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Crossing choir in U.S. premiere of Dillon's 'Nine Rivers'



By David Patrick Stearns
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NEW YORK - While parachuting into the thick of New York City's new-music community, the Crossing choir from Philadelphia couldn't have known what it was getting into with the U.S. premiere of James Dillon's *Nine Rivers*. The piece stretches over three evenings (it started Wednesday) at Columbia University's Miller Theater and is a major new-music event at a venue that seen has many.

Long-established Scottish composer Dillon, 60, is part of a movement known as "the new complexity" that, far from retreating from modernism, leaps further into it. This is music written with no apparent concessions to performance practicality. It's no wonder the world premiere of the three-concert cycle was canceled repeatedly in Europe.

Though the Crossing has confronted some of the more challenging music being written today, *Nine Rivers* is a large step beyond any of that, with thickets of microtones and no instrumental accompaniment to give the singers their bearings. Not surprisingly, many held tuning forks to their ears during the performance.

Luckily, the weight of the piece was evenly distributed between International Contemporary Ensemble, the red fish blue fish percussion group, and the Crossing, the choir's section being one of four heard on Wednesday; a different four, including one choral section, will be performed at Saturday's finale. (The second part, sans choir, is Friday.)

Outwardly, *Nine Rivers* would seem to be music that can be fathomed only by an ultra-intelligent few and enjoyed by no one. Yet such notions were disproven in its first minutes. "*Nine Rivers* is a mythos of imagined waters, of fairies and snake-gods; a melancholy of flow, a requiem for poisoned rivers, an odyssey, a theatre of memory," writes the composer. And he's true to his word.

Much of it feels like a jungle, but in a world you've never known, with bristling undercurrents and piercing calls and yelps from creatures that have yet to exist.

The music's ultimate challenge isn't so much its language but that it must be sustained over the course of a restless musical journey. At times, Dillon seems to drill to the center of the Earth, but doesn't stop there. The first section for percussion ensemble was full of colorful sheets of sound. The second had chattering string-instrument counterpoint before flying off in many directions.

The non-vocal sections were conducted with clarity and sensitivity by Steven Schick, though the Crossing's section, the third, titled "Viriditas" ("greenness"), was handled by founder/director Donald Nally. It's hard to know what's meant to be intelligible in this unaccompanied choral section, since lines of poetry are often splintered between vocal sections with individual phrases heard simultaneously. With each of the 16 singers often singing something different - and in oblique relationship to each other - this music will never show off a choir's tone and diction. At times, the group's energy level threatened to flag. But the musical rainforest that the music traces in the air was rendered with abundant clarity in the performance, showing how the music concludes in ways that make no analytic sense but feel intuitively right.

Such endings are among Dillon's hallmarks. One section ends with a bang and then a twinkle. The fourth made less sense, which might be a symptom of sensory overload on the part of the beholder or a falling-off of inspiration in the music. Whatever. There was more than enough stimulation to justify a New York visit - and the dedication from the performers. The appreciative, ponytailed composer gave Schick a big hug during bows. But Nally got a kiss on the cheek.

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