imperative, but it must be accompanied by acceptance, by the recognition that a perceived change *has already happened*. Acceptance of this is essential to the cognitive agility one needs in order to continue creating one's music. The poles are Proteus and Procrustes and one hopes to be closer to the former than the latter.

Perhaps the story of Arethusa is an object lesson in the dangers of non-acceptance—a delicate point if we read it too superficially. I am not advocating Arethusa's surrender to Alpheus, nor her mere acceptance of the obvious fact that change is inevitable, but rather that *identity per se is inevitably linked not to immobility but to change*. The question is how to use change to *maintain* identity, rather than to destroy it. Therein lies freedom. I think that is what this music is about.

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Madrid, 14 January & 31 August 2009