

James Dillon's mega opus: A view from the trenches

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By David Patrick Stearns

"We're using tuning forks during the performances."

"Of course you are. Why wouldn't you?"

Such was the exchange between choral conductor Donald Nally and the International Contemporary Ensemble at Columbia University's Miller Theater during the preparation of *Nine Rivers*, a mega-work by Scottish composer James Dillon that will be performed over three nights Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. Three nights of Dillon is likely to have a density of three weeks of, say, Philip Glass. That sounds like an exaggeration but it's probably not at least from what I heard at a Monday afternoon rehearsal of *The Crossing*, Nally's contemporary-music super-choir in Philadelphia,

The 60-year-old Dillon is part of a school that's called "the new complexity" that makes German neo-modernist such as Wolfgang Rihm and Matthias Pintscher seem expansive in comparison. Dillon-like composers such as Brian Ferneyhough create monuments to the constructive possibilities of the human mind that don't really fall into any typical spectrum of good or bad music. You marvel or you don't. Any marveling at Monday's rehearsal was as much about looking at the score as hearing it. Not only would I happily wallpaper my work room with the patterns of notes on the page, but much of the text doesn't make sense unless seen. Several different language are employed, including Scottish Gael. Often, a single poetic sentence is splintered into phrases that can be read vertically in the score but not actually heard since, in execution, different words are being sung simultaneously and thus cancel each other out.

"Are there any micro-tones here?" I asked ironically about two minutes after my arrival.

That might normally mean that the vocal writing is anything but sympathetic to the human voice. Among the 15 singers there – each of which are on their own in the multi-part vocal writing – most had their own individual tuning forks held close to the ear. The note D seems to be a reference point. However, you can't say the vocal writing is clueless. The primary challenge is simultaneity of discrete elements in micro-tonal counterpoint to each other. And is there anything more difficult to sing, soundly in tune, as micro-tones?

The composer calls the piece one of the most oft-canceled premieres in history and one can understand why. Mastering the vocal writing is one thing – and *The Crossing* is probably going where no New York vocal group ever could, and only because its handpicked singers are able to navigate their schedules around rehearsals for Opera Company of Philadelphia's forthcoming *Carmen*. The performance also includes the International Contemporary Ensemble and the Red Fish Blue Fish percussion group; no doubt their music is as complex as *The Crossing*'s. But as oblique and angular as the individual musical elements are, putting them together has a total effect that may well justify the extraordinary hard work going into it.

What I heard reminded me of the splintered collage effects of what I call the Tower of Babel movement in Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia*. That's the section full of orchestral quotes from some the more rhythmically infectious moments of the Mahler Symphony No. 2 interspersed with lots of spoken exclamations as well as tunes sung with no apparent relationship to anything else around them. The movement is one of

my favorites in all of 20th century music. Were Berio's collage somehow melded with, say, one of Johannes Ockeghem's 15th-century motets (which are highly mathematical) you would have something approximating what Dillon hath wrought.

The question is if such music actually contributes anything to the music world at large – other than a handful of people who are smart enough to figure it out, both from hearing the sound and peering at the score. Though I obviously haven't heard anything close to the whole thing, I would say absolutely yes.

My point of reference here is a disc by the 17th-century composer/chemist/Rosicrucianist Michael Maier. His collection of vocal fugues, titled *Atalanta Fugiens*, popped out at me in a Paris record shop on Friday in a Glossa-label recording by one of the great polyphony choirs around, Ensemble Plus Ultra (the same group that recorded the complete works of Tomas Luis de Victoria, just out on Deutsche Grammophon). Though much more spare than Dillon, these Maier works are just as esoteric, the choice of notes guided by layer upon layer of precepts in conjunction with a series of etchings carrying tarot-card-like image illustrating their inner meaning. What's missing is any sense of human heat or vitality.

Only with that comparison is it clear that Dillon has heat aplenty. Dillon has something to communicate – Nally believes the music is about the constant cycle of growth and disintegration that's part of everyday life – and whatever compositional systems he's using seem to liberate his message rather than obscuring it. The Maier problem is one that I also hear in a lot of modern electronic pop music made by groups who are known to take a lot of drugs (no names mentioned; I don't like law suits) – certainly a factor that draws artists into themselves, just as alchemy and the secret society of Rosicrucians seem to have done for Maier.

And as for Dillon, the key to successfully ingesting his music (you'll notice I didn't use the word "enjoy") isn't being as smart as he is, walking in his creative shoes and knowing exactly what made him make the choices he did. Listening to him is like looking at the Gaudi church in Barcelona. Who can take in the totality or understand the floor plan? You simply acknowledge that a human mind made this and did so for us. It's called intellectual bedazzlement